

CHAPTER ONE OF
The LOST BOY
BY DAVID PELZER

Read this chapter to complete attached homework!

W

inter 1970, Daly City, California—I'm alone. I'm hungry and I'm shivering in the dark. I sit on top of my hands at the bottom of the stairs in the garage. My head is tilted backward. My hands became numb hours ago. My neck and shoulder muscles begin to throb. But that's nothing new—I've learned to turn off the pain.

I'm Mother's prisoner.

I am nine years old, and I've been living like this for years. Every day it's the same thing. I wake up from sleeping on an old army cot in the garage, perform the morning chores, and if I'm lucky, eat leftover breakfast cereal from my brothers. I run to school, steal food, return to "The House" and am forced to throw up in the toilet bowl to prove that I didn't commit the crime of stealing any food.

I receive beatings or play another one of her "games," perform afternoon chores, then sit at the bottom of the stairs until I'm summoned to complete the evening chores. Then, and only if I have completed all of my chores on time, and if I have not committed any "crimes," I may be fed a morsel of food.

My day ends only when Mother allows me to sleep on the army cot, where my body curls up in my meek effort to retain any body heat. The only pleasure in my life is when I sleep. That's the only time I can escape my life. I love to dream.

Weekends are worse. No school means no food and more time at "The House." All I can do is try to imagine myself away—somewhere, anywhere—from "The House." For years I have been the outcast of "The Family." As long as I can remember I have always been in trouble and have "deserved" to be punished. At first I thought I was a bad boy. Then I thought Mother was sick because she only acted differently when my brothers were not around and my father was away at work. But somehow I always knew Mother and I had a private relationship. I also realized that for some reason I have been Mother's sole target for her unexplained rage and twisted pleasure.

I have no home. I am a member of no one's family. I know deep inside that I do not now, nor will I ever, deserve any love, attention or even recognition as a human being. I am a child called "It."

I'm all alone inside.

Upstairs the battle begins. Since it's after four in the afternoon, I know both of my parents are drunk. The yelling starts. First the name-calling, then the swearing. I count the seconds before the subject turns to me—it always does. The sound of Mother's voice makes my insides torn. "What do you mean?" she shrieks at my father, Stephen. "You think I treat 'The Boy' bad? Do you?" Her voice then turns ice cold. I can imagine her pointing a finger at my father's face. "You . . . listen . . . to . . . me. You . . . have no idea what 'It's' like. If you think I treat 'It' that bad . . . then . . . 'It' can live somewhere else."

I can picture my father—who, after all these years, still tries somewhat to stand up for me—swirling the liquor in his glass, making the ice from his drink rattle. "Now calm down," he begins. "All I'm trying to say is . . . well . . . no child deserves to live like that. My God, Roerva, you treat . . . dogs better than . . . than you do 'The Boy.'"

The argument builds to an ear-shattering climax. Mother slams her drink on the kitchen countertop.

Father has crossed the line. No one ever tells Mother what to do. I know I will have to pay the price for her rage. I realize it's only a matter of time before she orders me upstairs. I prepare myself. Ever so slowly I slide my hands out from under my butt, but not too far—for I know sometimes she'll check on me. I know I am never to move a muscle without her permission.

I feel so small inside. I only wish I could somehow . . .

Without warning, Mother opens the door leading to the downstairs garage. "You!" she screams. "Get your ass up here! Now!"

In a flash I bolt up the stairs. I wait a moment for her command before I timidly open the door. Without a sound I approach Mother and await one of her "games."

It's the game of address, in which I have to stand exactly three feet in front of her, my hands glued to my side, my head tilted down at a 45-degree angle and my eyes locked onto her feet. Upon the first command I must look above her bust, but below her eyes. Upon the second command I must look into her eyes, but never, never may I speak, breathe or move a single muscle unless Mother gives me permission to do so. Mother

and I have been playing this game since I was seven years old, so today it's just another routine in my lifeless existence.

Suddenly Mother reaches over and seizes my right ear. By accident, I flinch. With her free hand Mother punishes my movement with a solid slap to my face. Her hand becomes a blur, right up until the moment before it strikes my face. I cannot see very well without my glasses. Since it is not a school day, I am not allowed to wear them. The blow from her hand burns my skin. "Who told you to move?" Mother sneers. I keep my eyes open, fixing them on a spot on the carpet. Mother checks for my reaction before again yanking my ear as she leads me to the front door.

