

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE SNUGGLY

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CHAPTER 1

Carlotta was a special kind of cockroach: *fastidious*. That means she was clean and neat to the point of fussiness.

“You’re too young and cute to be so fastidious,” her cousins would tell her on her visits home to Willowgrove Project B. “Let your feelers down once in a while. Get filthy with a friend. Spread a little disease.”

But Carlotta would shake her pretty head. “I love where I live,” she’d tell them. “It’s so clean and quiet. I bet I’m the only cockroach in the whole building.”

And she was. The building Carlotta lived in, Ivory Tower East, was almost brand new, fifty-one stories high, and the only insect living there was Carlotta herself. She lived in the penthouse apartment on the fifty-first floor. Even the rooftop health club was on a lower floor.

It was like living on cloud nine.

Carlotta hadn’t been born on the fifty-first floor. She was carried up there one day while sleeping in a large pot containing a miniature orange tree.

“When I awoke and opened my eyes,” she told her cousins some time later, “a city of lights was spread out before me.”

The penthouse apartment was owned by billionaire Solly ‘El Sol’ Sanders, who worked on a street called Wall. Mr. Sanders lived with his wife Joan and their young son, Dennis.

The reason only one insect lived in Ivory Tower East was that all the apartments, except



that one, were vacant. A few months earlier they'd nearly all been occupied. Then one day something terrible happened: The street 'El Sol' and most of his neighbors worked on, crashed.

It wasn't the first time Wall Street had crashed. The last big crash had occurred before Denny's father was born. The crashes hurt people in their wallets. A lot of them went broke.

As a result, persons owning expensive apartments all over the city couldn't meet their mortgage payments. They had to move out and hand their front door keys to their banks. The banks were stuck with lots of vacant apartments because few people could afford to buy them. So, many banks failed and more people lost their jobs.

Only Mr. Sanders and a few others were still incredibly rich after Wall Street crashed, and Mr. Sanders was among the richest of them all.

"I don't care if we're the only family left in the building," Denny told Carlotta as she watched him do his homework on his personal computer. "Except that next Halloween there won't be any neighbors with doorbells to ring for trick-or-treat, so I won't get any candy."

"Ask your father to *buy* you some neighbors," suggested Carlotta.

After finishing his homework, Denny played a few video games and ran his electric racing cars over his two-mile track. He would have watched some TV, but none of the sets in the apartment were working.

Even though Denny lived well and had lots of toys, Carlotta worried about him. She worried that he didn't eat enough.

"Why don't you have Chantal make you a sandwich?" she asked him almost every day.

"I don't *want* to be a sandwich," he'd always answer.

Denny hated it when Carlotta told him when to eat or what to wear. "I've already *got* a mother," he'd tell her.

Carlotta also worried that one day Denny might grab her and take her to school to use in one of his science experiments.

"Cockroaches are very, very intelligent," he'd tell her. "If I put you in a maze, after a while you'd learn how to find the food instead of falling into the water."

But Carlotta was more intelligent than Denny thought. She knew better than to let him flatter her into being the subject of an experiment that could end her life.

Carlotta and Denny had a lot of time to talk together because his parents were seldom home. Even when they were, they hardly said a word to their

son because they had so many important things to think about. Denny didn't mind this too much; he felt so nervous around his father that he could never even look him in the eye.

"Too bad the TV sets aren't working," sighed Carlotta, who enjoyed watching nature programs, especially those showing the lifestyles of cockroaches in exotic lands.

"Mom says the antenna on the roof is broken," Denny told her, "but we have cable, so I guess she's lying."

"Mothers don't lie," Carlotta scolded him. "Not without good reason."

Denny missed watching the science programs on TV. He wanted to be a scientist when he grew up.

"Dad makes his money on Wall Street," he told Carlotta, "but I'll make mine in a lab. I'll invent the super-strongest aspirin in the world and sell it to a big drug company for a zillion dollars."

Carlotta was impressed. "Here's looking at *you*, kid," she told Denny, tipping her antennae.

Then one afternoon, walking along the wall behind one of the TV sets, Carlotta noticed that the electric plug wasn't in its socket.

"Why don't you plug it in?" she asked Denny. "Maybe it'll work."

"You aren't using your noodle," he sighed. "You can't fix something that's broken just by plugging it in. Here, dummy, I'll show you."

So Denny got down on his hands and knees, found the plug, and stuck it into the wall socket. Then he pressed POWER. To his amazement, the screen grew bright with picture and sound.

"I fixed it!" he cried. "I'm a genius."

He was about to switch channels, when something on the screen caught his eye. "Hey, that's my dad," he told Carlotta. "Dad's on TV. And there's mom!"

Carlotta turned so fast she nearly made a somersault. She was just in time to see Mr. and Mrs. Sanders holding hands and smiling as they pushed their way through a crowd of shouting TV reporters.

When the image of his parents was replaced by a commercial, Denny switched to the science channel. Seeing his father on TV wasn't all that new. Mr. Sanders was an important man and often interviewed on TV talk shows.

"Dad must have made a lot of money in the stock market today," he told Carlotta. "He and mom were sure smiling."

"I hope so," said Carlotta, wondering why their smiles had looked so stiff. Just then the telephone rang. Denny answered it.

“Hi, Denny.” It was the voice of a girl in his class at school.

“Hi, Peggy. What’s happening?”

“I want to know what you’re going to do?”

“Do?”

“Now that your father’s going away for a long time.”

Denny was puzzled. “Where did you hear that?”

“Your father was on TV just now. Didn’t you see him?”

“Of course I did.”

“Then you must *know*.”

“Know *what*?”

“That he’s going to prison.”

“Oh, that.” Denny put the telephone receiver back on the hook. He felt like the day a wave had knocked him down and washed over him, nearly drowning him in pebbles and bubbles. He told Carlotta what Peggy had said. “I guess that’s why mom unplugged the TVs,” he told her. “She didn’t want me to know about dad.”

Carlotta didn’t know what to say. “So what are you going to do?” she asked finally.

“Watch some TV.” He pressed VOL on the remote. Just some stupid kids’ program was on, but he sat silently and watched it to the end.

CHAPTER 2

Later that afternoon, while Chantal, the French *au paire*, was preparing Denny’s supper, he walked into his mother’s dressing room. Joan Sanders, her blond hair held off her face by a pink stretch band, was smearing makeup on her face.

“I’m going to a \$10,000-a-plate political fund-raiser tonight,” she told Denny. “You’re having poached salmon with Chantal.”

“Is Dad going with you?”

“No. Your father decided to save the \$10,000. He won’t be voting any more anyway.”

“Can I ask where he is?”

Mrs. Sanders finished smearing, set down the jar of Pink Honey foundation, and turned toward Denny. Her face looked like a creamy pink mask, no eyebrows or lips or anything.

“You might as well know right now,” said the hole of her mouth. “Your father and I are getting a divorce.”

Denny stared at the mask. Its brown and white eyes looked back at him. He felt like another wave had smacked him. “Because Dad’s going to prison?”

The eyes grew wider. “Where did you hear that?”

“Peggy told me.”

His mother turned back to the mirror, “I was afraid one of your classmates would spill the beans,” she sighed. “But it doesn’t matter. You won’t be going back to that school any more. You and I are moving to Los Angeles — Beverly Hills, actually — in a few weeks. We’ll have a whole house to ourselves and an Olympic-size swimming pool. You’ll like that, won’t you?” Her eyes found his in the mirror.

“Sure,” said Denny, feeling like half the bubbly ocean was rushing through his brain. “Did dad kill somebody?”

“Of course not. It was just some nonsense about stock fraud and tax evasion. Fortunately for him, he was able to get a lighter sentence by turning state’s evidence against several of his associates. Now please. I don’t want to talk about it. When you’re older you’ll understand.”

“All right.”

“Mrs. Sanders smiled. “I must say, Dennis, you’re taking this like a little man. A lot of kids your age would cry and complain if their fathers were locked up. But you’re just like your dad — made of stone.”

Turning, his mother leaned over and kissed Denny’s cheek, leaving a little smudge of Pink Honey on the stone.

Chantal had prepared fish because it was Friday. Back home in France her mother always served their family fish on Fridays, even after the Pope said it was no longer necessary. Chantal carried on the tradition.

While Denny ate his supper, the young French woman spoke excitedly into her cordless telephone.

“*Je suis vachement embêtée,*” she told the friend at the other end. “*Lui, il va au prison. Elle, elle déménage a Beverlay Eels avec le gosse. Ooh-la-la. Quelle histoire de fou!*”

“Beverly Hills?” repeated Carlotta blankly when Denny told her the news that night. “Never heard of it. Do you suppose there are cockroaches in Beverly hills?”

"I don't care. I'm not going there." Climbing into bed, Denny bent his arms under his head and lay staring at the ceiling.

Carlotta settled on the wall next to him. "You can't stay here if both your parents go away. They'll turn off the air conditioning."

"I'm *not* staying. I'm running away from home tomorrow."

"Oh, golly!" cried Carlotta, very worried. She didn't cry out "Oh, God," or "Oh, Lord," because cockroaches have no notion at all of higher Beings. But "Oh, golly" gave her some relief.

"Where are you running to?" she asked him.

"I don't know, but I'll sleep on it."

* Translation: "I'm utterly freaked out. *He's* going to prison. *She's* moving to Beverly Hills with the kid. Ooh-la-la. What a cuckoo's nest!"

* * *

All night long, while Denny slept, turning restlessly from side to side, Carlotta watched over him. She had a date with a good-looking Panamanian roach the following night in Willowgrove, but would cancel it if necessary.

Because *no way* would Carlotta let Denny run away from home without her. The outside world was full of danger. A child not yet eight years old, who'd only ridden in a chauffeured limousine, wouldn't know how to travel safely.

The next morning Denny still hadn't figured out where to go or how to get there. Then, over breakfast, he heard Chantal tell a friend on the phone that she would arrive in Stoatsville on the Bamburgen bus.

"Ze lady I work for is still asleep," she said in her cute French accent, "but ze keed can play by 'eemself until she wakes up. Don't worry. I'm out of 'ere."

