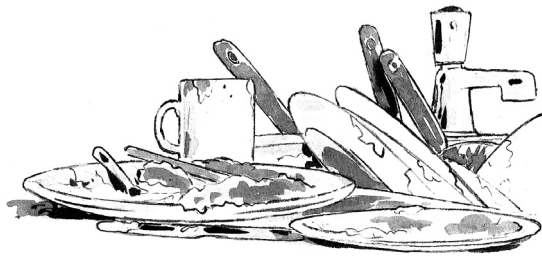




Grand Prize!



"Mom! Dad!" Twelve-year-old Darin Johnson slammed the kitchen door behind him. "I'm home."



"So, what do you expect — a party?" Darin's fourteen-year-old sister, Tamara, stood at the sink rinsing dishes and loading them into the dishwasher.

Ignoring the remark, Darin tossed his Bible on the table and grabbed a cookie from the package on the counter. "Where are Mom and Dad?"

"Beats me." Tamara shrugged. "Last time I checked it wasn't my day to watch them."





"Mom?" Darin walked out of the kitchen and headed upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. "You're not going to believe this!"

"We're in here," his mother called from the study. "Dad's trying to hook up this computer. I thought you were going to phone when Scouts was over."

"The Thompsons gave me a ride," Darin said, entering the room. "Awesome!" Darin's eyes lit up as he checked out the new computer. "Do I get the old one in my room?"

Mr. Johnson smiled from where he knelt behind the computer desk. "We'll have to see about that. I'm sure Tamara has her eyes on it, too."

"But I asked first, right?" Darin argued. "That should count for something."

"Fat chance!"

Darin wheeled around to see Tamara in the doorway, her hands on her hips. "I'm three years older than you. I need it much more than you do," she said.

"I don't think so," Darin said. "All you ever do is talk on the phone. What do you need a





computer for — to keep track of what you've told everyone?" Darin laughed at his own joke until he noticed no one else was laughing.

"That's enough, you two," Mr. Johnson said. "Keep it up and I'll give the thing to someone at the office."

Mrs. Johnson sat down in a blue and yellow flowered easy chair in the corner of the room. "Darin, weren't you going to tell us something when you came in?"

Puzzled, Darin glanced over at his mother. Then he remembered. "Oh, yeah! You are not going to believe what I found out tonight! You know the essay I had to write for the competition two months ago?"

Mrs. Johnson put her hand to her mouth. "Darin! You didn't..."

Darin punched the air enthusiastically. "I did! I won the wilderness trip. The Grand prize!"

"No way!" Tamara screamed. "You're lying!"

Shaking his head, Darin continued. "I get to invite two friends to go with me over spring break. Three days out in the open on our own."



Nobody to boss us around or tell us to quiet down." Darin's eyes were closed, a grin across his face. "Sweet!"

Darin's father laughed. "Sounds like a release from prison."

Opening his eyes, Darin blushed. "Oh. I didn't mean that it's bad around here or anything. It's just that..."

Now both of his parents were laughing. "We understand, Darin," his mother said. "Now go brush your teeth and get ready for bed. Until spring break you're still under our command."

Real funny. Darin rolled his eyes as he walked down the hall to his bedroom. Passing Tamara's room, he heard her talking on the phone to one of her friends.

"This is so not fair," she moaned. "That kid gets every lucky break. Why don't I ever win anything?"

"Maybe because all you ever do is talk about entering contests," Darin muttered. Shutting his door behind him he plopped down on the bed. Folding his arms behind his neck, he thought about which friends he would invite.





This was going to be really difficult. Of course he'd ask Andrew McGinnis, his best friend, but beyond that, he didn't know.

Rolling to his side, he watched his four goldfish swimming in the tank on his dresser. The smallest one chased a larger fish under the tunnel and behind a rock. Darin laughed. "You go, Shorty," he cheered. Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, he stood and went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Staring in the mirror at his dark brown curls, he imagined camouflage patches of green, brown, and black across his cheeks. *"I'll bring along some peroxide and bleach my hair. This is going to be way too cool."*

"Darin?" Tamara pounded on the bathroom door. "Hurry up. I need to go."

"I just got in here," Darin answered, wetting his fingers and pushing his hair off his forehead.

Peering in the mirror one last time he smiled to himself. *"Maybe I'll get a buzz before I go — like a real Marine. High and tight."*

Pushing his T-shirt sleeve up high into his armpit, he bent his arm and examined his





muscle. Growing. Still, Darin was not satisfied. *"I have really got to get in shape. Maybe Dad will let me join the fitness center down the street."*

"Mother!" Tamara shouted, outside the door.

"I'm coming," Darin hollered. "Hold your pants on!" Opening the door slowly, he pushed past his sister, dodging to avoid her elbow.

"Darin." This time it was his father calling from downstairs. "Your mother and I want to talk to you."

"Great," he muttered. "Can't a guy even have a little extra time in the bathroom?"

"Coming," he yelled. Darin slipped into a sweat suit, grabbed a pair of socks, and headed downstairs.