"Turn around!" she yells. "Look at me!" But I cheat. From the corner of my eye I steal a glance at Father. He gulps down another swallow from his drink. His once rigid shoulders are now slumped over. His job as a fireman in San Francisco, his years of drinking and the strained relationship with Mother have taken their toll on him. Once my superhero and known for his courageous efforts in rescuing children from burning buildings, Father is now a beaten man. He takes another swallow before Mother begins. "Your father here thinks I

treat you bad. Well, do I? Do I?"

My lips tremble. For a second I'm unsure whether I am supposed to answer. Mother must know this and probably enjoys "the game" all the more. Either way, I'm doomed. I feel like an insect about to be squashed. My dry mouth opens. I can feel a film of paste separate from my lips. I begin to stutter.

Before I can form a word, Mother again yanks on my right ear. My ear feels as if it were on fire. "Shut that mouth of yours! No one told you to talk! Did they? Well, did they?" Mother bellows.

My eyes seek out Father. Seconds later he must have felt my need. "Roerva," he says, "that's no way to treat The Boy."

Again I tense my body and again Mother yanks on my ear, but this time she maintains the pressure, forcing me to stand on my toes. Mother's face turns dark red. "So you think I treat him badly? I . . ." Pointing her index finger at her chest, Mother continues. "I don't need this. Stephen, if you think I'm treating it badly . . . well, it can just get out of my house!"

I strain my legs, trying to stand a little taller, and begin to tighten my upper body so that when Mother strikes I can be ready. Suddenly she lets go of my ear and opens the front door. "Get out!" she

screeches. "Get out of my house! I don't like you! I don't want you! I never loved you! Get the hell out of my house!"

I freeze. I'm not sure of this game. My brain begins to spin with all the options of what Mother's real intentions may be. *To survive, I have to think ahead.* Father steps in front of me. "No!" he cries out. "That's enough. Stop it, Roerva. Stop the whole thing. Just let The Boy be."

Mother now steps between Father and me. "No?" Mother begins in a sarcastic voice. "How many times have you told me that about The Boy? The Boy this, The Boy that. The Boy, The Boy, The Boy. How many times, Stephen?" She reaches out, touching Father's arm as if pleading with him; as if their lives would be so much better if I no longer lived with them—if I no longer existed.

Inside my head my brain screams, Oh my God! Now I know!

Without thinking, Father cuts her off. "No," he states in a low voice. "This," he says, spreading his hands, "this is wrong." I can tell by his trailing voice that Father has lost his steam. He appears to be on the verge of tears. He looks at me and shakes his head before looking at Mother. "Where will he live? Who's going to take care of . . .?"

"Stephen, don't you get it? Don't you understand? I don't give a damn what happens to him. I don't give a damn about The Boy."

Suddenly, the front door flies open. Mother smiles as she holds the doorknob. "Okay. All right. I'll leave it up to The Boy." She bends down, just inches in front of my face. Mother's breath reeks of booze. Her eyes are ice cold and full of pure hatred. I wish I could turn away. I wish I were back in the garage. In a slow, raspy voice, Mother says, "If you think I treat you so badly, you can leave."

I snap out of my protective mold and take a chance by looking at Father. He misses my glance as he sips another drink. My mind begins to tumble. I don't understand the purpose of her new game. Suddenly I realize that this is no game. It takes a few seconds for me to understand that this is my chance—my chance to escape. *I've wanted to run away for years, but some invisible fear kept me from doing it.* But I tell myself that this is too easy. I so badly want to move my legs, but they remain rigid.

"Well?" Mother screams into my ear. "It's your choice." Time seems to stand still. As I stare down at the carpet, I can hear Mother begin to hiss. "He won't leave. The Boy will never leave. It hasn't the guts to go."

I can feel the inside of my body begin to shake. For a moment I close my eyes, wishing myself away. In my mind I can see myself walking through the door. I smile inside. I so badly want to leave. The more I envision myself walking through the door, the more I begin to feel a warmth spread through my soul. Suddenly, I can feel my body moving. My eyes pop open. I look down at my worn-out sneakers. My feet are stepping through the front door. Oh my God, I say to myself, I can't believe I'm doing this! Out of fear, I dare not stop.

"There," Mother triumphantly states. "The Boy did it. It's his decision. I didn't force him. Remember that, Stephen. I want you to know I didn't force him."

