

The background of the book cover is a detailed illustration of a suburban scene. In the foreground, a green lawn is visible. On the sidewalk, there is a stack of newspapers tied together with a string, a red folding knife lying on its side, and a red bicycle with a white basket on the back, which is tipped over. In the background, a house with a large front door and stone steps is shown. The scene is lit with warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

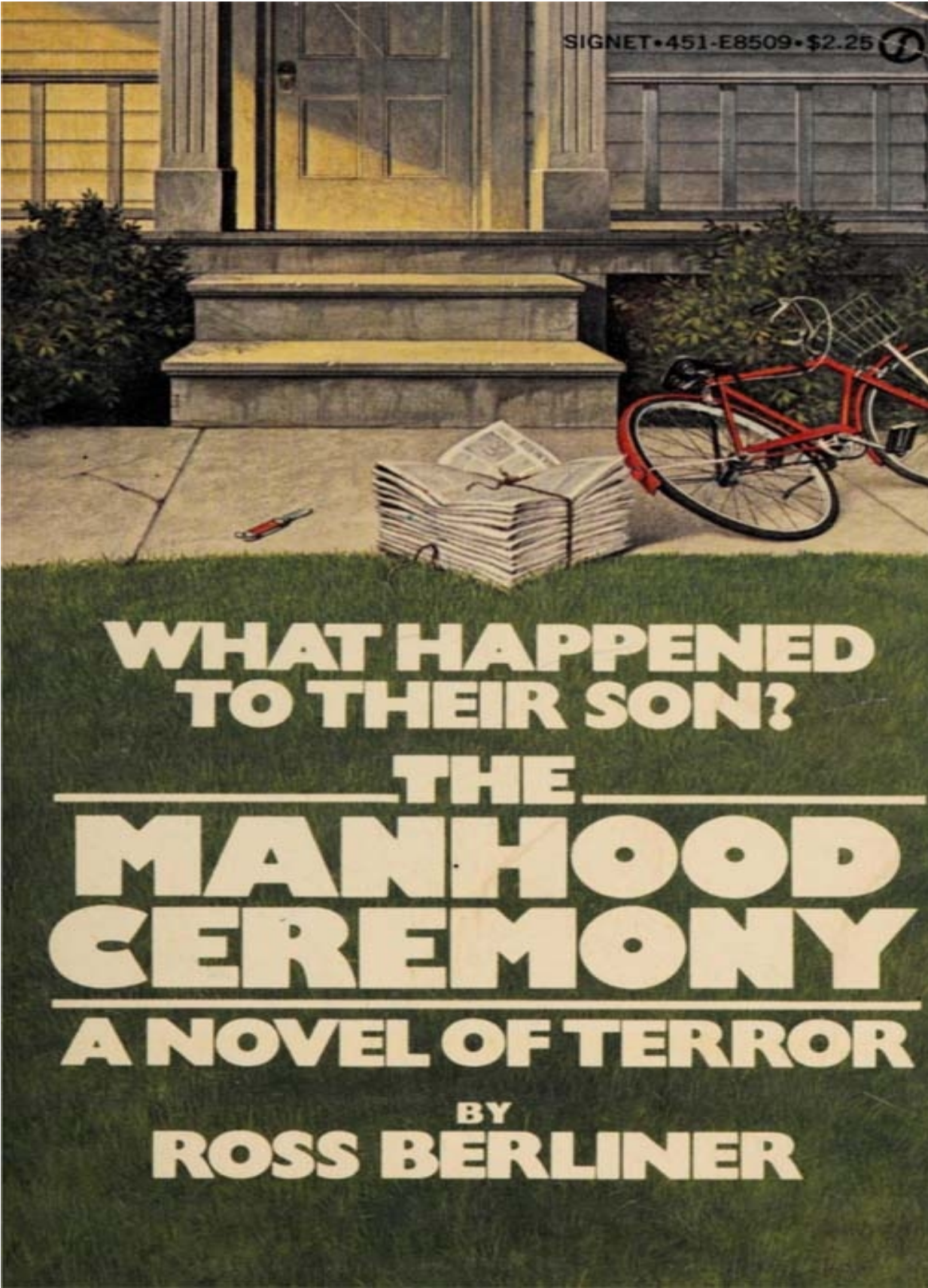
**WHAT HAPPENED
TO THEIR SON?**

THE

**MANHOOD
CEREMONY**

A NOVEL OF TERROR

**BY
ROSS BERLINER**

The background of the book cover is a detailed illustration of a suburban house at night. The house has a large, dark wooden door with a brass handle, flanked by windows with white shutters. A set of three stone steps leads up to the door. On the sidewalk in front of the steps, there is a red bicycle leaning against a large stack of newspapers. A small, red-handled knife lies on the sidewalk near the newspapers. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the house and possibly a street light, creating a somber and mysterious atmosphere.

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Annotation

“LET’S DO SOMETHING CRAZY,” THE TALL, BEARDED STRANGER SAID.

He tightened his hold on Ricky’s hand and pulled him closer with the other.

“Do you trust me? Do you?”

Ricky suddenly felt a wave of fear, but it was mixed with excitement. He flushed, feeling his body arch toward the tall man.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” Ricky whispered.

“Then come with me.”

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The Manhood Ceremony

ONE

The late-afternoon sun cast shadows over the corners of the apartment buildings, creating sharp triangles of shade across the carefully cut lawns. April had renewed the grass, so that the green glistened in the direct sunlight. At the corner of the sidewalk, a lone elderly woman clutching a thin plastic bag waited impatiently for the bus, shifting her feet and looking down the street about every third second, then glancing guiltily at her watch. There was an unnatural quiet in the spring air, punctuated only by the infrequent whirring of a rapidly passing car.