"Stoatsville," Denny told Carlotta a few minutes later in his room. "I'm going to Stoatsville on the Bamburgen bus."

"I'm coming with you," Carlotta told him. "The world is a dangerous place and you're not street smart."

"Well, okay." Denny was secretly disappointed that Carlotta didn't try to talk him out of running away. A little scared at his own decision, he needed to argue with someone to pump up his courage.

Carlotta read his mind, as cockroaches who love a human sometimes can. "The reason I'm not trying to stop you," she told him, "will be clear later on."

"Thanks a *lot*," said Denny. "You sound more and more like my mom

every day. Soon you'll be putting guck on your face." Bending down, he tried picking up his backpack, but could hardly lift it off the floor. "I was afraid of that," he said.

Zippering open the pack, he took out his coin, stamp and baseball-card collections, two Corvettes, a Porsche, switch boxes and two hundred feet of race track, his video player and cartridges, his laptop computer, his Swiss Army pocket knife and his cash savings. "It's the batteries that weight the most," he explained to Carlotta.

After considering each item, Denny decided to leave behind everything except his video player, five favorite games, his pocket knife and his cash. He ignored Carlotta's pleas that he take a sweater. "I'll need my cash for the bus ticket," he said, stuffing the wad of bills into the pocket of his designer jeans, "and I can always buy another laptop with my credit card if I get desperate."

"Not to mention some soap, a toothbrush and clean clothes for tomorrow."

"Naw," Denny told her. "I don't need stuff like that. Nobody's gonna be smelling me."

"I will be."

"I thought cockroaches liked dirt."

"They do as a rule," nodded Carlotta, "but I'm fastidious."

"Oh, I thought you were *Carlotta*, ha, ha, ha," laughed Denny. Lifting his rucksack to his back, he started out the door, his little friend riding miffed and speechless on top.

A few minutes later, fifty-one floors below, the two doormen greeted Denny with huge smiles. "Johnny ain't here yet," said one, referring to the Sanders' chauffeur.

"I'll wait for him outside," Denny told them.

"Okay then, Denny. You have a nice day." As he went out, the two doormen, who loved scandals concerning families of the rich and famous, exchanged grins and winks.

Once outside, Denny walked as fast as he could down the sidewalk and around the corner. It was the first time in his life he'd walked in the street without an adult. "So far so good," he told Carlotta. "Now I have to find the bus station."

But how? He looked around. A police car with two officers inside was cruising by. "Maybe *they* can tell me where it is."

"No, no, no," Carlotta whispered urgently. "Policemen always ask a lot of questions. Just keep walking. Put your shoulders back, hold your chin high,

and walk like you know where you're going."

"Is that how to find the bus station?"

"No, but you don't want to look lost. Look lost and people will be all over you in a second."

"That makes sense," nodded Denny, who actually had no idea what Carlotta was talking about. And what did she mean by 'street smart?'. He sighed to himself. Probably all this would be clear later on, when he was older, and it didn't matter any more.

CHAPTER 3

The avenue down which Denny walked so stiffly was lined with expensive shops, trendy restaurants, and art galleries. It was early on a Saturday morning, so as yet there weren't many wealthy men and women out buying goat cheese ravioli or Picasso paintings.

Carlotta kept reminding Denny not to cross streets when the sign said DON'T WALK.

"I already *have* a mother," he'd tell her each time. "Stop bugging me."

"*Bugging?* It isn't polite to get personal."

"Well, if you were an old horse instead of a bug, I'd tell you to stop *nagging* me. Ha. Anyway, what makes you think we're walking in the right direction?"

"My innate sense of the earth's magnetic field."

"Maybe I should ask somebody anyway," Denny told her. "I don't think it's a good idea to walk with my chin up in the wrong direction for very long."

"Well, don't ask any kidnappers or muggers," Carlotta cautioned him. "I'm not big enough to dial 911."

Fortunately, none of the pedestrians walking on the avenue at that hour looked like criminals. All, however, looked like they would immediately report to the police any little boy wearing a backpack and asking about bus stations.

Just then three individuals caught Denny's eye. They were lying on the sidewalk and looked like they hadn't gotten up for about a month.

"Those are homeless people," Denny told Carlotta. "My mom won't ever

let me stop and look at them, but now I can.”

So Denny walked up to the homeless people and looked hard at them. They were dressed in old, dirty clothes, were covered with dirty blankets, had filthy skin and hair, and lay on sheets of corrugated cardboard. Black plastic bags containing their belongings were stacked against the wall of the building next to them. Two appeared to be sleeping, but the third looked back at Denny with dark, red-rimmed eyes.

“I suppose you want me to give you some money,” Denny said to him.

“No,” said the homeless person.

“Why not? That’s what my mother says you people always want.”

“We don’t ask kids for money,” said the man.

“Then you’re dumb. I have lots of money I could give you.”

The homeless person, whose stomach ached because he hadn’t eaten breakfast that day, or supper the night before, gazed wordlessly at Denny. This was the first person wearing clean socks who had looked at him or talked to him in five years, and he was wishing he’d go away.

“If you tell me where the bus station is, I’ll give you a dollar,” Denny told him.

“I don’t know where it is,” said the homeless man.

“I’ll give you *five* dollars, if you tell me.”

“I still don’t know,” he shrugged.

“I’ll give you *ten* dollars.”

“It’s three blocks down and two blocks over,” the man said.

“Thanks. That’s all I wanted to know.” And Denny started to walk away.

“Hey, kid,” called the homeless person, “what about the ten?”

“I lied,” Denny told him. “I never was going to give you any money anyway.”

The homeless person laughed. “I lied too,” he said. “Lots of luck finding the bus station.”

With chin high, Denny walked on down the avenue. He wondered when Carlotta was going to say something. “You’re very much like your father,” she told him after a few blocks.

“Of course,” laughed Denny. “I’m his son. Ha, ha, ha.”

CHAPTER 4

Carlotta sometimes asked herself why she loved Denny. His behavior often puzzled and offended her. Did she love him because she enjoyed fussing over him, or because she believed that deep down he really was a good kid, a kid with a conscience?

When cockroaches need to broaden their outlooks or improve their minds, they go on long trips. One reason Carlotta hadn't tried to stop Denny from running away from home was because she thought seeing some of the world might make a better person out of him. Another reason was, she feared he might lose his temper and step on her.

Shortly after leaving the homeless people, Carlotta sensed she and Denny weren't alone.

Suddenly, "Good morning," said a deep voice behind her.

Carlotta whirled. "Oh!" Standing on the backpack zipper flap was the most fascinating cockroach she'd ever seen. Somewhat older than Carlotta, he was handsome, distinguished and intelligent-looking.

"Let me introduce myself," said the stranger, tipping his feelers politely. "My name is Cornelius Cockroach."

"I...I'm Carlotta," Carlotta gasped. "Why are you here?"

"I heard the young master asking about the bus station. As I'm headed there myself, I thought I'd jump aboard for the ride."

"You're very welcome," said Carlotta, trying not to stare. "Where are you coming from and where are you going on the bus?"

"Since the death of my wife," Cornelius told her, "I've been living in the office of a human, a famous child guidance counselor. Right now I'm on holiday, hoping to clear the cobwebs from my brain and breathe some fresh air. You can't imagine how exhausting it is listening to children's troubles all day. This city's full of kids with weird problems."

"No!" exclaimed Carlotta, as if his words surprised her. But at the same time she was pointing at Denny with three of her thumbs.

Cornelius glanced at the back of Denny's head. "Him too? Well, it

doesn't matter. All I need's a ride."

"Just a ride?" asked Carlotta, waving her feelers around her head in a fascinating way.

"Ahem," said Cornelius, clearing his throat. "I must admit I was also tempted to climb aboard by the sight of one very attractive passenger. Carlotta, my dear, I hope you don't have a boyfriend or husband hidden somewhere in this child's backpack."

But Carlotta didn't want to make things too easy for her new acquaintance. Smiling mysteriously, she said nothing. Just then the sound of strange music reached their ears.

"Oh, look!" cried Denny. "A street musician."

Up ahead on the sidewalk a man with red hair, watery blue eyes and a curly beard, was playing a banjo. The five-string instrument hung from his neck on a wide, colorful strip of cloth. At the man's feet was an open instrument case lined with dark blue velvet. On the velvet lay a sprinkle of coins, like stars in a sky.

Denny walked right up to the man. "I like music," he told him.

"Then you can't be all bad," said the man, hardly glancing at Denny as he double-thumbed with his right hand and hammered on and off the frets with his left.

"What do you mean by that?"

The banjo player turned his eyes on Denny. "People who like something are okay," he said. "If they like music, they're very okay."

"I like music, but I hate what you're playing," Denny told him. "Play something else."

"Sure. What?"

"The Sorcerer's Apprentice."

"No," said the red-haired man.

"Then play 'Peter and the Wolf.'"

"No."

"Then 'The Nutcracker Suite.'"

"Here's something," said the man. "It's called 'The Cumberland Mountain Bear Chase.'"

The name of the song was hardly out of his mouth before the man's fingers started picking and strumming, frailing and fretting so fast, they looked like a blur. So many notes came popping and twanging out of the strings, Denny couldn't tell where they all came from.

Denny liked this music a lot more than "Peter and the Wolf" or "The Nut-

cracker,” which he had to listen to at school, but he was angry at the man for not playing what he’d asked.

“I hate this,” Denny told him after listening a minute. “I was going to give you some money, but not any more.”

“Can’t help it, kiddo,” said the musician. “This is a five-string banjo and this is what it likes to play.”

“I’ll give you a dollar *not* to play it,” Denny told him.

But the man didn’t seem to hear.

Denny raised his voice. “I’ll give you *ten* dollars not to play it.”

The music kept coming. “I never took money *not* to play,” the man told Denny, “and I’m not starting now. Keep your money, kiddo.”

“Okay, I’ll give you ten dollars to show me where the bus station is.”

Taking out a ten dollar bill, Denny waved it in front of the man’s face.

The music didn’t stop, but it went into a kind of holding pattern. “Why do you want the bus station?”

“I’m running away from home.”

