

Prologue

ESCAPE

I still was not sure. Escape? Would I go tonight? If they caught me, I knew they would move me up the hill to the Acute Care Unit. So, if I went, I had to be careful.

I lay there, keeping track of the nurses' rounds. At night, they checked on me every fifteen minutes. I stared at the window. Outside, the tall light pole lit both the building and the bushes two floors below.



Should I go? Should I?

I didn't know.

Betty, the short nurse, gently pushed open my door and peeked in.

"He's still sleeping, Alice," I heard her whisper.

Nurses. They can't help me. No one can help me.

The large outdoor lamp snapped off. 4 a.m. Now there was nothing in my room

but darkness and the sound of the two nurses walking the halls.

I hate this claustrophobic box. I'm trapped inside it. I clenched the sheet and gritted my teeth. I've got to get out. I've got to get back to my family. I have to get back to New York and find a new job.

Quietly, I slipped out of my pajamas, rolled them in to a ball and put them under the covers. I'd made up my mind; I would go tonight! I found my underpants in the top dresser drawer; hid my sneakers under the bed. I got back under the covers and waited for the next bed check. Then I put on my socks and shirt and pulled on my chinos. I took the vial of Zoloft from the night table, stuffed it in my pocket, then took it out again.

Fuck it! Doesn't work anyway, and threw it across the room.

After the nurse closed my door, I walked to the window and struggled to work the screen free. It came loose with a jar, and I hid it on the floor behind the old, stuffed armchair. 4:50.

When will I go? Will I go? I have to!

I kept watching the sky to see if the summer night was starting to lighten.

You're going to let them keep you here? Are you? Or are you going to do something about it? It's now or never, asshole. Have you got the guts?

I practiced in the dark going back and forth from the bed to the window, measuring my 5' 7" frame against the size of the opening that led to the ground two floors below . . . to the ground and to freedom. Back and forth, back and forth, from the bed to the window. But each time I went to the window, fear forced me back. The magnetic pull of the room held me, froze me, just like two months ago when I stood

alone on the subway platform beneath the World Trade Center.

Stay by the mouth of the tunnel, I thought that afternoon. Then he won't have time to stop the train.

I remembered picking up my new attaché case and walking to the end of the station platform where the subway would come in to wait for the next train, hiding next to the tunnel wall. I straightened my suit coat and fixed my tie.

What will people think? I wondered.

Successful, young insurance executive, dressed in felt-collared overcoat, gray pin-striped Paul Stuart suit, Hermès tie and well shined Gucci loafers, carrying a Ghurka attaché case, killed today in the World Trade Center on the tracks of the R train. It is not known if his death was an accident or a suicide. There was no note.

My thoughts were the same now.

Do you have the guts?

Now, like then, I could not make my body move.

It's only two floors. What's the big deal? What's the big deal!

I studied the darkness outside.

You've got to go before it gets light. You've already lost an hour. It'll be light soon.

Again and again, I tried to force myself through the open window, but my body would not go.

That's right, just stay here! You never had the courage to kill yourself. So why should this be any different?

Then, in an instant, it happened. As though watching from across the room, I saw my body move in slow motion towards the open window. Something grabbed me, pulled me, pushed me. As if in a trance, one moment I was in the room, the next, outside, sliding down the white siding of the Main House to the bushes below.

Crash!

Chapter 1



As the old yellow bus slowly rattled to my stop, I watched Buttons streaked across our huge front lawn and sailed over the small boxwood hedge at the end of the yard onto the pebbled sidewalk. His black spots blurred as he dashed beneath the tall maple trees, down the dirt path, to meet me at the corner.

With my book bag swinging behind me, I bounded down the worn, black rubber steps and landed on the grass beside him. I bent to one knee, and scratched him hard behind



his ears. I knew Buttons loved this. And I loved him. He was my best friend.

“Hi, Boy. Ya miss me? Come on. I’ll race you home!”

Off we went, splashing together through the muddy puddles and racing past the black mailboxes, before turning up the long winding driveway towards our large white house.

Above the porch, in the middle of the railing, was the big new ‘W’ that my father had recently added. ‘W’ for Walker, high above the street, for all to see from the road. I remembered Mother arguing with him last week after the carpenters left.

“You never ask me anymore!” she yelled. “You never ask me anything anymore. Why didn’t you tell me you wanted to put *your* initial in the middle of the railing? How could you? Why don’t you just put your statue up there, too? It’s like buying that damn car—red and white. What were you thinking? You’ve got your goddamn firedog, don’t you? Did you need a fire engine too? And a Packard of all things. If you really want everybody to know you’re in the insurance business, don’t be so subtle. Put up a flashing sign for God’s sake. *Cheap Insurance.*”

We sprinted around the side porch, away from the ‘W’, to the front of the house. Mother had told me that years ago our home had been a large dairy barn. Cows had come in from the east, so the structure was turned that way with the entrance facing

away from the road. Ours was one of the biggest houses in Garden Village with two tall white columns on either side of the red front door and a heavy brown-shingled roof high above.

Haskell was sweeping leaves off the front steps where a black metal jockey in red vest and white jodhpurs stood holding out a welcoming ring for my father's imaginary horses.

"Hi, Haskell."

Haskell smiled his deep warm smile, took off his straw hat and knelt down so Buttons could lick his wrinkled face.

"Good day at school, Master Jay?"

"Fine, Haskell, except for that old Mrs. Applebee. She's a witch."

Haskell laughed his deep Southern laugh and scratched his short grey hair. "I suppose you just have to let things be, Master Jay. Just concentrate on those three Rs: readin', writin' and 'rithmetic."

"Gotcha. Is Mom home?"

"I do believe she is."

I walked up the steps and tried the brass knob, but the door was locked. Buttons stood tall on his hind legs, scratching excitedly at the red door while I rang the bell. No answer.

"Mom? Mom! I'm home," I called.

I rang the bell again. Finally, Mother slowly unlocked the door and pulled it open. Buttons pushed his way past her and scampered down the waxed hallway with his legs

flying every which way over the Persian throw rugs and parquet floor.

“Oh, hi, Honey. Sorry, I was in the back,” she said holding her glass. “I had some laundry to do.”

Her face was lined and haggard, her hair stiff from too many bleachings. No longer did she look like the pretty young woman in the Red Cross uniform smiling out from the silver picture frame on the living room table. Now, her body, once firm from sports, was undernourished and thin. The blue shine in her eyes had gone pale. She put her arm around me and hugged me tightly. As we kissed, I smelled her breath reeking of alcohol.

“Jay, why don’t you run upstairs and put on some clean clothes?” she said. “Your friends will be here any minute.”

Buttons came galloping around the corner from the kitchen and scampered after me up the two flights past the spacious master bedroom and my brother Harry’s room to my bedroom on the third floor.

I sat on the lower bunk next to my crystal radio set and peeled off my school clothes. Across the room, as Buttons whipped his tail against my battered desk, the broken ceramic Princeton tiger teeter-tottered back and forth on its three remaining legs. I rifled through my drawer, found a fresh T-shirt, then pulled on a pair of old blue jeans, and tied my Keds. I found my beaded Indian belt mixed in with my LPs of Elvis and Frankie Lymon.

“Hurry up, Honey!” Mother called from downstairs. “Billy’s here.”

I pushed aside the blue and pink riding ribbons that hung from my mirror’s

wooden frame and checked my hair. Decals of my baseball heroes—Pee Wee Reese, Duke Snider, Whitey Ford—fought for space on the glass with the multi-colored chiffon scarves doused in sweet perfume that were given to me as souvenirs by my new girlfriend Judy. With one more pass of the brush, I called for Buttons and we ran down the stairs together.

Bill Schumacher was waiting in the main hallway. He was a couple of inches taller than me, about 5' 9", and thinner, with a thick, black flat top.

“Hi, Bill.”

“Hey, Jay. Hi Buttons. Good dog.”

Buttons rolled over thrashing his tail back and forth while Bill scratched his spotted belly.

The front door pushed open and Jack O’Neil clambered into the vestibule. Jack was covered with freckles and had a thick chunk of bright red hair sticking out from under his checkered hunting hat. Right behind him came Andy Barret, a gangly kid of over 6'. Andy was wearing a blue-and-white Yankee’s jacket that matched his baseball cap. And his blue-and-white t-shirt proudly proclaimed New York as the winner of this year’s ’56 World Series.

“Hey, Andy. So, what’s with all this baseball stuff?” I asked. “I bet you’re wearing Yankee u-trou too, right?”

“Come on! Lay off. It may have taken my Boys of Summer seven games, but we finally beat the Dodgers.”

“Hi boys,” Mother said as she came into the foyer carrying her drink. “Well, it

looks like we have the 'Happy Hackers Club' duly assembled. Here's the wet washcloth. Now remember, stay away from the crystal and anything else that can break. It's 3:15, so you can play tag 'til four. I've put the record player down in the basement. After your snack, you can listen to the Edgar Allen Poe tale. Jay, why don't you start?"

"OK."

I took the washcloth and covered my eyes.

"One, two, three . . ."

My friends scattered. We chased each other around the house throwing couch pillows about the living room, messing the rugs in the side hallway and sneaking under the majestic table in the foreboding dining room. I ducked into my favorite hiding place—deep in the back of the hall closet—way in the back where no one could see me. My father's heavy Polo coats and tweed Chesterfields swallowed me up as I pressed into the far corner. From the shelves overhead, the rich, clean scent of Vitalis cascaded down from the sweatbands of his many hats from Brooks mixed in with the smell of mothballs. Smothered by his heavy winter overcoats, I wondered, *Why can't we spend more time together? He's always too busy with his work to concern himself with me. Why is he always working?*

"It's four o'clock," Mother called. "Come on boys. Snacks in the kitchen."

Mom sat and joked with us as she sipped her drink and we ate our cookies and finished our milk.

"Now are you sure you eighth graders are old enough to listen to this record player by yourselves?" she asked. "Edgar Allen Poe can be pretty scary."

We looked at each other nervously, hesitated, then all nodded our heads tentatively. The doorbell rang and we jumped.

“I’ll get it, Mom.”

I ran into the main hall and tugged at the heavy front door. Mrs. Phillips, our neighbor from across the street, stood on the step outside with my brother Harry.

“Hi, Mrs. Phillips. Hi, Har’.”

“Hi, Jay. How’s your mom? Hope she’s feeling better. Well, I have to run. Tell her I said ‘Hi’.”

Harry was five years younger than me. He had just celebrated his eighth birthday. Like mine, his hair was platinum blond and his eyes were dark blue. But he was thinner than me and a head shorter.

“Come on Harry. We’re just going down to the basement. Jack, Bill and Andy are here. Hurry up. We’re going to listen to *The Cask of Amontillado*.”

I led my friends down the shaky steps from the pantry to a rickety metal card table and record player in the dank basement. We huddled together on five small folding chairs under a dim lightbulb that hung from the low cellar ceiling. When the record began, Mother handed me the flashlight, turned out the light, went up the steps and closed the pantry door. Quietly, we sat together and listened as the phonograph needle scratch out Poe’s penetrating words in the dark:

“...I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I re-echoed, I aided, I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamorer grew still. It was now midnight, and my task was drawing to a close. I had completed the eighth, the ninth and the tenth tier. I had finished a portion of the last and the eleventh; there remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled with its weight; I placed it partially in its destined position. But

now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head..."

Harry looked at me wide eyed and grabbed my arm. It was only then that I heard it. From above, there was a low groaning sound and the rattling of chains. The noise grew louder. Heavy footsteps were coming down the stairwell. In unison, we jumped from the table and fled for safety. Up the storm door steps we ran, forcing ourselves against the double doors, pushing, pushing, then pushing them up and open. We erupted out onto the back lawn into the safety of daylight. Timidly, we peered back down the stairs into the dark cellar well. A raucous laughter came from the kitchen. Standing in the back doorway, Mother was doubled over in hysterics. In one hand she held the snow chains from the garage and in the other her glass. We looked at one another, nervously at first, and then we began to laugh, harder and harder.

"Some Mom you've got there," Andy giggled.

"Sure had me scared," Bill smirked.

"Me too," Harry added, still shaking.

I smiled. "That's my mom," I said, and pushed Harry and Andy back towards the kitchen.

The gang picked up their jackets and hats in the large main hallway and got ready to leave.

"Hey, Jay. Want to ride our bikes over to Judy's tomorrow?" Andy asked. "I mean if you don't crash in to any more parked cars."

I could still feel the black and blue marks around my groin from last week's accident.

“Lay off will ya? Us Happy Hackers have to stick together. I wasn’t looking where I was going. OK?”

“Maybe she’ll give me more scarves.” Andy said. “I’ve got more than you, you know.”

“Are you kidding? No way! I’ve got seven. And I’m crazy for her. We’re all crazy for her. Right? I wish more girls would move here from California.”

“Maybe we can have her over,” Andy whispered with a smile. “You know, get her upstairs, and play doctor.”

“Are you nuts? It might have worked with Suzy. She’s only eight. But Judy’ll never fall for that. She’s thirteen.” I shook my head. “She’s stacked, not stupid.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Andy said.

“What about that Rock ‘n Roll show in Brooklyn on Saturday?” Bill asked. “Alan Freed’s at the Paramount. Why don’t we take her to Brooklyn to see the Flamingos? They’re so great. Right?”

“Or we could take her to the Saturday matinee to see *African Jungle*?” Jack offered. “It’s playing in Pleasantville in 3-D. We could sit in the back, and, you know, make out. See this? Got it last week.”

“What’s that?” I asked, looking at the purplish red mark on Jack’s neck.

“Don’t you know anything? It’s a hickey.”

“A hickey? What’s a hickey?”

“It’s from kissing, stupid. Judy gave it to me last week back by the lockers.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Nah. It’s my love bite.”

“Hmmm.” I looked at the others and shrugged my shoulders. “Anyway, if we go to the movies, we can’t go with Mom,” I said. “Last week the two of us went to see Gary Cooper in *High Noon*. We couldn’t agree on where to sit and got in to a huge fight. So, Mom ended up sitting in the row behind me for the whole show. She said it was my fault. It’s been bugging me ever since. Anyway, let’s talk about it tomorrow.”

“Yeah. We’ll put on our Flapjacks and go on over there,” Bill said.

“We gotta go, Jay.” Jack pulled on his windbreaker. “Come on, Andy. Hurry up, Bill.”

“Hey, Jay, did you ever find that retainer I dropped on your front lawn last week?” Bill asked. “My dad’s really pissed.”

“No, but I’ll keep looking for it.”

Andy grabbed me by the arm as he walked to the door. “You wanna go to Lamstons tomorrow after school?” he whispered in my ear. “We can swipe some more of those plastic soldiers?”

I looked around to see if the others were listening, then whispered, “I don’t know, Andy. Maybe we should lay low for a couple of weeks. We’ll be screwed if we get caught. Let’s talk about it tomorrow. OK? See you later alligator.”

Andy winked. “OK then. After a while crocodile.”

When my friends left, Mom helped Harry and me start our homework at the kitchen table. She freshened her white wine and finished up cooking our dinners.