I step through the front door, knowing full well that Mother will reach out and yank me back in. I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I quicken my pace. After stepping past the door, I turn right and walk down the red steps. From behind me I can hear the sounds of Mother and Father straining themselves as they lean outside. "Roerva," Father says in a low voice, "this is wrong."

"No!" she replies in a flat voice. *"And remember, it was his decision. Besides, he'll be back."*

I'm so excited that I nearly trip on my own feet and stumble down the stairs. I grab on to the handrail to stabilize myself, I make it to the walkway, and I fight to control my breathing. I turn right and walk up the street until I'm sure no one can see me past The House, then I break into a run. I make it halfway up the street before stopping, only for a moment, to look back down at The House.

With my hands on my knees I bend down panting. I try to strain my ears for the sounds of Mother's station wagon. Somehow, Mother's letting me go seems all too easy. I know she'll be after me in a few moments. After catching my breath, I again quicken my pace. I reach the top of Crestline Avenue and stare down at the small green house. But there's no station wagon racing out of the garage. No one running after me. No yelling, screaming or hitting. I'm not sitting at the bottom of the stairs in the garage, not being beaten in the back of the knees with a broomstick and not getting locked in the bathroom with another concoction of ammonia and Clorox.

I spin around at the sound of a passing car. I wave.

Even though I'm wearing ragged pants, a torn, thin, long-sleeved shirt and a pair of worn-out

tennis shoes, I feel happy inside. I'm warm. I tell myself I'm never going back. After years of living in fear, surviving torturous beatings and eating out of garbage cans, I now know I will somehow survive.

I have no friends, no place to hide, nothing to turn to. But I know exactly where I'm going—the river. Years ago, when I was a member of The Family, for every summer vacation we would drive up to the Russian River in Guerneville. The best times in my life were the days spent learning to swim at Johnson's Beach, riding down the Super Slide, going on hayrides at sunset and playing with my brothers on the old tree stump by our cabin. Remembering the smell of the giant redwood trees and the beauty of the dark green river makes me smile.

I'm not sure exactly where Guerneville is, but I do know it lies north of the Golden Gate Bridge. I'm sure it will take me a few days to get there, but I don't care. Once I'm there I can survive by stealing loaves of French bread and salami from the local Safeway supermarket, and sleep on Johnson's Beach while listening to the sounds of the cars rumbling across the old evergreen Parker truss bridge that leads into the city. Guerneville was the

only place I ever felt safe. Ever since I was in kindergarten, I knew it was where I wanted to live. And once I make it there, I know I will live in Guerneville for the rest of my life.

I begin walking down Eastgate Avenue when a cold chill whistles through my body. The sun has set and the evening fog begins to roll in from the nearby ocean. I clamp my hands inside my armpits and make my way down the street. My teeth begin to chatter. The thrill of the great escape begins to wear off. I begin to think that maybe, maybe, Mother was right. As much as she beat me and yelled at me, at least the garage was warmer than out here. Besides, I tell myself, I do lie and steal food. Maybe I do deserve to be punished. I stop for a second to rethink my plan. If I turn back now, right now, she'll yell and beat me—but I'm used to that. If I'm lucky, tomorrow she may feed me some leftover scraps from dinner. Then I can steal food from school the next day. Really, all I have to do is go back. I smile to myself. I've survived worse from Mother before.

I stop midstride. The thought of returning to The House doesn't sound half bad. Besides, I tell myself, I could never find the river anyway. I turn around. She was right.

I picture myself sitting at the bottom of the stairs, shaking with fear, frightened of every sound I may hear from above. Counting the seconds and being terrified by every set of commercials; then waiting for the sound of the floor to creak upstairs when Mother gets up from the couch, strolls into the kitchen to pour herself a drink and then screeches for me to come upstairs—where she'll beat me until I can no longer stand. I may be unable to crawl away.

I hate commercials.

The sound of a nearby cricket rubbing its wings brings me back to reality. I try to find the insect and stop for a moment when I think I'm close. The chirping stops. I remain perfectly still. If I catch it, maybe I could put the cricket in my pocket and make it my pet. I hear the cricket again. As I bend over to reach out, I hear the rumbling sounds of Mother's car from behind me. I dive beside a nearby car the moment before the headlights spot me. The car creeps down the street. The sound of Mother's squeaky brakes pierces through my ears. She's searching for me. I begin to wheeze. I clamp my eyes closed as her headlights inch their way toward me. I wait for the sound of Mother's car to grind to a halt, followed by her leaping from the

car, then throwing me back into her station wagon. I count the seconds. I open my eyes slowly, turning my head to the left just in time to see the rear brakes light up before the brakes squeal. It's over! She's found me! In a way, I'm relieved. I would have never made it to the river. The anticipation drained me. Come on, come on, I say to myself. Just do it. Come on.

