

IN CLASS WE GOT seated alphabetically by our last names. Karen Aaronburg always sat in the first seat, front row. Not only did Karen's last name begin with *A*, but the letter that followed was another *A*. So Karen Aaronburg had a lock on that first seat, and she sat on it like no one on earth could ever take it away.

Since my last name began with an *F*, I often got seated in the first seat, second row, right next to Karen Aaronburg. That suited me fine. Maybe she was a little snotty, but I liked her face, especially those bright blue eyes.

One morning we were having snack. I had just started to eat a carrot when I felt her eyes on me.

"Have you heard the scuttlebutt?" she asked.

"Huh?" I wasn't sure I heard her right.

"The scuttlebutt," she repeated. "Do you know what that word means?"

"Yeah!" I lied.

"It means gossip," she explained.

"Hey, I know, I know."

"Well, have you heard the scuttlebutt?" she asked again.

"No." I tried to look disinterested.

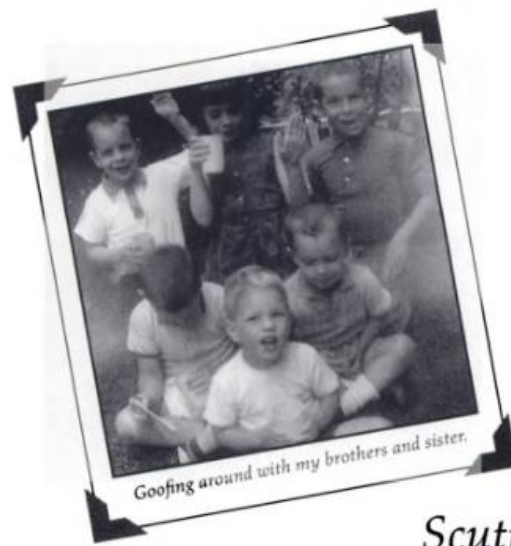
"Well, do you want to hear?" She gave me a straight look. "It's about you, sort of."

"What?"

Leaning forward, she motioned me closer.

"Your mother is going to have another baby."

I stared at her, unable to tell if she was mock-



Scuttlebutt

ing me or acting smug or enjoying the shocked look that must have been plastered all over my face. She simply stared back, and her face had never looked quite so wide awake as it did at that moment.

"No way," I finally said.

"It's true," she replied, nodding. "Ask your mother."

I had to sit through four more hours before I could check the truth of this story. When I got off the bus, I rushed into the house and kitchen.

"A girl in school told me you were going to have another baby," I sputtered. "Is that true?"

Mom looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"Well . . . yes," she admitted with a shy smile. "Isn't that wonderful?"

"But why didn't *you* tell me?"

"Dad and I weren't quite ready," she said. "We were going to tell you in a few weeks. Who was the girl?"

"Karen Aaronburg."

"Oh." Mom nodded. "I think I know what

happened. I mentioned it to Polly Renshaw.

Polly and Beth Aaronburg are first cousins. Polly must've told Beth, and Beth told Karen."

"And Karen told me," I said. "Mom! It would be nice if I knew before every other kid in school!"

"You're right," Mom agreed. "I'm sorry."

By Christmas vacation, Mom was going around saying, "I'm a house, aren't I?" Nobody disagreed. She looked like she was about to burst. In late January we all came home from school to find a new baby boy, Johnny, in the bassinet.

Next school year, right after Thanksgiving, Karen motioned me close to her.

"I've got more scuttlebutt," she said softly.

"What?" My cheeks burned like she'd just smacked me, hard. "A baby?"

"Yeah, another one." Karen gave me a knowing smile. "Mom told me last night. Hey, I'm trying to figure out all the kids in your family. Is this right? Seven kids? Am I missing anybody?"

She handed me a piece of paper with this list written on it:

Ralph
Jimmy
Lainie
Tommy
Bobby
Johnny
New baby

I turned away without answering. Her list was accurate, but I was so mad I couldn't even look at her. And Karen seemed to understand, because she didn't say another word about it for the rest of the day.

"Are you pregnant again, Mom?" I blurted out that afternoon.

At first she looked confused.

"Yes, oh goodness, I'm sorry!" She apologized for not telling me, but what good did that do?

That night, at supper, Mom shared the news with the whole family.

"Lainie, this time when I go to the hospital, maybe I'll bring you back a little sister!"

Lainie smiled at that. But four months later, on the first day of spring, we all come home to find baby number seven, Joey, asleep in the bassinet.