“OK. It’s ready,” she said. “Go sit in the dining room. I’ll bring it in before it gets

cold.”

I sat at one end of the glistening mahogany table with Harry at the other. Mom pushed through the swinging door with our dinners, but as the door swung back, the two plates she carried crashed to the floor.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she smiled, cleaning up the mess. “I have extras in the kitchen.”

Mother took the broken plates back into the kitchen, and then quickly reappeared.

“Here you are,” she said. “Now, I want to see you two clean those plates.”

As I looked down at my food and saw that both the hamburger and the peas were covered with lint from the carpet. I shook my head.

Why does she have to drink so much? I wondered.

After television, on my way up to bed, I watched Mother from the first landing. She was pushing the heavy hall table in front of the stairs leading up to the seven bedrooms. Then she brought pots and pans from the kitchen to put on top of the hall chairs to block the steps.

“Mom,” I called. “What are you doing? How’s Dad going to get up the stairs tonight when he comes home?”

“Don’t worry about your father. Just go to bed, Hon’. Good night, Jay.”

She pushed two more chairs in to place, completely barricading the way to the bedrooms, and wiped her brow.

“Good night, Mom.”

Upstairs in my bed, I heard her crying at the foot of the stairs and mumbling to herself.

“Nineteen years of marriage this Sunday. I can’t take this anymore. I’m sick and tired of him always coming home drunk and smelling of perfume. And still fucking me . . . even when I’m having my period. Even then he wants to fuck me. I’ll show him. If he comes home tonight, he’ll have to stumble over this mess to get to bed. Bastard! And if he makes it up the stairs, then there’ll be hell to pay . . . I need a drink.”

I pulled the pillow over my head and thought about my family. I didn’t understand why my mother drank so much and why some nights my father never came home. I always looked forward to meeting him on his way from the station. Tired and disheveled in his rumpled suit, he carried his briefcase in one hand, the *Times* in the other. I would watch him walk slowly down the gravel sidewalk with his rep club tie pulled down from his sweaty custom collar. When I ran to meet him, I would hug him tightly around his portly waist. He would bend down next to me under the trellis at the neighbor’s house and give me the package of Spearmint gum that he always brought from the station. Tonight, instead of hugging him tight, I hugged my pillow and tried to make the unhappy thoughts in my head go away.

“Please God, let me have a happy family,” I prayed before falling asleep.

Saturday was the day mother always took my friends, Harry and me to Coney Island to go on the amusement park rides. It was our weekend ritual. We waited eagerly in the car for Mom to finish up in the kitchen. The day was bright and warm. When she climbed in, she put the top down on the red and white Packard. We always stopped at

Byron's for ice cream cones. And, as Mother zoomed along the expressway towards Brooklyn, the wind painted sweet multi-color drippings along the side of the car. It wasn't long before we could see the tower of the tall Parachute Jump. Its iron skeleton rose high above the Steeplechase and the Cyclone.

Mother paid the parking lot attendant as Bill, Andy, Jack, Harry and I scampered off towards our favorite rides.

"Hey! Wait!" Mom called. "Come back here. Here's five dollars each for the arcade and the rides. Now be sure to be back here by four."

From the top of the roller coaster we could look out over the Atlantic before diving straight down on the tracks, catching our stomachs in our throats. We did four trips on the Cyclone, then walked over to the steeplechase. Harry liked the white horse and I liked the black one. When the bell rang, the five of us dashed off on our steeds around the outside of the building. We darted up to the second floor on our rails, then inside the building to the finish line. Each time, Bill's dapple-gray horse beat us by a nose. After the rides, we played the pinball machines and went through the Fun House, posing with funny faces in front of the curved mirrors. Mother finally rounded us up between the rows of concession stands as we ate our sugary clouds of pink cotton candy. It was time to go home. We walked together towards the exit, our stomachs aching from Nathan's hot dogs, candy and Cokes—tired but happy.

On our way to the car, we came to a crowd of men, women and children circled around two boys who were fighting. A small black boy was defending himself with a broken fishing pole from a taller white boy. Cautiously, they stalked each other from

opposite sides of the circle's edge. Never did they take their eyes off one another fearing an attack while their guard was down. The crowd stood and watched.

"What's going on?" Mother asked one man.

"The white kid tried to steal the little colored boy's fishing rod."

"Well why isn't anybody stopping it?"

"Lady, what are you—nuts? The white kid's got a knife."

Mother pushed her way through the crowd and stepped between the two boys.

"Give me that," she said to the white boy.

"Get out of here lady," the big boy shouted.

"Mother, be careful, he's got a knife," I yelled.

"Give me that knife," she said to the boy, "or I'll take it from you."

She stared directly into the boy's eyes. The boy began to cower.

"Well, he has to give up the rod too," he said.

"Alright then." She turned to the smaller boy. "Hand them both over right now," she demanded.

The frightened little boy gave Mother his splintered fishing rod and the bigger boy gave her his knife.

"What happened?" she asked the black boy.

"I was just sitting on the pier fishing when this guy tried to take my new pole." The little boy wiped the tears from his eyes. "He took out this big knife. We started fighting and he broke my pole. Now all I have is my broken rod."

Mother put her arm around the little boy.

“Here. Take this and get a new pole.”

She put a twenty-dollar bill in the boy’s small, callused hand. The little black boy looked up in amazement. Then he picked up his tackle box. Mother watched him as he walked away before turning to the other boy.

“As for you, go home!” she said. “And in the future, if you want to bully someone, bully someone your own size. Come on children, let’s go.”

The stunned crowd watched as Mother turned and headed for the parking lot. As we walked to the car, I listened to my friends whisper amongst themselves.

“I can’t believe she did it,” Andy said to no one in particular.

“Did you see that?” Jack replied.

“Wow! You’ve got some Mom,” Bill said slapping me on the back. “She sure is brave.”

My chest swelled and my step was lighter. I felt taller. I was so proud of my mother.

That night at dinner, Mother said, “Now hurry up, boys, and finish up. We have to go into New York City tonight.”

“Oh Mom, not again?” I complained. “We went into town just last week.”

“I know, but I want to see if I can find your father tonight. I think he’s in Greenwich Village again. Hurry up. And Jay, when we get back, I’m going to need another one of your back rubs with the ointment. My back’s killing me.” Mother smiled. “I love the way you do my shoulders. It always feels so good.”

As she drained her glass, I felt my heart sink.

Harry and I reluctantly finished our meals, put on our coats and got in the car.

The drive to the city went quickly. Before long, we were cruising up and down the dark tree-lined streets of Greenwich Village that had now become so familiar to us.

“Look for a white '55 Thunderbird with a red convertible top. It's his girlfriend's.”

“Mom, we know,” Harry sighed.

After spending an hour peering at parked cars under city street lamps, I said, “Mom, it's ten o'clock. I'm tired. Can't we go home?”

“Mom, I've got to go to the bathroom,” Harry whined. “Why do we always have to come to Greenwich Village anyway?”

“OK. OK. One more block and then we'll stop,” Mother said. “We can go to The Bonsoir.”

“Oh, Mom, not again,” Harry whined. “I want to go home.”

“Just for a little bit. You can have your Shirley Temples, and I'll give you quarters for the jukebox. Maybe we'll see your father there. And there might be a floor show tonight.”

Minutes later we squeezed inside the tiny nightclub on 8th Street, and sat in mother's corner booth. Harry and I had become used to spending time at the Bonsoir sipping our drinks and munching our cherries. Mother would usually stop here for an hour or two at the end of her futile nocturnal escapades in search of our father before heading back to Garden Village. Tonight she listened to the torch singer in the red dress, and swayed back and forth on the banquette humming along while drinking her

drinks.

“*Come down, come down from your ivory tower,*” mother sang as she downed her Rusty Nail.

“Jay, tomorrow night, if your father comes home . . . Jay, are you listening to me?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Tomorrow night, if your father comes home, as you’re going up to bed, I want you to say to him Bonsoir.”

“What?”

“Bonsoir. It means good night in French. Understand? Say it.”

“Bonsoarr.”

“No. No. Like this. Bonsoir.”

I pursed my lips. “Bonsoir.”

“That’s it. Perfect. Now Jay, don’t forget. OK?”

“Yes, Mom. I won’t.”

The young waiter walked over to our table.

“Ma’am, we’re closing now. Here’s your bill.”

Mother blinked at the tab, then looked up and smiled.

“I thought I already paid.” Her eyelids had grown heavy. “You know, some of the other waiters give me my cocktails on the house.”

She paid the tab and left a ten-dollar tip. Walking to the exit, she stopped and looked over her shoulder and smiled again at the waiter.

“I’m a good customer, you know. We’ll see you next Saturday.”

Uncomfortable and embarrassed, I thought, *Why is she doing this?*

I looked at mother, then Harry.

“Come on, Mom. Let’s go home,” I said. “I’m tired.”

Harry and I slept on the back seat as mother slowly navigated the Packard back to our enormous empty house on Long Island.

The next morning, I was combing my hair in the downstairs bathroom when Mother called me from the kitchen.

“Jay, there’s something I have to tell you. It’s important.”

“What, Mom?”

“You know, you’ll never be able to drink alcohol.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean in our family, you just can’t drink alcohol.”

“No?” I pushed up my pompadour. “Well then I’ll just drink beer or wine.”

“No . . . no, I mean you can’t drink any alcohol at all—ever.”

“Why not? You and Dad . . .”

“Jay, please. You just can’t drink alcohol! All right? Never forget that, Jay.

Remember what I just told you. Do you understand?”

“Sure.” But I didn’t. *What does she mean? I can’t drink any alcohol ever. Why is she telling me this now?*

“There go the church bells,” she said. “It’s twelve noon. Jay, why don’t you take your brother outside and play. I have something I have to do.”

“OK. Harry? Harry!” I yelled. “Come on, Harry. Let’s go out front and hit some pop-ups. Go get your glove.”

We pushed open the terrace door and ran across the pebbled driveway to the massive front yard. I put Harry down by the hedge next to the street. Then I trudged back up through the thick green grass to the top of the lawn with my bat. When I turned, I laughed. Way at the other end, Harry looked like a miniscule Charlie Brown with his big head, big mitt, big baseball cap and tiny body.

We had been playing ball for a while when Mrs. Thomas drove up in her station wagon, waved and stopped.

“Hi boys. I’m here to pick your Mom up for golf.”

She pulled around the side of the house to the front door and parked her car behind the high hedge. Not long afterwards, while I was hitting fly balls to Harry, an ambulance came racing up the drive followed closely by a squad car with its red lights flashing and siren blaring.

I watched as the two policemen ran in the front door.

“Jay? Com’on, Jay!” Harry yelled. “Hit me some more pop ups!”

I turned from the house and picked up the ball and hit a line drive over Harry’s head.

Five minutes later, Harry and I watched as the two vehicles sped down the driveway into the street.

We started for the house when Mrs. Thomas came out the side door and walked quickly across the lawn. As I looked at her, I could tell by her eyes that she had been

crying.

“Jay, promise me you’ll wait right here. I’ll be right back. I have to take Harry over to the Phillips’. They can watch Harry. I’ll be right back to get you. OK, Jay. Are you OK?”

“Sure, Mrs. Thomas. I’m fine,” I said. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll wait right here.”

“Harry. Come on. Harry! Hurry up. Get in the car. We have to go to the Phillips’ right away.”

After Mrs. Thomas left, I tossed the ball in the air, took some practice swings, bounced the ball on the bat. The sun was hot and I was thinking about the ambulance. And why was Mrs. Thomas crying? I wanted to get my soccer ball in the laundry room, so I wandered up the drive and walked inside the front door. As I entered the front hall, I noticed the smell of gas and followed its scent towards the kitchen. I tried to push open the kitchen door. It would not budge. I pushed again, harder. Finally, with difficulty, I jarred the door open. Inside, wet towels were placed on the floor along the openings of all the doors and along the windowsills. I gagged from the strong odor of gas. Buttons lay still under the kitchen table by his dog bowl. The door to the stove was open. Next to the bowl of fruit on the counter top was a handwritten note. I covered my nose and mouth with a washcloth and picked up the piece of paper.

My hand shook as I read the message. Mother had written the words from her favorite song . . . the song from the movie we saw last week, *High Noon*.

Do not forsake me, oh my darling,

On this, our wedding day,

Do not forsake me, oh my darling,

Wait, wait along.

“What has she done?” I looked around the kitchen frightened. “What do I do?” I sobbed. “What do I do?”

I gagged as the tears ran down my face. I held myself, my body shaking with despair. The back door opened and a massive black silhouette stood blocking the sunlight.

“Where’s my mother?” I gasped.

A tall policeman walked into the kitchen and put his hand on my shoulder.

“Come on, son. You can’t stay in here. You’ve got to get outside and get some air.”

Confused, I stared at him.

“But, where’s my mother gone?” I stammered.

“Don’t cry, son. I think she’ll be OK.”

“But, Buttons . . . What about Buttons?”

“Let’s go outside, son.”

Chapter 2



walked quietly into Mother's small bedroom. Her plastic neck brace hung over the white wicker chair in the corner. At the edge of the night table, her glass of vodka sweated, half- finished. *Watchtower* magazines held open the red leather Bible from Billy Graham's wife. The passage *If God be for us, who can be against us?* was underlined. A pale afternoon sun lit the clock on the dresser.

3:05. She had asked me to wake her at 2:00.



The muffled sound of the Atlantic's breaking waves blew up from the beach below through the sheer white window curtains.

"Mom? Mom. It's time to get up."

She lay sleeping on the bed in her nightgown with a sheet pulled across her body. Her dyed blonde hair, tangled and wet, stuck to her brow. I reached out and touched her, but she did not stir. I shook her shoulder. Slowly, she began to rouse.

While I sat on the edge of the bed, she reached up without opening her eyes and pulled me down to her. Her lips touched mine, and I felt her tongue in my mouth playing with mine. She lay back with a smile, her eyes still closed, still only half-conscious.

"Where were you, Bob?" she mumbled.

I quickly pulled away and left the bedroom, ashamed and bewildered.

What the hell was that? I wiped the kiss away with my sleeve and headed for the

kitchen. *I'm not Uncle Bob, or any of those other 'uncles'. Jesus!*

Mother's kiss brought me back to that summer night two years ago on Nantucket before her divorce—a memory that still haunted me.

I was upstairs reading in my bed across from the room where Harry was sleeping.

Mother called me. "Jay? Jay, come down here."

I put down the Hardy Boys, climbed out of bed and went downstairs to her bedroom. She was covered with her bedspread and propped up by several pillows, her vodka next to the lamp.

"Jay, do you know about the birds and the bees yet?" she asked.

"K-kinda," I stammered.

"Well, you're almost twelve now. It's time you learned. Come here, I want to show you something."

She drew back the sheet. Her white panty girdle held her wrinkled stomach cinched beneath her bare, tired breasts.

"Now, when you make love to a woman . . . you get on top, like this."

She pulled me on to her.

