

MICHAEL VEY

THE PRISONER OF CELL 25

Richard Paul Evans



MERCURY INK



THRESHOLD EDITIONS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

(Pulse Logo) (Mercury Ink logo)

SIMON PULSE / Mercury Ink

An imprint of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing Division

1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

First Simon Pulse hardcover edition August 2011

Copyright © 2011 by Richard Paul Evans

All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Simon Pulse and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or business@simonandschuster.com.

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at www.simonspeakers.com.

Designed by name

The text of this book was set in Berling LT Std.

Manufactured in the United States of America

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

TK

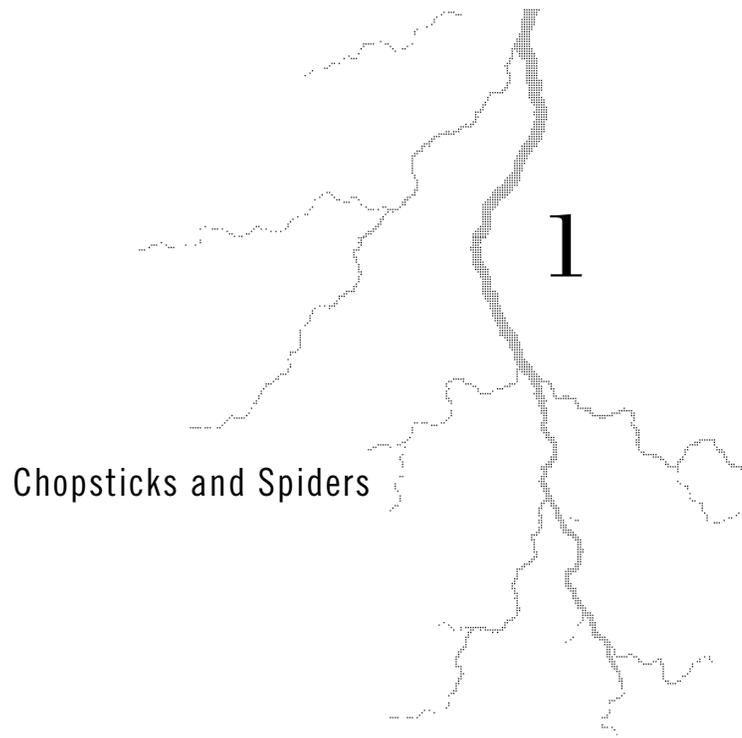
ISBN 978-1-4516-5650-3

ISBN 978-1-4516-5822-4 (eBook)

To Michael



PART ONE



“Have you found the last two?” The voice on the phone was angry and coarse, like the sound of car tires over broken glass.

“Not yet,” the well-dressed man on the other end of the phone replied. “Not yet. But we believe we’re close—and they still don’t know that we’re hunting them.”

“You *believe* you’re close?”

“They’re two children among a billion—finding them is like finding a lost chopstick in China.”

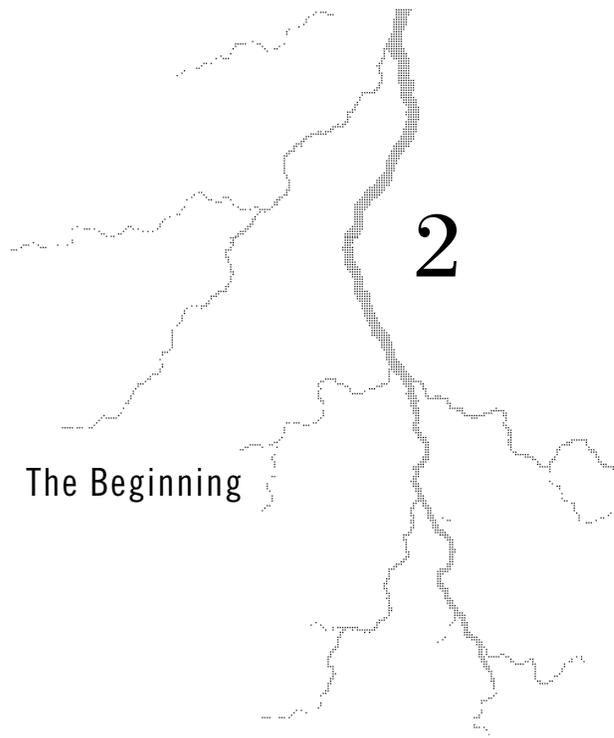
“Is that what you want me to tell the board?”