A sudden sound caused the woman to turn her head quickly in the direction of the street that ran perpendicular to where she was standing. The whistling was thin and tentative but pierced the quiet street corner with the awakening of music. Her eyes caught the figure of a lithe, gangly twelve-year-old boy loping carelessly along the pavement unconsciously pursing his lips in a tuneless, reedlike sound. As he moved closer, she noted his blank expression and staring eyes. He seemed not to be aware that she was there. She saw him reach the corner near her without looking her way. His eyes searched until he spied a pile of newspapers tied carefully with a thin cord. He walked quickly over to the papers, knelt, and began to slowly untie the cord, his fingers moving expertly as if he were used to the task. Slowly he began to count the papers. She watched with thoughtless interest, her attention riveted by the quiet and the waiting.

The boy made piles of papers, soundlessly counting each with moving lips. His carefully pressed jeans clung tightly to his firm buttocks but wrinkled at the knees and rode high over his ankles, suggesting recent rapid growth. With his hand he wiped away the slight perspiration on his upper lip. As he raised his arm, his clean blue Lacoste shirt slipped out of his pants and the woman saw a thin strip of very white skin. She stared at his blond hair drifting into strands in the light spring breeze. She started to think, What a handsome boy, but just then another noise diverted her attention. The rumbling sound of the approaching bus as it made its way over the rise of the hill had finally reached her, and she swung around to meet it. As the bus curved and pulled up heavily against the curb, she lifted her plastic bag and glanced nervously into her palm to check on her money.

Then she lifted herself on the steps, deposited her fare in the box, and sat wearily down in a seat by the window. She glanced back at the boy. He was so totally absorbed in counting the piles of newspapers lying in a semi-circle around his knees that he had not looked up to acknowledge the bus. It was only then that the woman realized that before she had gotten on the bus, someone had gotten off. A moderately tall bearded man stood on the sidewalk blinking in the sunlight, staring at the boy. The bus quickly changed gears and lurched away. The woman glanced back. Neither the boy nor the man had moved. They looked like still figures in a painting.

The man touched his beard tenderly. The light hurt his eyes. But bright light had always hurt his eyes. He slowly passed his hands across his slightly closed lids for momentary relief. As his hands came down, trembling, he looked again at the boy. He had seen him as the bus came over the hill. He glanced up quickly to look at the street sign. Where am I? he thought. He read the sign but could not place where he was. This was a part of the city he was unfamiliar with: the suburbs, the part of the city where he had rarely gone until today. The boy appeared oblivious of the man. His blond head was bent. The tall man stared with fascination at the smooth white skin forming a band between the boy's shirt and pants. He rubbed his left hand along his hairy right arm with absent-minded stroking.

Finally he took a few steps forward. "Hi, kid."

The boy looked up and blinked, the sun blinding him for a second. Finally he saw the outline of the tall bearded man in the white denim painter's overalls and heavy flannel shirt standing over him. He thought he recognized the man with the beard shadowed by the flickering sunlight behind his back.

"Hi, Jim," the boy called happily as he rubbed his eyes, which were squinting in the sun's glare.

"My name's not Jim," the man said very slowly.

The boy frowned and blinked several times until his eyes gradually became accustomed to the unexpected brightness. As he began to fill in the man's form, he quickly realized that the tall bearded man was not Jim Fletcher, his guitar teacher. He felt instantly disappointed. Of all the men he knew, Jim Fletcher was the one he respected the most. Despite the fact that he was bored with the guitar, he had continued taking lessons so that he could meet with Fletcher once weekly. Tonight, Friday, was his lesson, and he had been waiting impatiently all day for the hours to pass. He had even

thought about the lesson with Fletcher as he stood in the outfield of the Little League baseball game from which he had just come to deliver his papers. He recalled with a flash of guilt that he had been standing on the grassy ball field wishing that Jim Fletcher and not Edward Stern were his father. He colored slightly as the thought resurfaced briefly.

“Oh,” the boy said quickly. “I thought you were someone else.”

The tall man’s tongue flicked over his lips. “Who’s Jim?”

“My guitar teacher,” the boy said, feeling somewhat foolish.

The man paused for a brief minute, then spoke softly. “You seemed so happy to see me. This Jim must be somethin’ special.”

The boy lowered his head and didn’t answer. Even the man’s husky voice sounded like that of his favorite older male friend. He felt thrown off his guard.

“Do you really like this Jim fella?” The man leaned forward slightly.

The boy nodded. “Yeah. He’s my best friend.”

The man sighed. “Then he’s mighty lucky.”

The boy blushed, not fully understanding why. He was not accustomed to compliments from adults that came so easily, so comfortably. He did not answer but waited expectantly for the tall bearded man to speak.

“My name’s Arvis.” The man’s voice almost caressed him with a slow hypnotic rhythm.

“Hello, Arvis.” The boy felt his knees beginning to ache slightly from kneeling, so he started slowly to rise.

“What’s your name, kid?” the man asked gently.

“Ricky. My name is Ricky Stern.”

An arm shot out from the tall man’s side with hand extended. “Hi, Ricky Stern.” The sound of his name almost tinkled with coarse laughter inside the man’s throat. Ricky tentatively took the thick leathery hand and shook it lightly. The man seemed reluctant to let their hands come apart, but gradually their palms unlocked.

“Could you tell me where I am?” The man’s voice was soft and careful.

“You lost?” Ricky cocked his head.

“I think so.” Arvis took a step to the side, out of the bright sunlight.

“This is the corner of Clarendon and Summit.” Ricky turned his head toward the street sign.

“Where’s that?” Arvis bent forward.

“Fairfax.”