The car cruises past me.

I don't believe it! I jump up from behind the car and stare at a shiny two-door sedan tapping its brakes every few seconds. Suddenly I feel light-headed. My stomach tightens up. A surge of fluid climbs up my throat. I stumble over to someone's grass and try to throw up. After a few seconds of dry heaves because of my empty stomach, I glance up at the stars. I can see patches of clear sky through the foggy mist. Bright silver stars twinkle above me. I try to remember how long it's been since I've been outside like this. I take a few deep breaths.

"No!" I yell. "I'm not going back! I'm never going back!" I turn around and walk back down the street, north toward the Golden Gate Bridge. After a few seconds I walk past the car, which is now parked in someone's driveway. I can see a

couple standing at the top of the steps being greeted by the host. The sound of laughter and music escape through the open door. I wonder what it would be like to be welcomed in a home. As I make my way past a house, my nose detects the smell of food, and the thought of wolfing down something to eat possesses me. It's Saturday night—that means I haven't eaten anything since Friday morning at school. Food, I think to myself. I have to find some food.

Sometime later I make my way to my old church. Years ago, Mother sent my two brothers, Ron and Stan, and me to afternoon catechism classes for a few weeks. I haven't been to the church since I was seven. I gently open the door. Immediately I can feel the heat seep through the holes in my pants and my paper-thin shirt. As quietly as I can, I close the door behind me. I can see the priest picking up books from the pews. I hide beside the door, hoping he won't see me. The priest makes his way to the back pews toward me. I so badly want to stay, but . . . I close my eyes, trying to absorb the heat for a moment, before my hand again reaches for the door.

Once outside I cross the street, where I can see a row of stores. I stop in front of a doughnut shop.

One early morning, years ago, Father stopped to pick up some doughnuts before he drove the family to the Russian River. It was a magical time for me. Now I stare through the glass, then up at the fat, jolly, animated cartoon characters that were painted on the wall and going through the various stages of making doughnuts.

From my left the smell of pizza makes my head turn. I stumble past a few stores until I stop in front of a pizza bar. My mouth waters. Without thinking I open the door and make my way, in a daze, to the back of the room. My eyes take a few minutes to adjust. I can make out a pool table, the sounds of beer mugs clashing together and laughter. I can feel stares from above me, and I stop at the far corner of the bar. My eyes dart around in search of abandoned food. Finding none, I make my way to the pool table, where two men have just finished a game. I find a quarter on the table and slowly cover it with my fingers. I look around before dragging the quarter over the edge of the pool table and into my hand. The coin feels warm. As casually as possible I stroll back to the bar. A voice explodes above me. I try to ignore the sound. From behind, someone grabs my left shoulder. Instantly I tighten my upper body, waiting for a

blow to my face or stomach. "Hey kid, what are you doing?"

I spin around toward the voice, but I refuse to look up.

"I said, what are you doing?" the voice again asks.

I look up at a man wearing a white apron covered with red pizza sauce. He places his hands on his hips, waiting for a reply. I try to answer, but I begin to stutter. "Uhm. Noth . . . noithng . . . sir."

The man places his hand on my shoulder and leads me to the end of the bar. He then stops and bends down. "Hey kid, you need to give me the quarter."

I shake my head no. Before I can tell him a lie, the man says, "Hey, man, I saw you do it. Now give it back. Those guys over there need it to play pool." I clench my fist. That quarter can buy me some food, maybe even a piece of pizza. The man continues to stare at me. Slowly I uncurl my fingers and drop the coin into the man's hand. He flicks the quarter over to a pair of men holding pool sticks. "Thanks, Mark," one of them yells.

"Yeab, man, no problem." I try to turn away, looking for the front door, when Mark grabs me. "What are you doing here? Why'd you steal that quarter?"

I retreat inside my shell and stare at the floor.

"Hey, man," Mark raises his voice, "I asked you a question."