“*Remind* the board that I’ve already found fifteen of the seventeen children. I’ve put out a million-dollar bounty on the last two, we’ve got spiders crawling the Web, and we have a whole team of investigators scanning global records for their whereabouts. It’s just a matter of time before we find them—or they step into one of our traps.”

"*Time* isn't on our side," the voice returned sharply. "Those kids are already too old. You know how difficult they are to turn at this age."

"I know better than anyone," the well-dressed man said, tapping his ruby-capped pen on his desk. "But I have my ways. And if they don't turn, there's always Cell 25."

There was a long pause, then the voice on the phone replied darkly, "Yes. There's always Cell 25."



It's not like I was looking for trouble. I didn't have to. At my height it just always found me.

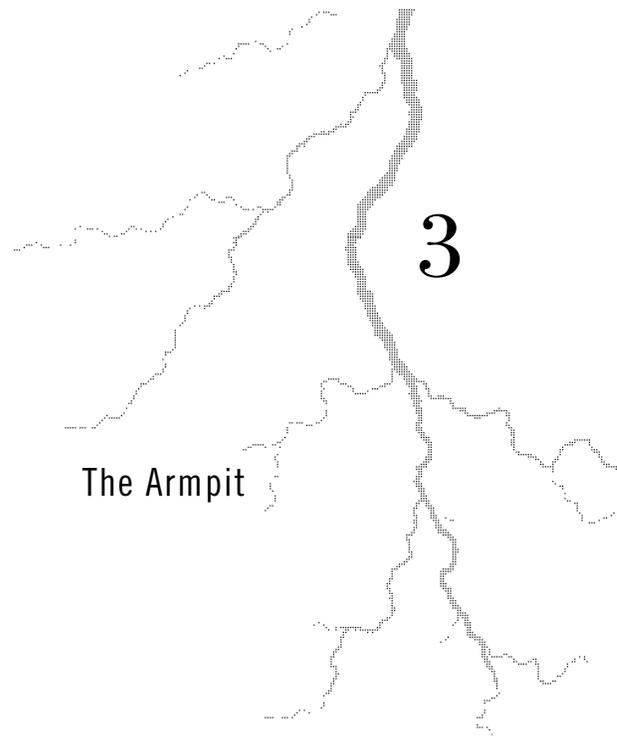
My name is Michael Vey, and the story I'm about to tell you is strange. Very strange. It's my story.

If you passed me walking home from school you probably wouldn't even notice me. That's because I'm just a kid like you. I go to school like you. I get bullied like you. Unlike you, I live in Idaho. Don't ask me what state Idaho is in—news flash—Idaho is a state. The fact that most people don't know where Idaho is, is exactly why my mother and I moved here—so people wouldn't find us. But that's part of my story.

Besides living in Idaho, I'm different from you in other ways. For one, I have Tourette's syndrome. You probably know less about Tourette's syndrome than you do Idaho. Usually when you see someone on TV pretending to have Tourette's syndrome, they're shouting

swear words or barking like a dog. Most of us with Tourette's don't do that. I mostly just blink my eyes a lot. If I'm really anxious, I'll also clear my throat or make a gulping noise. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes kids make fun of me. It's no picnic having Tourette's, but there are worse things that can happen to you—like having your dad die of a heart attack when you're eight. Believe me, that's much worse. I'm still not over that. Maybe I never will be.

There's something else you don't know about me. It's my secret. Something that scares people more than you would believe. That secret is the reason we moved to Idaho in the first place. But, again, that's part of my story. So I might as well tell it to you.



Mr. Dallstrom's office is as good a place to begin as any. Or as bad a place. Mr. Dallstrom is the principal of Meridian High School, where I go to school. If you ask me, ninth grade is the armpit of life. And there I was in the very stinkiest part of that armpit—the principal's office. I was sitting in Mr. Dallstrom's office, blinking like crazy.

