

CHAPTER 1

Some people must like to be the bearers of bad news. One of these is my younger brother, Archie. I had been practicing some preseason tennis on the indoor courts at Atherton High School and then ridden home on my bike, bucking the March winds. I had just barely entered our suburban house when he raced up to me.

"Gary, Ralph's dead," he said, his voice trembling with emotion.

"What?" I asked, unable to believe my ears. Was this some kind of a joke?

"Ralph's dead," he said again. "He fell off the balcony in the Carter High School auditorium and killed himself."

This couldn't be true. Nobody fell off a balcony in real life. That sort of thing only happened in movies. Especially not my first cousin, Ralph, who was an all-star athlete and in complete control of his body at all times. But Archie, who liked practical jokes, looked pale and deadly serious. He obviously wasn't kidding.

I raced into the kitchen where my mother and my other brother, Tom, were sitting at the table in our breakfast nook, looking stunned. Nobody sat here at this time of day. Tears rolled freely down my mother's cheeks while she dabbed at them ineffectually with a tissue and sniffed as if she had a cold. Happy-go-lucky Tom looked as if he had lost his last friend.

"Is it true?" I asked them.

My mother nodded and then said, the words choking her, "We just got a phone call from Aunt Dorothy. It happened after an assembly in the auditorium. Apparently Ralph stayed behind and was there all alone."

None of this made any sense. "Does Dad know?" I asked.

"I just called him," Mother said. "He's on his way home."

My father was the brother of Aunt Dorothy and the uncle of Ralph. I asked more questions, but my mother had given me all the information she had. If it were anybody else, I might have almost believed it—but Ralph. Ralph was indestructible. He climbed the highest trees, dove off the biggest rocks. We were the same age, but he did everything a little bit better than I did—and a lot more flamboyantly.

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I heard our car pull into the driveway and turned off the radio. I was tired of hearing about communist-hunting by the House Un-American Activities Committee, anyway. And tired of listening to pop songs that had lost their music and meaning since Ralph died.

I was also tired of itching and not being able to scratch. Quarantined in the small and darkened corner room above the garage with measles, I had been unable to attend his funeral, which had taken place this afternoon in Carter, the second town east of Buffalo, Atherton being the first.

Part of me felt bad about not attending the funeral, but part of me was relieved. I had never been to a funeral, and I felt that I was too young to start attending them. But Tom and Archie were younger than I was and they had gone. As the oldest, I should have been there.

Archie was the first person up the stairs. He stopped in the doorway to my room. Nobody was allowed inside except my mother. He wore the same dark blue suit he wore to Sunday School, complete with white shirt and tie. At eleven years old, he was still on the small side, but

he was beginning to grow vertically. His light brown hair was neatly brushed, which was unusual.

“You should have been there, Gary,” he said, echoing my thoughts and breathing hard from running up the stairs. “There were hundreds of people. Everybody loved Ralph.”

I tried to focus on him through my rheumy eyes and said, “Were there a lot of students from Carter High School?”

“Yes, they brought them in buses. The church was packed. Some of them spoke. They said nice things about Ralph.”

“We met our cousins at the reception afterward at the church,” Tom said.

He had followed Archie up the stairs and was standing behind him in the doorway, looking over his shoulder at me. He also wore a dark suit, but he was a full-fledged teenager, having just turned fifteen. He was challenging me in the height department, although he was still as skinny as a broomstick. He wore his hair short, like me, so it always looked neat. When his acne went away, he would be handsome.

I was confused for a moment. Ralph was our cousin, but he was dead. He had no brothers or sisters. Then I remembered. “Oh, you mean the ones who came from England?”

“Right. The Drucquers. They have two kids. Ed is a sophomore at Carter High and Kate is a freshman.”

So she was Tom’s age. And Ed was between Tom and me. I had never met the Drucquers. They had apparently come to Carter from England a couple of years ago, but Aunt Dorothy had only known about them for a year.

“Do they have English accents?” I asked.

“Mr. and Mrs. Drucquer do,” Archie said. “It was hard to understand some of the things they said. Ed has an accent, too, but Kate speaks almost perfect English.”

I didn’t bother to point out that what the Drucquers spoke had a better claim to being called English than what we Americans spoke.

“Ed is chubby,” Archie said, “like his parents. But Kate is thin and has red hair. Compared to the others, she is very unique.”

“Unique doesn’t take a modifier,” I said, automatically.

Ignoring me, Archie continued, “But Ed is a little strange.”

“He asked us if we knew anything about a diamond necklace that belonged to our family,” Tom said. “It was apparently brought over from England some time ago. But I’ve never heard of it.”

I hadn’t either. My father appeared in the doorway, dressed in a three-piece suit. He still looked handsome and athletic and had all his hair. Because of the lack of light and the glop in my eyes, I couldn’t see the blue eyes behind his wire-rimmed glasses. He asked me how I was feeling. I told him I was feeling a little better, because that’s what he wanted to hear. He didn’t like any display of weakness. Better to placate him than tell the truth. He said the funeral was tastefully done, with appropriate music and heart-felt eulogies. My father liked rituals, especially if they were well executed.

He hadn’t learned any more about how Ralph had fallen off the balcony. The account in the Buffalo Express had been uninformative on that score. He had also met the Drucquers for the first time. I asked him how we were related to them.

“We have a common English ancestor from the early 1800s,” he said. “Although the Drucquers may have originated someplace else, maybe Holland. I’m a little hazy on the details.”

Tom asked him about a diamond necklace.

“There is no diamond necklace. That’s a family legend. It’s fun to talk about, but that’s all it is.”

That night, when my fever was at its highest, I had nightmares about Ralph falling off the balcony at the Carter High School auditorium, over and over again. But it never occurred to me, even in those nightmares, that very soon I would be an involuntary student at Carter High, myself.