"You put your hands on her breasts like this. And then you put your penis inside her, down here."

"Mom . . ." I pulled away, frightened and confused. "I'm really sleepy. I have to go."

I fled her room, raced upstairs, closed my door and quickly turned on my radio.

“Jay. Jay!” Mother shouted. “Come back down here.”

As I lay dazed on my bed, I turned the radio louder and louder until Dinah Shore’s “Love and Marriage” drowned out her calls. I curled up into a tight ball beneath my covers and held myself until I finally rocked to sleep.

I shook myself from my daydream and came back to the bright Florida sunlight.

“Where’ve you been?” Harry asked. He had been waiting for me in the kitchen.

“What?” I looked at Harry. “Oh . . . nowhere . . . I was just thinking about something.”

“You OK?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, I’m OK,” I snapped. “Are *you* OK?”

“Yeah, I’m OK. Well, come on. You said three o’clock. It’s 3:15. Let’s go. We’re late. It’s time to play Skeet Booze.”

I laughed. My brother had dragged the two large garbage pails out of the kitchen onto the small second floor landing that overlooked the vacant lot next door.

“I go first,” he said.

Harry rummaged in his garbage pail for an empty liquor bottle and then found one for me.

“Ready?”

He winged his bottle far above the thick palmetto brambles that covered the empty lot. As it sailed up through the air, I reared back and flung mine as hard as I could.

Bang!

Our two bottles exploded into a thousand shards of glistening glass before tinkling down like tired fireworks onto the sand in the dense underbrush.

We took turns rifling bottles high into the air—green Scotch bottles, clear vodka bottles, yellow wine bottles, brown beer bottles.

Bash! Boom! Smash!

A car pulled into the driveway below. It was Uncle Bob. He sat behind the wheel of another new used car. This time it was a blue and gray 1950 Chevrolet. He fought to get his door open, then stepped out into the sun, unsteady, and pushed back his oily white hair. His faded blue eyes, opaque with sadness, glanced up at us.

“Hi, Bob.” We waved. “Nice car.”

“Fourth one in ten weeks. I almost couldn’t get the insurance this time. Your mother’s hit almost every light pole on A1A. It’s amazing she made it all the way down from Long Island with you two last month.”

Bob’s flabby arms struggled to pull the packages from the liquor store off the rear seat. He waddled, huffing and puffing like a giant penguin, up the path to the stairs, careful not to be pricked by the treacherous sandspurs; he always wore thick white socks with his sandals for this very purpose. Bob stopped to catch his breath at the bottom of the stairs, and then began trudging up the flight of steps like a proper English butler—formal, pudgy, fairly short and balding. He was in his mid-50s but looked older with his ruddy complexion from years of drinking. Bob usually smelled like mothballs or whiskey, or often both. He hardly ever spoke.

Bob stopped at the landing and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief “Can

you give me a hand?" he sighed. "Where's Jean?"

"In the bedroom," I said. "I think she's expecting you."

"This Chevy better last longer than the others. If she smacks it up, it could be her last one."

Mother pushed open the kitchen door wearing her white nightgown and neck brace.

"Oh, Bob, she's a beauty. Really. Much bigger than that tiny Hillman. From now on Jay'll drive us home from The 19th Hole. I promise. Now that he's fourteen, as long as I sit next to him, he's allowed to drive at night in Florida. No more light poles for me. I've had it with all those hospitals." She gave Bob a long kiss. "Boys, why don't you run down to the beach for a swim? Uncle Bob and I have to freshen up." She smiled at Bob. "We'll go to the Kon-Tiki for dinner tonight. I love that organ music. And those Mai Tais with the little red parasols are delicious."

After we got our swimsuits and flip-flops on, Harry went out to the back porch. When he slammed the screen door shut, chameleons skittered every which way across the wooden planks, disappearing through the cracks to safety. He shoved aside the small red trailer by the Ping-Pong table and found his pail and shovel hidden back in the corner.

"Happy Hour's from 5:00 to 7:00," Mother called as she led Bob into the bedroom. "So, be sure to be back by 4:30."

I took two towels from the worn clothesline in the backyard and helped Harry drag our rafts down the wobbly steps to the path that led through the marsh grass to the

beach.

Across the large expanse of white sand, I spotted Sam, my sometimes girlfriend since the beginning of August. She was folding up the large striped cabanas at her father's stand, and wearing the same small yellow bikini she had worn all summer long. It made her mahogany skin shine. Her jet-black hair was wet and pulled back into a long ponytail as always. As I approached, Sam squinted into the sunlight and scrunched up her nose.

"Hi, Jay. I missed you last weekend. You said you were coming down. What happened?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I had to bag groceries at Winn-Dixie. Mom wants me to pitch in for the motorcycle, so I had to get a job. Some job. I help women carry their packages out to the parking lot for tips. You know, sometimes, after I've put the bags in their cars, they start touching me . . . holding my arm. They tell me, 'Young man, I'd like to give you something more than just a tip.' It's kind of embarrassing."

"They're probably just lonely like your mom," Sam said with a smile. With her dark tan, her white teeth sparkled. "They all come down here to Florida to get their quick six-month divorce, just like your mom. There're a lot of women like that here, especially at the beach."

"Maybe it's these stripped clam diggers. What do you think? They're kind of tight. Right? Do you like the rope belt? Maybe it's my T-shirt. You know what? Some of them, after they give me a dollar tip, they ask me to go home with them when I'm finished with work. They scare the hell out of me."

“Not doing so bad for a fourteen-year-old, eh? Just tell them, ‘That’s OK, I’m only allowed to accept tips, nothin’ else,’ then grab the money and hightail it back to the store.” Sam laughed. “I guess some of those old broads are super horny. And what’s this about a motorcycle?” She cocked her head and looked at me. “Didn’t you just get a Cushman scooter for your birthday?”

“Well, yeah. Right after I passed the driver’s test and got my license. But now I want a motorcycle. All the guys at Sandpiper Beach laugh at me when I show up for classes on that red piece of tin. They all ride cycles. I feel like a jerk. Besides, I’m joining Freddy’s motorcycle club, *The Dominoes*. I have to have a bike, not a lawn mower. Everybody else has one. I want to fit in, and be part of the gang. Mom says we should have enough money by October.”

“What about that Dick Chester? Does he have a bike?”

“No. But he’s different. Sam, I tell you, he’ll never fit in. And he doesn’t want to—he doesn’t care. The guy’s crazy. I mean *really* crazy. I guess that’s why he’s in the gang.”

“Well, I don’t know. Come on, give me a hand with these before it starts to rain.”

As the clouds darkened, I started to help Sam fold up the last of the green cabanas while Harry played by the water’s edge. He darted back and forth, trying to catch the sand crabs with his pail and shovel as they scampered across the sand to escape the ocean’s froth.

“Hey, Harry! Get up here and help us put the umbrellas and chairs away before it starts raining,” I called. “Then you can go up and watch your cartoons.”

Harry grabbed his bucket and joined us for the last of the work. Then he waved good-bye and headed back up the creaky wooden steps to spend the rest of the afternoon sitting in front of the TV, escaping from his life by joining his cartoon friends in their fantasy world.

Sam opened the flap of the main cabana, and we went inside to watch the storm. Most of the sunbathers had left by now, and only a few cars rolled slowly by on the hard-packed sand. I looked at Sam. Salt water still dripped from her hair and clung to her long eyelashes. Her deep brown irises were framed by the whites of her eyes. They hid beneath her thick, black eyebrows that nearly met above her brown, chiseled nose. Many summers of working for her dad on the beach had darkened her skin to a glistening ebony.

We lay side-by-side on the large blue air mattresses and looked out from underneath the flap as the rain walked down the white sand in sheets. Sam's body was lean and firm, covered with the clean smell of Coppertone. She rolled over onto her back and closed her eyes. Her high hip bones stretched the elastic band on her yellow bikini bottoms taut above her flat stomach that rose and sank like a wave. As I stroked her cheek and neck, Sam let her head fall back onto the inflated pillow. The scent of honeysuckle from the nearby dunes swirled throughout the cabana. Gradually, I let my hand slide down her arm. At her waist, I brushed the golden hairs on her belly and drew small circles with my fingers around her bellybutton. Her eyes stayed closed. Cautiously, I rubbed my hand back and forth along the drawstring of her swimsuit from one hipbone to the other. Then, slowly, I slid my fingers under the elastic of her bikini

panties down to her crotch. I felt her pubic hair and stroked it as I tried to work my fingers between her lips. Suddenly, she stirred and pushed me away.

“Next time you say you’re going to meet me—meet me, goddamnit!” I saw the fire in her eyes. “A date’s a date, Jay. Maybe I’m not rich, but I’m not just some beach rat, you know. I thought you liked me. I thought we were friends.”

“I do,” I gulped. “We are.”

“Come on! The rain’s stopped. Help me get this place cleaned up. I have to get home.”

I sulked after her, disappointed and frustrated, as we organized the remaining cabanas.

“Will I see you next weekend?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“Are you sure? Don’t say it if you’re not sure.”

“Yes. I’m sure. I want to see you.”

“Good. I hope so.”

Sam dusted the sand off her hands, wriggled her faded blue jeans up over her hips and pulled on her Sandpiper letter sweater.

“Hope I’ll see you next weekend,” she said. ‘Bye.’”

“Me too. I hope I’ll see you next weekend. ‘Bye.’”

She walked barefoot to her old red Dodge convertible and drove away down the beach. I watched her tire marks in the wet sand until they disappeared under the pier.

By the time I got home, Mother had slipped into a floral sundress and put on her

make-up and neck brace.

“Hurry up, Jay. We’re going to miss Happy Hour,” she said. “Here’re the car keys. You know how to drive a stick shift, don’t you? After dinner we’ll go to the boardwalk and play putt-putt if you want. You boys love that.”

Mother, Harry and I all piled into our new used car. Bob had already taken the bus into town to meet his drinking buddies at The 19th Hole, and then go with them to the dog races.

We drove through the twilight of a wonderful, warm Florida night up A1A in the Chevy. At The Bellaire Plaza, I pulled in and parked in front of the Kon-Tiki with its pointed thatched roof and palm trees. Two 20-foot carved Polynesian statues stood guard on either side of the front door.

Mother found her booth by the dance floor where she could flirt with the organist. His name was Geno. Tonight, he wore a light blue shirt with black ruffled sleeves. As was his custom, he left the shirt open to his navel. His black, slicked-back hair was held in place with pomade and dyed to match the thin moustache that crept across his upper lip.

“Play that one I like so much, Geno . . . Geno, play ‘Stormy Weather,’” Mother asked. “I love the way you flick the lights. You make it just like a storm.”

She put a five-dollar bill in the glass on the top of the organ, and walked back to her drink at our table. As she sang along with the song, Mother played with the tiny paper parasols in front of her empty plate. She took a long drag on her Picayune, drained her Mai Tai and ordered another while Harry and I ate our hamburgers. Sitting

between us, looking tired and alone, she clutched her stem glass with an iron fist, lost in thought. Finally, she reached across the table and took my hand.

“Come on, Jay. Let’s dance.”

She led me onto the small wooden floor and held me tight against her bosom.

“Since my man and I ain’t together,” she mumbled, “keeps rainin’ all the time.”

Mother forced her knee between my legs. I felt uncomfortable and moved stiffly as she steered me slowly around the dance floor. Geno flickered the lights so that it looked like thunder.

“Don’t you just love this song, Jay?” She mumbled. “It’s ‘Stormy Weather.’”

I had heard the song so many times before that I knew every word as well as the inevitable consequences of dinners at the Kon-Tiki.

Finally, the music stopped. Mother put her arm around my neck for support and wobbled back to our banquette. She slouched against the shiny red vinyl seat and tipped back her drink.

“Ahh.” She banged the glass down on the table and smacked her lips. “OK, boys. Let’s go. It’s time to go. Up! Up! Up!”

She fumbled in her purse and put a \$50 bill on the table. Hoisting herself out of her seat, she lost her balance and knocked the line of tiny paper umbrellas off the edge of the table onto the floor. We followed as she zigzagged to the exit and then out between the two tall totem poles into the dim light of the parking lot.

“Jay? Jay? Look. You have to do it like this,” she slurred. “See? Put the gun in your mouth just like this. See?” She put her index finger to the roof of her mouth, cocked

her thumb, then quickly pulled her middle finger like a trigger.

“Bang!”

She laughed, spun her head around and looked at us through glazed eyes. “Let’s go to the dog track, boys. I’m feelin’ lucky. Here, catch, Jay. You can drive.”

She tried to throw the keys across the car’s hood, but they fell on the pavement beneath the car.

“Let’s go to the track,” she muttered and stumbled into the car.

No longer did she remember the miniature golf game she had promised us; she never did. I found the keys by the muffler and got behind the wheel. Mother’s door was open; her head tilted back against the front seat with her neck brace unsnapped. She slept, snoring. I shook my head.

“Close her door, Harry. When we get home, you can watch TV.”

That night, as I drifted off to sleep, I thought to myself, *Tonight was just like all the others—I have no mother to talk to . . .*

Gently, I pushed open the door to my mother’s bedroom. She lay passed out on her bed. I sat next to her and slowly pulled the covers off her and raised her nightgown. She did not stir. Her matted hair was wet with perspiration, and her head rested heavily on the pillow. I reached out and gently put my hand on her thigh, then gradually slid it higher up her leg. My heart was racing. I watched her heavy breath move her wrinkled stomach up and down. As I reached up to touch her . . .

I awoke with a jolt from this fantasy in my bedroom to the morning’s strong sunshine. My pajamas were stuck to my leg, and there was a stiff spot on the bed

sheet.

Jesus, I thought. Couldn't have been my dream about Mom. No way! Maybe it was Sam . . . or maybe the Playboy magazine. Goddamn! My first wet dream. How 'bout that? I'm finally a man! Damn. At last, I'm finally a man!

I jumped from the bed and went to find my brother in the bathroom.

"Harry, guess what?" I smirked. "I came."

"You came where?" His nine-year-old eyes looked at me in a curious way. "What are you talking about? You came?"

"Don't you get it? I had a wet dream Oh, never mind. Forget it. I'll explain it to you later. I have to go tell Tommy."

I brushed my teeth quickly, ran the Remington across my peach fuzz, hopped in and out of the shower, spritzed on some Vitalis, combed my hair back into a perfect D.A., sprayed my pits and splashed on some Canoe that my father had given me for my fourteenth birthday. On my way back to my room, I took my towel and snapped Harry's ass. I found my pegged pants under the bed by the *Playboy*, yanked on my T-shirt and rolled up the sleeves.

"Belt? Belt? Where the hell did I . . . ? Ah, there it is."

I threaded the two thin silver buckles through the loops and arranged them so they hung low on the right side of my waist over my hip. I found two white socks in my drawer, slipped them on, then poked my feet into my blood red Thom McAnn Flapjacks. With a snap, I pulled the tongues shut.

On my way to the kitchen, I noticed Mother's bedroom door was cracked open.