“All *right*.” The man stopped playing. Smiling broadly he reached out and shook Denny’s hand. “The name’s Red,” he told him. “A kid like you running away from home can’t be all bad.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re giving your folks a *lot of joy*.”

Denny looked at Red cautiously, not sure whether he’d been paid a compliment or not. Denny had said mean things to adults all his life, but adults never said anything mean to little kids whose fathers were billionaires. Denny was about to tell Red exactly who his father was, but then remembered *where* his father was, and decided not to.

Red scooped up the coins, closed the empty banjo case, and hung it on his back from a long leather strap. “*Allons, enfant*,” he said, and started walking with long strides, strumming softly.

“What does *allons enfant* mean?” Denny asked, hurrying to keep up.

“Those are the first words of the French national anthem. They mean, ‘Let’s go, kiddo.’”

“I don’t believe you,” Denny told him crossly. “Nobody would start a song ‘Let’s go, kiddo,’ especially not a national anthem.”

“‘Oh-oh say can you see?’ is better?”

“Of *course* it is. You’re *crazy*.”

But Red just laughed and walked on down the street, singing and strumming, “*Allons enfants de la patrie-yuh, le jour de gloire est arrive*.”

CHAPTER 5

The two roaches bounced along on top of Denny's pack, feeling the wind on their faces.

"Way to go, Denno," cried Cornelius, hunkering down next to Carlotta.

"You *approve* of his behavior?" asked Carlotta in disbelief.

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Are you kidding? I was worried about protecting Denny from all the weird people on the street. Now I want to protect *them* from *him*."

"Don't worry, Carlotta. The kid's a genius at manipulating adults. He'll go far in life."

"His father's a stock market tycoon," she remarked wryly. "*He* went far — all the way to the slammer."

"Who's his old man?"

"Solly Sanders."

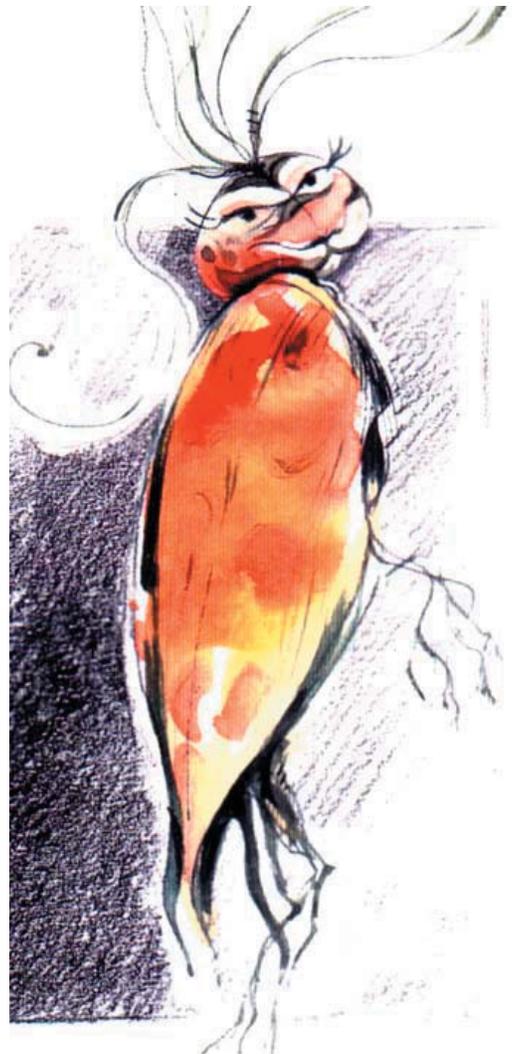
Cornelius whistled. "I saw 'El Sol' on TV last night. The judge only gave him a year because he ratted on his pals. Way to go. When Solly gets out on good behavior a couple months from now, he can invite the judge for a spin on his yacht."

Carlotta sighed. Life was strange. Each time she thought she'd met the roach of her dreams, he turned out to be a fool.

"If you were a human," Carlotta asked him, "which would you rather have, a billion dollars or a conscience?"

"A billion dollars," replied Cornelius immediately.

Carlotta couldn't believe it. "How can a roach who lives in the office of a famous child



guidance counselor have such stupid values?” she asked him.

“Just because a man counsels kids doesn’t mean he tells them to hate money. My mentor, Mr. Two, would *love* to get Denny on his couch. He’d charge ‘El Sol’ a thousand bucks an hour.”

“Would he at least try to *help* Denny?”

“Help, shmelp. The kid doesn’t need help. He’s a genius.”

Carlotta felt confused. Could Cornelius possibly be right? Was Denny acting like a spoiled brat, or like a genius? Was Cornelius a slimebucket, or was he telling it the way it was?

In other words, was having a billion dollars *really* better than having a conscience?

Because of the traffic and banjo noises, Denny overheard only snatches of the conversation atop his pack. But it made him feel important knowing he was being talked about.

Denny was especially glad the new roach was on the side of him and his dad. Carlotta talked like his ex-teacher, Ms. Silva. “What good is all the money in the world if you lose your soul getting it?” she asked her class one day. The kids went home and asked their parents the same question. The parents wrote angry notes to the principal and Ms. Silva was fired. What a loser.

* * *

“We’re almost there, kiddo,” Red told Denny a few minutes later. “You know what bus you want?”

“Yes, and it’s none of your business where I’m going.”

“Well, I’ll come inside with you anyway because the bus station is full of bad characters.”

“Aren’t you going to try and talk me out of running away?”

“Heck no,” laughed Red. “Ran away a couple times myself when I was a kid. Second time it stuck. Haven’t seen my mom or dad or sisters for over fifteen years.”

“Really?” Denny looked at Red curiously. “Don’t you miss them?”

“Sometimes. Thanksgivings. Birthdays.”

“How do you make money to live on?”

“Busking. That means playing my banjo on the street. Washing dishes. You name it. Anything honest, I do it.”

“You never did anything *dishonest*?” Denny asked suspiciously.

“No, but once they thought I did. They put me in jail for eighteen days.”

“What was it like?”

Red thought a moment. “Ever hear of a place called hell?”

“Yes, only mom says it doesn’t really exist.”

“Well,” Red told him, “I think it does. Only it’s called ‘jail.’”

Just then they arrived at the bus station. Tickets for the Bamburgen bus were sold upstairs. As Denny rode up the escalator, Red followed a little distance behind.

Three or four persons wearing backpacks were lined up at the ticket window. Overhearing their conversation, Denny learned they were part of a hiking group. All bought tickets to the same destination, Pine Haven.

Hoping the ticket seller would think he was part of the hiking group, Denny bought a ticket to Pine Haven also.

As he bought his ticket, Denny remembered he’d promised Red ten dollars for taking him to the bus station. Only now he didn’t want to give him any money at all. So when he got a ten-dollar bill in change, Denny put the money into his pocket.

With the bus scheduled to leave in five minutes, Denny decided he’d better go to the bathroom. He’d never been to a public rest room before, except with his mother. She was always warning him never to go into those places alone.

Just then Denny saw Red hurrying over. “I’ll stand guard,” he said.

Denny went into one of the stalls and when he came out he told Red, “I want you to go away now.”

“Okay, kiddo,” Red told him. “I’ll disappear as soon as you’re safely on the bus.”

“No,” Denny told him, “go away *now*. I’m not giving you any money.”

“Did I say I *wanted* money?” Red asked him, surprised.

“Sure you want money,” Denny shouted, stamping his foot angrily. “All anybody ever wants is money. Well, you can’t have mine!”

At that moment a man in jeans and a plaid shirt ran up. “Police,” he barked. He grabbed Red, whirled him around, and pushed him against the wall. “Spread ‘em.”

Red spread his legs apart so that the policeman could search him for weapons. When he didn’t find any, the policeman took Red’s banjo case, ripped it open, and shook it upside down. A small metal object fell to the floor with a ping.

“You just dinged a brand new tuning fork,” grumbled Red.

“Shut up, buddy,” shouted the plainclothes cop. He turned to Denny. “Was this guy bothering you?”

Denny was so startled he didn’t know what to say.

"I was just making sure the boy got on the bus okay," Red said to the policeman. "Tell him, kiddo."

Denny realized that if he made a fuss the policeman might start asking questions and end up calling his mom.

"I'm going hiking," he told the officer, pointing toward the group of people with packs. Just then the Bamburgen bus arrived at the gate. "I've got to go, sir."

"Okay," said the cop. "I'll take this fellow in anyway and see if he has any outstandings or priors."

"Will you put him in jail?"

"Maybe. It depends on what we find."

Denny wondered if Red would be seeing his dad in jail. Maybe he should ask him to say hello for him. No. Maybe not.

As Denny walked toward the bus, the policeman was putting handcuffs on Red. Suddenly there was a crash and a twang. Denny looked back. The banjo had slipped out of Red's hand and fallen to the floor where it lay broken.

"Dammit, man," cried Red, "that banjo cost me three hundred bucks. It's a *Vega!*"

"What did you call me, buddy?" demanded the cop.

Handing his ticket to the driver, Denny walked through the glass door and climbed onto the bus. Once inside, he didn't look out again.

Whew, he said to himself, taking off his pack and sinking into a seat. *That* was sure a close call!

CHAPTER 6

Cornelius Cockroach was in great spirits. "This is getting to be fun," he told Carlotta as they boarded the bus on Denny's pack. "Glad I could come."

"I'm glad it's fun for *someone*," sighed Carlotta. "It's like a nightmare to me. I never realized how much Denny resembles his father."

"You're too fussy," Cornelius told her. "Boys will be boys. It's good for them to act out. Trains them for the nitty gritty and hurley burley of life."

"But Denny's *hurting* people. What he's doing isn't *nice*."

Cornelius laughed. “*Nice* doesn’t put caviar on the table. *Nice* doesn’t meet the payments on the BMW.”

Carlotta was about to remark that *nice* doesn’t send Wall Street tycoons to prison either, but just then Denny started taking off his backpack. The two roaches scrambled to get onto his collar.

“Are you guys still with me?” Denny asked.