You could guess that I'm not fond of Mr. Dallstrom, which would be stating the obvious like saying, "breathing is important" or "Rice Krispies squares are the greatest food ever invented." No one at Meridian was fond of Mr. Dallstrom except Ms. Duncan, who directed the Glee Club. She had a picture of Mr. Dallstrom on her desk, which she sometimes stared at with soft, googly eyes. Every time Mr. Dallstrom came over the PA system, she would furiously whack her baton on a music stand to quiet us. Then, after he'd said his piece, she would get all red-faced and sweaty, and remind us of how

lucky we were to be led through the treacherous wilderness of high school by such a manly and steadfast defender of public education.

Mr. Dallstrom is a bald, thin scarecrow of a man with a poochy stomach. Think of a pregnant Abraham Lincoln with no beard and a yellow toupee instead of a top hat and you get the picture. He also looks like he's a hundred years old. At least.

When I was in fifth grade our teacher told us that "the easiest way to remember the difference between *PRINCIPLE* (an underlying law or ethic), and *PRINCIPAL* (the chief administrator of a school), is that the Principal is your PAL." Believe me, Mr. Dallstrom did not put the PAL in Principal.

It was the second time that month I'd been called to his office for something someone else did to me. Mr. Dallstrom was big on punishing the victim.

"I believe this is the second time you've been in my office this month," Mr. Dallstrom said to me, his eyes half closed. "Is that right, Mr. Vey?"

That was the other thing about Mr. Dallstrom—he liked to ask questions that he already knew the answer to. I was never sure if I was supposed to answer him or not. I mean, he knew the answer, and I knew the answer, so what was the point? Bottom line, it was the second time I'd been locked in my locker by Jack Vranes and his friends that month. This time they put me in upside down and I nearly passed out before the custodian unlocked my locker and dragged me down to Mr. Dallstrom's office.

Jack Vranes was like seventeen and still in ninth grade. He'd been held back so many times he had a driver's license, a car, a mustache, and a tattoo. He sometimes called himself Jackal, which is a pretty accurate description, since both he and the animal prey on smaller mammals. Jack had biceps the size of ripe Florida oranges and wasn't afraid to use them. Actually, he loved to use them. He and his gang, Mitchell and Wade, watched ultimate fighting, and Jack took Brazilian jujitsu lessons at a gym not far from the school. His dream in life was to someday fight in the Octagon, where he could pound people and get paid for it.

“Is that right?” Dallstrom repeated, still staring at me. I ticked almost a dozen times, then said, “But, sir, it wasn’t my fault. They shoved me inside my locker upside down.” He wasn’t looking very moved by my plight so I continued. “There were three of them and they’re a lot bigger than me. A *lot* bigger.”

My hope for sympathy was met by Mr. Dallstrom’s infamous “stare o’ death.” Really, you’d have to see it to understand. Last quarter, when we were studying Greek mythology and we got to the part about Medusa—a Gorgon woman who could turn people to stone by looking into their eyes—I figured out where Mr. Dallstrom had come from. Maybe it had something to do with my Tourette, but I blurted out, “That must be Mr. Dallstrom’s great, great, great, great grandmother.”

Everyone laughed. Everyone except for Mr. Dallstrom, who had picked that precise moment to slip into our class. I spent a week in after-school detention, which wasn’t all bad because at least I was safe from Jack and his posse, who somehow never got sent to detention no matter how many kids they stuffed into the lunchroom garbage cans or locked in their lockers. Anyway, that had officially put me on Mr. Dallstrom’s troublemaker list.

“Mr. Vey, you cannot be stuffed into a locker without your consent,” Mr. Dallstrom said, which may be the dumbest thing ever said in a school. “You should have resisted.” That’s like blaming someone who was struck by lightning for getting in the way.

“But I tried, sir.”

“Obviously not hard enough.” He took out a pen. “Who are these boys who allegedly stuffed you into your locker?” Mr. Dallstrom cocked his head to one side, his pen wagging impatiently in front of him. I stared at the pen in its hypnotic trajectory.

“I’m waiting, Mr. Vey. Their names?”