"I didn't steal anything. I . . . I just thought that . . . I mean, I just saw the quarter and . . . I . . ."

"First off, I saw you steal the quarter, and secondly, the guys need it so they can play pool. Besides, man, what were you going to do with a quarter anyway?"

I could feel an eruption of anger surge through me. "Food!" I blurt out. "All I wanted was to buy a piece of pizza! Okay?"

"A piece of pizza?" Mark laughs. "Man, where are you from . . . Mars?"

I try to think of an answer. I can feel myself lock up inside. I empty my lungs of breath and shrug my shoulders.

"Hey, man, calm down. Here, pull up a stool," Mark says in a soft voice. "Jerry, give me a Coke." Mark now looks down at me. *I try to pull my arms into my sleeves—to hide my slash marks and bruises. I try to turn away from him. "Hey, kid, are you all right?" Mark asks.*

I shake my head from side to side. No! I say to myself. I'm not all right. Nothing's right! I so badly want to tell him, but . . .

"Here, drink up," Mark says as he slides over the glass of Coke. *I grab the red plastic glass with both hands and suck on the paper straw until the soda is gone.*

"Hey, kid," Mark asks, "what's your name? You got a home? Where do you live?"

I'm so ashamed. I know I can't answer. I act as if I did not hear him.

Mark nods his head in approval. "Don't move," he states as he grabs my glass. From behind the bar I can see him fill up the glass as he grabs the phone. The phone cord stretches to its limit as Mark strains to give me another Coke. After he hangs up the phone, Mark sits back down. "You want to tell me what's wrong?"

"Mother and I don't get along," I mumble, hoping no one can hear me. "She . . . ah . . . she . . . told me to leave."

"Don't you think she's worried about you?" he asks.

"Right! Are you kidding?" I blurt out. Oops, I say to myself. Keep your mouth shut! I tap my finger on the bar, trying to turn away from Mark. I glance at the two men playing pool and the others beside them—laughing, eating, having a good time.

I wish I were a real person.

I suddenly feel sick again. As I slide down the stool, I turn back to Mark. "I gotta go."

"Where ya going?"

"Uhm, I just gotta go, str."

"Did your mother really tell you to leave?"

Without looking at him, I nod my head yes.

Mark smiles. "I bet she's really worried about you. What do you think? I tell you what. You give me her number, and I'll give her a call, okay?"

I can feel my blood race. The door, I tell myself. Just get to the door and run. My head frantically swivels from side to side in search of an exit.

"Come on now. Besides," Mark says, raising his eyebrows, "you can't leave now. I'm making you a pizza . . . with the works!"

My head snaps up. "Really?" I shout. "But . . . I don't have any . . ."

"Hey, man, don't worry about it. Just wait here." Mark gets up and makes his way to the front. He smiles at me through an opening from the kitchen. My mouth begins to water. I can see myself eating a hot meal—not from a garbage can or a piece of stale bread, but a real meal.

Minutes pass. I sit upright waiting for another glance from Mark.

From the front door a policeman in a dark blue

uniform enters the shop. I don't think anything of it until Mark walks toward the officer. The two men talk for a few moments, then Mark nods his head and points toward me. I spin around, searching for a door in the back of the room. Nothing. I turn back toward Mark. He's gone, and so is the police officer. I twist my head from side to side as I strain my eyes, hunting for the two men. They're both gone. False alarm. My heart begins to slow down. I begin to breathe again. I smile.

"Excuse me, young man." I raise my head up to a police officer smiling down at me. "I think you need to come with me."

No! I say to myself. I refuse to move! The tips of my fingers dig into the bottom of the stool. I try to find Mark. I can't believe he called the police. He seemed so cool. He had given me a Coke and promised me some food. Why did he do this? As much as I hate Mark now, I hate myself more. I knew I should have just kept on walking down the street. I should have never, never come into the pizza bar. I knew I should have gotten out of town as soon as I could. How could I have been so stupid!

I know I've lost. I feel whatever strength I had now drain. I so badly want to find a hole to curl up into and fall asleep. I slide off the bar stool. The

officer walks behind me. "Don't worry," he says. "You're going to be all right." I barely hear what he is saying. All I can think about is that somewhere out there, she is waiting for me. I'm going back to The House—back to The Mother. The police officer walks me to the front door. "Thanks for giving us a call," the officer says to Mark.

I stare down at the floor. I'm so angry. I refuse to look at Mark. I wish I were invisible.