“Yes we are,” Carlotta told him. “Our new friend is called Cornelius, by the way.”

“Hi Cornelius-by-the-way. How’m I doing?”

“Batting a thousand, my boy.”

“Yeah,” said Denny. “I think so too.”

As the bus started to move, Denny slouched down in his seat so that all he saw was the back of the seat in front of him. A moment later the bus rolled out of the terminal and joined the stream of traffic heading out of town.

Suddenly it occurred to Denny that he really was on his way. A kind of panic seized him. “Carlotta! Cornelius!” he whispered urgently. “What am I doing here? Where am I going?”

But neither cockroach replied. It was long past their nap time and both were sound asleep.

There was no turning back now.

Luckily Denny had brought his video games. Taking one out of his pack he began to play. What a great game. He could shoot down all the dragons and none could hurt him.

The bus rolled and time ticked quickly by. “Pine Haven!” called the driver, after an hour.

Pine Haven was a hilly little town with wooden houses almost hidden in leafy trees. The bus pulled over to the side of the road and Denny climbed off with the hiking group. Not wanting to appear lost, he followed them into a convenience store.

Some in the group bought coffee to go, bags of nuts, raisins and candy. Denny bought a small jar of smoked oysters and another of herring in sour cream, a box of crackers, two pieces of carrot cake, and two sodas.

Maybe running away from home isn’t so bad, he was thinking. At least no one tells me when and what to eat.

But just as he was about to unwrap one of the carrot cakes, a little voice said in his ear, “Save the dessert for later.”

“Let the boy be, Carlotta,” said another voice. “He’ll need energy for whatever lies ahead.”

“Thanks, Cornelius,” said Denny, unwrapping the cake and sinking his teeth into the moist icing.

Denny decided to stick with the hikers. Soon he found himself in a forest of tall trees, bushes, rocky paths, and streams. After a few minutes he fell behind the group, but since he had no other place to go, he kept on walking.

“Hiking is the most boring thing in the world,” Denny told Carlotta and Cornelius after five minutes or so. “I hope wherever I’m going, I’ll get there soon.”

“We hope so too,” said Carlotta who was enjoying the trip even less than he.

But ‘soon’ came and ‘soon’ went and Denny was still walking on the trail. Then he remembered his video games, took one out of his pack and started zapping monsters. Almost immediately he tripped on a stone and fell face forward on the ground. “Ow!”

As Denny fell, his hand hit a rock and the video player flew through the air and landed in a stream.

Two hikers walking nearby, hearing Denny’s cry, hurried to help him up. “My video game fell in the water,” Denny told them, rubbing his knees and chins.

The hikers looked into the stream and saw the little box shining up at them. One turned to his friend. “If I touch it, do you think it would electrocute me?”

“Try and see,” urged Denny. But when he said this the hikers looked at him resentfully.

“Where are your folks?” one asked.

Denny pointed over his shoulder. “They’re coming. Aren’t you going to give me my game?”

“It’s electric and it’s in water and we’re afraid to touch it,” explained the hiker. “It’s probably safe, but we don’t know for sure.”

“If you’re such cowards, *I’ll* get it out,” Denny told them.

“Be our guest,” shrugged the other, “but first you might want to ask your folks if they know a good undertaker.” Chuckling, the two turned and walked on up the trail.

Denny stamped his foot. “Cowards,” he shouted after them. He stared angrily into the water at his toy.

“Don’t touch it,” said Carlotta in his ear. “We could *all* die.”

“Who cares.”

Just then two teenagers, a boy and a girl, came walking up the trail.

“Would you give me my video game?” Denny asked the girl in a helpless little voice.

“Sure, honey.” But just as she was reaching for the toy, the girl paused. “What’s wrong with *you*?” she asked Denny. “Why can’t *you* take it out? Is this some kind of trick?”

“No,” Denny told her. “I’m afraid it’ll electrocute me.”

“Oh? And what about *me*?” huffed the girl, getting back to her feet. “Don’t you care if *I* die?”

“You’re big,” he told her, “so you should know about things like this.”

“Well, thanks a lot,” said the girl. Rejoining her friend, she started walking away, then called back over her shoulder, “Why don’t you get a part in some horror movie? Like the starring role.”

Denny watched her disappear up the trail. “What a *jerk*,” he said to his cockroach friends. “I shouldn’t have told her the truth.”

“Yes, you should have,” Carlotta told him. “The truth may have saved her life.”

“Yeah, but I still don’t have my video game. Next time I’ll remember: *Never tell anybody the truth.*” And he started walking up the trail.

That was Carlotta’s limit. “Don’t just leave the thing lying exposed there,” she told Denny crossly. “At least cover it with a rock so that the next person who comes along won’t get killed.”

“No. It’s not my fault if people are dumb.”

But he’d hardly taken ten more steps when a man with very long legs and a walking stick came along, saw the toy, and flipped it out of the water with his stick.

Denny ran back. “That’s mine,” he told the man.

“Well,” said the fellow, putting the game into his pack, “you shouldn’t litter the forest with your toys. I’ll carry it out and toss it in a trash can for you.”

Without waiting for an argument, he started up the trail with long strides.

Denny was so angry he kicked a stone, a stone that didn’t budge because it reached down into the center of the earth. “Ow,” he cried, hopping up and down and clutching his toes.

Carlotta turned to Cornelius. “Well,” she said, “what do you think of the ‘young master’ *now*?”

Cornelius grinned. “He won’t die young, anyway.”

“No,” griped Carlotta, “because he lets others take the risks for him. He’s just like his father.”

“Shut up, Carlotta,” said Denny suddenly. “It’s not my fault if people are dumb. All I wanted was my game back. Anyway, why don’t you get lost? You’re not my friend any more.” And he stamped angrily up the trail.

Carlotta’s mouth dropped open. “Do you mean that, Denny? Do you want Cornelius and me to jump off and leave you all by yourself?”

“Cornelius can stay. He’s nice to me.”

Carlotta didn’t have to think twice. “I’m out of here,” she announced. She looked at Cornelius. “Are you staying or coming with me?”

“Can you find your way home alone?”

“*Can* I? Just watch!”

And with a flick of antennae and tail, Carlotta disappeared.

CHAPTER 7

Denny hadn’t gone much farther when suddenly he noticed a little dark cloud buzzing around his head. Flies! Waving his arms, he tried to scare them off. No good. He tried running away from them, but when he stopped they were still there.

“Who *are* they and what do they *want*?” he asked Cornelius.

Before the cockroach could answer, someone striding by said, “They’re gnats. Use your insect repellent.”

“I don’t have any,” said Denny, hurrying after the person. “Can you give me some?”

“Never use the stuff. Destroys the ozone layer.”

Denny trotted faster to keep up. “Then what should I do?”

“Climb,” said the fellow. “Fewer bugs on the hilltops.”

But when Denny looked at the hill he saw no way to squeeze past all the bushes and trees. “How do I get there?”

The man stopped. “Look,” he said, pointing at a tree on which was painted a red dot next to a white dot. “Those dots mark the trail up to Deer Ridge. Follow the red and white dots. Where are your parents, by the way?”

“They had to go to the bathroom.”

“When they get back, tell them to follow the dots,” the man said, and

hurried off.

Following the dots took Denny up a steep rocky trail toward the hilltop. With Carlotta gone, Cornelius put up all his feet and got comfortable on top of Denny's pack. "Climbing away from the gnats is better than using insect spray," he told Denny as Denny labored up the hill. "Insect spray gets in my eyes and feelers. I find it utterly repellent."

"Well, I'd use it if I had any," Denny told him. "I hate climbing hills worse than I hate cockroaches."

"Thanks for sharing that with me," said Cornelius, a tad drily.

Hurt as he was by Denny's bluntness, Cornelius still firmly believed the theory that youngsters should be encouraged to do and say whatever they liked. This helped kids develop into strong, independent adults. At least that's how it worked with *cockroach* children. *Human* children took so long to grow up, no cockroach had ever lived long enough to test the theory on them.

For the next hour Denny walked and climbed, climbed and walked, following the red and white dots. It wasn't easy. His hands, knees and face were scratched by branches and his whole head itched from gnat bites. Each time he looked up from the ground to locate the next dots, he tripped over a stone.

After a while Denny noticed his backpack weighed twice as much as when he'd started. Then it felt three times as heavy. Then four times.

Seating himself on a rock, he opened his pack, took out a can of soda, the jar of smoked oysters and a handful of crackers, and devoured them. When done, he tossed the empty containers on the ground and stomped the aluminum can flat.

"That's so no homeless person can find it and sit on it and get rich," he explained to Cornelius, walking on up the trail. "My dad says we don't want poor people getting rich sitting on their cans."

"Of course we don't," said Cornelius. But he was starting to wish Carlotta hadn't left. In all the time he'd lived in the child guidance clinic he'd never known a child quite as naughty as Denny. Something seemed to be completely missing in the boy and Cornelius wished Carlotta was there to help him figure out what it was.

CHAPTER 8

While Denny was hiking up the Deer Ridge Trail with Cornelius Cockroach on his collar and a small cloud of gnats around his head, a lot was happening on the fifty-first floor of Ivory Tower East. The police had been there since eleven o'clock that morning. TV crews and reporters had arrived even before that, and were setting up their lights and cameras and cleaning out their noses in time for the noon newscasts.

At last the moment came. A director wearing earphones pointed dramatically at a well-known journalist standing next to Denny's mother.

"Have you any idea where your son is, Mrs. Sanders?" the journalist asked her.

She stared at the man. "If I had any idea where Denny is, would we be standing here talking?"

"Right," he said. "Now, Mrs. Sanders, I understand that Denny's favorite video games are missing. Could this mean Denny *ran away* because his father went to prison yesterday?"

"Absolutely not."

"Might he have run away because you are *divorcing* his father?"

"Certainly not."

"Then you know of *no reason* why your son might have run away from home at this time?"

"None at all."

The TV reporter faced the camera and shook his head sadly. "Well, folks," he said, "it's starting to look more and more like a kidnapping. Seven telephone lines have been set up to receive ransom demands and Denny's frantic parents are offering a reward of *one thousand dollars* for information leading to their son's safe return.