“Oh?” It was clear the man was still baffled as to his whereabouts.

“Virginia. Outside of Washington.”

“Virginia? My God, I didn’t know I had come so far!”

Ricky looked at the confused man and smiled.

Arvis slowly smiled back. He laughed a dry but warm laugh and shrugged his shoulders. “You must think it’s pretty dumb for a grown man to get lost.”

Ricky did not answer. He kept watching the man lean toward him.

“You deliverin’ newspapers?” Arvis pointed to the piles. “Just about to.” Ricky nodded.

“I used to do that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I thought it was boring as hell.”

Ricky laughed. “Me too.”

“Do you have to?”

“What?” Ricky frowned.

“Deliver papers.”

Ricky frowned, then made a face. “Yeah. I have to.”

Arvis ran his eyes over the boy. “But you sure don’t need the money.”

“Yes, I do.” Ricky shook his head.

“I bet your folks have money.”

Ricky cocked his head. “Why?”

Arvis put out his finger and ran it slowly over the front of Ricky’s knitted shirt, letting it rest on the appliquéd crocodile on the boy’s chest. Ricky watched the finger gliding over his chest with fascination.

“These clothes. They look expensive.”

“They are. But I need the cash. No allowance unless I earn it. My old man’s a nut on that.”

“He’s pretty tough?”

“Yeah.” Ricky was surprised at the anger in his voice.

Arvis listened to the tone and pressed. “He must have a lot to get mad at you about, then.”

Ricky turned away and stared down the empty street. No doors were opening. The sound of children’s voices, so often in the background, was strangely absent. He took in a deep breath. “No. I’m a good kid. He never gets mad at me. ’Cause I don’t ever do much wrong.”

Wetting his lips nervously, Arvis moved a step closer. "That's funny. When I was your age, I was always into something. Always having fun. Always doing something crazy." He listened for Ricky's reply, but it did not come. Ricky stared at the tall man and then glanced down at the large shadow as it cut across his own body. He waited for his new companion to speak again.

"Don't you ever want to do something crazy—something wild?"

The question hung like smoke in the slowly ebbing sunlight. Ricky savored the sound and slowly nodded his head, not daring to speak the words.

"Sure you do. Except you probably never got the chance." Arvis spoke very confidentially, his voice shaking slightly but embracing the boy.

Ricky let his tongue slip out of his mouth and pressed his white teeth into the pink tip. He waited awhile before answering.

"I've had chances. Things my friends do. But they're dumb things."

"Not worth the trouble?" Arvis asked casually.

"Yeah." Ricky nodded. "Dumb."

Arvis turned around and looked down the street. No one was walking in either direction. He slowly ran his fingers through his unkempt black curly hair, which fell over his shoulders.

"You want to try somethin'?" he asked softly.

Ricky bent toward him. "What?"

"I said, 'Do you want to try somethin'?' " Arvis answered patiently.

Ricky smiled enigmatically. "I know what you said. I asked, 'What?' "

Arvis rubbed his moist palms over his white denimed thighs and slowly placed his right hand on Ricky's neck. He moved his fingers over the blond threads of hair along the nape. Ricky did not move, but his body shivered slightly.

Leaning toward the boy, Arvis whispered without stopping the light fingering of his neck, "Do you trust me?"

"I— I— I don't know," Ricky stammered. He was feeling strangely detached and defiant. The man's hand was warm and soothing. He sensed that he should move away, but he stayed still, beginning to sway slightly under the moving fingers.

"You can trust me. I'm like"—Arvis paused—"what's his name?"

"Jim."

“I’m like Jim.” The hypnotic fingers did not stop. Ricky felt the pressure of the hand on his neck as he was slowly pulled a step closer to the man.

“Hi, Ricky,” the soothing voice continued. He did sound like Jim Fletcher.

“Hi... Arvis.” The words were getting difficult.

“Do you trust me?” The man’s other hand had quietly come down and taken the boy’s left hand and was squeezing very softly. Ricky remembered the guitar teacher’s fingers as they guided his hand over the guitar strings.

“Yes,” Ricky finally said.

“I trust you too.” Arvis smiled and his eyes wrinkled as his full, sallow face suddenly relaxed.

There was a long moment of silence. Ricky felt the hand lightly holding his own and the other hand now running gently over his shoulder blades. I should run away, he thought. I have to deliver my papers. It’s getting late. But I don’t want to leave this man. He has something to tell me, something to show me. I’ve always wanted Jim to take me out—to a ball game or to a restaurant—just the two of us, like real friends. But he never has.

I should be scared, but I’m not. Why aren’t I scared? If he was bad, I would be scared. But I feel good—funny but good. If I feel this way, what’s wrong if I listen, if I stay for a minute more?

“Let’s do something crazy.” Arvis’s voice seemed to come from a great distance.

Ricky shook his head while asking, “What?”

“Let’s take the next bus and go to the movies ... or a ball game, or maybe the zoo. Which would you like?”

Ricky moved back. “But my papers.”

“Oh, leave them. When we’re done, I’ll come back and help you deliver them. That’s what friends do.” Arvis paused, took a deep breath. “Do you trust me?” He tightened his hold on Ricky’s hand and pulled him closer with the other. “Do you?”

Ricky suddenly felt a wave of fear, but it was mixed with excitement. He flushed, feeling his body arch toward the tall man.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” Ricky whispered.

“Then come with me.”

“I’m not sure I should.”

Ricky felt the hand stroking his back tighten and squeeze the firm flesh on his back. The voice became tense and shaky. “Do you trust me?”

Ricky could not answer. Suddenly he felt pain as the older man’s hand crushed his in a viselike grip. “*Do you?*” the voice asked again with tight urgency.