There was no way I was going to tell him. First, he already knew who had done it. Everyone knew Jack had put more kids than textbooks into lockers. Second, ratting out Jack was the shortest route to death. I just looked at Mr. Dallstrom, my eyes blinking like crazy.

“Stop twitching and answer my question.”

"I can't tell you," I finally said.

"Can't or won't?"

Pick one, I thought. "I forgot who did it."

Mr. Dallstrom continued staring at me through those half-closed eyes of his. "Did you now?" He stopped wagging his pen and set it on the desk. "I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Vey. Now you'll have to take their punishment as well. Four weeks in after-school detention. I believe you know where detention is held."

"Yes, sir. It's in the lunchroom."

"Good. Then you'll have no trouble finding your way there."

Like I said, Mr. Dallstrom excelled at punishing the victim. He signed a tardy excuse note and handed it to me. "Give that to your teacher. You can go back to your class now, Mr. Vey."

"Thank you, sir," I said, not entirely certain what I was thanking him for. I walked out of his office and slowly down the long, empty corridor to biology. The hallway was lined with posters made by the Basketball Boosters' Club with messages like GO WARRIORS, SINK THE VIKINGS—that sort of thing—rendered in bright poster paints.

I got my backpack from my locker, then went to class.

My biology teacher, Mr. Poulsen, a short, balding man with thick eyebrows and a massive comb-over, was in the middle of lecturing and stopped mid-sentence at my entrance. "Glad you decided to join us, Mr. Vey."

"Sorry. I was at the principal's office. Mr. Dallstrom said to give this to you." I handed him my note. He took the paper without looking at it. "Sit down. We're reviewing for tomorrow's test."

Every eye in the class followed me as I walked to my desk. I sat on the second row from the back just behind my best friend, Ostin Liss, who is one of the smartest kids in the universe. Ostin's name looks European or something, but it isn't. His mother named him that because he was born in Austin, Texas. It was his private curse that she had spelled it wrong. I suspect that Ostin was adopted, because I couldn't figure out how someone that smart could come from someone who couldn't spell the name of the city she lived in. But

even if Ostin's mom wasn't the brightest crayon in the box, I liked her a lot. She spoke with a Texan accent and called everyone "honey," which may sound annoying but it wasn't. She was always nice and kept a supply of red licorice in their pantry just because she knew I liked it and my mother didn't buy candy.

Ostin never got shoved into his locker, probably because he was wider than it—not that Jack and his friends left him alone. They didn't. In fact he had suffered the ultimate humiliation from Jack and his friends. He'd been pantsed in public.

"How'd it go with Dallstrom?" Ostin whispered.

I shook my head. "Brutal."

As I sat down, Taylor Ridley, who sat in the desk to my left, turned and smiled at me. Taylor is a cheerleader and one of the prettiest girls at Meridian. Heck, she's one of the prettiest girls in any high school anywhere in the world. She has a face that could be on the cover of a beauty magazine, long, light brown hair and big brown eyes the color of maple syrup. Since I'm being completely honest here, I'll admit that I had a crush on her from the second I first saw her. It took me less than a day to realize that so did everyone else at Meridian.

Taylor was always nice to me. At first I hoped she was nice because she liked me, but really she's just one of those people who is nice to everyone. Nice or not, it didn't matter. She was way out of my league. Like a thousand miles out of my league. So I never told anyone about my secret crush—not even Ostin, whom I told everything. Some dreams are just too embarrassing to share.

Anyway, whenever Taylor looked at me, it made my tics go wild. Stress does that to people with Tourette's. I forced myself not to blink as I sat down and pulled my biology book out of my backpack. That's the thing about my tics. If I try real hard, I can delay them, but I can't make them go away. It's like having a bad itch. You can ignore it for a little while, but it's going to build up until you scratch. I've learned tricks to hide my tics. Like sometimes I'll drop a pencil on the ground, then when I bend down to get it, I'll blink or grimace

like crazy. I'm sure the kids around me think I'm really clumsy because sometimes I'll drop my pencil four or five times in one class. Anyway, between Mr. Dallstrom and Jack and Taylor, I was blinking like an old neon sign.