"Hey, kid," Mark smiles as he shoves a thin white box into my hands, "I told you I'd give you a pizza."

My heart sinks. I smile at him. I begin to shake my head no. I know I'm not worthy. I push the box back toward Mark. For a second, nothing else in my world exists. I look into his heart. I know he understands. Without a word, I know what he is telling me. I take the box. I look deeper into his eyes, "Thank you, sir." Mark runs his hand through my hair. I suck in the scent from the box.

"It's the works. And kid . . . hang tough. You'll be fine," Mark says as I make my way out the door, holding my prize. The pizza box warms my hands. Outside a gray swirling fog covers the street where the police car is parked in the middle of the road. I hug the box close to my chest. I can feel the pizza

slide down to the bottom of the box as the officer opens the front door of his car for me. I can hear a faint humming sound from the heat pump of the floorboard. I wiggle my toes to warm myself. I watch the officer as he makes his way to the driver's side. He slides into the car, then picks up a microphone. A soft, female voice answers his call. I turn away, looking back toward the pizza bar. Mark and a group of adults shiver as they stand together outside. As the police car slowly rumbles away, Mark raises his hand, forms a peace sign, then waves good-bye. One by one, the others smile as they join him.

My throat tightens. I can taste the salt as tears run down my face. Somehow I know I'll miss Mark. I stare down at my shoes and wiggle my toes. One of them pops through a hole.

"So," the officer says, "first time in a police car?"

"Yes, sir," I reply. "Am I . . . uhm . . . I mean, am I in trouble, sir?"

The officer smiles. "No. We're just concerned. It's kinda late, and you're a little young to be out here alone. What's your name?"

I glance down at my dirty toe.

"Come on, now. There's no harm in telling me your name."

I clear my throat. I don't want to talk to the officer. I don't want to talk to anybody. I know every time I open my mouth, I'm one step closer to Mother's evil clutches. But, I tell myself, what can I do? I know whatever chances I had of escaping to the river are now gone. I don't care. As long as I don't have to return to her. After a few seconds I answer the officer, "Da . . . Da . . . David, sir," I stutter. "My name is David."

The officer chuckles. I smile back. He tells me I'm a good-looking boy. "How old are you?"

"Nine, sir."

"Nine? Kinda small, aren't you?"

We begin to talk back and forth. I can't believe how much the officer is interested in me. I feel he actually likes me. He parks the car in front of the police station and leads me downstairs to an empty room with a pool table in the middle. We sit beside the pool table, and the officer says, "Hey, David, let's say we get to that pizza before it gets cold."

My head bounces up and down. I rip open the box. I bend down and suck in the aroma. "So, David," the officer asks, "where did you say you live?"

I freeze. The toppings from my piece of pizza slide off. I turn away. I was hoping he would somehow forget why he picked me up.

"Come on now, David. I'm really concerned about you." His eyes lock onto mine. I can't turn away. I gently replace my piece of pizza in the box. The officer reaches out to touch my hand. By reflex, I flinch. Before the officer tries again, I stare him down. Inside my head I scream, Don't you understand? Mother doesn't want me, doesn't love me, doesn't give a damn about me! All right? So . . . if you can just leave me alone, I can be on my way. Okay?!

The officer backs his chair away from the table before he begins in a soft voice. "David, I'm here to help you. You have to know that, and I'm going to stay here with you as long as it takes." He leans over and lifts my chin with his finger. Tears roll down my eyes. My nose is runny. I know now there is no escape for me. I don't have the guts to look the policeman in the eyes.

"Crestline Avenue, sir," I say in a low voice.

"Crestline Avenue?" the officer asks.

"Yes, sir . . . 40 Crestline Avenue."

"David, you did the right thing. Whatever the problem is, I'm sure we can work it out."

I tell him the phone number and the officer disappears for a few moments. After he returns, he again attacks the pizza.

I pick up the same piece of pizza. It's cold and soggy. I so badly want to eat, but my mind is a million miles away. The policeman reassures me with a smile. "Everything's going to be okay."