Ricky nodded, his eyes beginning to fill with tears, afraid to tell the man that he was hurting him.

“Then you will come with me?”

Ricky gasped as the hand tightened even more. He blinked his eyes to keep back his tears. He was deeply afraid but strangely excited. This was his chance to know what an older man said and did and felt. It was almost as if the guitar lesson would never stop. He had the exhilarating feeling that he was living his dream.

“Will you?” The man’s face was against his ear.

Ricky nodded dumbly.

The two figures stood silently on the deserted suburban street for several minutes, not moving except for the rhythmic stroking of the older man’s hand against the boy’s back.

Suddenly a bus appeared over the rise. Arvis took his hand off Ricky’s neck and raised it to flag down the bus. It pulled up to the street corner and the two figures silently climbed aboard. The newspapers lay in piles along the curb as the bus noisily pulled away.

TWO

The late-afternoon sun spread a soft haze of muted gold over the long, low, elegant brick homes on the secluded street in Fairfax, Virginia. An occasional Volvo or Mercedes inched its way slowly along the recently repaved wide street, easing leisurely up one of the rising circular driveways and sliding to a calculated halt. Women in casual but obviously expensive sweaters, skirts, or pantsuits with tweed coats draped loosely over their shoulders slipped out of the drivers' seats and reached into the back seats to pull out garishly printed shopping bags and wrapped packages. Ignoring the wash of yellows and ambers that flowed over the expansive sloping front lawns of newly sprouting greenery, the women walked briskly into their homes.

Soon a few men drove quickly up the street and impatiently jerked their new, shiny cars to a halt in front of the houses. Vigorously they grabbed briefcases or doctors' bags and, heads down in thought, automatically guided themselves toward their front doors. An occasional child's voice could be heard in the distance, but few young people could be seen walking along the streets. Usually they emerged silently from their mothers' cars, books, notebooks, and canvas school bags held tightly in their hands, following obediently behind their mothers into the homes. The calm beauty of the early evening seemed to escape the children as well as the adults.

It was a typical Friday in Fairfax.

The Stern home, at the end of the block, rested on top of a small hill of full green shrubbery and carefully mowed lawn, the fresh green grass cuttings on the curving front walk attesting to the recency of Ricky's labors. The house was dark in the dimming lights. Only the streetlight that had sprang to life in the last half hour illuminated the tastefully subdued expansiveness of the brick rancher. There was no movement in or around the Stern home.

Her bedroom curtains fluttered lazily in the evening breeze. The air had grown cooler and chilled the room. Dorothea Stern stirred slightly in

her sleep and unconsciously pulled the sheet up toward her chin. The room was dark. The still form on the double bed moved again, groaning slightly.

Suddenly her eyes opened and she stared into the darkness of her room. She looked unknowingly for a few seconds before she sat bolt upright in the bed, the sheet falling away from her wrinkled dress. Her arm reached out automatically to her right, searching. As it swept across the top of the end table, a half-filled glass crashed to the floor, spilling its light brown contents over the pale blue carpet.

“Shit,” she groaned in the dark.

For a minute she coughed—a dry, harsh sound which bent her body forward. Then she leaned awkwardly to the right and pulled the tiny cord on the crystal lamp sitting in the center of the table. Her drawn and puffy face became suffused with a sudden light. She reached her left hand back to brush the moist strands of dark blond hair from her forehead and eyes. Her lips felt dry and dirty, so she quickly ran her tongue over the rough surface, tasting lipstick and cigarettes.

Suddenly she became fully aware of the outside darkness. She grabbed for the small bedside clock and stared at the face for a long time. “Jesus, it’s nine o’clock.”

She pulled her leaden body over the edge of the bed, leaning over to try to dissolve the headache pinching her temples. She reached over and grasped the small bottle on the table. She tilted the plastic container and watched wearily as a small yellow tablet fell into her palm. Another Valium, she thought. That’s all I need to take away the headache. She looked at the liquor seeping into the blue carpet and cursed again. Stumbling slightly, she made her way into the bathroom to get a glass of water. She threw the tiny pill into her mouth and sipped the water, gulping the tablet with the first swallow. She straightened and rubbed her shoulders.

Where is everybody? she wondered. Ricky must be home. Why in the hell didn’t he wake her to make dinner? She stopped and ran her thick tongue around in her mouth. Had he told her he was going out for dinner? Her thoughts blurred for a moment. No. Definitely not. Tonight was his guitar lesson. In half an hour. Or was it his bar mitzvah lesson? Her foggy mind wasn’t certain. He must be home. Maybe he made his own dinner. But that wasn’t like him. He usually woke her up when she was like this, taking one of her afternoon naps. The bourbon-and-Valium sleeps that made up for the tossing and turning during the silent morning hours. He usually came

into her room and gently woke her up. She smiled, remembering. Kissing her to get her up. Whispering into her ear to get up. Ricky. He knew, and he said nothing. But where in the hell was he today?

Dorothea smoothed down the front of her dress, slipped her feet into her bedroom slippers, and quickly opened the bedroom door.

“Ricky?” she called.

The house was silent. She flipped on the hallway light. Darkness always frightened her. She made her way slowly down the corridor, peering into each room, turning on lights in the den and then in the bathroom off Edward’s room, then in Ricky’s room. But nothing moved. Everything was the same as it was when she had carried her drink into her own bedroom earlier that afternoon.

“Ricky?” she called again. Still no answer.

“Edward?” she called, knowing she would probably not get any response. Her voice lingered in the still recesses of the large house.