Mom and Bob were still asleep nude on the bed. Bob looked like a white whale, Mother more like a skinny eel. A half-finished bottle of Smirnoff lay on its side on the carpet.

I gobbled down two raspberry Pop-Tarts and chugged a glass of milk. In the carport, I grabbed my black leather jacket from the peg, took the scooter's starter cord in my hand and gave the rope a hard, excited yank.

"Owwwwww!"

The rubber handle slipped through my fingers, smashing my first two knuckles against the metal side of my Cushman.

"Piece of shit!"

I sucked the blood and kicked the rear wheel. I pulled the cord again, and the engine caught. Off I rode through the cold morning air to school, the throttle fully open, pushing the governor's 40 mph top end to the max to look for Tommy.

Three greasers in motorcycle jackets and black jeans were huddled against the radiator in the boys' room, warming their hands from their early morning rides. They wore their collars up and had thick taps on their heavy black boots. One was busy fixing his skinny white belt, sliding the tiny buckles back and forth along the waist of his tight pants. The other two were crooning in harmony like the Del-Vikings and snapping their fingers while bogarting their Camels.

Tommy was posing in front of the mirror like a gunslinger, his white jeans riding low on his hips, his feet spread apart, his knees bent. Carefully, he watched as he coaxed the sides of his peroxidized blond flat top back into a D.A.

"Yeah. There. That's it," he muttered, stepping back to study his hair again. "No.

Damn it. That's not it." He started over, pushing his wings back and parting them down the middle in the back with the end of his comb.

"Tommy. Guess what?" I whispered. "I'm finally a man."

"Wait, wait. Can't you see? I'm busy. OK? Ah, that's it. OK. What?"

"Tommy, I'm a man! Finally, I'm a man!"

"It took you long enough." He smiled. "You get laid?"

"Shhh . . . Not so loud. I don't want the other guys to hear. Tommy, I came."

"Well, it's about time. Tell you what. Seems like you're ready to meet my step-sis. Scotty's eighteen. Dig? Maybe Friday after she gets off work at the White Castle we can go to the drive-in. Better yet, there's a beer party on Sandpiper Beach Friday night. We can watch the submarine races." Tommy winked. "See if you can't get the car from your mom. There might be some drag racing too. Wait 'til you see Scotty in her new sack dress. Man, she's hot."

My eyes lit up. "Great. But Tommy, don't tell her I'm fourteen. You know, chicks like older guys. Hey, Tommy. You know, we *Dominoes* have to stick together, right?"

Tommy smiled. "Don't worry, she likes to break in young guys—believe me."

Friday afternoon, I pulled into the Calhouns' driveway in Mother's Chevrolet. A new pink and white '57 DeSoto Firedome sparkled beneath the shower from Tommy's hose. Its silver Lake Pipes slid beneath the long rear fender skirts, hugging the raked bottom. Purple pinstripes swirled around the door handles and flamed back towards the fins. When I honked, Tommy looked up and waved as he finished spraying down the shining chrome spinners that glittered inside the whitewalls.

“Right on time.” Tommy wiped the louvered hood dry and threw the towel in a bucket. “I’ll take Scotty’s car. She’ll go with you. Hey, Sis?” he shouted. “Let’s go, Sis! Jay’s here. Come on. Hurry up.”

“Wait a minute, will ya?” Scotty ran out the front door, her backless red high heels clip-clopping on the flagstones. “Can’t you see I’m still putting on my make up?” She pouted, tucking her lipstick into a small red purse.

Tommy’s stepsister was petite with short, black hair. She wore her new red sack dress tied around her alabaster neck and again just below her knees. Blazing from behind her, the strong afternoon sun inked the black hourglass silhouette of her breasts and hips hidden beneath the soft summer cloth of her crimson package.

“Hi, Jay. Tommy’s told me a lot about you.” She put her hands on her waist and cocked her hips. “I heard you joined *The Dominoes*.” Her wet lips glistened.

“Yeah, I’m part of the gang now,” I boasted.

“Scotty, you ride with Jay,” Tommy said. “Come on, hurry up, we’re gonna be late.” He slid onto the white leather bucket seat of the Firedome and fired up the glass-packs. “Jay, you follow me. We’ll take the Silver Beach Bridge. Got the beer?”

“I took some Scotch. Mom’s got so much, she’ll never know it’s gone.”

“Come on then. Let’s go. And don’t get stuck in the sand.” Tommy winked.

Tommy peeled out of the driveway, laying rubber down the block, and I cruised after him through the salt-scented breeze towards the ocean. Our cars traveled together in a close caravan through the warmth of this perfect day. We sped through a tunnel of palm trees that took us to the bridge. I locked on to the Firedome’s rear bumper and

watched the silver plaque jingle jangle beneath the shining Continental kit and dual exhausts. It said, *Lil' Fox*. The deep rumble of Tommy's sedan ricocheted off the cement causeway walls and snarled at the saffron sky. Scotty moved closer. When she reached to search the radio for rock 'n' roll, her soft skin brushed my arm.

"Listen, Jay."

Each time she smiled, her green-brown eyes sparkled in the city lights.

"It's WAPE!" Scotty giggled. "That's my favorite station."

When she rolled her window down and let the late afternoon wind blow through her hair, the car filled with her jasmine perfume.

"Listen, Jay. It's 'All Shook Up'!" She swayed side to side excitedly in her seat. "Isn't Elvis sooooo great? I'm crazy about Elvis," and she gave me a kiss on the cheek.

We passed the bars on Main Street, the recreation center, the YMCA, then turned down the sandy tunnel ramp under the aged Halifax Hotel onto the beach where we found our friends gathered next to the lifeguard station.

Couples were dancing the Lindy in the sand as *Blue Suede Shoes* spilled from a transistor radio. Others lay about on checkered blankets warming themselves in front of a small bonfire, drinking beer and necking. Sparks jumped from the driftwood's flames and carried on the evening's breeze out over the white crashing waves. Above, hungry gulls hung in the night's purple sky hoping for scraps of hot dogs or fries. Their shrill cries mixed with the screams from the arcade's bumper car rides and the Ferris wheel. Not far away, beneath the strings of twinkling honky-tonk lights, couples strolled arm in arm along the boardwalk, sipping Cokes and eating cotton candy. Tommy pulled up

next to Bobby's yellow, chopped and channeled '53 Studebaker coupe. He revved the mufflers, then cut the engine.

"Hey, you guys, we made it!" he shouted.

"Where's the action?" Scotty yelled.

Peggy and Bobby waved. "Over here."

"Come on, Jay." Scotty took me by the hand and pulled me towards the fire.

"Let's get something to eat."

We huddled together with our burgers on an old driftwood log and listened to Buddy Knox chirp out the words to *Party Doll*. The strong scent of azaleas blew down from the dunes and across the beach on the evening wind. Waves swelled and crushed the shore before their froth slid back into the black Atlantic. Scotty squeezed my arm.

"Can I have a drink, Jay?"

"Sure."

I twisted the red cap off the bottle of Dewar's and poured two Scotches.

We clinked our plastic cups, and I choked down the first warm swallow with a grimace.

"Look, silly. It's not that bad." She took a long swig. "See?"

"Sure is strong." I winced. "It kind of burns."

"You'll get used to it. Wine's fine, but liquor's quicker," she giggled.

At first, I hesitated. But then I wrapped my arm around her thin waist.

She moved closer, put her hand on my leg and whispered, "When we finish our drinks, why don't we go back to my place? My folks left for Orlando this morning. They won't be back 'til Sunday."

“S-sure,” I stammered. I emptied my glass. “I’m done. Let’s go.”

“OK. Oh, Jay! Don’t forget the bottle. We can have some more in the car.”

“Oh, yeah. Right. OK. Let’s go.”

“Howdyyyyyyy everybody! It’s the Woooooooolfmannnnn here,” the car radio howled. “Friday night on Florida’s number one radio station. And this one’s going out to all you hepcats.”

Scotty moved closer to me, took my hand off the gearshift and wrapped it around her shoulder. She turned the music up and sang along.

“Wake up little Susie, wake up . . .”

When we pulled into her driveway, only the outside porch light was on.

“Come on in, but don’t turn on the lights,” she said. “I like it dark. Go in the living room. There’s an LP by the Platters on the Victrola. Why don’t you play it? I’ll get some ice.”

I switched the record player on, and watched the 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ drop down the spindle onto the whirling turntable. When the arm swung over and gently placed the needle in the first groove, *One In A Million* jumped from the Mercury label and filled the room with soft music.

Scotty pushed open the kitchen door and came out carrying a tray with a bowl of ice and two glasses that she put on the coffee table. She took a match and lit the candles on either side of the couch and then poured our drinks. When she moved closer to me, I could tell she had freshened her perfume. The fragrance was heavy, rich and sweet.

“Jay, let’s get drunk. Whaddya say? Do you want to?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s have some fun,” she purred.

She clinked my glass, and we gulped the Scotch.

“I think I’m starting to like this stuff.” I smiled. “It feels good going down now. I think . . . I think I’m getting bombed. I like it. Yeah, let’s have some fun.”

I poured two new drinks. Scotty took my glass and put it on the table, then took me by the shoulders and pulled me to her. We sank down on to the large throw pillows, and I began to kiss her cheeks and neck. My hands found her breasts, and I began to rub them firmly up and down. She reached down under me and started to massage my groin. My cock stiffened.

“Do not lust after her beauty in your heart,” she whispered in my ear.

I wrapped my fingers in her hair and pulled her to me. I kissed her hard on the mouth. Our lips pushed apart, her tongue played with mine. I fumbled with the drawstring at the top of her dress.

“No, silly, it’s a sack dress. Remember?” She giggled. “Here. Let me show you.”

She reached behind her neck, undid the bow and lowered the front of her dress, then unhooked her bra. I could see the tan lines that circled her nipples in the candlelight. She loosened the bottom string of her dress and murmured, “I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of loving until the morning.”

I forced her dress up to her waist and rushed to pull her panties down over her

ankles. Madly, I began to go up and down on top of her.

“No! No! Wait!” she gasped. “Not like that. Let me show you. Sllllloowly. Sllllloowly.”

She unzipped my pants and reached inside my underpants to pull out my hard-on.

“There,” she said. “Now you’re free. Like this.” She guided me into her, receiving me easily.

“Giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh,” she groaned.

We began furiously rocking up and down on the soft couch, my hips banging down hard upon her again and again. White light flashed through my body. Instantly, I exploded up into her, feeling the waves of cum drain my energy. I shuddered and collapsed on top of her. I rested my head against her moist neck. Her wet hair smelled of jasmine. I could feel her holding me underneath my underpants.

“Thou didst trust in thine own beauty, and playedest the harlot because of thy renown,” she hissed, “and pouredest out thy fornication on every one that passed by.”

We lay on the couch in the dark, breathing heavily, until headlights swept across the living room.

“Jay! Get up! Get up! Quick! Put your clothes on.”

I quickly pulled up my pants and did my belt buckle as the front door swung open. Tommy bounced into the hall with his beach towel whistling *All Shook Up*.

“Hi, guys. Mighty dark in here. What’s up?”

Scotty and I sat next to each other on the couch sipping our Scotches.

“N-not much,” I stammered. I looked at Scotty.

“How was the party?” she asked.

“Not bad. I almost got a blow job from Susie.” He smiled and yawned. “I’m beat, Sis. Off to bed.”

He started up the stairs, then turned.

“Oh, Scotty dear. Aren’t those your panties under the coffee table?” He smiled and left us sitting in the dark.

Late the next day, I rode my brand new red and white 165 Harley over to Freddy King’s house. The black motorcycle jacket I wore was one of the five we had stolen from Sears and Roebuck the week before. On the front, above my heart, it said, *Jay*. The back was covered with a large black and white number five domino indicating my rank in our club. *The Dominoes* stretched across the back from shoulder to shoulder.

When I pulled in the driveway, Freddy’s spastic seventeen-year-old brother Carl was sprawled out on the cement floor of the carport. He kneeled with his double-jointed legs splayed out behind him like spaghetti. Six or seven empty glass Coke bottles lay scattered about him. Against the wall was a large white refrigerator. Its door was open, displaying his stash of stacks and stacks of Coca-Cola. As I revved my engine, Carl jerked his head around, throwing the drool from his mouth. When he smiled, the rotted spaces between his yellow teeth showed the damage done by a ten-year diet of sweet soft drinks. In his crooked hand, Carl held a dirty rag that he was using to clean his brother’s midnight blue Triumph motorcycle.

“Hi, Jway. How you doin’?” he slobbered.

“Good. Playing with Freddy’s bike again, huh?”

Carl dropped his eyes, embarrassed. He stared at the concrete floor.

“Is your brother home?”

Carl snapped his head around towards the kitchen door.

“Fweddy,” he slurred. “Fweddy. Jway’s here.”

Freddy banged open the screen door. He was slightly shorter than me, about 5' 5", with greasy hair and long sideburns. His ruddy face was covered with acne. Freddy had just been made President of The Dominoes.

“Carl! I told you to stay away from my bike,” he grumbled. “You’re dribbling all over it. Wipe the spit off your mouth and get inside. You can watch TV ’til Mom gets back.”

“I was just twyin to shine it for ya. ’Bye, Jway.” Carl dragged himself across the cement carport floor and up the steps through the kitchen door.

“God. That imbecile never listens. I’ve told him a hundred times not to touch my bike. You’d never know he was my *older* brother.”

“So, Pres, you ready for some rock ‘n’ roll tonight?” I asked. “The sock hop should be hot. Can you believe that Jerry Lee Lewis will be there?” I hunched my jacket up on my shoulders and pretended to run my thumb along an ivory keyboard. “*You shake my nerves and you rattle my brain,*” I shouted. “Man, it should be sooooo cool.”

“You bet!” Freddy dropped to one knee like Jerry Lee and reached up to pound an imaginary keyboard. He shimmied and howled, “*You broke my will . . . oh what a*

thrill . . . Goodness gracious great balls of . . . Hang on. Hang on. I've got to fix my 'do."

He stared in to the rearview mirror on his Triumph. "The damn thing won't stay no matter how much grease I put on it."

"Freddy, your mop looks fine. You're just going to get more zits from all that stuff anyway. Let's go. We're going to miss the dance and Jerry Lee if we don't hustle."

He pulled a comb from the back pocket of his tight jeans, propped up his sagging pompadour, then pushed the oily sides back into wings. Freddy studied himself in the mirror before sliding the point of his comb down the middle in back to make his D.A. perfect.

"That's it!" he chuckled with a wolfish snarl.

"You know, Pres, we've got to be careful tonight. The damn cops are looking for us again. That crazy bastard Chester really pissed them off last week spinning those doughnuts in front of the station house. They've been laying for us ever since. And swiping these jackets from doesn't help any. If they catch us, we're screwed. They know we're not allowed on the roads after dark."

"I told Tommy and Dick to go ahead. We'll meet 'em at the gym. If we traveled in a pack tonight, our goddamn mufflers would wake up the whole precinct," Freddy warned. "We have to be quiet if we're going to drive at night."