Right! I tell myself. The only time I ever felt secure, safe and wanted was when I was a tiny child. I was five that day when The Family waited for me as I raced up the small hill on the last day of kindergarten. I can still see Mommy's face glowing with love as she shouted, "Come on, sweetheart. Come on now, David!" She opened the door for me after giving me a tight hug. Then she shut the door before Father sped away. Destination: the river. That summer Mommy taught me how to float on my back. I was scared, but Mommy stayed with me until I learned to float all by myself. I was so proud as I showed off to her, proving to Mommy I was a big boy, worthy of her attention and praise. That summer was the best time of my life. But now, as I sit in front of the policeman, I know nothing will ever be like it was back then. My good times are now only memories.

The officer looks up. I turn my shoulders to find my father in one of his red cotton shirts standing behind me. Another police officer nods at the policeman sitting with me. "Mr. Pelzer?" the officer near me asks.

My father nods yes. The two of them disappear into an office. The policeman closes the door. I wish I could hear what they're saying. I'm sure it's about me and how I'm always in trouble with Mother. I'm only relieved that she didn't come, but somehow I know that she would never dare risk exposing herself to anyone of authority. I know she always uses Father for her dirty work. She controls Father—the same as she tries to control everyone. Above all, I know she must hide the secret. No one must ever know about our private relationship. But I know she's slipping. She's losing control. I try to think what this means. To survive, I must think ahead.

Minutes later the door from the office creaks. Father steps out from the room, shaking the policeman's hand. The officer approaches me. He bends down. "David, it was just a small misunderstanding. Your father here tells me that you became upset when your mother wouldn't let you ride your bike. You didn't need to run away for something like that. So, you go home with your father now, and you and your mother work this thing out. Your father here says she's worried sick over you." He then changes the tone of his voice as he points a finger at me. "And don't you ever put your parents through that again. I hope you've learned

your lesson. It can be pretty scary out there, right?" the officer asks, while gesturing to the outside of the building.

I stand in front of the officer in total disbelief. I can't believe what I'm hearing. Ride my bike? I don't even have one! I've never even ridden on one before! I want to spin around to see if he is talking to some other kid. From behind, Father looks down at me. His eyes are blank. I realize this is just one of Mother's cover stories. It figures.

"And David," the officer states, "treat your parents with dignity and respect. You don't know how lucky you are."

My mind becomes foggy. All I can hear inside my head is, "how lucky you are . . . how lucky you are . . .," over and over and over again. I shudder when Father slams the door from the driver's side of the station wagon. He exhales deeply before leaning over to me. "Jesus H. Christ, David!" he begins as he turns the ignition and pumps the gas pedal. "What in the hell were you thinking? Do you have any idea what you did? Do you know what you put your mother through?"

My head snaps toward Father. Put her through? What about me? Doesn't anyone care about me? But . . . I tell myself, maybe she broke down.

Maybe she's really concerned about me. Is it possible she knows she went too far? For a moment I can imagine Mother sobbing in Father's arms, wondering where I am, whether I'm alive. Then I can see my mommy running up to me with tears in her eyes as she wraps me in love, showering me with kisses, tears rolling down her face. I can almost hear my mommy say the three most important words I long to hear. And I'll be ready to say the four most important words: I love you, too!

"David!" Father grabs my arm. I jump up, striking my head against the top of the car. "Do you have any idea what your mother's been doing? I can't get a moment of peace in that house. For Christ's sake, it's been nothing but hell since you left. Jesus, can't you just stay out of trouble? Can't you just try and make her happy? Just stay out of her way and do whatever she wants. Can you do that? Can you do that for me? Well?" Father yells, raising his voice so loud I can feel my skin crawl.

Slowly I nod my head yes. I don't dare make a sound as I cry deep inside. I know I'm wrong. And, as always, it's all my fault. I turn to Father while shaking my head up and down. He reaches over to pat my head.

"All right," he says in a softer tone, "all right. That's my Tiger. Now let's go home."

As Father drives the car up the same street I walked down hours ago, I sit at the far side of the car, resting the weight of my body on the door. I feel like a trapped animal who wants to claw its way through the glass. The closer we get to The House, the more I can feel myself quiver inside. I need to go to the bathroom. Home, I say to myself. I stare down at my hands. My fingers tremble from fear. I know in a few moments I'll be back where it all started. In all, nothing's changed, and I know nothing will. I wish I were someone, anyone but who I am. I wish I had a life, a family, a home.

Father drives into the garage. He turns to me before opening his door. "Well, here we are," he states with a false smile. "We're home."

I look right through him, hoping, praying he can feel my fear, my pain from inside of me. Home? I say to myself.

I have no home.