When she reached the living room, she turned on every lamp, brightening the elegant velvet- and leather-upholstered furniture into brilliant shades of orange and brown. Ricky’s guitar sat propped up against the living-room sofa where she had placed it earlier. At that moment it looked enormous to Dorothea. She hurried to the kitchen and switched on the lights. The silverware and plates at the three places had not been touched. She had been careful to set the table before her afternoon retreat in case she overslept. Time and Edward’s anger had rehearsed her well in preparing for that possibility. So Ricky had not been home to eat. As far as she could tell, Ricky had not been home at all.

The odor coming from the oven reminded her that she had forgotten to set the automatic switch. She opened the oven door and saw the burnt, shriveled mound of meat surrounded by the juiceless overcooked remains of carrots circling it. She stared helplessly for a second, then slammed the oven door shut and turned away, her eyes filling. Again, she thought. Oh, Christ, again.

I must have forgotten that he was going out, she thought. He always tells me, but I must have forgotten. And Edward is working late again. That I do remember, she thought bitterly. He told me this morning. Have to work late at the office tonight, Dotty. I remember those shitty words. His smile. That shitty smile. And then gone. Like he only existed here—in this house. No goodbye. Just gone. First to his own bedroom to get some more

cigarettes and then the door slamming. Just gone. What's the difference? she thought. It's not new. Working late. Happens all the time. Drifting by each other. Existing together, not living together. So what? But Ricky? Where was he? What had she forgotten?

She checked the bulletin board for the list of names. After scanning them, she decided on the most likely choice. Her fingers shook as she started dialing. She waited nervously, biting on the cuticle of her left thumb as the phone rang incessantly and nobody answered. She stood transfixed, listening to the endless ringing as if in a daze. Then she finally hung up the phone and turned to the next name on the list.

Mrs. Alston answered quickly.

"Hello, Mrs. Alston, this is Dorothea Stern. Is my son Ricky there?"

"No, Mrs. Stern, he's not. Is anything wrong?"

Dorothea Stern forced a light laugh. "Oh, no. He told me he was going out and I just forgot where it was. I feel so foolish."

The woman at the other end answered calmly, "He's not here. But I'll ask Matt. Hold on. Maybe he'll know."

Dorothea ran her broken thumbnail across the doorjamb impatiently. I need a manicure, she thought absently. When was the last time? She tried remembering, but all she could recall was her hand dipped in a crystal bowl of warm water a long time ago. Come on, she cried to herself, it's almost nine-thirty. His guitar lesson, not his bar mitzvah lesson. Now she was sure. Where are you? Come back to the phone.

As if hearing her, a high-pitched boy's voice came to her from the receiver. "I don't know where he could be, Mrs. Stern. The last time I saw him he was leaving the ball field to go and deliver his papers."

"Thanks, Matt," Dorothea said quickly, and she hung up without saying goodbye. She systematically called all of the names on the bulletin-board list. But each time, she hung up without finding out anything about Ricky. Several of the boys had said the same thing. They had seen him leave the ball field to deliver his papers. She looked around the kitchen, bewildered. What should she do? He had never done this before. Should she go and look for him? He was almost thirteen. A big boy. Not a baby. But where was he?

The front doorbell rang, startling her. It's him. He lost his key. She ran to the door and flung it open.

A tall bearded man stood on the top step. "Evening, Mrs. Stern. Sorry I'm a little late, but the last lesson ran over." Ricky's guitar teacher moved to enter the house.

Dorothea blocked his way. "Ricky's not home."

Jim Fletcher looked surprised. "Not home?"

"No. He's out."

"But we had our lesson tonight." The tall man tried unsuccessfully to hide his annoyance.

Dorothea said nothing.

"He knew it was tonight He called me last night to ask me to bring him a special pick." The man held up an ivory triangle in the dim light of the hallway.

Dorothea tried to conceal her mounting terror. "I'm sorry. But he went somewhere. Let me pay you."

Fletcher grunted and shook his head. "That won't be necessary, Mrs. Stern. But please ask Ricky not to do this again. I can't believe it. He's my best pupil." The bearded man turned and quickly descended the steps into the darkness, leaving Dorothea framed in the doorway, mutely staring at his retreating back.

She closed the door and rushed into the kitchen. The phone rang. She jumped and grabbed the receiver. "Ricky?" she called.

A man's deep voice answered. "No, Mrs. Stern. This is Bob Carswell. Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," she answered feebly, almost begging him to hang up and not go on.

"Well, I had to deliver the papers myself tonight. What happened to Ricky?"

"Deliver them yourself?" she weakly echoed.

"Yes. I got a lot of calls. And so I went to his corner. And there were all the papers neatly laid out in piles like Ricky always does. None of them had been delivered. Is he home?"

"No." Dorothea felt her heart pounding. Her body shook uncontrollably.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know." She began to cry.

"My God. Mrs. Stern, let me talk to your husband."

"He's not home either."

“Maybe he’s with Ricky.”

Dorothea laughed crazily, then checked herself. “No. No, he’s not. He’s working.”

“Are you okay, Mrs. Stern?” Carswell asked quickly.

Dorothea took a deep breath and finally answered as calmly as possible. “No, Mr. Carswell, I’m not okay. Ricky is lost. And I’m upset. But maybe he’s not really lost. Maybe he’s somewhere and he thinks I know where he is.”

“What are you going to do?” The man’s voice was serious and steady.

Dorothea felt giddy. Her head was beginning to pinch with pain again. “I don’t know. Oh, God, I don’t know what to do.”

“Get your husband, Mrs. Stern. Call him now. That’s the first thing to do. Let him take over. Maybe he’ll know something.” His voice was urging her, caressing her as one would a crying child. “Do you hear me, Mrs. Stern? Call your husband.”