"And now we go to Federal Prison where newsman Tom Roland is standing by with Solly Sanders, the missing boy's father. But first this."

After several commercials the camera opened on another TV journalist who was standing in bright sunshine on a tennis court next to Denny's father.

Solly Sanders was dressed in tennis shorts and shirt. He had a steel racquet in his hand, a towel around his neck, and a long cigar in his mouth. In the near distance TV viewers could see something that looked like a guard tower but was actually a high referees' chair.

"Well, Solly, I guess the awful thing that happened today can put even a guy like you off his game," the journalist said.

Solly looked puzzled. "Awful thing? This is Saturday, ain't it? Wall Street's closed."

"I'm talking about your *son's disappearance*. Can you tell the television audience what your tennis score was like after you learned the bad news?"

Sanders mopped his brow. "Not good, Tommy, not good. But like they say around here, it ain't over till it's over. We still got three more sets to play."

"I like your spirit," smiled Tommy Roland. "This must be a terrible time for 'El Sol': in prison for stock fraud and tax evasion, your kid kidnapped. Have you a word of advice for our TV viewers?"

"I sure do," said Solly Sanders. "Sell short."

"Good advice at any time," smiled the journalist, turning to the camera. "And now back to the studio."

CHAPTER 9

When Denny arrived at Deer Ridge it was mid-afternoon. Climbing up on a huge boulder, he looked out at the view of tree-covered hills and small lakes.

"Darn," he said to Cornelius. "Why didn't I hike to one of the lakes? Then I could have swum."

"Bugs," Cornelius reminded him. "Gnats love water."

That's when Denny looked around and realized the little cloud was gone. "I got rid of the gnats," he cried, jumping up and down. "I'm a genius."

"Dr. Einstein, I presume?"

At the sound of a human voice, Denny whirled. Standing on the boulder near him, holding bunches of twigs, was a man who looked like he hadn't shaved in a week. The stranger was dressed in baggy tan pants with lots of pockets, and a tan and white shirt.

"My name's not Einstein," Denny told him. "It's Denny. And I'm not a

doctor.”

“Glad to meet you, *Mr. Denny*. My name is legion,” said the man.

Denny squinted at him suspiciously. “I never heard of anybody with a name like that. What are you doing here?”

“Running away from home,” the man told him. “Right now I’m gathering sticks for a fire to cook my supper.”

Gathering sticks looked like fun, so Denny decided to gather some too. “I’m running away from home too, *Mr. Legion*,” he said, “but if you tell anybody on me, I’ll tell them you bothered me.”

“I won’t say a word, sport, so long as *you* promise not to bother *me*.”

Denny looked at the man like he was crazy. “Okay,” he agreed.

The man told Denny to pile the sticks between some stones that had been set in a circle on top of the boulder. The stones were blackened by fire, but cold.

“I’m seven,” Denny told the man as they looked for more sticks. “But I’ll be eight in two weeks.”

“Seven’s a fantastic age.”

“Why?”

“Because seven is the age of *reason*.” Picking up a thick stick, he broke it over his knee and tossed it on the pile. “A kid of seven has all the reasoning power he’ll ever have.”

“You mean I’m as smart as I’ll ever be?”

“Well, you still don’t have much *information*, or much *experience*. But you have all your ability to think and reason.”

Denny strutted around proudly. “Hear that, *Cornelius*? I’m smart as I’ll ever be.”

Unable to beg any god to help him, *Cornelius* muttered something unprintable.

By the time Denny and his new acquaintance had gathered enough sticks and branches, they both felt hungry.

“I’ll have to take you down the hill now,” the man told Denny. “Seriously. You can’t stay up here all night. I have very little food left, it’s going to rain, and there’s no place for you to sleep.”

“I bet you have lots of room,” Denny told him. “You just want to call my parents and make me go home.”

“I’ll show you what I mean.”

The man led Denny down the boulder to where an overhang of rock made a shallow cave. Under the overhang was an inflated air mattress and a blue nylon backpack. “You see, there’s only room for one person to sleep.”

"I can sleep on the air mattress," said Denny. "I slept on one before. The cave is plenty big enough for me."

"Then where will *I* sleep?"

"Anywhere you want."

"What *on*?"

"On anything. On the stone."

"Well, I'll tell you what," said the man, "my problem is that if I sleep outside I'll get wet in the rain. Sleeping wet on cold, wet stone won't do my arthritis any good at all."

"What's arthritis?"

"A painful inflammation of the joints, brought on by cold and damp. Which reminds me. Did you bring a jacket? It gets chilly up here at night."

"No, and I already *have* a mother," Denny told him.

"It's up to you. But I warn you, it'll be dark soon and my flashlight batteries won't last much longer. Either I take you down now and get back before dark, or we're both stuck here until tomorrow morning."

"That's *your* problem," Denny told him, climbing back up on top of the boulder and stretching out with his hands under his head. "I helped you find the sticks, so I get to stay."

"Fine," sighed the man, "but I only have one package of soup left and a few slices of bread."

"I like soup," Denny said, "and bread too."

The man looked at Denny lying on the rock and began to chuckle. He chuckled and chuckled.

"What are you laughing at?" Denny demanded.

"I was just thinking."

"Thinking what?"

"Lots of things. I was thinking that being seven is special for another reason too."

"Like what?"

"Seven is the age of *conscience*. When a person is seven, he should have a sense of right and wrong. He should *want* to do right. He should *want* to be good. He should *want* to let me take him down the hill so I don't get a killer attack of arthritis tonight."

"I have *plenty* of conscience," Denny assured him.

"Maybe so, but then it's still asleep. It's never been awakened."

"How do you know?"

"I can tell. I bet you never even cry."

"I don't," Denny told him proudly. "I'm made of stone, like my father."

Legion laughed. "Good. Then you can sleep outside tonight. Rain can't hurt a stone."

"You're crazy," said Denny. "I'm a little kid. You can't make a little kid sleep outside in the pouring rain."

The man sighed. "No, I can't, because I have a conscience. Seeing you there in the morning, dripping wet with a high fever, would make me feel terrible. So let me take you down the hill before it gets dark."

"No," said Denny. "I'm staying right here."

Sitting in Denny's collar, Cornelius listened to the conversation in a kind of despair. "Oh, Carlotta," he moaned softly, "You had such good sense. I wish you were here."

As the words fell from his tongue, Cornelius heard a gentle laugh. Carlotta! There she was, standing on a nearby rock. He was about to call out a greeting, when Carlotta put a feeler over her mouth. "Shhh." Then she beckoned him to join her.

"Carlotta!" whispered Cornelius when they were together again. "You've come back."

"I've been here all the time," she admitted. "On his sock. I love Denny like a son. No matter how stupidly he behaves, I have to watch over him and see that he's safe."

"Denny's seven and his conscience is still asleep." Cornelius told her. "If it doesn't wake up soon, he could grow up to be a monster."

Carlotta smiled sadly. "I've been thinking, Cornelius," she said. "Maybe it's better *not* having a conscience. What good has a conscience ever done *me*? I worry, suffer, and have regrets. I nag and criticize Denny, and he hates me for it."

"I'm *sure* he doesn't hate you. He's just reacting like a child."

"Well, then look at Denny's father. He certainly hasn't got a conscience. Still, everybody admires him because he's rich. When he gets out of jail he'll go off to play golf in Palm Springs or the French Riviera. But if he had a *conscience*, he'd never have a peaceful night's sleep thinking of all the crimes he's committed and people he ruined. So tell me, Cornelius, what *good* is a conscience if it just makes its owner miserable?"

Cornelius shook his head. "When you put it that way, I don't know either." He glanced over at Denny who had hidden himself behind some trees and was stuffing his face with the rest of his food, not sharing it with his new friend. Denny would sleep very well tonight, Cornelius was sure.

"You're right," he said to Carlotta. "A conscience is about as useful as a drop of glue on your foot."

When Denny finished his meal, he wadded up the wrappers and threw them off the boulder because now that they were empty he didn't mind if Legion saw what he'd been eating. Then, taking his Swiss army knife from his pack, he selected the largest, sharpest blade.

"Where's he going now?" asked Cornelius anxiously, as Denny started down the boulder.

Zippering over the rock, the cockroaches followed Denny down to the shelter where they saw him kneel on Legion's air mattress. The knife rose and fell. Pow, poof, rip, pow, poof, rip. In a few seconds the air mattress was completely ruined.

"Oh!" cried Carlotta. "Look what he's done."

While the horrified roaches watched, Denny pressed out all the remaining air until the mattress was perfectly flat.

For a long moment Carlotta and Cornelius stood there too stunned to speak.

"I don't think Denny's conscience will wake up during *my* lifetime," Cornelius observed at last. "Or during *his* for that matter."

"Well, maybe we should be happy for him," said Carlotta. "If by *not* having a conscience a person can make lots of money, some day this boy could be very, very rich — even a billionaire, like his dad."

CHAPTER 10

The man didn't see the empty food wrappers or his ruined mattress right away. As the evening came on he was busy getting the fire to burn and heating water in a pan. When it was hot, he stirred in a packet of instant soup and poured out a cup for Denny.

"That's dinner," he told him. "A cup of soup apiece and two slices of bread."

But Denny wasn't feeling hungry at all since his secret pigout. He had other plans for his soup. Just then a chilly wind blew over him and he wished he'd brought a sweater. "I'm cold," he told the man.

"Ha!" said Carlotta triumphantly to herself.

The man looked up. Black clouds had covered the sky and the wind was gusting. "My jacket's in the cave. You can wear that."

Denny set his cup on the rock and went to get the jacket. It was so large it covered him from neck to knees.

Carlotta and Cornelius were happy for the extra insulation. "Ask Mr. Legion why he ran away from home," Cornelius whispered in Denny's ear, as he and Carlotta hunkered down in the warm collar.

"I was *going* to," said Denny. "Shut up, Cornelius."

"Pardon me for living," sniffed Cornelius, but he winked at Carlotta, who giggled. Denny was getting so rotten he was becoming a joke.