Poulsen started up again. "Okay, class, we were talking about electricity and the body. 'I sing the body electric,' said the poet Whitman. Who, pray tell, can explain what role electricity plays in the body?"

He panned the room with his dusty gaze, clearly disappointed with the lack of participation. "You better know this, people. It's on your test tomorrow."

"Electricity runs our heart," the girl with massive braces on the front row said.

"Cor-rect," he said. "And what else?"

Taylor raised her hand. "It signals all of our nerves and thoughts."

"That's right, Miss Ridley. And where does this electricity come from?" He looked around the room. "Where does the electricity come from? Come on, people." It was dangerous when no one was answering because that's when he started hunting out those least likely to answer correctly. "How about you, Mr. Morris?"

"Uh, batteries?"

The class laughed.

"Brilliant," Poulsen said, shaking his head. "Batteries. Okay, Mr. Morris, perhaps it's time you changed your batteries, because clearly they are running down. Where does electricity come from, Mr. Vey?"

I swallowed. "Electrolytes?" I said.

"That would be true, Mr. Vey, if you were an electric eel."

Everyone laughed again. Taylor glanced over at me sympathetically. I dropped my pencil on the floor.

Ostin raised his hand.

"Mr. Liss," Poulsen said. "Enlighten us."

Ostin straightened himself up in his chair like he was about to deliver a lecture, which he was.

"The human body generates an electrical current through chemical concentrations in the nerves in a process called bioelectrogenesis. Whenever a nerve signal is sent, potassium ions flood out of nerve

cells and sodium ions flood in. Both of these ions have slightly different charges and so the difference in ionic concentrations inside and outside the nerve cell creates a charge which our bodies process as electricity.”

“Bravo, Mr. Liss. Harvard awaits. For those of you who have no idea what Mr. Liss just said, I’ll write it on the board. Bio-elec-trogen-e-sis.”

When Poulsen’s back was turned, Ostin turned around and whispered, “What happened with Dallstrom? Did Jack get detention?”

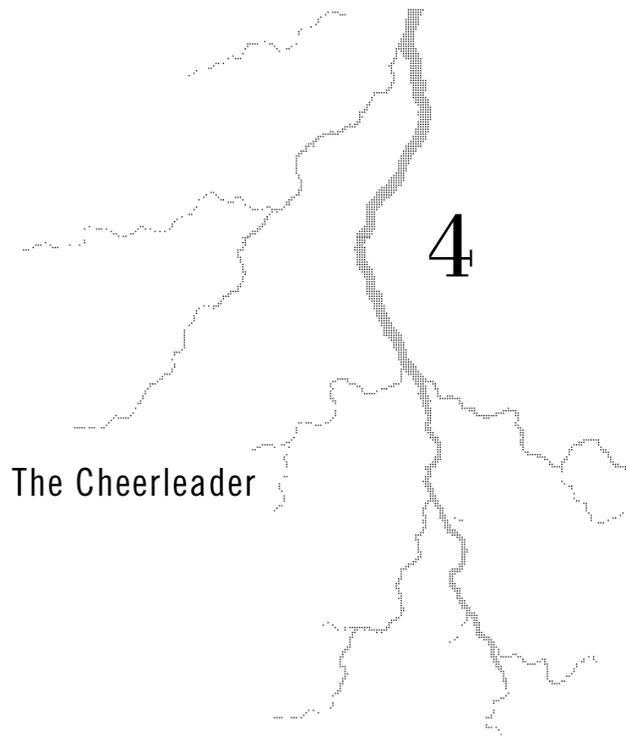
I shook my head. “No, I got detention.”

His eyebrows rose. “For getting shoved into your own locker?”

“Yeah.”

“Dallstrom’s a tool.”

“*That* I know.”



That Wednesday felt like one of the longest days in school ever. I had no idea that it wasn't even close to being over. After the final bell rang, Ostin and I walked to our lockers, which were next to each other.

"Want to come over and play Halo?" Ostin asked.

"Can't. I've got detention, remember?"

"Oh, yeah."

"I'll knock on your door when I get home."

Ostin and I lived just two doors from each other in the same apartment building.

"I won't be home. I have clogging lessons at four."