We kick started our engines, turned on our headlights, and headed down the back street. As we rode together, Freddy signaled to slow down.

"Damn it! Jay, I forgot to get gas. I'm just about out."

"OK. Let's go to Ted's on US 1. He likes us."

We swung around, dropped down to the Highway and headed north for the gas station. As we pulled up to the pumps, headlights flashed on from behind the service bays at the far end of the repair shop.

“Shit! Freddy! It’s the cops. Quick! We’ve got to get out of here. I’ll try to get them to follow me. Get going and get some gas. I’ll meet you at the dance.”

I gunned my cycle and raced past the cop to draw the cruiser away from Freddy. I hit the curb, bounced up onto US 1, and sped up the right lane. The police car swung out after me, its red lights swirling and siren howling. Shifting down from third to second, I threw open the throttle and hugged the gas tank with my chest. When I slammed it back in to third, the speedometer hit 70. My front wheel began to shimmy on the pavement, and my studded leather saddlebags clattered against my rear fender in the wind.

Ahead, at the intersection, the light was slowly turning from yellow to red. I sped through the crossing, just as a green convertible jumped the light and came barreling at me from the right. I hit my brakes, skidded sideways—missed the sedan’s rear fender by a foot. I glanced over my shoulder. The cruiser had run the red light and was right behind me with its headlights flashing.

Fuck. Don’t those guys have anything better to do on a Saturday night?

I turned back to look up the road. Five feet in front of me, at a dead stop, I suddenly saw the letters **F O R D** on the tailgate of a shiny red pick-up. I slammed on both brakes and lay the cycle down, waiting for the collision. My front chrome roll bar caught the road and spun the bike up wildly. I bounced off the truck’s rear quarter panel,

wrenched the handlebar back to center, and flew down the right side of the long line of traffic. All at once, a massive beige and white Mercury pulled out into the breakdown lane, forcing me up over the curb onto the grassy shoulder. My jacket's shoulder ripped as I clipped the car's long tailfin.

"Get out of the way!" I shouted.

The thirtyish driver gave me the finger.

I skidded across the grass, past a palm tree and his two-tone Merc. Behind me, the squad car was charging in the left lane, its siren blaring. I looked up. Just ten feet ahead, there loomed the solid brick wall of a bridge abutment. Squeezing between the line of cars and the thick concrete blocks, I screeched back onto the road, then turned hard right. As I sped around the sandy corner, my roll bar caught the curb and fishtailed my rear wheel. I cranked open the throttle. My rear wheel snapped back underneath me, spraying a rooster tail of gravel across the road. Flying over the crest of the next hill, I saw the sign ahead: *DEAD END*. I screeched to a halt.

A momentary quiet fell across the evening's twilight. The heaving from my idling engine sounded like the heavy snorting of exhausted racehorses gasping for air. With each piston stroke from beneath the red and white gas tank, my cycle shivered. I looked back down the road through the cloud of dust, then up ahead. The only thing further on was a driveway leading to a large white house. I stared at the house, then back down the road again. Suddenly, the cop car came charging around the corner—racing up the hill. The flashing red lights were getting bigger and bigger.

"Shit!"

I revved the engine and popped the clutch. Spinning the bike around, I raced up the road, straight down the driveway, onto the side yard. I skidded under a clothesline, tore across a flowerbed and punched through a small opening in a thick hedge. Quickly, I cut my engine and peeked back at the road from behind a large palmetto bush. My heart was pounding.

Two massive police officers with black sunglasses and guns stood alongside their cruiser at the edge of the lawn. They rocked back and forth in their tall boots for a moment with their arms crossed, then climbed back in their car, slammed the doors hard, turned around and drove away.

“Thank God,” I muttered. “No Juvenile Court tonight.”

I kick-started my Harley, turned it around and began my ride up Sandpiper Boulevard. Just before the school, I saw the gang joking amongst themselves in front of a grove of palm trees that hid their motorcycles. All of them were wearing their black leather jackets from Sears. As I pulled up, they all waved—all except Dick Chester. He was busy combing his thick red hair back into a ducktail.

“Close call, I see,” Tommy said. He popped his gum. “Your jacket’s ripped. I guess we’re going to have to make another trip to Sears.”

Freddy smiled weakly. “Jay, thanks for getting those guys off my tail.”

“Look, Freddy, if you’re going to be our leader, the leader of The Dominoes, you gotta have enough brains to keep your gas tank full at night.”

“OK. OK. You’re right, Jay. I’m sorry.”

“Let’s get going,” Tommy urged. “We’re gonna miss Jerry Lee.”

Dick Chester looked up from the silver ID bracelet he had gotten from Joanie Funichello. It glistened as it hung down from his freckled wrist. His washed-out green, beady eyes darted about above his slack jaw. Like Elvis, he curled his lip and threw his leather collar up in the back.

“Yeah. And get some ass,” he drawled with his maniacal grin.

His lazy tongue moved the dangling toothpick from one the side of his narrow mouth to the other.

“You dig it?”

Chester pulled a pint of Jack Daniels from the hip pocket of his pegged jeans, twisted off the black cap, and took a long pull. As he downed half the bottle, I watched his Adam’s Apple jump with each gulp. He re-capped the bottle and put it back in his jeans. He wiped his mouth with the back of the sleeve of his black leather jacket, then gave his lips a smack. He pulled a comb from his pocket and raked his thick, red hair back on the sides into a perfect D.A.

Suddenly a blast of music came from the gym, shaking the night.

“Come along my baby, whole lotta shakin’ goin’ on . . . Yes, I said come along my baby, baby you can’t go wrong . . .”

Jerry Lee was pounding on the ivories.

We all joined in, screaming loudly, *“Come along my baby . . . you drive me crazy . . . Goodness, gracious, great balls of fire!”*

Chester looked across at us with his green, wolfish eyes, and said with a snarl, “Come on, you pussies, we’re gonna miss the dance.”

He threw one leg over the handlebars of his scooter and spat. The studded belt he wore rode low on his narrow hips. With a swagger, Chester walked off into the night towards the gym.

On Sunday night, Mother left Uncle Bob to watch Harry and went off with her friends for drinks at The Nineteenth Hole. I wanted to get out of the house and go to the movies to see *I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, but I had to have someone eighteen years or older sitting next to me when I drove Mom's car. I called Scotty, but she was just going out the door on her way to work at the White Castle. So I decided, *Screw it. I'll take the Chevy anyway and drive into town to see this week's current horror film by myself.*

It was past midnight when I left the dank, dilapidated movie theater. I stood under the faded marquee that touted the scariest movie of the year and stared out at the pouring rain. On the billboard above, six or seven of the twinkling lights that heralded the Boone Theatre were out. The *W* in *Werewolf* was hanging upside down by a nail, swinging back and forth in the blustery wind, and the *O* in wolf was missing.

On the other side of the dark street, Mom's Bel Air was being buffeted by sheets of rain. I tossed up the collar of my jean jacket, ran through the puddles in my motorcycle boots and jumped shivering onto the worn upholstery. I slammed the door hard as the rain pelted the windshield. Strong gusts rocked the Chevy from side to side. When I turned the ignition key, only the dashboard instrument panel glowed a faint red. I tried again . . . then again. Finally, the engine turned over. I switched on the windshield wipers, but they did not budge.

"Great car, Mom. How do I get home?" I said to no one. "I can't see a thing."

I rolled down the window to get my bearings. Barely did the eerie, blue city lights illuminate the slick, black, glistening streets. As I drove slowly through the empty town up Route A1A past rows and rows of darkened motels, I prayed no banshees, zombies or lycanthropes would attack me.

It was 1am when I finally arrived home. Three cars were parked in the driveway. I killed the headlights and shut off the engine. Voices of men arguing loudly came through the slats of the jalousie windows. It sounded like they were in the living room.

“Get out of the way, old man, and you won’t get hurt,” someone said.

“If you don’t leave right now, I’m going to *make* you leave.” It sounded like Uncle Bob.

Another voice said, “Put down the bat, old boy. Put it down now!”

I peeked in through the carport door and saw a young man in a white Orioles T-shirt and baseball cap lunge for Bob. Another grabbed my baseball bat that Bob was holding, and twisted it away from him.

“Give me that, you old geezer. We’re the baseball players. Not you.”

The one in the T-shirt wrestled Uncle Bob to the living room floor, pinning him down with one knee. Mother was in the corner leaning against a tall man in a Yankees jersey. They all looked drunk.

“Get off of me, you bastard!” Bob shouted. “Get out of our house!”

“*Our* house?” The man holding Mother laughed. “I thought this was Jean’s house.”

“I’m sick and tired of you bush league ball players always following her home,”

Bob said. "Don't you know any young women?"

"Look, Pops, we're leaving now. I'm going to let you up. But when we come back, you better not be here. Let's go guys. It's almost curfew. We gotta get back to the stadium. 'Bye, Jean." Mother looked up wearily.

The three men walked out the front door and up the driveway, laughing.

Uncle Bob shouted after them, "Don't come back again! If you do, I'll call the police."

They turned and gave him the finger as they got in their cars and drove off.

I came into the house through the side door. Bob brushed back his oily, white hair and smoothed his soiled shirt and trousers. He turned and smiled at Mother. She was slumped in a chair at the kitchen table.

"It's time for bed, Jean. Let me help you," he said gently. "You have to stop flirting with these baseball players at the bars."

He ducked his head under her arm and took her wrist in his hand. With his other arm around her waist, he collected Mother against his hip. His face was flushed.

"Good night, Jay." He carried her unsteadily towards the bedroom. "We'll see you in the morning."

"Sleepy . . . so sleep . . .," Mother slurred.

I looked around at the sparsely decorated living room—the flimsy folding TV tables, the cheap armchairs. I pulled the Scotch from the liquor cabinet and took a long swallow before putting it back with all of the other bottles. I walked to my bedroom, closed the door and sat down on my bed.

Why does it have to be this way? I thought. As I put my head on the pillow, and stared at the ceiling, a tear ran down the side of my face.

Monday night, Mother, Harry and I sat huddled together in silence eating our TV dinners off aluminum trays and watching the end of *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Finally, Mother turned to me and said, “Jay, your father called this morning while you were at the beach. He wants to know if you want to stay on at Sandpiper High next year or go away to boarding school in Connecticut. He said he can get you into Dunbarton. That’s where he went to school. You’d have to repeat your freshman grade. But that’s OK. You’re only fourteen, so you won’t be the oldest one in your class. And you’ll probably be repeating some of your classwork, so your first year should be easy and you’ll get good grades. He said you can stay with him and his new wife over the holidays if you want. He just bought a big new house on Long Island. Or you can fly down here and visit Harry and me.” Mother finished her beer. “What do you think?” she said with hesitation. “Do you want to go, Jay? You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

I thought hard, surprised by this opportunity to escape. I did not want to leave Harry behind. He would have to go through this hell all by himself. And I would miss the Dominoes. I would even miss Mother. But I thought how mixed up this past year had been—going to Florida with Mother for her quick divorce—all of the drinking and the chaos. I did not want to be with my father. But I did not want to be with my mother either. This was my chance—my chance to break free—my chance to get away. I stared at the floor, and then looked at Mother.

“Mom, I love you . . .”

She smiled a weak smile.

“But, yes, I do want to go.”

She turned away, as if struck by a blow. She seemed smaller in the flickering pale light of the TV screen.

“Mom . . .? Mom . . .? Mom, can I have a beer?”

Chapter 3



“**A**-a-all right gentlemen, quiet down!” Mr. Furgeson bellowed. He cast a stern eye over his new students. “According to the Dean of Boys, it



seems as though some of you have already forgotten the schedule at Dunbarton. So, let me remind you again. We rise p-p-promptly at 6:00. Breakfast at 7:00. Classes 'til 3:00. Then a-a-athletics, chapel and dinner. After dinner, study hall is from 7:30 to 9:00. A-a-and lights out is at 9:30 sharp. You should all know this by now. And above all,

remember that Dunbarton is a school for gentlemen. That's particularly true for you Third Formers. Do not ever forget this. I hope I'm making myself clear . . . c-c-crystal clear!"

Mr. Furgeson was one of the two dorm masters in Larson House, a timeworn white frame building nestled in the dogwoods on one corner of the school's campus. With his stutter, baldhead, potbelly and short stature, his nickname was Porky Pig.

"Are there a-a-any questions?" He scanned our young, bewildered faces. "A-a-alright then. Dismissed."

My roommate, Jim, and I walked back upstairs with two of my new friends from down the hall, Paul and Chris. It amused me that my roommate, Jim, and Chris both had the same last name, Chapman, if not the same build or mental agility. Although they were both 185 pounds, Chris was 6' 2", talked all the time and was not very bright; Jim, on the other hand, was 5' 9", said very little, and was an A student. Chris's roommate Paul was more my size: 5' 7", 145. He wore a flat top, and used pomade to push it up from his widow's peak. It was clear that his hair gel certainly did not help his acne. But, like Jim, he was one of the brightest students in the Third Form. But, unlike me, Paul was clumsy at sports.

Jim's father was a banker in Providence, and Paul's a well-known surgeon in Hartford. Chris' dad owned a large finance company in New York. All three seemed to have happy families. None came from broken homes. I grasped at my new friends and held them tightly.

During the first few weeks of school, I had learned to compensate for my poor

academic skills with my athletic ability. Paul and I complemented each other this way in the school curriculum. Paul helped me with my studies, and I was the jock who was his best friend. We were proud of each other.

“You wanna get together after lights tonight?” Paul asked. “I can help you with your Math, and then you can show me how to do those clapping pushups.”

“Sure. I’ve got a test tomorrow. I don’t want to be stuck in the fifth quintile forever.”

“OK. We’ll be over when the masters finish their rounds.” Paul laughed. “And I’ve got a funny idea for French tomorrow. I’ll tell you about it later after lights out.”

I sat at my desk across from Jim, staring at my Math book and thinking about being at Dunbarton. Mother was wrong. Despite dropping back a year to get into this top-ranked prep school, my grades were a disaster. But, regardless of my dismal academic showing, this was still a time of great excitement for me. Everything here was different from the high school life I had left behind in Florida. Being on my own, meeting new teachers, exploring the classrooms in the different buildings, finding my way around campus—all of this filled me with a feeling of exhilaration that I had never known before. I loved the independence. Being away from my parents and on my own was the best part of it all. This new, unknown place in Connecticut thrilled me. Never before had I been amongst the elite—those who dressed and carried themselves in ways other boys didn’t. These boys were special, and certainly not part of any Dominoes motorcycle gang. Being a part of Dunbarton filled me with pride. It challenged me daily to fight to improve my academic standing as well as my limited wardrobe. I would not give up

easily this place to which I had been allowed to escape—a place where, for the most part, I finally felt secure.

Contrary to my Floridian life that only offered nights of lonely TV dinners with my brother Harry, this privileged boarding school gave me a newfound camaraderie in the dining hall. Instead of beers with Mother at the drive-in, or—if she drank too much—late night motorcycle rides on the beach with Scotty, now my weekends were filled with the excitement of football games.

