

ERIC WALTERS

***FAR
FROM THE
TREE***

Cover illustration by
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CHAPTER

1

A *thud* startled me out of a solid sleep. Somebody was pounding on one of the apartment doors on our floor. It sounded close. I looked at my watch. It glowed out the time — 2:18. The bars had closed, so it was probably just somebody coming home drunk who'd lost his key or was too sloshed to know how to fit it in the lock.

“What’s happening?” my youngest brother Joshua asked from the top bunk across the room.

“Yeah, what’s happening? What do they want?” Justin, three years older than Joshua, groaned from the bottom bunk.

“It’s nothing. Go back to sleep. Both of you.”

The walls were thin in this building and there was always drama going on in the halls, the lobby or out front. Usually, though, it wasn’t on a weeknight.

“It doesn’t sound like nothing, Jamesy,” Joshua replied. That was the name he’d always called me since he was little. I didn’t mind.

“Probably just somebody who forgot their key or—”

“Open up, it’s the police!” a loud voice called out.

They pounded again. It was more than close. It was at our front door. My heart raced.

Our bedroom door flew open, and a shadow ran in and closed the door.

“I have to hide.”

It was my older brother Jason. He sounded panicked.

“What’s going on?” I demanded.

“Ssshhh . . . keep your voice down.”

“What’s—”

More pounding on the door, followed by more yelling.

“What do they want?” I hissed.

“Me, they want me. I have to hide.”

Jason slid under the bed as we heard our mother’s voice come from the other room.

“Tell Mom to say they need a search warrant,” Jason said from under the bed. “Go out there and don’t let them come in . . . Go!” he hissed.

I threw my feet over the edge of the bed and stumbled toward the door. I opened it and got to the front door just as Mom did.

She looked at me. “Go back to your room.”

“No, I wanna know what’s going on.”

I also thought I should be there for her.

“Do you know where your brother is?” she asked, gesturing to the couch where Jason usually slept. His pillow and blankets were lying on the floor.

“He’s in my room, under the bed. Ask them if they have a warrant before you let them in.”

They pounded on the door again. I could see the door vibrating as they hit it. I knew how it felt. I was trembling along with it.

“If they had a warrant they would have broken the door down,” Mom replied. “I’m going to talk to them.”

Before I could object, she took the chain off the lock and opened the door. There was a man in a suit with two uniformed officers standing behind him. The suit took a step forward, but Mom placed a hand against his chest and stopped him. That was like her. She didn’t take garbage from anybody and was afraid of almost nobody.

“You don’t have a warrant, do you?”

The suit shook his head.

“Then you can’t come in without my consent.”

“That’s correct,” he said reluctantly.

“In that case, I’m offering an invitation to come into my apartment.” She made a welcoming gesture. All three stepped in and she closed the door behind them. They were

all large and took up space. I backed away uneasily. I figured she'd let them in because it was better to do this in our apartment where all the neighbours couldn't hear.

"Now, what exactly do you want?" she asked.

"To speak to your son." The suit pointed to me.

"Me?" I was shocked. What did they want with me? I hadn't done anything.

"What do you want with James?" Mom demanded. She sounded even more shocked than I felt.

"James? No, we want to talk to Jason," the suit said. He turned to one of the uniforms. "Is that him?"

"No . . . I'm pretty sure," the uniform replied.

"He matches the description," the suit said.

"Big news: brothers look the same," Mom said. "James is only thirteen."

"Yeah, that's not who we want. I guess they all do look the same," he said.

We looked alike but that was where it ended.

"He's pretty big for a thirteen-year-old," the suit said.

"All my boys have that in common, too. What do you want to talk to Jason about?"

"We have some questions to ask him."

"At two in the morning?"

The suit didn't answer at first. He looked like he was

weighing his words. "There has been a series of car thefts in the area."

"And you think my son is involved in those?" Mom demanded.

"We just want to talk to him."

"Three of you in the middle of the night just want to talk to him?" she asked. "Or have you come to arrest him?"

The suit didn't answer her question, but it was obvious from his expression. "We have sufficient reason to bring him to the station for further questioning, pending a warrant."

I had a rush of anger. I wasn't sure if it was directed more to these cops or Jason for doing whatever he'd done. Him being arrested was the last thing Mom needed.

"So you figured he was here, but you didn't think to get a search warrant," she said. "Who was the bright light who didn't think that one all the way through?"

The suit looked annoyed, and both of the uniforms smiled slightly and then put those smiles away when he looked at them.