“Thank you.” Dorothea dropped the phone onto the hook as if it had burned her fingers. “I will,” she said quietly to the empty house. “But first I’ve got to have a drink.” She opened the upper cabinet in the kitchen, poured a tumbler half full of whiskey, walked slowly to the refrigerator, opened the freezer, took out two ice cubes, dropped them gingerly into the glass, and lifted the glass to her lips with her eyes closed. Gulping, she quickly finished the whiskey, took the glass to the sink, and carefully washed it out. She placed it next to the bottle, which she left out on the kitchen table. She stood very still for several minutes before she moved toward the telephone.

“Flynn, Stern, and Prescott,” the starchy voice announced at the other end.

“Mr. Stern, please,” Dorothea whispered.

“What did you say?” the firm voice commanded.

“I want to speak to Mr. Stern.” Dorothea’s voice rose to a near scream.

“I’m sorry, madam, but Mr. Stern has left for the day.” The words were uttered totally without feeling—brisk, to the point.

“Are you sure?” Dorothea pleaded.

“Yes, madam, I am sure.” The same cold, efficient, nasal voice.

Dorothea paused, her tongue tasting bitter in her mouth. “Did he say where he was going?”

“Yes, Mrs. Stern. He said he was going home.” Dorothea wondered if she heard a note of pity.

“Are you sure? It’s an emergency.” Dorothea’s words cascaded together into a single breath.

“An emergency?”

Dorothea was trembling. Her head felt light and confused. “Yes. An emergency. And he is not home.”

There was a long pause at the other end. Finally the woman answered softly, “I’m sorry, Mrs. Stern.”

Dorothea slammed down the receiver. She gingerly reached into the cabinet and pulled out the telephone book. She laid it down on the kitchen table and stared at the green cover. Feeling a nagging ache beginning in her stomach, she pressed her fists into her abdomen, taking deep breaths. She reached across the kitchen table and poured herself another half a tumbler of whiskey. Without bothering to get the ice cubes, she started sipping the warm liquid as she opened the thick book and began thumbing through the pages, the names changing in size as her finger shakily moved down the page, names growing larger and then smaller, so she pressed her face into the pages until she had finally located the number she was looking for. She picked up a pencil from the top of the dishwasher and wrote the number very slowly on the front of the book, checking back with each digit to be sure she had it right. She looked at the number after she had closed the thick book and repeated it slowly to herself. How strange, she thought. I’ve never called this number before.

Edward Stern pulled back the sheet and surveyed his naked body. Not bad, he thought. A little flabby along the sides, but only a little. A few more games of squash at the club should take care of that. He lifted his right leg and watched the corded muscles tighten in the solid long thigh. Not bad for thirty-eight, he mused. He lowered his leg and began running his hand along his hairless chest, massaging slowly, luxuriating in the sensual feel of fingers against flesh. He slowly and carefully made his way over the thin line of black hair that ran down the center of his abdomen. Finally Edward’s hands reached the wiry pubic hair. With his other hand he cupped his scrotum, massaging it lightly, his head tilting back slightly. He felt the nipples on his chest tighten and the stirrings begin within his lightly held crotch. His mouth opened as he bathed in the sensual waves flooding his

body. Quickly he pulled his hand away and stared down at himself. Ready, he thought. It's so easy to get ready. Where in the hell is she?

He turned toward the night table and pulled a cigarette out of the pack. He was just lighting it with one hand as his other hand drifted down to his groin to continue the stroking when she walked out of the bathroom.

"Got yourself all ready, I see." She moved her tall slim body gracefully across the small bedroom, her eyes riveted on his manipulating hand. He smiled from behind the haze of cigarette smoke and said nothing. Suddenly she tripped slightly, bent down, and threw a brown leather boot across the room toward a blue-and-white-flowered chair that was draped carelessly with Edward's expensive gray plaid coat, vest, and pants. His underwear lay carelessly on the floor next to the chair.

"Damn it. How many times have I told you not to throw your shoes in the middle of the floor? It's so damn dark. I always trip." Her husky voice contained little anger, only the weary echo of repetition.

Edward did not answer. He leaned over and crushed out his cigarette in the blue ashtray and lay back with his arms behind his head, waiting.

She moved to the edge of the bed and sat down with her back toward him. He reached over and began running his hands along the taut curves of her sides and saw her body sink slightly into the mattress. She turned toward him and wet her lips.

"Slowly, Edward. Please, slowly," she asked quietly.

Lowering herself onto the bed, she half turned her long pale form toward him. He ran his eyes over her, gazing at the small breasts capped by the pink nipples, the flat abdomen dipping into the triangle of light brown hair between her legs. He touched her breasts, gently rubbed one nipple, and felt it harden under his fingers. His other hand slipped between her thighs, searching, finding, stroking, moving quickly. Her mouth opened slightly and she closed her eyes. Pressing her body closer toward him, she reached behind him and ran her fingers over his back, riding downward to the soft rounded buttocks, which she stroked hungrily. Her hands moved over the crest of his thighs to touch and hold his swollen penis. She sighed as his fingers continued to spark her, ignite her into waves of sexual heat. She moved her hands over his penis very slowly.

Suddenly he pulled away. "No," he panted.

She nodded and let her hands drop to her sides. She lay still, feeling his fingers and then his aroused body pressing into her as they lay side by

side. She felt him turn her over so that she was lying on her back. She spread her thighs and felt him enter. Stay, she begged. Stay tonight. Wait for me, Edward. Stay in me tonight, she cried silently. She felt him begin to move within her. As he quickened, she begged her body to run faster, accelerate, join him in his race. Just as she was feeling herself begin to get lost in the sexual excitement, it was all over. Holding him, she felt his body shudder. His chest lifted slightly from her breasts and he groaned very softly. She opened her eyes and watched him pump for several seconds, his eyes closed and his tongue resting on his lower lip. She felt detached and apart, observing, watching the same filmstrip for the hundredth time, knowing what was happening and what would follow.