As Denny sat down again, he "accidentally" knocked over his cup with his foot, spilling soup all over the boulder. Next, he "accidentally" stepped on his pieces of bread. "I'm sorry, Mr. Legion," he said.

"That's okay, Denny," said the man, handing Denny the rest of his own soup and bread, "but there's no more food. We'll have to pull our belts a little tighter."

As the evening got colder they moved nearer the fire.

"Legion, why did you run away from home?" Denny asked. "Don't you miss your family?"

"Sure I do. I'll bet your family misses you, too."

"Naw, they're so busy they haven't even noticed I'm gone."

"Your parents are probably worried sick. First thing tomorrow I'm taking you down the hill. I should have done it this afternoon."

"I won't go," Denny told him. "I'm not going to live in California."

"Is your family moving there?"

"My mom and I are moving to Beverly Hills. She and my dad are getting a divorce."

"California's okay," said the man. "Beverly Hills is a conscience wasteland, but then what place *isn't* nowadays?"



“What kind of job do you have?” Denny asked him.

“No job at the moment. I *was* working on Wall Street, in the stock market.”

“Did it crash on you?”

The man looked at Denny in surprise. “You know about that?” Then he shook his head. “No, the crash didn’t get me. You might say I was caught in a large net.”

“Like tunas?”

“Right. Only I wasn’t a tuna. I was a dolphin — or maybe just a fluke — who got caught with the tunas. Even so, they’re putting me in the can too.” The man laughed. “That’s a pretty good joke,” he told Denny. “They’re putting me in the can too.”

Denny didn’t smile, but he knew what Legion had meant. Very intently he asked, “Are you going to jail?”

“Well, you *have* reached the age of reason,” smiled the man. “Yes,” he told Denny, “I am. I have to report to the authorities on Monday.”

“How long will you be in jail?”

“Five years. But then I’m not the *big* fish. The big fish will probably be out of jail in a couple of months.”

His words made Denny’s heart go thump. “Who’s the ‘big fish?’”

The man glanced at Denny. The boy was watching his face so intently it puzzled him.

“The big fish,” he replied after a moment, “is a very greedy guy who has a billion dollars and can afford some pretty good lawyers. To get a lighter jail sentence, he informed on a lot of other dishonest people — little people I worked with. When *they* got caught, I was scooped up in the same net.”

“But if *you* didn’t do anything wrong, why are they putting you in jail too?”

“Because I’d *seen* cheating and fraud being done by my co-workers, but didn’t report them to the police.”

“Why didn’t you?” asked Denny, stunned by such obvious stupidity. “Then they wouldn’t send you to jail!”

“Because I don’t like tattling on other people.”

“More than you don’t like going to jail?”

“Well, we’ll see, won’t we?” the man chuckled wryly. “I’ll have five years to decide which is worse, betraying my crooked colleagues or spending five years in the clink.”

For a while neither of them spoke. “It’s funny we ran away to the same

place,” Denny said after a while. “I ran here because I followed some people.”

The man thought a moment. “I don’t know why I came here,” he told Denny. “I’ve never been hiking or camping in my life. Maybe I just wanted to fill my lungs with fresh air for the last time and try to figure out why I spent so much of my life making money to buy stuff that never made me happy anyway.”

“You should buy a video player. *That* would make you happy.”

The man chuckled. “Does yours make *you* happy?”

“It fell in the water,” Denny said. Then he considered the question. “I guess I was happy when I was playing it, but not all *that* happy. When you stop playing, the things you worry about grab you.”

“That’s my point exactly.”

For a while the two sat and looked into the fire, thinking their own thoughts. At last Denny asked, “Legion, do you really have to go to jail on Monday? It’s so soon.”

“Jail on Monday,” replied his friend, “without passing GO, without collecting two hundred dollars.” Reaching over, he mussed Denny’s hair.

“Do you have children?” Denny asked him.

The man seemed surprised at the question. “In fact, I have a little boy just your age. He’ll be eight next month, only I won’t be seeing him on his birthday.”

“Because you’ll be in jail?”

“Because he’s moving to Seattle with his mother. I’ll miss him a lot.”

“Oh,” said Denny, looking back into the fire which had burned down to embers. “Do you think the big fish that almost got away is happy?”

The man laughed. “Well, he has a billion dollars waiting for him when he gets out of jail, and no conscience to bother him. Maybe if some day he saw the *results* of his greed — actually met the people he caused to lose their jobs and reputations and families — maybe his conscience would wake up. But he doesn’t see anything he doesn’t want to see. He lives in an ivory tower and never looks down. Do *you* think he’s happy?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m not sure what happiness *is*. Do *you* know what it is?”

“That’s a good question. Someone once said, to be happy you need three things: someone to love, something interesting to do, and something to look forward to. So, what about it? Do *you* think the ‘big fish’ is happy by that definition?”

Denny stared into the fire. “I don’t know, but I *hope* so.”

Denny's unexpected reply made the man look at the boy more closely. Strange, he was thinking, this kid not only *looks* like a young Solly Sanders, a little while ago he was even *acting* like him — rotten!

Could he possibly be Solly Sanders' kid?

CHAPTER 11

On the fifty-first floor of Ivory Tower East, the TV reporters were prepping their sensational late-breaking news story for the evening newscast. At the same time dozens of journalists were gathered in front of the jail.

Facing the camera, one of the reporters outside the jail said excitedly, "There's word tonight that the young victim of the alleged brutal bus station attack may have been Dennis Sanders, the missing son of 'El Sol' Sanders, the jailed stock-market billionaire."

Just then the camera showed a crowd of police officers coming out of a door, pulling along a man whose hands were shackled behind his back. They dove into the shoving crowd of reporters.

One TV reporter waded through the throng and shouted at the man, "You told the police the boy you allegedly molested might have been the Sanders kid. Is that right?" He thrust the microphone into the suspect's bearded face.

"I didn't molest anyone."

"Did you tell the police the kid was Dennis Sanders so you could get the reward?"

"The reward?" The two blue eyes opened wide. "What reward? Is there a reward?"

"One thousand dollars for information leading to the return of the Sanders kid."

"Okay, I said it for the reward. Make a note of that, please."

As he was shoved into a police car, one officer put his hand on the man's red hair and pushed him down so that his head wouldn't damage the door frame.

The camera turned back to the reporter. "They say this street musician who calls himself Red, keeps asking for his banjo, which he says is a Vega.

CBS News has learned tonight that Vegas are considered by some experts to be the Stradivarius of five-string banjos. Stradivarius violins cost on average one million dollars. Stay tuned — no pun intended — for more news on this breaking story of kidnapping and molestation, and for updates on the mystery of the missing Stradivarius. Now this.”

That evening the entire city was watching the TV news to learn the latest on the billionaire’s missing son. “It’s better than the soaps,” many were saying.

In Willowgrove Project B, thousands of cockroaches came out of the walls and drains to watch the eleven o’clock news.

“Wait a minute!” said Rhoda Roach, seeing a picture of Denny on the screen. “Isn’t that *Carlotta*’s boy?”

“I think you’re right,” nodded her friend Rena. “I wonder where *Carlotta* is. They say she stood up some good-looking roach from Panama who was taking her dinner-dancing this evening.”

“I guess she’s dancing to a different tune tonight,” chuckled Rhoda. “Poor *Carlotta*. She’ll never get married. She’s much too independent and head-strong.”

“And too fastidious. Guys hate that. By the way, where’s that roach from Panama staying while he’s in town?”

“Forget him,” Rhoda told her, wiggling her feelers. “His dance card is already full for the week.”

CHAPTER 12

It started to rain. Large drops pit-patted onto the grey boulder. Others fell sizzling into the fire.

“You go on down,” the man told Denny. “There’s a blanket underneath the air mattress. Wrap up in it and get some sleep.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll make sure the fire goes out, and clean up our litter. See you in a bit.”

His words reminded Denny about the soda can and wrappers he’d tossed off the rock. He decided to go down and hide them before Legion saw them.

When Denny reached the cave he felt the flattened mattress, but couldn’t remember why he’d done it. He only remembered he’d been angry and wanted

to hurt someone. Now he wasn't angry any more, but the damage was done.

Stuffing the trash under the mattress, he lay down on top of it and covered himself and everything else with the blanket. If he was lucky, Legion wouldn't notice what he'd done until the next morning, and by then Denny would be gone.

The rain fell harder. Denny heard Legion running, but he didn't enter the cave. What was he doing?

Suddenly a huge flash of lightning turned the night to day. In the brief flash, Denny saw Legion sitting against the boulder, his feet drawn up, trying to stay dry. But Denny could tell Legion's face and clothes were drenched.

"You can come in if you want," Denny called.

"I'm okay," the man called back. "You get some sleep."

"If you want to come in, I don't care."

Inside Denny's collar Cornelius turned to Carlotta, "I think that's an offer Legion can't refuse."

After a long pause, Legion said, "You sure?"

Denny moved over to make room. But as soon as his friend sat down on the mattress, he could tell it had no air in it.

"It must have sprung a leak," he told Denny. "Sorry."

Denny yawned. "That's okay, Legion."

The minutes went by and Denny grew sleepier and sleepier. As he dozed off he leaned more and more to the side, and soon was fast asleep in his friend's lap.

By this time Carlotta and Cornelius were curled up snugly in Denny's collar. "Oh!" cried Carlotta, "I just remembered I had a date to go dancing tonight. I hope the guy wasn't too upset when I didn't show."

"You'll never know," Cornelius told her.

"Why not?"

"Because you're never going to see him again."

"Sez who?" laughed Carlotta.

"Sez me," said Cornelius. "And now, as Denny would say, 'Shut up and go to sleep.'"

And Carlotta, smiling, did.

CHAPTER 13

Tired from his long day of walking and climbing, Denny slept soundly, so the night passed quickly for him. But it passed very slowly for the man he called Legion, whose real name was Ted Zifrin.

When the rain stopped and the air grew cooler, the rock grew cold. Sitting all night in one position with the sleeping boy in his arms had made Zifrin's joints ache. He wished he could reach his aspirins, but didn't want to move and awaken Denny.