My father's large house on Long Island, four times the size of my Mother's home, was no better for me. It lay in Old Westerly, on Long Island, covered by a cold cloud of constipated wealth. Father's icy demeanor matched its chill. Never did he allow time for us to be together to talk. Instead, he lived his life only to restore the fortune his parents had lost in the Great Depression. His focus remained fixed on rebuilding the prestige of the Walker family that vanished in 1929. There was not a minute to waste on being a father. Rather, it was either hard work at the office regaining his family's lost power, or, on weekends, concentrating on the manicured putting greens at one of his five famous golf clubs with business associates.

His new wife, Florence, my daffy stepmother, ignored me as much as my father did. If it was not her bowling leagues, where, oddly enough, my mother had introduced her to my father, or her beauty salons, then her afternoons were spent with her oddball son Ronald. Evenings were reserved for her drinking and maudlin memories of a career in ballet that was never realized.

Only Fritz, her German shepherd, and my old friends in Garden Village, two

towns over from Old Westerly, gave me the happiness that I so desperately sought.

The door creaked open. Paul and Chris squeezed into my room from the darkened hallway with their flashlights.

“Let’s have some fun in French tomorrow,” Paul said with excitement. “What do you say?”

“Shh . . . the masters are going to hear you,” Jim whispered.

“OK. OK.” Paul lowered his voice. “So, here’s my plan . . . ”

“What?” I asked.

“You know how Professor Gallard always comes to class looking like he doesn’t have a dime?”

Chris nudged me and smiled. “Listen to this,” he giggled.

“Well, tomorrow, when we’re in French class, let’s give him one of our old clean dress shirts as a joke.” Paul laughed. “We can even stuff some fake money into it.”

“What? Give him a shirt?” I looked around embarrassed. “I’ve only got four shirts—not to mention only one sports coat and three ties. I can’t give him a shirt. The only reason I’ve got four shirts is because of those forged notes you write for Chris and me so we can go down to the laundry and tell them we lost our shirts. I need my shirts—even if they do belong to somebody else.”

“Don’t worry, Jay.” Paul gave me a friendly pat on the shoulder. “I’ve got an old an old tux shirt we can use.”

“You know, Gallard always wears the same shirt,” Chris laughed. “I bet his shirt could follow him to class by itself.”

“You should talk,” Paul said with a smile. “You’ve been wearing the same pair of corduroys since school began. Look at them—they’re worn clear through at the crotch.”

“Well, yeah . . . but whaddya expect? They’re corduroys, for God’s sake. I told ya. I’m going to wear them all year long. Why not? There aren’t any girls here. Right? Why not? And, look . . . See? The safety pins hold them together just fine. They’re just fine. So, lay off.”

Jim dug into his bottom drawer. “Here’s some Monopoly money. We can stuff it in the shirt since he’s always broke. The poor guy probably doesn’t have a dime to his name.”

“OK. I’ll bring it to class,” I offered. “Hey. You guys better push off. I’ll get my ass in a sling if I get caught with you guys in my room after lights out.”

“But what about the Math?” Paul asked. “You have to study.”

“Study?” I gave him a hard stare. “Look, Paul, when I’m not reading Playboy, I’m up all night guzzling coffee and popping NoDoz like M&Ms in that goddamn closet. I’ve been studying in there with my flashlight ’til 3 a.m. almost every night for the past three weeks. But, don’t you get it? It doesn’t help at all. How can I learn anything when my fucking family’s falling apart? Paul, without you . . . without your help, Paul . . . if you weren’t writing my English papers for me, I’d have flunked out of here by now. It took you four weeks to finally make me understand that the fifth quintile isn’t the best place to be academically. Last week, I cheated on one of Casey’s Chem quizzes, and I still only got a 63. Screw Math tonight. I’ll never get it anyway. I’m probably the dumbest kid who ever went to Dunbarton!”

“You’re sure, Jay? You’re sure you don’t want me to help you?”

“Paul, you know I’ve been busting my butt studying. I study all the time. But no matter how much time I spend studying, I just don’t get it. It just won’t sink in. I think the Headmaster’s Weimaraner’s got better grades than me. Last quarter I was 128 out of 134 for God’s sake. And with my luck, those six other Neanderthals will probably go right by me this semester, so I’ll fall even further behind. At this rate, I’ll never get my class ring. But, thanks, Paul . . . thanks anyway. I really appreciate your help.”

“O.K. See you in French class. Oh, and Jay, don’t beat yourself up . . . you’re going to get it. Just hang in there.”

After Paul and Chris crept back down the dark hall to their room, Jim and I turned out our lights.

“Gnite, Jay.”

“Nite, Jim.”

Before falling asleep, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling and thinking about my classes. They were so hard for me. This was the first time I had ever really had to study. And with the constant chaotic distractions of my shattered family life always rolling around in the back of my head, my concentration was nil. I was just barely getting by.

Still, I looked forward to French. I had never taken a foreign language before, and the lifestyle and culture of France intrigued me. Plus, Gallard’s funny accent made me laugh. I cherished his tales of bohemian nightlife in Paris.

“Jay. Telephone. Jay! Wake up. It’s the telephone.” Mr. Barsten shook my shoulder. “Telephone, Jay. You have a call from your mother up at The Cottage.”

I stared up at the old master with his wire-rimmed glasses and thinning white hair.

“What?”

“Phone call.”

“Oh. OK. OK. I’ll get dressed.”

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and pulled on my shirt and khakis. As I walked up the hill to Stengel Cottage, I thought, *Why does she have to keep calling?* The clock atop Sweeny Hall glowed 11:25. *Can’t she just leave me alone?*

In the basement, a phone dangled from its cord in one of the old wooden booths.

“Hello?” I mumbled.

“Jay? Jay, Honey, it’s your mother. You’re gonna haveta come home,” she slurred. “I’m sorry, Honey. I just can’t afford to keep you there anymore. Your father . . . your father isn’t sending me enough money.”

“Mom. It’s OK. Go to bed,” I pleaded. “Dad takes care of the tuition. I asked you before, please stop calling me here at night.”

“But, you don’t understand . . .,” she muttered.

“Mom, I love you. I’m going to hang up now. Good night.”

As I walked back across the deserted campus, I thought of all the nights she came home drunk after spending time at the local taverns with her entourage of young lovers—the brawls, the shouting. I drew my hand across my forehead, trying to wipe the thoughts from my mind.

“God, please help her,” I said with gritted teeth.

Thursday afternoon, I waited outside French class in the dark hallway of Dryden Hall. Under my arm, with my books, I held the small package for Gallard and listened at the door.

“Watteau. Répétez.”

“Watteau,” said the class.

I pushed the door open a crack. Professor Gallard had his back to me and was pointing to a nude in a French painting on the board. I slid into my seat and hid the bundle under my small desk.

“Non! Non! Non! Comme ceci. Vvvvattoe.”

“Vvvvvvattoe,” the class yelled.

Gallard, a man in his forties, stood lean and straight holding a large book of French art. As he turned, his oily, thinning hair gleamed in the afternoon sunlight shining in from the window. His clothes as usual were soiled and rumpled. His shirt was the same one he had worn yesterday. Obviously, he did not care how he looked, or he had very little money, or both.

“Boys, see how Fragonard painted his women?” He pointed to *The Bathers* on the board. “Fragonard. *Répétez.*”

“Fragonard,” the class repeated.

“Non! Non! Non! Frrragonarrrrr.”

“Frrrrragonarrrrrrrr!” We all laughed.

“Now, boys, pay attention. As you get older, you will learn to appreciate Fragonard’s plump ladies. Women, you know, do not all have to be blonde with blue

eyes and long legs. Beauty is more than that.”

We all stared in quiet disbelief.

“You should look for brains, not breasts...as you get older, you will learn this. In Paris, my affairs were with French women who were bright but not necessarily beautiful. Fragonard saw this. He was *‘le fils’* of eighteenth century French Rococo painting. Gentlemen, who knows what *‘le fils’* means?”

Mr. Gallard surveyed his students through his smoked reading glasses. I scrunched down in my seat.

“Ah! Monsieur Walker.”

“*Le fils?*” I stammered. “Let me think. Ah. *Le fils*. That means the office. Le fils. The office. Like l’office, right?”

“*Non*. Fragonard was not the office of the eighteenth century.”

The class burst out laughing.

As I floundered and squirmed, a tall slender boy with blond, wavy hair raised his hand. His name was Eric Tempelton. He sat in the front row and seemed to always make things look easy. Eric carried a nonchalant air about himself. He struck me as both pretentious and aloof. Having no wardrobe of my own, I was envious of how well he dressed—tweed sports coats, belted polo coat, tasseled loafers. It seemed that even his notebooks were monogrammed.

For me, every morning I had to carefully plan what I would wear from my meager wardrobe. My only jacket was the blue blazer my father bought me the day before I left for school. After we had finished our Bloody Marys and steak sandwiches at 21, Dad

took me to J. Press. Still tipsy from the vodka, he stood behind me grinning into the three mirrors as the tailor worked at the jacket's cuffs. Later that night at home in the kitchen after dinner and too many after-dinner drinks, he tried to open the buttonhole of my new blazer with a carving knife. By the time he finally sent me off to bed, the lapel was ruined.

“*Oui, Monsieur Tempelton?*”

“*Le fils veut dire l'enfant mâle de ses parents,*” he answered with a casual air. “*Le fils* means ‘the son.’”

“*Très bien, Monsieur Tempelton. Correct!*”

Eric turned in his seat and smirked at me.

“Pompous ass,” I whispered to Paul.

“Relax,” he said under his breath. “If his father wasn't in the goddamn Ambassador in Paris, he wouldn't be so goddamn good in French.”

“Jay Walker,” Mr. Gallard said, “you have to study harder.”

“I have been, Sir. But I've been a little busy. You see, some of us boys have been putting together a small present for you.”

“*Vraiment? Un petit cadeau? And what would that be?*”

“I guess we've noticed that most of the masters wear Ivy League clothes, but you seem to wear the same shirt all the time.”

“Young man, in France, body odor is considered to be an aphrodisiac.”

Gallard winked at the class, and the students erupted in laughter.

“Monsieur, we'd like to give you a gift.” I handed him the package. “I hope it fits.”

He tore open the brown wrapping paper and held the shirt across his chest, then raised his eyebrows with mock astonishment as he ogled the Monopoly money.

“Merci, Monsieur Walker. But still, you must try harder.”

“I will, Sir. I promise,” I muttered.

As soon as the class bell rang, I left for Harmon Hall to pick up my socks, jock and T-shirt for football practice. Today’s scrimmage would determine the starting positions for Saturday’s game against Old Standish.

So much for hitting the books, as my father always says. Now it’s time to hit heads.

Winding amongst the tall fir trees, a brick path took me down through the clean smell of fresh-cut grass to the playing fields. There, the white yard lines pointed across the gridiron to the other side of the valley. On the distant hillside, the red September sun was brushing a kaleidoscope of fall’s mottled golds across the soft heather peaks. Fall’s palette of changing patterns had started to blanket the campus.

In the locker room, downstairs at the gym, the chalk talk by Coach Davis was brief and firm.

“So that’s it, boys. Got it?” His piercing brown eyes bore through each one of us. “Good. Let’s get to it then. And remember . . . no mistakes!”

Wooden benches screeched across the cement floor as we pushed them aside to make our way through the fetid stench that fouled the locker room. The thirty-two of us gushed up the concrete cellar stairs in new game uniforms while the clatter of our low-cut cleats ricocheted off the brick walls of the old building. We ran across the road

beneath the freshly painted goal post onto the white striped turf. Above the froth of dark blue jerseys and bulging shoulder pads, our shining Riddell helmets floated like gold bubbles splattered with decals of wild boars for exceptional performances. The large blue Ds on the helmets' sides shouted 'Dunbarton!' Spikes churned the emerald sod; gold game pants glistened in the autumn light like yellow sparks jumping across a murky sea. With faces covered by cages, we charged across the hallowed pitch—a throng of fierce gladiators. Both the energy and the strength of our youth crashed down upon the playing field like a tsunami.

I thrived on this competition. It excited me. The adhesive tape that bound my wrists and ankles, the hip guards and thigh pads that slapped against my body as I ran, the sweet smell of foam rubber and sweat from inside my helmet, the number 22 that stretched across my chest—all of this made me feel alive.

Coach Davis stood before us with his muscular legs spread wide apart and a tight, white Dunbarton T-shirt stretched across his powerful chest. His black hair was cropped short and his nose flattened from his playing days at Yale. He gave a sharp blast on his whistle and tugged his cap down over his eyes.

“Calisthenics!” he shouted.

The team droned out the cadence for jumping jacks in unison: “One, two, three, four. One, two . . .”

Offensive and defensive plays followed the blocking and tackling drills. Then he broke the team into two groups. I was one of the first picked as running back for the Red Team, but so was Eric Tempelton.

By the end of the scrimmage, the Red Team trailed 10—7. With two minutes left in the last quarter. Our QB, Jenkins, brought us into the huddle.

“Listen up. 22. 22 dog left on 3. Walker! Got it? 22 dog left on 3. Let’s do this!”

My number was called.

At the snap, I ran out eight yards, faked right, then brushed past the linebacker for the end zone. As I crossed the goal line and went up for the catch, the bright sunlight blinded me from the ball, and it bounced off my shoulder pad on to the turf.

Coach Davis flung his cap to the ground and kicked it.

“Get out of there, Walker!” he bellowed. “Eric, take his place. And remember . . . no mistakes!”

Tempelton pushed his long blond hair back and pulled on his helmet. “Nice catch, Walker,” he said sarcastically as he trotted on to the field.

“OK. Tempelton. Fade in, then cut sharp for the corner,” I heard Jenkins say as he tightened his chinstrap. “Guys—same play. 22 dog left on 3. Let’s make it work this time. It’s there.”

The team broke the huddle with a loud clap.

“Readyyyyyy . . . Hut! Hut!” Jenkins barked.

He took the snap, dropped back five yards and lofted a perfect spiral. Alone in the corner of the end zone, Tempelton reached up for the ball with one hand and pulled it in.

“Touchdown!” the Red Team yelled, as the final horn blew.

Eric walked off the field surrounded by his teammates, hugging the football. As

he jogged past me, he snickered, “Hey, Walker, try holding on to this,” and he tossed me the ball. “Whenever you want a lesson, just let me know.”

I showered without speaking to anyone, and sulked back to my room. Jim ducked as I flung my books against the Dunbarton blanket that hung on the wall.

“How the hell did that Tempelton bastard make Turn that thing off!” I snarled.

“Come on, Jay,” Jim pleaded. “It’s *Kookie, Kookie, Lend Me Your Comb*.”

“I don’t care if it’s *God Bless America*—turn that shit off!”

“I’ll turn it down,” Jim grumbled.

“How the hell did Tempelton make that catch? Son of a bitch!” I yelled. “I would’ve had it if the sun hadn’t been in my eyes.”

Paul looked up from my *Playboy*. “Jay, you’re 5' 7". He’s six inches taller. No wonder he made the catch. Next time put some of that black greasepaint he uses under your eyes—it’ll cut the glare.”