He withdrew quickly, his penis soft and moist, and turned to lie on his back. He reached over and lit another cigarette, dropping the match carelessly on the floor. He puffed silently, staring at the ceiling.

She turned on her side and stared at his handsome, almost perfect profile. Smoke circled his eyes and spiraled upward. The stillness embarrassed her. She could not stand the after-moments of silence, filled with so much worry and shame. She hated these times more than she hated his inability to carry her with him.

She cleared her throat. "You okay?"

He nodded and turned away from her, pretending to put out his cigarette.

"You don't have to put it out," she said blankly.

"I want to." His voice was muffled.

"Then go ahead." She crossed her long arms over her breasts, pressing them into solid mounds of flesh to still the urgent beating inside.

"How about you?" he asked the ceiling.

She shrugged. "No."

"Sorry." He tried to sound casual but concerned.

"Are you?" she snapped. Then she settled back into the pillow, hating herself for asking that question that she had promised herself never to ask again.

"Damn it, yes. I am sorry. I can't help it." He was getting belligerent.

"So you've said." There was no response, so she felt cheated and punished him more. "Each time."

"What should I do?" He turned toward her and his face was suddenly older and more deeply lined than she had ever seen it before. Debbie saw

for the first time the look of middle age creeping across the smooth face of her lover. How much older he looks tonight, she thought. He looks thirty-eight at this second. Never before. But for this second, he truly looks thirty-eight.

She sat up in bed, draping the sheet over her knees. This was a new line of conversation and she was unprepared and uncomfortable. They had always kept their talk to the office or to whatever was on his mind from the day—the cases, the other lawyers, the girls in the office pool, the fatigue, the courtroom, the political news, anything but the deeply personal secret hidden fears, thoughts, and hopes. Unspoken rule, but a rule nonetheless. No feelings. Sex and the office. And now, after a long and difficult year together, this ... this probing, this asking, this weakness. She wanted to change the subject. Nothing frightened her more than getting sucked into other people's feelings. She hoped that he would forget the question and talk about the office—anything, but not himself.

“Do you want some more wine?” she asked, trying to sound calm.

“What should I do?” he asked again through the whirling confusion of her thoughts.

“Give me a cigarette,” she said simply.

“Did you hear me?” he demanded as he lit her cigarette. “I want to know what you think I should do. There's got to be something wrong. Wrong with me.”

She nodded. “I agree. There does. But forget it.”

“I can't. It's all I think about most of the day—praying that it will change, that I can last. But it doesn't happen.”

“No.” She puffed on the cigarette.

“Don't you care?” he asked angrily.

She stared at him in disbelief. “Of course I care. Are you crazy?”

“I'm sorry.” He stared at her as if waiting to be slapped.

Debbie felt a wave of hatred sweep over her. What in the hell does he think I am? His office whore? How dare he ask me if I care? He's a thoughtless bastard. No wonder his wife's a drunk. How in the hell did I allow myself to get mixed up with this Jewish bastard? Oh, God. One year. Nothing he pays me is worth this shit.

Edward sat up next to her and took her hand in both of his. She did not draw away but let her hand lie immobile within his.

“I'm sorry for the whole year.” He sighed.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, will you please stop saying you’re sorry.”

“But it must be hard on you. You know ... not being satisfied.”

She stared at him and her jawline tightened. “Stuff your pity. I do all right.”

He pressed her hand tightly. She felt his moist palms pulsating lightly against her own. “What are you driving at?” he asked.

“Look, Edward, let’s drop the subject. Let’s drop everything. I’m getting sick of the whole fucking arrangement.”

He searched her face. “What in the hell did you mean, ‘I do all right’?”

“Damn it, Edward, what is this—a night of truths? Stop it.”

“Debbie, what did you mean?” He grabbed her shoulders and held her so tightly that she struggled helplessly to get free. Her mind spun with rage. She wanted to spit in his face.

“Do you think I sat around for one whole year having somebody get his rocks off on me and me get nothing? If you thought that, then you’re dumber than I thought.”

“Are you trying to tell me you’ve been sleeping with another guy?”

Debbie laughed, her shoulders shaking slightly under his grip. “Another guy. Shit, Edward, I’ve been sleeping with half the city on my nights off. If you know what I mean. After the first three months I thought I’d go crazy. So every time you left me feeling like a used rubber, I went out and balled another guy. Really balled. Not the shitty one-minute action *you* call sex.”

Edward stared into the cold brown eyes laughing at him. He raked her body with his weary eyes. Tightening his grip on her shoulder with his left hand, he quickly lifted his right hand and slapped her hard across the face.

She didn’t move. Debbie Schmidt blinked a few times and moistened her lips. She threw her head back slightly, tossing her brown hair back over her shoulder. More, Edward? her body asked. Is that what you want? her face inquired. He stared at her, his face contorted with anger and his body sagging. Finally she asked in a steady voice, “You finished, Stern?”

“Yes,” he murmured.

She reached up, loosened his fingers from her shoulder, slipped out of bed, and lifted a robe from the end of the bed. She draped it over herself and paused for a minute to inspect the marks on her face in the bathroom mirror.

“You know something, Edward?” she called as she walked out of the bathroom. “That’s the most exciting thing you’ve done to me in a whole year.”

Edward pulled himself out of bed and sluggishly began pulling on his socks. He refused to answer her.

“Maybe we could try that next time. At least it’s different.” Her voice scraped over him.

“Shut up, Debbie,” he said sadly.

She stopped in the middle of the room and watched him struggling to tie his shoes with shaking fingers.