So he sat very still, thinking about his life and what a mess he'd made of it. As the hours passed, the joints of his arms and shoulders, hips and ankles, started to swell. When morning came, he felt like the Tin Woodsman in the Oz story: all his joints were stuck!

Watching the sky grow light, Ted Zifrin was almost glad he couldn't move. If he couldn't move, he couldn't report to jail on Monday. He wished he could sit there through summer's end, into the autumn, and watch the autumn leaves turn red and gold.

He looked at the sleeping boy. How ironic. He actually felt sorry for the son of a billionaire, a billionaire whose lies had sent him to prison.

When he thought of his own kid, Bobby, and of Marsha, his wife, Zifrin was very sad. Marsha felt he should have turned in his co-workers when he saw they were cheating, or turned state evidence. If he'd followed her advice, he wouldn't be on his way to jail. Well, maybe she'd been right, but a man couldn't do what a man couldn't do.

The sky grew lighter. After a while Denny stirred, opened his eyes, and sat up.

"Where am I?" he asked. Then he remembered. "I'm hungry, Legion," he said, getting to his feet.

"Well, I'd like to get you some breakfast," Zifrin told him, "but the truth is, I can't move."

Denny stared at him. "Why not?"

"Arthritis." Trying to move one arm, he winced in pain.

Denny knelt down and looked into his friend's face. "You've got to move, Legion," he cried urgently. "You've *got* to."

"I can't Denny. My joints are stuck." Glancing sideways, Zifrin saw that the mattress had been badly torn. "Good grief! What happened to the mattress?"

Denny felt his mind whirling. His heart pumped fast and his breath went in and out rapidly. "You've got to get up, Legion," he cried, "C'mon. *Try*." Frantically he tugged at his friend's arm, trying to pull him to his feet.

"Ow," cried Zifrin. "Don't Denny. I can't move. Listen, could you get me two aspirins out of that box?"

Denny fumbled in the box and found the bottle of aspirins but couldn't open the "child-proof" lid. Neither could Zifrin, whose fingers were too stiff and sore.

Denny looked in anguish at his crippled friend, wanting desperately to run away. Why hadn't he run away that night, before seeing Legion lying in pain, the result of his stupid selfishness? Now was too late; having seen him, he had to help him.

"It's my fault," Denny told him. "*I* cut the mattress. I'm sorry, Legion. I didn't mean to hurt you."

As Denny said this, he felt something terrible happening in his chest. It made him cough and choke. Suddenly a great sound ripped from his lungs. Then another. His lungs filled and refilled with air, like trees heaving with wind before a storm. And then he started to cry great drops of rain.

Denny's tears ran down his face and down his neck. Carlotta and Cornelius, both awake and listening in astonishment to the conversation, started feeling damp inside Denny's collar. Carlotta tasted the wet. Salt!

"These are tears," she cried. "Denny! Your conscience has awakened! Go with it, boy!"

"Gosh help you, boy," Cornelius shouted in Denny's ear.

"Why are you telling him that?" demanded Carlotta.

"Because with a conscience like that, he's in for a lifetime of regret, self reproach and misery."

"No," said Carlotta firmly. "I figured it out last night. Humans — like cockroaches — *need* to feel miserable at times. If they don't, they never know how good happiness feels. Misery and happiness are two sides of the same coin, like rain and sunshine, or work and vacation. You can't really enjoy one until you've experienced the other."

"How do you know this?" Cornelius asked her.

Carlotta blushed a deep brown. "Because I was so utterly miserable without you yesterday," she whispered, "and so incredibly happy curled up with you last night."

"No regrets?"

"None"

Cornelius caressed Carlotta's head with the tips of his feelers. "Me neither."

Just then their happy moment was interrupted by a tremendous jolt. Denny, who had started to run, had fallen.

"Denny," cried Carlotta, "I hope you're not running away."

"I'm running to get help for Legion," he told her, picking himself up. "But when I look for the red and white dots, I trip over stones."

"You run and we'll look," Carlotta told him. "I'll tell you if the trail turns right or left."

"Thanks, Carlotta," said Denny, starting to run again. "I figured you'd be back."

"Because you know I *love* you?" Carlotta cooed.

"Because I know you love *Cornelius*," shouted Denny, with a laugh.

It was early Sunday morning and all the way down the trail no hikers were to be found. At last Denny arrived at the bottom of the hill. To his great joy he saw a ranger station. A man wearing a khaki uniform stood in the doorway. Denny ran to him.

The ranger listened in astonishment as Denny blurted out his story, then got on the phone. "We need an ambulance and a mountain rescue team," he said into the receiver.

After finishing his call, the ranger turned to Denny. "What's your name, young man?"

"Denny Sanders."

The ranger stared. "You're not *whatsisname's* kid, are you?"

"I'm Sol Sanders' kid."

"Good grief! Half the East Coast is looking for you. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," said Denny, "but Mr. Legion isn't. I hope the ambulance is going to hurry."

"Don't worry about that," said the ranger. Picking up the phone again, he dialed the sheriff's office. "Sam," he said, "I've got Solly Sanders' boy here — yeah, the billionaire's son. His kidnapper's got himself stuck on Deer Ridge. An emergency vehicle's on the way. Get over here fast."

As the ranger talked, Denny signalled frantically, trying to interrupt. When at last the man put the phone down, Denny blurted, "Mr. Legion didn't

kidnap me.”

“Don’t worry about it, son, we’ll bring him in. Have you eaten breakfast?” Suddenly he paused, hit his forehead with his fist, and grinned, “I can’t believe I’m talking to a billionaire’s kid.”

“That’s not important,” Denny told him urgently. “What’s important is that Mr. Legion did *not* kidnap me.”

“Okay, okay. Don’t worry about it.”

The ambulance arrived. Four persons got out. After speaking with the ranger and Denny, they double-timed off up the Deer Ridge Trail. A moment later the sheriff arrived.

“I better go with them,” he said. “No telling if this weirdo has a gun. You stay here with the boy. Don’t let him out of your sight. I sent one of my deputies to bring him an Egg McMuffin.”

“Yuck,” grimaced Denny.

“Oh?” said the sheriff. “What would you prefer?”

“Smoked salmon on an onion bagel. And one for Mr. Legion too. He didn’t have any breakfast either, and he shared his soup and bread with me.”

“Oh, he did, did he? Well, maybe the judge will take that into account before we put him in jail and throw away the key.”

“But he didn’t *kidnap* me,” cried Denny. “Honest!”

The two men exchanged a look. “That’s the syndrome, all right,” said the sheriff. “Hostages start liking their kidnappers. Well,” he sighed, “call the Deli. See if they’ll send over a bagel with some smoked salmon on it. Put it on your expense account. I’ll be down in a bit.”

“Order one for Legion too,” Denny told the ranger. “With cream cheese and chives.” Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out a wad of bills. “I’ll pay for them.”

Before going out, the sheriff knelt down in front of Denny. “Gimme a break, kid,” he said. “Do you really want us to believe this guy wasn’t planning to ransom you for a couple million bucks?”

“Legion doesn’t even know who I am,” Denny swore. “I never told him my last name.”

But a while later, when they brought “Legion” down from the mountain on a stretcher and learned who he really was, Ted Zifrin admitted he’d known almost from the start who Denny was.

Denny couldn’t believe his ears. “Legion,” he cried, trotting along behind the stretcher as they carried his friend to the ambulance, “you knew my dad got you caught in the net and you were nice to me anyway?”

“Sure. You’re a good kid. And by the way, thanks for the lox and bagel.”

“But they think you kidnapped me.” Denny hopped up and down nervously as the stretcher was pushed inside the vehicle.

“Well,” came his friend’s voice from inside, “you’ll have to tell them different.”

“I’m trying to,” Denny called in, “but they don’t believe me.”

“Then keep telling them till they do.”

A moment later the ambulance turned out of the parking lot onto the highway, its siren wailing.

While Denny sat in the sheriff’s office waiting for his mother to arrive, Carlotta and Cornelius congratulated him on the awakening of his conscience.

“From now on you’ll always do your best to know right from wrong, and you’ll be deliriously happy when you do good,” Carlotta told him.

“And suffer horrible pangs of conscience when you do anything that hurts others,” added Cornelius, who was enjoying talking fussily and righteously, like Carlotta.

“Big deal,” Denny told them. “So who needs a lousy conscience anyway? I’m more miserable about what I did to Legion than I’ve ever been in my life.”

“Denny,” Carlotta said, “if I could wave a magic wand and make your conscience go back to sleep, would you like that?”

Denny thought a moment. “No,” he said. “Am I crazy?”

“No,” chuckled Carlotta. “No one would ever want to give up his conscience, because people usually pay a *big price* for theirs. Deep down you surely know that having one will make everything in your life more *meaningful* and *interesting*.”

“Maybe,” Denny told her, “but that lox and bagel was the most *uninteresting* lox and bagel I ever ate.”

Carlotta looked around in surprise. “What do you expect in a place like this?” she asked him. “Kosher?”

CHAPTER 14

Driving back to the city in the rear seat of the limo, Joan Sanders explained to her son that she didn’t appreciate what he’d put her through. “I was very, very upset,” she told Denny.

“Why?”

“*Why?*” She turned and looked at him in disbelief. “Doesn’t it occur to you that I have better things to do on a Saturday night than sit home waiting for some kidnapper to call with a ransom demand?”

“Did anyone call?”

“No,” said Mrs. Sanders.

“Well, if the kidnappers called and asked for a million dollars, would you give it to them?”

“Of course I would have,” replied his mother.

“What if they asked for two million?”

“I’d have given them two million. What do you think I am?”

“And ten million? Would you pay ten million to get me back?”

Mrs. Sanders thought a minute. “No,” she said at last, “but I would have prayed for your safe return.”

“That’s good,” said Denny with relief. “I was afraid you were crazy.”

“Not at all,” said his mother. “I don’t know if you know it, Dennis, but the fellow who bothered you in the bus station is trying to claim the reward I offered for your return. However, I’m not crazy enough to give it to him.”

Denny looked puzzled. “I wasn’t bothered by anyone in the bus station.”

“Of course you were. By that awful man with the red beard. Did he touch you?”

