

CHAPTER

4

satin cape I had stashed inside it earlier. It was part of the Dracula costume Mom had sewed three Halloweens ago, but it made the perfect magician's cape. I put it on and went back to the dining room. Showtime.

I tapped a crystal water goblet with a table knife.

Ting . . . ting . . . ting . . .

"Ladies and gentlemen!" I said in my most dramatic voice. "In honor of Mom's birthday and to celebrate this most auspicious occasion, I will now perform a trick that will both amaze and delight you!"

I paused for effect. Then I grabbed the edge of the red tablecloth and, with a snap of my wrists, jerked it toward the floor. Like magic, it slid under the gold-rimmed plates and the cake. In a heartbeat, I was standing before the amazed crowd with the cloth in my hands and the bare wood of the table gleaming in the candlelight.

I did it!

I dropped the tablecloth on the floor and raised my hands over my head. Then I leaned over and took the biggest bow of my life.

"Ta-daaaa!"

And that was my first mistake.

ACTUALLY, MY FIRST MISTAKE WASN'T TAKING A BOW, IT WAS STANDING UP AGAIN.

On the way up, I hit Mom's water glass . . . which fell over and hit a candlestick . . . which fell over and caught a napkin on fire . . . which made Uncle Pete yell, "Pour on water!" . . . which made me throw a glass of water . . . which was my second mistake.

I don't know what Grandma Melvyn had in her water glass, but it sure wasn't water. When I threw it on the flame, it went *WHOOOSH* and the fire spread across the table . . . which made Aunt Trudy knock Uncle Pete right into the cake . . . which made him knock the cake onto the floor . . . which probably saved us all from food poisoning, but which really took the magic out of the moment.

While Ape Boy climbed the china cabinet to get a better

view, Mom got the fire extinguisher and put out the flames. When the fire was out and the smoke cleared, Grandma Melvyn and I were alone in the dining room. I looked out the window to avoid the Wicked Wobble Eye, and that's when I heard the weirdest sound ever. It was a wheezing, honking, snorting sound like a cross between an asthmatic goose and an insane pig. I looked at Grandma Melvyn. Sure enough, she was laughing. Or maybe she was having some kind of fit. It was hard to tell. Her whole body shook and tears streamed down her cheeks. She wheezed and sputtered trying to get her breath between snorts. Her face was bright red and she looked like she was going to fall out of her chair.

Perfect. Grandma Melvyn, the woman who never ever, *ever* laughed, was going to laugh herself to death because of me. I was about to call an ambulance when she stopped and said something that nearly knocked me over.

"Well, Robbie," she said, "your bow needs work, but I've seen worse acts."

"What?" I asked.

"Got cake in your ears?"

"No," I said, "it's just that you never called me by my name before."

"Well, you never did anything interesting before," she said. "Maybe staying here won't be as bad as it looks."

"What?" I asked.

Grandma Melvyn narrowed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. Her mouth curled up on one side in something that wasn't quite a smile.

"Well, well," she said. "Trixie didn't tell you yet, did she? I'm stuck with you bunch of losers."

"What?"

"What? What? What?" Grandma Melvyn snapped. "There something wrong with you? Thomas Edison didn't say 'watt' that much, and he invented the lightbulb. Oh, that's a good one."

She went back to wheezing and snorting while I sat there with my mouth open like the first guy in a sci-fi movie to witness an alien invasion: amazed, confused, and too stupid to run.

Grandma Melvyn poked me with her cane.

"Don't work yourself into a wedgie," she said. "I'm out of here the minute those Trixies at Almetta Insurance chuck up the dough for my knee operation. Sooner, if Trixie stops ordering pizza and goes back to cooking."

Grandma Melvyn stood up and leaned hard on her cane. She shuffled out of the dining room and down the hall. I heard her yell at Mom in the kitchen: "Make with the ice cream, Trixie! You call this a birthday

party? Where's the ice cream?"

I sat there a long, long time before I got up and went to my room.

That night, Mom came to my room. She stood in the doorway with her hand behind her back.

"Hey, kiddo," she said. "I brought you some cake."

Great. There's nothing like a slice of charcoal cake after a gigantic flaming disaster.

Mom pulled a cellophane-wrapped cupcake from behind her back and handed it to me. It was one of those store-bought kind with that waxy chocolate icing and a white squiggle down the middle. I love those cupcakes.

"Dad's getting in late tonight, by the way," she said. "But he's gone again early tomorrow, so he'll call to chat tomorrow night."

I didn't say anything.

"Look, Robbie," Mom said. "I was trying to tell you earlier that Grandma Melvyn has to stay with us for a little while so she can get her knee fixed. She's been with Aunt Trudy and Uncle Pete, but they're going on a long trip on Tuesday and Grandma Melvyn can't stay by herself, so she's coming here tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

I frowned. I bet they booked a one-way ticket to

Grandma-Melvyn-Isn't-Hereville. Aunt Trudy is a bad cook, but she's not stupid.

"Hey," Mom said, "it's what families do. We all make sacrifices, but we'll get through this like everything else. It will be fine. You'll see. First, we have to—"

"Mom!" Ape Boy screamed from the kitchen. "Get it out of my hair! MOM!"

"Bubble gum," she said. "Robbie, here's the thing. We have to—"

"MOOOOMMM!" Ape Boy screamed again.

Mom gave me a tiny hug.

"We'll talk later," she said.

"MOOOOOOOOOOMMMMMMMMMMM!"

"I'm *coming!*" she yelled.

Mom closed the door and was gone. I sat on my bed and looked at the cellophane cupcake. Mom used to pack one in my lunch box every day, before we had to have a budget for everything. Like Mom says, we all make sacrifices.

With a flick of my wrist, I sent the cupcake flying toward the metal trash can beside my desk. It ricocheted off the desk leg into the basket, landing on a pile of empty juice boxes and crumpled Kleenex.

I flipped off my light and went to sleep.