“First the bastard makes me look like a clown in French class . . . I studied that stuff just last night! Why can’t I get it? And now, just when my sprained ankle’s healed, he’s won the goddamn starting position for Saturday’s game.”

“Easy, Jay. It’s just a stupid game,” Paul said. “The guy lives in France, for chrissakes. His father works at the Embassy. No wonder he speaks the language.”

Sunday evening, after Chapel, I found an empty phone booth in the basement of Stengel Cottage and pulled the glass door shut. I dreaded the collect calls I had to make to my father each week. He wanted me to call him every Sunday night at 7:00. Exactly 7:00. Finally, the minute hand nudged the 12.

“Hi, Dad, it’s me.”

“How are the grades, Jackson?”

I shuddered at the nickname. I hated it.

“Well, Sir, I’m not flunking French anymore.”

“You know, Son, when I was at Dunbarton, I hit the books. I hit them hard. Good grades just came rolling in. Then off I went to Princeton. I don’t know why you’re having so much trouble. I don’t understand it. Just hit the books, Jackson.”

“Yes, Sir. I will.”

“I never had a problem with good marks when I was at Dunbarton.”

“I’ll study harder, Sir. I promise. I’ll call you next Sunday at 7:00. Good night.”

I hung up the phone and kicked the glass door open.

Hit the books. That’s all you ever say. I am hitting the goddamn books. How did you get into Dunbarton and Princeton anyway? It couldn’t have been your parents’ money, could it? Hit the books. Shit. I study hard. Why can’t I get good grades?

Monday morning, I got up at 6:00 to drag myself over to Dryden Hall for my work detail. Chef Leonard ran the kitchen like a tyrant. He was 6' 3" and had a ferocious temper. Even at 63, he was feared by most of the student body. And everyone knew about the metal plate he had in his head from the war.

Don’t even think about being late, I told myself as I scrambled into my corduroys and loafers.

I brushed my teeth, combed my hair, jumped down the front steps pulling on my blazer, and ran up Chapel Street with my tie in hand.

“You’re late,” Leonard snapped as I whirled around the corner into the kitchen.

“Try that again, and I’ll send you to the Dean of Boys.”

Late. How could I be late? I wondered.

“I’m done here, Leonard. What’s next?”

I looked across the kitchen counter and could not believe who I saw standing in front of the dumbwaiter—that bastard, Eric Tempelton. He gave me a sarcastic smirk as he put away the last tray of glasses.

I clenched my fists and glared at him.

He even looks good in a goddamn apron, I thought. He’s got everything—money, looks, smarts.

I fumbled around behind the counter with the silverware while Eric strutted about the kitchen putting the plates in order. Each time he looked over, my stomach churned.

After breakfast, back in my room, I sank down on the bed across from Jim and complained.

“I can’t take this Tempelton guy anymore, Jim. He’s driving me nuts. He’s so goddamn perfect.”

“Jay, we’ll do something. Don’t worry. There’s got to be something we can do.”

Paul opened the door and came bouncing into the room.

“The way he dresses . . . it’s like he’s right out of the Brooks catalog,” I said. “I can barely scrape together a tie and a sports coat.”

“Talking about Tempelton again?” Paul asked.

“I just can’t stop thinking about him, Paul. He’s driving me nuts.”

“Me too,” Jim said. “He’s always got that . . . that . . . What was that word Mr. James taught us today in Etymology?”

“You mean insouciance?” Paul said.

“Yeah, that’s it. That’s what he’s got. My father wants me to have it too. Dad calls it sprezzatura,” Jim said. “He wants me to have that easy manner of studied carelessness. I guess he hasn’t noticed I’m 5' 9" and 185, and no James Dean. It’s kind of hard for a tank to be nonchalant.”

“Wait a minute! I’ve got an idea.” Paul’s eyes were opened wide. “His clothes are out of the Brooks catalog, eh? Well, you know what?”

“What?” Jim and I both asked.

“At the bottom of Harmon Hall, the wombats drop off the laundry on Tuesday afternoon—right?”

“Yeah,” Jim said.

“Well, why don’t we help Eric cut down on his wardrobe?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Tomorrow after class, we can watch from the bathroom window to see when they drop off the baskets. And when they leave, we’ll help ourselves to Tempelton’s finest dress shirts.”

“Holy shit! That’s brilliant! But what if you two get caught?” Jim cautioned.

“Us? We won’t get caught,” Paul said with a smile.

“OK, Paul, I’m in. I’m definitely in,” I said. “Paul, you’re a fuckin’ genius. And I get his pink shirts.”

On Tuesday afternoon, crowd together in a stall in the basement Boys Room, Paul and I stood on the toilet seat and peeked out the dusty window. Finally we heard the *clang, clang, clang* of the large canvass baskets full of clean clothes being pushed down the wooden steps from the laundry. We watched through the dirty pane as the workers lined the bins against the far wall, then shuffled off towards the library. We sneaked out the bathroom door, and checked the empty halls. Each of the five baskets was marked by a dorm house name.

“Larson House, Middle Hall, Chapel House,” Paul muttered. “Aha! Harts Lodge.”

We dove in, windmilling through the brown paper packages. Tempelton’s two bulging bundles were at the very bottom of the white canvas tub.

“Here they are, Paul. Look at these! Oxford shirts. My God! Pink! Blue! Green striped! They’re all from Brooks, and they’re all my size!”

As I flipped through the clean stack of the new button-downs, the stairwell door swung open.

“Boys! You boys there,” Dean Kravitch shouted as he stepped forward from a group of underclassmen. “What are you two doing there?”

“Nothing, Sir.” I dropped the opened bundle behind my back on top of the pile of brown paper packages in the large white tub.

“That’s my laundry!” Eric Tempelton shouted. “What are you doing with my clothes?”

I felt the iron grasp of Dean Kravitch’s fingers around the back of my neck. He kicked open the basement door and dragged Paul and me up the stairs to his dark

sanctum.

“Do you know what the punishment for stealing is at Dunbarton?”

His face shook scarlet with anger.

“But, Sir, we were just looking for . . .”

The dean lunged at me.

“Don’t lie to me, Walker!” he roared. “You’re getting forty hours of yard work. Both of you.” He wiped the spit from his lips. “You’re lucky I’m not throwing you both out of school.” He flashed his silver letter opener towards the door. “Now get out of my chambers.”

We slunk back to Larson House and climbed the stairs to Paul’s room.

“What? Forty hours! Goddamn that Eric Tempelton,” Paul moaned. “We’ve got to get that son of a bitch.”

“I’ll find a way,” I mumbled.

The fourteenth was Fall Festivities weekend at Dunbarton. Paul had invited his girlfriend Sue from Darien to come up to Waterville for the dance. She was bringing her friend Barbara as a date for me. So, during the week, Paul and I did little else but dream about seeing the girls and try to deepen our tans with an illegal sun lamp.

At last Saturday came. When Fifth Period was finally over, I walked down Hill Street with Paul towards the old train station. My tan chinos were freshly pressed, heinie buckle well cinched and oxblood Weejuns brightly polished. I fixed my tab collar and let the refreshing mid-autumn breeze sweep my rep tie over my shoulder. Brylcreem held my blond hair slicked back in place, and the musky scent of English Leather swirled

about my head. I smiled as I felt the blue and gold crest on my blazer's breast pocket swell with pride. My step had a jaunty spring to it. Paul opened his sports coat, put his hands deep in his pockets and began to whistle. We quickened our pace.

Strung out along the rickety station platform, a line of students from school prowled back and forth alongside the rails like a pack of hungry wolves. One took a clean linen handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brow. Another nervously checked his hair in one of the dirty station windows and patted down his cowlick. Then, from far down the track, came the faint sound of a locomotive.

Paul elbowed me and winked. "Get ready for the slaughter."

The train crept in to the station with a screech of brakes and explosion of steam. Porters rushed to put down small metal step stools with loud clanking sounds and helped passengers to the landing. Most of the girls got off waving to their boyfriends for help with their bags. A few were more timid. They peered out the train windows hoping that their dates would be there. Paul spotted Sue waiting by the last car.

"There she is."

Sue was about 5' with short, blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Next to her was a taller brunette in a forest green suit.

"Barbara? That's Barbara!" I blinked.

"Come on, Jay. Let's go help them with their things."

We took off in a jog towards the rear of the train.

"Hi, Sue. How are you?" He gave her a kiss. "How was the trip?"

"Well, it would have been just *awful* if those two cute guys from Yale hadn't sat

down next to us on their way up from Grand Central,” she teased. “Too bad they had to get off at New Haven.” Sue smiled at me. “So, Jay? You must be Jay—right? Jay, I want you to meet my friend, Barbara . . . Barbara Lockland. She lives in New York City.”

I stared into Barbara’s eyes. They were the most beautiful greenish-brown eyes I had ever seen.

“Hello, Jay.” She offered me her hand.

“Come on, Jay. Let’s get going,” Paul said. “The dance starts at 7:00.”

I pulled my eyes away from Barbara’s and groped about for her luggage. Together, we walked back up Hill Street towards campus. It was the first time in a long while that I had felt so happy. At last, it felt as though I truly fit in.

Before long, we were in front of Janson Lodge, an old clapboard house covered in tangled ivy where the girls would stay for the weekend.

“We’ll see you about 6:30,” Paul said.

“Yes. S-s-see you soon, Barbara,” I stammered.

As I turned to follow Paul, Barbara called after me. “Oh, Jay. May I have my bags?”

I looked down, then blushed. “Oh, sure. Sorry. Here you are. See you later.”

Paul and I hustled back to Larson House to get ready for the evening’s big event—a black tie dinner-dance with candlelight, and music by Lester Lanin’s Society Band.

I shaved off what little peach fuzz I had with my Remington Electric, doused myself with more English Leather and struggled with my cufflinks and studs for my

pleated shirt. I found my silk, over the calf stockings in my sock draw and pulled them on—I liked their sheer look. I hooked my suspenders, in front and back, to my formal trousers with the silk stripe running down the side of the pant legs. Their grosgrain band circled my waist just perfectly and closed with a round button covered in black silk cloth. My black, patent leather dancing pumps still lay wrapped in tissue paper inside the Brooks Brothers shoebox. I admired their flat, grosgrain bows that matched my lapels, suspenders and cummerbund. I slipped them on over my silk socks, clicked my cummerbund closed and spun its clasp around my waist to the back. Before attacking my bow tie, I checked the folds of my cummerbund. Were they facing up? This was one of the few things my father had ever taught me—the folds have to be facing up to catch the crumbs that fall during dinner, he said. I grabbed my toothbrush and used its plastic end to help tie the knot of my grosgrain butterfly bow tie—a trick learned from one of the Sixth Formers.

When I went to the mirror to tighten the bow and check my hair for a second time, it was hard for me to recognize the happy face that was smiling back at me. I snapped my suspenders, slipped on my dinner jacket and straightened my handkerchief.

“Hey, Jay. Close the door,” Paul whispered. “Come over here. Check this out.”

He rummaged through the back of his closet and yanked out one of his old cowboy boots.

“Check this out.”

Paul reached in and pulled a fifth of J&B.

“Holy shit!” I gasped. “Where in the hell did you get that?”

“Dad’s not very good at hiding the key for the liquor cabinet.” He twisted open the red cap with a crack. “I’ve been saving it for a special occasion. And now we have one. Here, have a swig.”

I pulled hard on the bottle’s dark green neck. The warm, raw Scotch burned as it went down.

“N-n-not bad,” I choked, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

Paul lifted the bottle and took a long swallow.

“Ahhh. To Festivities!”

He wiped his lips with his sleeve and handed the bottle back to me.

“Have another. Say? How’d you do on that book report?”

Paul reached for the bottle again.

“The book report? I flunked it. Sukany said I missed the point completely. He said the whole point was that Holden Caulfield was surrounded by a world of phonies. Then he stopped and looked at me and said, ‘Just like you.’ Can you believe it? Just like me. And then he just sat there and stared at me.”

I took another gulp.

“Nice guy, your English teacher.”

“Yeah. Really nice guy! So then I looked up ‘phonies.’ It means a fake or a fraud . . . Paul, do you think I’m a phony?”

“No way, Jay! Absolutely not. If anyone’s a phony, it’s that guy Tempelton.”

“You know, I’ll probably end up just like poor old Holden if I keep flunking my

classes. Maybe I should get a goddamn red hunting hat. What d'ya think? Of course Tempelton got a goddamn A+ on his book report.”

Paul spritzed his mouth with Binaca.

“Here. Use some of this.”

Once we freshened our breaths, Paul put the bottle back in his closet, and we pinned on each other's boutonnières.

“OK! Let's go, Pal.” He winked. “Let's have some fun tonight!”

When we got to the lobby of Janson Lodge, I saw Barbara standing tall next to Sue in a long pink taffeta dress. Her white gloves reached above her elbows. Pearls were sparkling from her earlobes and from around her long neck. There were pink ribbons that dangled from her white corsage. My eyes brightened.

We walked as couples across the quadrangle, arm in arm, beneath the large elm trees. In the distance, the dining room candles flickered through the evening's twilight. Swing music washed out over the white trim of the large open windows and spilled down from the second floor on to the bricks in the courtyard.

“Let's hurry,” Paul urged. “They've already started.”

At the top of the stairs, smartly dressed couples in evening wear pushed about at a large glass punch bowl laughing and jostling for drinks. Others mingled around the fifty circular tables adorned with white linen tablecloths, shining silverware and fresh-cut flowers. A large oil painting of the headmaster and his wife hung above the flames that crackled in the huge two-sided fireplace in the middle of the hall. At the far end of the room, propped up on a makeshift stage, Lester Lanin swiveled his hips to the

orchestra's fast tempo. He tossed his monogrammed souvenir hats high above the packed crowd that was frantically dancing the Twist in front of his bandstand. The swing band's drums clashed loudly against the electricity that filled the room and drove the dancers to a faster rhythm.

Paul led us beneath the somber gallery of oil portraits of past headmasters that decorated the mahogany walls to a table halfway between the fireplace and the orchestra.

As we sat by the window, I watched the wind carry Barbara's auburn hair back from her high cheekbones and full red lips. The gentle smell of her light perfume intoxicated me. It stoked the fiery courage already set ablaze by the Scotch.

"Barbara, let's dance."

I followed her to the dance floor and took her in my arms. She was just my height. Our bodies fit together perfectly. The waltz began—"It Had To Be You"—and I pulled her to me. As we danced, I could not believe how light she was. I felt the warmth of her glove and the softness of her cheek. Her arm cradled my shoulder; her hips swayed with the music; her satin gown rubbed against my tux trousers. I could feel her fingers brushing the back of my neck. All of it excited me.

Here I am holding this woman, dancing in black tie at Dunbarton, I marveled. I must be dreaming. Am I in a fantasy world, or is this really real?

The song ended and, as we returned to our table, the dinner chime rang.