“You mean *Red?*” Denny turned and stared at his mother. “My friend *Red?*”

“Yes, Red. The fellow with the missing Stradivarius.”

“You mean Red who plays the five-string banjo?”

“Whatever.”

“Red never touched me,” Denny told her. Then he remembered that the last time he saw Red a policeman was arresting him. “I just didn’t want to give him any money. That’s all.”

“Of *course* you didn’t. Why should a little boy give money to a grown man?”

“I promised him ten dollars,” Denny explained, “only he never asked me for it. I was afraid he would. Mom, I have to tell the police Red never touched me.”

“Fine,” said Mrs. Sanders. “Tell them anything you want, but it’ll be a cold day in West Palm Beach before I give a thousand dollars to that fiddler.”

For a long time neither spoke. The limo entered the Sunday afternoon traffic that flowed across the bridge into the city.

“I’m going to a charity ball for animals this evening,” Denny’s mother told him after a while. “You and Chantal will share a can of *choucroute garni*. You like that.”

“Do we have any Dijon mustard?”

“Of course.”

Denny squiggled down in his seat. “I had a yucky lox and bagel and cream cheese for breakfast,” he told his mother.

“Well,” said Mrs. Sanders, nodding her head knowingly, “that’s exactly what happens when little boys run away from home.”

CHAPTER 15

The next day Johnny, the Sanders’ chauffeur, drove Denny to the minimum security prison outside the city.

“My dad never *ever* had time to talk to me my whole life,” Denny told the driver. “Maybe this time he will.”

“You can bet the family farm on it,” said Johnny.

Father and son met in a large, comfortable room with over-stuffed armchairs and tables with magazines on them. Outside the windows, inmates in white shorts were playing tennis.

Solly Sanders ruffled Denny’s hair while glancing at his five thousand-dollar Rolex watch. As he did so, it crossed his mind that the safest place to wear such an expensive timepiece was in prison. Out on the street guys would mug you for it. “I have twenty whole minutes,” he told Denny. “What’s on your mind, son?”

“Nothing,” Denny replied. “They said I had to come.”

Denny had intended to look his father in the eye on this visit, but discovered he still couldn’t do it. Even in prison, he felt intimidated by his father.

“You must have *something* to say to your dad,” frowned the Wall Street wizard. “You could at least ask me how I like the food in here.”

Denny stared at the floor. “Well,” he said finally, “I guess I want to ask you if you’re happy.”

At this unexpected question, Denny’s father burst out laughing. “Happy!” he exclaimed. “Denny, I’m locked up! Locked up with four lousy tennis

courts and a swimming pool the size of a Jacuzzi.” He frowned thoughtfully. “Maybe it *is* a Jacuzzi.” Then he continued, “I’ll admit they have some good gym equipment here, but *no golf*. Not even nine lousy holes. Denny,” he cried, “what the hell do I pay *taxes* for?”

“I thought that why you’re here,” Denny said. “Because you *didn’t* pay your taxes.” But he didn’t look in his father’s eyes when he said it.

“Don’t worry about me being happy,” Sanders told him, “so long as I don’t punch a guard or knife a fellow inmate, I’ll be out in a month or two.” And he laughed, “Ha, ha, ha.”

“And you’ll have a billion dollars waiting for you.”

His father smiled. “That’s right. Kinda makes the whole thing worth while. Guess I *am* happy.”

“Would you be twice as happy if you had *two* billion dollars waiting?” Denny asked him.

“Of course I would.”

“And *ten* times as happy if you had *ten* billion?”

“Is there some point to these questions?” asked his father, glancing at his watch.

“You’ll even be happy when me and Mom go to Beverly Hills to live?”

“Oh,” said his father. “*That’s* what’s bothering you. You think I’ll let you guys go without any money. Don’t worry. Your mother gets twenty million in the divorce settlement. If I ever die, you inherit everything, the whole ball of wax.”

But Denny looked glum. “What’s the matter?” his father asked, glancing at his watch. “I’ve got a court reserved for three o’clock. C’mon, tell me what’s eating you.”

“It isn’t important. Go play.”

“Hell no. We still have seven minutes. What’s on your mind?”

“I was wondering how much consciences cost.”

“*Consciences?*” Solly squinted at his son’s face. Was something wrong with the kid’s mind that he should ask such a stupid question? “Nobody can buy a conscience,” he told Denny. “You’re either born with one or you’re not.”

“A friend of mine says some people pay a big price for their conscience. You’ve got a billion dollars. Would you give that much to have one?”

Sanders threw back his head and laughed heartily. “No, Denny. Even if I could buy one for *ten dollars*, I wouldn’t. Why? Because a conscience isn’t worth *anything*. You think your old man would be one of the richest men in the country today if he had a conscience? No way, Jose.”

“But this friend of mine — her name’s Carlotta — says that having a conscience and doing good things for people makes life more interesting and happy. I believe her.”

“How would *you* know,” laughed his father. “What good have *you* ever done anybody?”

“I just know,” Denny told him. “If I can get my pal Red out of jail I know I’ll be happier than I ever was in my whole life.”

“Red? That Commie in the train depot? The loser violinist? Which reminds me, I put a million bucks in your college fund — for tuition, books and...,” he winked at Denny, “girlfriends. You’re enrolled at Yale when you’re eighteen, okay? So tell me, have you decided what you want to do with your life? Will it be Wall Street, like your dad?”

“No,” said Denny. “I already told you a long time ago. I want to invent the super-strongest aspirin in the world.”

Solly struck himself on the forehead. “Yeah, that’s right. I remember now. And you want to sell the formula to some drug company for a zillion bucks.” Sanders grinned. “*That’s* my boy talking. You’re a chip off the old block.”

“Only I changed my mind,” Denny told him. “I don’t want to sell the formula. I want to be a doctor when I grow up and give the aspirins free to a friend of mine. He’s hurting real bad in his joints, and it’s all my fault.”

“Give the aspirins away *free*?” Solly stared at his son in disbelief. “You think it’ll make you *happy* to give something away *free*?”

“Yes, if it stops my friend from hurting.”

“Happier than you’d be with a zillion dollars?”

“I think so.”

“You’re nuts,” laughed Sol Sanders. “Who’s this friend of yours anyway?”

“His name’s Legion.”

“He told you his name was legion?”

“That’s what he said.”

Sol Sanders shook his head. “Legion isn’t a person’s name,” he told Denny. “Somebody was kidding you. If a guy says his name is legion, he means he’s just one of many, one of thousands, even of millions. Legion is written with a small letter “l,” not a capital.”

“Oh,” said Denny. “I didn’t know that.”

“So let’s run it by one more time,” said Solly. “When you grow up, Denny my son, what are you going to do with your award-winning, all-new, super-strength aspirins?”

Denny raised his head and for the first time in his life looked his father straight in the eye. "I'm giving them away free to a friend of mine who's hurting real bad," he said. "His name is legion."

CHAPTER 16

"So how did it go downtown?" Carlotta asked Denny one afternoon a few days later when he returned from the police station looking very excited.

"You should have come," Denny told her breathlessly. "It was great. I said I wouldn't make a complaint against Red, so they had to let him go. Did you see me on TV?"

"I'll watch you at eleven. Did they ever find Red's banjo?"

"No, but some guy who saw Red on TV last week sent him a Stradivarius, so he's going to take violin lessons."

"Is your mother giving him the reward?"

"No, but Red says he'll make the money for lessons by being a guest on TV talk shows. He already signed three contracts."

"What about Legion?" Carlotta asked. "Have you been in touch with him?"

"Yes, only his name's not really Legion," Denny told her, "it's Ted. Ted's feeling a little better, but he's still in the hospital. They say the judge may let him go free because he's suffering enough, and because he was good to me. Also, his wife decided not to move to Seattle."

"That's great! I'm just sorry he's isn't all well yet."

"I know. I talked to him on the phone. Ted says I should hurry up and invent my super-strong aspirins, but I told him I'm only in the second grade. I hope he can wait until I'm a doctor."

"Does he have a choice? He can't even move."

Denny laughed. Carlotta could be so funny sometimes when she wasn't being fussy. "Are you coming to California with me?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, Denny." Then Carlotta blushed. "Denny, you're the first to know: Cornelius popped the question last night and I said yes."

Denny clapped his hands. "That's great, Carlotta," he cried. "When are you guys getting married?"

“The problem is *where*, not when. You see, I was born in Willowgrove Project B, and I want to get married there, where all my friends and relatives are. But Cornelius is an uptown, upscale cockroach. He says Willowgrove is tacky. And he’s right about that.”

“Well, wherever the wedding is, I want to come,” Denny told her. “I hope it’s in Willowgrove, though. I hear half the people who live there have guns.”

Carlotta sighed. “Denny, you know your mother would never let you to come to a city housing project to watch two cockroaches get married.”

Denny nodded. “You’re right,” he admitted, “she never would. But I’ve got to be at your wedding, Carlotta. It’s because of me you met Cornelius in the first place.”

“I know. We’ll have to figure out a way.”

So Denny thought and thought very hard. Suddenly it came to him. “Carlotta!” he cried. “Have the wedding right here in *our* apartment. You can invite all the cockroaches from Willowgrove and I’ll send out for the food and stuff.”

“Fantastic!” cried Carlotta. “When my family sees the view from your terrace, they’ll never want to leave. Your father will have lots of company when he gets home from the slammer.”

“Okay, but after the wedding you and Cornelius have to come to Beverly Hills with me,” Denny told her. “Ted says it’s a conscience wasteland. Maybe mine’ll get lost if you aren’t there to remind me.”

“It’s your responsibility now,” chuckled Carlotta. “And anyway, Cornelius and I want to start a family.”

“Then start it out there.”

“But they may not have our species of roach in California.”

“Then get busy! Have a zillion babies so that every kid out there will have a cockroach of his own, like I do.”

Carlotta smiled fondly. “And so every *cockroach* out there will have a *kid* of her own, like *I* do.”

“Yes. And I’ll be able to tell everybody I meet: this fussy old cockroach is my best friend in the whole world. Her name is Carlotta!”

THE END