"Your parents must be so proud of you," Mom snapped.

"They are. Raising a police officer is a lot better than raising criminals."

Mom's look of confidence evaporated. Instead, she

looked like she was about to cry. She acted tough on the outside, but she wasn't. I didn't know if other people saw it, but I did. She fought it off and her face hardened again. I knew she didn't want them to see they'd gotten to her.

"You don't recognize me, do you?" the suit asked.

He did look sort of familiar, but lots of cops had that same look — short hair, stocky build and arrogant expression. Even when they weren't in uniform, even when they were trying to blend in undercover, they had that look. He had that look.

"I'm Detective Roberts. I was one of the officers who arrested your oldest son, J.J."

Mom let out a big sigh. She was like a deflating balloon. She looked so tired. Even more than she usually did.

"Jason doesn't have any time to get into trouble. Besides going to school, he also has a job after school."

"At the car wash," Detective Roberts said.

Obviously, they knew where he worked as well as where he lived.

"It's more than that. They do car detailing," Mom said. "He's a good boy. He even gives me money to help with the rent . . . not because I ask but because he wants to help."

"He's been helping himself in other ways," Detective Roberts said.

I didn't like the tone of his voice or the look in his eyes.

"I guess he was just following in the family tradition," Detective Roberts continued.

What did he mean? Nobody else in the family had ever worked at a car wash.

"I did a background check. Your husband and his brothers are serving some serious time in federal prison. The Campbell brothers have quite the reputation."

I hadn't expected any of this and judging from my mom's expression she hadn't seen it coming either.

The detective turned to me and pointed. "You're thirteen, right?"

I nodded.

"It's probably just a matter of time before me or somebody else will be banging on the door with a warrant for *your* arrest. Like they say, the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree."

"Get out of my house right now!" Mom yelled.

Her burst of anger surprised me.

"You can't just come in here and harass my children! I want your badge number." Fatigue had been replaced with fiery anger. Even my father, who didn't seem afraid of anybody, had learned to fear that look in her eyes.

Detective Roberts pulled a business card out of his

pocket and offered it to her. "All the information is right here."

She snatched it from his hand. "Get out of my home, now!"

"We'll go, but Jason should just come down to the station with his lawyer. It would be better."

"Better for who?" Mom questioned.

"For him. Things can get rough out there and there's no predicting what can happen."

"Are you threatening my son?" She now turned to me. "James, you heard him, you're a witness, he just threatened Jason."

I nodded my head.

"Not threatening," he said calmly. "Just telling it like it is. People who run or resist arrest, well, can cause bad things to happen — and not just for him."

What did he mean by that?

"If you're harbouring a known fugitive, you could be charged with obstruction of justice. That could mean up to two years in jail. With your husband already incarcerated, what would happen to this one and the two younger boys?"

I felt a rush of fear. Was he telling the truth? Could they arrest Mom?

"Get out," she growled. "Get out before I throw you out."

“You want to add assaulting an officer to obstruction?
Be my guest.”

Mom pulled out her phone. “I’m going to record this.” She tapped the video on the camera app and pointed it at the officers. “I’ve asked these three to leave my premises and they are threatening to arrest me. Keep it up, big man . . . keep talking and don’t get out, and I’ll sue the police department and make sure they fire you.”

His defiant expression changed.

“As you requested, we’re leaving. Thanks for recording that we’ve notified you of our interest in your son, Jason Campbell. Good night, ma’am.”

The three of them left our apartment and Mom slammed the door behind them. The sound of it echoed down the hall. Even through the closed door I could hear their footfalls stamping away. Big, thick police shoes weren’t made for moving quietly or quickly.

She put on the chain again and looked out through the peephole.

“What did he mean about the tree and fruit?” I asked.

“He was just being a jerk.”

“I know that, but what does it mean?”

She let out a big sigh. “It means that orange trees have oranges that drop to the ground right beneath them. Apple

trees have apples that drop to the ground and—”

“And criminals have kids who become criminals,” I said. “That’s why he thinks he’ll be coming to arrest me.”

She nodded and her whole body seemed to shudder.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She had a small smile. “That’s so like you to worry about me.”

“Could they really arrest *you* for Jason being here?”

“They could try, but it would never stick. Don’t worry, they’re just bluffing. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Maybe Jason isn’t even involved,” I said, even though I didn’t believe it. He was probably guilty. I turned and walked toward my bedroom. Jason could hide from the cops, but he couldn’t hide from me.