"Ugh," I said. It was hard to imagine Ostin doing any physical activity, but dancing with a bunch of seven-year-old girls wearing black, patent leather tap shoes was like a bad car wreck—gross, but you just have to look. "You've got to get out of that, man. If anyone here finds out, you're ruined for life."

"I know. But the clogging teacher's my mom's cousin and Mom says she needs the money and I need the exercise."

"It's still cruel," I said, shutting my locker. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He put out his fist. "Bones."

"Bones," I said, bumping his fist even though I was sick of doing it—I mean, it was okay the first *million* times.

The hallways were crowded with students as I walked with my backpack down to the lunchroom. Ms. Johnson, a young, new English teacher, had just been assigned to supervise detention, which I thought was a good thing. She was reputed to be cool and nice, which, I hoped, meant she might let us out early.

I walked up to her. I had to force myself not to tic. "I'm Michael Vey. I'm here for detention."

She smiled at me like I'd just arrived at a dinner party. "Hi, Michael. Welcome." She looked down at her clipboard and marked my name on her roll. "Go ahead and pick a table."

The smell of lunch still lingered in the air (which was a punishment of its own), and I could hear the lunch workers behind the metal window screens preparing for tomorrow's disaster.

There were three other students in detention: two boys and one girl. I was smaller than all of them and the only one who didn't look like a homicidal psychopath. As I looked around the room for a place to sit the girl looked at me and scowled, warning me away from her table. I found a vacant table in the corner and sat down.

I hated being in detention, but at least today it wouldn't be a complete waste of time. I needed to study for Poulsen's test. As I got my books from my pack, I noticed that my shoulder still hurt a little from being crammed into my locker. I tugged on my collar and exposed a bright red scrape. Fortunately, I had gotten my fingers out of the way just in time to not have the door slammed on them. I wondered if anyone would call my mom about the incident. I hoped not. She had a stupid job she didn't like and I didn't want to make her day any worse than it already was.

Just twenty minutes into detention, Ms. Johnson said, "All right, that's enough. Time to go."

I scooped my books into my pack and threw it over my shoulder. "See you tomorrow," I said to Ms. Johnson.

"See you tomorrow, Michael," she said pleasantly.

Outside the cafeteria, the halls were now empty except for the janitorial crew that had moved in and were pushing wide brooms up and down the tiled corridors. I stopped at my locker and grabbed the licorice I'd stowed in there after lunch and had looked forward to all day. I peeled back its wrapper and took a delicious chewy bite. Whoever invented licorice was a genius. I loved licorice almost as much as Rice Krispies squares. I swung my pack over my shoulder, then walked out the south door, glad to finally be going home.

I had just come around the corner of the school when Jack and his posse, Mitchell and Wade, emerged from between two Dumpsters. Jack grabbed me by the front of my shirt. I dropped my licorice.

"You ratted us out to Dallstrom, didn't you?" Jack said.

I looked up at him, my eyes twitching like crazy. "I didn't tell him."

"Yeah, right, you little chicken." Jack shoved me backward into a pyracantha bush. Sharp thorns pricked my neck, arms, and legs. The only place that wasn't stinging was where my backpack protected me.

"You're going to pay," Jack said, pointing at me, "big-time." He turned to Mitchell, who was almost as tall as Jack but not as broad-shouldered or muscular. "Show him what we do to snitchers."

"I didn't tell on you," I said again. "I promise."

Before I could climb out of the bush, Mitchell pulled me up and thumped me hard on the eye. I saw a bright flash and felt my eye immediately begin to swell. I put my hand over it, trying not to lose my balance.

"Hit him again," Jack said.

The next fist landed on my nose. It hurt like crazy. I could feel blood running down my lips and chin. My eyes watered. Then Jack

walked up and punched me right in the gut. I fell to my knees, unable to breathe. When I could finally fill my lungs with air I began to groan. I couldn't stop blinking.

"He's crying like a baby," Mitchell said joyfully. "Cry, baby, cry."