Headmaster Rockwell, a lean man in his sixties, stood straight and tall looking out over the gathering from the main table. Wearing an immaculate double-breasted

dinner jacket from the '30s, he hooked his thumbs into the pockets of his trim white waistcoat. His black, thinning hair was combed back and his brown eyes sparkled.

Just as he stepped to the microphone to welcome the gathering, Mrs. Richardson came clip-clopping across the polished hardwood floor in front of him in her pigeon-toed way. All eyes focused on her low-cut, red satin ball gown and the rhinestones that glittered from the bows on her black patent mules. She glided across the room with an air of nonchalance, timing her arrival, as always, just *after* all in the dining hall were seated.

"Who's that?" Barbara asked.

"Mrs. R," I whispered. "One of the masters' wives."

As she approached her husband's table, her blue eyes twinkled beneath her thick, black lashes. And casually, as she went to sit, she let her left hand brush across Shawn Ketchum's broad shoulders.

"Looks like she's sleeping with Shawn this week."

"What!" Barbara's eyes widened.

"Two years ago, her husband had a heart attack. So, he's out of commission. Ever since, she's been looking to the Sixth Formers to keep herself happy."

Shawn stood up eagerly and pulled out her chair. She settled down beside him, slowly crossing her legs, while smiling across the table of ten at her husband like an ingénue.

Rockwell pulled heavily on his white waistcoat, swallowed hard, and began again.

“Welcome. Welcome all, to our Fall Dance. I hope our lovely guests will have a wonderful weekend with us here at Dunbarton.” His chest swelled as he went up and down on his toes with his hands clasped behind him. “Don’t worry,” he smiled. “I won’t take up any of your time. And dinner will be served shortly. Please enjoy yourselves. Have fun!” He gave a little wave and rejoined his wife.

I leaned over to Barbara. “Archer’s a funny old goat, but he means well.” She smiled.

“So, tell me,” I asked. “What do you do in New York?”

“I’m studying fashion.” She cocked her head and looked up at me. “My father found me a job last summer at one of Manhattan’s top design houses,” she said in a nonchalant way. “I love fashion. So, I’m going to study at an art and design school in New York after high school. What about you, Jay? What are you taking?”

I stared into her eyes. I could not get over her beauty.

“Jay? What about you?”

“What? Oh, me? Math. French. Nothing special.”

“I’ve always wanted to be a designer. That’s my dream,” she said. “I made my dress. Do you like it?”

“Do I like it? Barbara, you look great. I mean really great.”

She smiled.

“You know, I’ve got dreams too,” I said. “I’m going to work for my ol’ man in New York after college. One day, I’ll take over Walker & Company. And then when I get old, I’ll leave it to my kids. And then they’ll leave it to their kids. That way, the company will

go on and on, and on and on . . .”

“Your father owns a company?”

“An insurance brokerage firm. I’ll wait to get married. You know, take my time. Make sure to find the right one.” I tried to sound older. “I don’t want to get divorced like my parents. No way. Get married maybe at twenty-eight or thirty-two. I don’t know. Then have a couple of kids. Boys . . . and maybe a girl. And a nice house with a white picket fence. You know, like the Nelsons—Ozzie and Harriet. I want to live happily ever after in Connecticut. Has to be Connecticut.”

“Connecticut? Why Connecticut?”

“Blue license plate.”

“Blue license plate?”

“Yeah. I want a blue license plate for the station wagon. You know, a station wagon for the kids and the dog . . . a Dalmatian.”

“A Dalmatian? How come a Dalmatian?” Barbara asked.

“I had one once in Garden Village. His name was Buttons. He was my best friend.”

“Buttons. What a great name.”

“We’ll be a happy family. That’s my dream—to have a happy family. You see? I’m a star gazer.”

“A what?”

“A star gazer. You know. I try to imagine things the way I hope they’ll be one day. I always want to be looking up . . . looking up at my dreams—gazing at the stars.”

“That’s a funny way to put it, star gazer. I kind of like it—star gazer. I’m going to remember that.”

The band began playing “Puttin’ On The Ritz.”

I smiled. “Well what do you say, Barbara? Do you . . .”

“Barbara, I can’t believe you’re here.”

Eric Tempelton stepped between our two chairs.

“I haven’t seen you since the Beach Club last summer. What a great gown. Did you make it? Come. Let’s have a dance.”

Before I could react, they were on the floor dancing cheek to cheek. I watched as Eric guided her gracefully around the room with a confident air. Finally, the song ended. But instead of leading Barbara back to our table, he took her to his table next to the fireplace. He sat close beside her and introduced her to his coterie of friends while sliding his arm across the back of her chair. I watched Barbara’s eyes sparkle while they chatted and laughed.

“Paul, look!” I hissed. “He’s got his hands all over her.”

Feverishly, I thought of how to get her back. I racked my brain. When I looked at Eric, I saw his left arm fall around Barbara’s pale shoulders. Suddenly, I exploded. In a fit of sudden rage, I jumped to my feet, knocking over my chair. I rushed across the room, pushing dancers out of my way. I grabbed Tempelton by the lapels and tore him violently from his chair. I flung him onto the parquet floor and pounced on top of him. He was strong, but stunned. We wrestled back and forth on the brickwork next to the flames in the fireplace. He tried to throw me off, but I pinned his shoulders.

“She’s mine, not yours,” I spat through clenched teeth, our faces inches apart.

“Keep your hands off her.” And then I hit him.

The crowd grabbed me and pulled me off him. They dragged me out of the dining room into the hallway where Dean Kravitch was waiting, shaking with fury.

“That does it, young man,” he snarled with a crimson face. “You’re finished with the dance. Finished. Do you hear me?”

“Y-y-yes, sir,” I stammered.

“Now, for God’s sake, Jay, tuck in your shirt and fix your tie, and get out of here at once. I expect to see you in my office tomorrow morning at eight o’clock sharp. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

I walked alone away from the dining room down the path through the night to Larson House. At the top of the stairs, I turned and went to Paul’s room, took the Scotch from his closet and wolfed down the soothing blend. The liquor sloshed from my mouth as I gulped my ambrosia that mixed with the tears running down my face. I flung the empty bottle back into Paul’s closet, and banged my way down the hall to my room. There I threw my rented tux on the floor and climbed in bed.

How can I get even? How?

The room began to turn, slowly at first, then faster and faster. I struggled to get up and held the wall to stop the spinning. I wobbled to the open window, doubled over, gasped, then puked all of the Scotch and dinner onto the porch roof below.

Sunday morning at eight, I pushed myself into Dean Kravitch’s dark inner

sanctum. He was sitting behind a large heavy desk dressed in a tweed sports jacket, white shirt and repp bow tie. A small reading light glowed beneath its green hood in front of him. Through the dark, he looked like an angry bloodhound with his dangling jowls and wrinkled face. He peered over the gold rims of his lunettes with fierce blue eyes. I stood trembling.

“Sit down, Mr. Walker!”

I found one of the tall red leather chairs in front of his desk. As I eased myself down onto its thick cushion, the pain of my hangover rocked forward and hit hard against my forehead.

“Mr. Walker. You know your admission to Dunbarton was due to your father who went here many years ago. You, young man, are what we call a legacy; your application received preferential treatment. Without it, you never would have been admitted to Dunbarton with the grades that you had at Sandpiper Beach High School.”

My mouth was dry as cotton. I swallowed hard as the Dean’s stern face grew larger.

“As you are well aware, in the short time that you have been here at Dunbarton, you have been able to distinguish yourself not once, but twice, with inappropriate behavior—first stealing and now fighting. This is not the caliber we expect from Dunbarton men. Therefore, Jay, you give me no choice. I am suspending you from Dunbarton for a period of three weeks.”

His image blurred as my eyes filled with tears.

“You will pack your bags after classes on Tuesday and be on the 4:25 train to

New York.”

I looked about the room, staring at the heavy velvet curtains and the patterns on the Oriental rug. I was lost.

What will my father say? I wondered with trepidation.

“Jay, is that clear? Do you understand?” he asked.

“Yes, sir. I understand,” I offered in a meek voice.

“Fine. That will be all. You may go.”

As I walked to the door I heard him say, “And Jay, for God’s sake, fix your tie.”

I pushed out the front door of Harmon Hall and wandered down the steps of the red-bricked building shaken. At the oval drive, I stopped and stared across the campus. I looked beyond the road, past the Cottage. Above the distant hills and the cotton clouds, geese were flying south in front of a turquoise sky. Through my tears, I saw the football fields . . . the football fields that I loved so much . . . the football fields that I was now leaving behind . . . all of this, I was leaving behind. I was losing all of this . . . this school that had become my family. Never would I find in Garden Village or Sandpiper Beach an echelon of boys like these here at Dunbarton. I had flossed, brushed and gargled before kissing their asses—but now, they had become my family, and I had lost them.

I’ve been given this opportunity, and what do I do? I throw it away. Why? My body was empty. I was hollow inside. Loneliness engulfed me.

I’m losing this. I’m losing all of this. I ran my hands through my hair. *What will my father say?* Suddenly, I decided. *I won’t tell anyone anything.*

Back at Larson House, I found Paul in my room thumbing through the Maidenform Bra ads in the *Sunday Times' Magazine* section and listening to *Tom Dooley* on my Kingston Trio album.

“That was some meeting with Kravitch. He really busted my balls,” I said.

“Oh yeah? Well guess what. There’s something else. You’re not going to believe this. Tempelton and Barbara have rekindled their old friendship. He’s going to put her on the train to New York this afternoon.”

My eyes narrowed. “What?”

“And that’s not all. It’s worse. She’s coming back up next Saturday to watch him play in the game against Saint Dominic’s. Jay, I’m really sorry. I didn’t even know they knew each other.”

I grabbed my study lamp, smashed it against the closet door, bounded down the stairs and slammed out the front door. In the shadows behind Larson House, I hid my face against the shingled siding and tried to smother my sobs in the ivy.

Monday afternoons were for ‘Extracurriculars’ at Dunbarton. At three o’clock each week, the Gun Club assembled in the basement of Memorial House. Tucked away in a cement crawl space was a small shooting gallery with string pulleys hooked to tiny paper targets. The team had six rifles that we used for practice.

Shooting was easy for me. I felt comfortable with the stock against my shoulder. As part of my instruction, I had learned to take my rifle apart—first the bolt, then the barrel, clean and oil the mechanism, and then re-assemble it. I was one of the best shots on the team. And, as one of the co-captains, I was given the responsibility of

cleaning up the gallery as well as locking the door at the end of the day. This afternoon, after the last marksman left, I broke my rifle down and put it in my gym bag with several rounds of ammunition before locking the door.

After dinner, Jim greeted me as I walked into our room.

“Hey, Jay. How’s it going?”

I slid my gym bag under my bed.

I looked at him. “You’ll never guess who I have kitchen detail with tomorrow morning.”

“I give up, who?”

“That prick Eric Tempelton’s working with me again.”

“No shit. After Festivities?” Jim shook his head. “You just can’t catch a break, can you?”

“Yeah. Well, I’ve got to get up early tomorrow. Leonard will tear my balls off if I’m late again.”

“Tell me about it.”

That night, I set my alarm for five instead of six and lay in bed excited by the thought of the bag beneath my bed.

Now I’ll finally be rid of him!

At midnight, I fell asleep.

Tuesday morning was crisp and clear. The strong rich fragrance of fall swirled through the chilled air. Tiptoeing down the front steps of Larson House, I felt the bolt of the rifle in my gym bag bounce hard against my back. I checked my watch.

Forty-five minutes and he'll be coming up the path from the Lodge.

The autumn leaves crackled beneath my loafers as I pushed up the hill past Dryden Hall and then down the path. There in the distant shadows, the chapel's bell tower rose tall before the pink clouds of sunrise. At its top, the school flag flew proudly for all to see.

Standing alone in the morning mist, I shivered, and cast an eye over the empty campus. Not a sound. I tugged on the front chapel doors. Tugged again. Both were locked. The small side door was locked too.

"Shit!"

But when I pulled on the back door, it opened with a low groan. I squeezed inside the dark chapel, stopped beneath the stained glass windows and listened to my heartbeat. I gathered myself, then crept up the center aisle towards the front chapel doors. I quietly climbed the narrow stairs in the back that took me to the choir loft on the second floor. Behind the organ, I found the tiny door leading to the ladder that led to the balcony high up on the roof. I struggled to drag my gym bag behind me as I mounted the last steep steps to the belfry.

I stood tall on the steeple platform, looking out across the cold clear campus, and inhaled the pungent smell of fallen leaves that blew across Fall's canvas. From high above, my view of the path that Eric would take on his way to the kitchen was perfect.

The cold, fresh morning air called me back to my task. With care, I assembled the rifle, and adjusted the scope to 400 feet. I took the shoulder strap and wrapped it tightly around my arm. Despite my shaking hands, I managed to get the bullet into the

chamber and close the bolt. With a silent sigh, I rested the rifle barrel on the tower rail and waited.

Soon, through the quiet haze, the sound of footsteps came from the other side of the sprawling lawn.

I squinted through the scope. *There he is.*

Eric Tempelton walked up the asphalt path between the pines with his hands deep in the pockets of his Loden coat. The elk horn buttons gathered the soft green cloth about both his slim body and his yellow cashmere scarf. I watched as his breath circled his hood in the clear morning light.

Slowly . . . slowly now . . . Wait . . . wait for him to get between the crosshairs. Slowly . . . slowly . . . Now squeeze back on the trigger. Now squeeze back on the trigger. Squeeze the fucking trigger!

Tears blurred my eyes as I watched Eric walk by. I let the gun slip from my hands. The butt of the rifle hit the belfry floor with a crash, and the sound echoed across the empty campus. Eric stopped. I crouched down behind the narrow wooden slats and held my breath. He looked up at the steeple, then continued on nonchalantly to the kitchen.

I picked up the rifle, climbed back down the ladder and left the church through the back door for the dining room. Next to the rear door of the kitchen, I hid my bag behind a dumpster and smoothed my hair in place. At the top of the stairs, I found my apron hanging by the sink. Eric was at work cutting the cinnamon buns for the morning meal.

“Morning,” I said to Leonard.

He huffed.

After breakfast, I replaced the rifle, and packed my clothes. Looking up from my suitcase, I saw my black leather jacket and motorcycle boots staring out at me from their hiding place in the back of my closet. Across the chest of the jacket, ‘Jay’ was written proudly in small white script. The silver buckles of my boots glistened from their twisted straps.

Come . . . , they whispered, Come home, Jay. You don’t fit in here. Come back to where you belong.

With a shudder, I closed the closet door and left the campus for the train station.

As I walked to town, I thought of Eric Tempelton, and felt my remorse.

What could have I been thinking? Kill him? Kill him? How could I? For Christ’s sake! What was I thinking?

I stopped in front of the old post office and read my letter one more time before dropping it in the mailbox.

Dear Barbara,

I’m so sorry for the way I behaved Saturday night at the dance.

I guess it was because, for the first time ever, you made me feel so happy. I

did not want to lose you.

I hope you will forgive me.

Please see me again in New York.

With love.

Jay