Then came Wade. Wade West had yellow hair and a crooked nose. He was the smallest and ugliest of the three, which is probably why he was the meanest since he had the most to prove. "I say we pants him." This was a specialty of Wade's. By "pants" he meant to pull off my pants—the ultimate act of humiliation. Last year in eighth grade, Wade had pantsed Ostin behind the school, pulling off his pants and underwear in front of a couple dozen classmates. Ostin had to run home naked from the waist down, something he had never lived down.

"Yeah," Mitchell agreed, "that'll teach him for ratting us out."

"No!" I shouted, struggling to my feet. "I didn't tell on you."

Just then someone shouted, "Leave him alone."

Taylor Ridley was standing alone near the school door, dressed in her purple and gold cheerleading outfit.

"Hey, check out the cheerleader," Wade said.

"You're just in time to watch us pants this guy," Mitchell said.

"Yeah, shake those pom-poms for us," Jack said, laughing like a maniac. Then he made up his own cheer, which was surprisingly clever for Jack. "Two, four, six, eight, who we gonna cremate?" He laughed again. "Grab him."

Before I could even try to get away, all three of them grabbed me. Despite that fact that my nose was still bleeding and I could barely see out of one eye, I went wild, squirming against their clamp-like grips. I got one hand loose and hit Jack in the neck, scoring only a dull thud. He responded by thumping me on the ear.

"Come on, you wimps!" he shouted at Mitchell and Wade. "You can't hold this runt?" They pinned me facedown on the ground, the weight of all three of them crushing me into the grass.

"Stupid little nerd," Mitchell said. "You think you can rat on us and not pay?"

I tried to curl up so they couldn't take my clothes, but they were too strong. Jack pulled on my shirt until it began to tear.

"You leave him alone or I'll get Mrs. Shaw!" Taylor shouted. "She's right inside." Mrs. Shaw was the cheerleaders' adviser and taught home economics. She was a soft-spoken, matronly woman and about as scary as a throw pillow. I think we all knew that she wasn't actually inside or Taylor would have just gotten her in the first place.

"Shut your mouth," Jack said.

Hearing him talk that way to Taylor infuriated me. "You shut your mouth, you loser," I said to Jack.

"You need to learn manners, blinky boy."

"You need mouthwash," I said.

Jack grabbed me by the hair and pulled my head around. "You're going to be wishing you'd kept your mouth shut." He smacked me again on the nose, which sent a shock of pain through my body. At that moment something snapped. I knew I couldn't hold back much longer.

"Let me go!" I shouted. "I'm warning you."

"Ooh," Wade said. "He's warning us."

"Yeah, whatcha gonna do?" Mitchell said. "Cry on us?"

"No, he's gonna wipe his nose on us," Wade laughed. He pulled off my shoes while Mitchell grabbed my waistband and started tugging at my pants. I was still trying to curl up.

"Stop struggling," Jack said. "Or we're going to take everything you got and make you streak home."

"Leave him alone!" Taylor yelled again.

"Mitch, hurry and pull his pants off," Wade said.

A surge of anger ran through my body so powerful I couldn't control it. Suddenly a sharp, electric *ZAP!* pierced the air, like the sound of ice being dropped onto a hot griddle. Electricity flashed and Jack and his posse screamed out as they all fell to their backs and flopped about on the grass like fish on land.

I rolled over to my side and wiped the blood from my nose with the back of my hand. I pushed myself up, red-faced and angry. I stood above Jack, who was frothing at the mouth. "I told you to leave me alone. If you ever touch me again, I'll do worse. Do you understand? Or do you want more?" I lifted my hand.

Terror was evident in his eyes. "No. Please don't."

I turned and looked at his posse. Both of them were on the ground, quivering and whimpering. In fact, Wade was bawling like a baby and moaning, "It hurts . . . it hurts so bad."

I walked over to him. "You bet it hurts. And that was just a little one. Next time you bully me, or any of my friends, I'll triple it."

As the three of them lay there groaning and quivering I sat back on the ground, pulled on my shoes, and tied them. Then I remembered Taylor.

I looked back over at the door, hoping she had gone inside. She hadn't. And from the expression on her face, I could tell she had seen everything. Bad, bad news. My mother was going to kill me. But there was nothing I could do about that now. I grabbed my backpack and ran home.