“Don’t forget your briefcase this time, Edward. It gets a little difficult sneaking it into the office in the mornings.” She paused and stared at him and then spoke in a clear, precise voice, all anger suddenly dissipated, only formality left behind. “Do you want me to quit?”

He shook his head. “That won’t be necessary.” His voice was flat and toneless.

She had begun hanging up her dress in the closet when she heard him whisper, “You’ve been with other guys. Debbie, tell me what I do wrong.”

“Ask your goddamn wife, Edward.”

He sighed deeply, “She wouldn’t know. It’s been a long time.”

Debbie Schmidt nodded. “No wonder,” she said to no one in particular. She closed the closet door, tied her robe tighter, and walked over to the kitchen table. She reached for a half-empty bottle of French burgundy, poured a glassful, and carried it to the silent man bent over in the chair.

“Here. Drink some of your wine.” She extended her hand.

He took the glass and stared up at her. Pity grabbed her and held her very still as she watched him sip the wine very slowly. Finally he licked his lips and spoke. “Thanks. I know I’m shit. I’ve always been that way. Don’t kick me out. I can stand the others. Just don’t kick me out. I’ll try. I’ll do anything you say.”

Debbie folded her arms in front of her. “Edward, I’m only twenty-four. I don’t need this crap.”

He nodded. “I know. But I do.”

She took his empty glass and placed it carefully in the sink. Turning toward him, she wondered at the difference between the vigorous, handsome, envied man for whom she worked in the carpeted glass-

encircled office and the wilting figure sinking into the chair in her bedroom. She leaned over and picked up his briefcase and gently laid it in his lap.

“See a doctor, Edward. Tell *him* your problems. But don’t try and bury them inside of me. I can’t help you. When you’re better, you can come back. On my terms. But see a doctor first, Edward. Please.”

As he was about to answer, the phone rang in the kitchen. Debbie jumped. She walked quickly to the phone and lifted the receiver. “Hello?”

A quavering voice hesitantly came toward her ear. “Miss Schmidt?”

“Yes.” Debbie thought she recognized that voice. But that was impossible.

“This is Dorothea Stern. Is my husband there?”

Debbie froze. She turned toward Edward, but he was staring blindly at the black leather case in his lap.

“No. Of course not. Why would he be here?” Her voice was even.

Dorothea’s voice rose into a shrill, panicky cry. “Please Miss Schmidt, if he’s there, let me speak to him. It’s an emergency.”

Running her tongue over her palate, Debbie smiled. What a clever bitch, she thought. After one whole year. What in the hell is she up to? Divorce? Revenge? Is she drunk? She sounds drunk.

“An emergency, Mrs. Stern?” Debbie raised her voice. Edward’s head snapped up and his mouth flew open.

“Yes, Miss Schmidt. Ricky is gone. I don’t know where he is. I’ve checked everywhere and nobody knows where he is. My God, he’s either run away from home or he’s been kidnapped.”

Debbie straightened her back and signaled to Edward to come closer. She held the phone next to his ear as she spoke into the mouthpiece.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Stern. I didn’t understand you. Would you say that again?”

Dorothea knew at that moment that Edward was there. She felt the phone slipping from her fingers. She started to gasp and shout into the phone.

“Edward, Ricky’s gone. Really gone. I think he’s either run away or been kidnapped. Please come home as fast as you can.”

Edward Stern grabbed the phone from Debbie’s hand. His face tightened. He barked into the phone, “Are you sure, Dotty?”

“Yes. Oh. Edward, just come home. Forgive me for calling you there. I never would have. You know that. But please come right home.”

“Have you been drinking, Dotty?”

Dorothea gritted her teeth. “Yes, God damn it, Edward, I’ve been drinking. I’m always drinking. That doesn’t mean anything. I’m sober enough to tell you to get your ass home because your son’s gone. Did you hear me? He’s gone.”

Edward said softly into the phone, “I’ll be right there. Don’t touch another pill or another drink, Dotty. Do you hear?”

Dorothea hung up the phone before he finished his question and stood leaning against the kitchen wall, smiling crazily. The ideal Jewish American family. That’s us. I’m drunk and he’s out balling. But we’re making it. We’re rich and he’s popular and handsome and I drink so nobody knows and I was pretty ... I was the prettiest Jewish girl in town once. And we had Ricky. The brightest. Medals. Working to make his own money. Always, “Yes, ma’am” and “No, sir.” Ideal. Except it’s all gone crazy, scrambled, in pieces—and one of the pieces is missing. Ricky. Oh, God, where is he? She sank down and leaned her face against the cool floor and stayed very still.

Holding the dead phone, Edward stared into the receiver for several seconds before he hung up. He looked stunned and distracted.

Debbie touched his sleeve. “Has she been drinking?”

“Yes.” Edward nodded. “But I think she knows what she’s saying. It’s ten o’clock and Ricky’s not home. He’s gone. I know my son, something’s happened.” He sprang forward, quickly picked up his case, and ran toward the door. For a second he stood at the door, then his pounding footsteps could be heard as he raced down the three flights of stairs.

Debbie walked to the door, opened it, and stood staring into the dimly lit hallway. Finally she whispered, “You poor son of a bitch.”

THREE

Ricky sat wedged into the corner of the double seat, feeling the tense body of the tall bearded man pressing tightly against him. He stared out the window, watching the streets of large sprawling suburban homes gradually fade as drive-in restaurants and shopping centers overtook the orderly suburbs. The evening light had begun to change into the smudged look of early night. He squinted to see as the bus whizzed by the darkening sidewalks. Lights began to illuminate the signs along the way, each staring back at him with neon brilliance. He looked with new fascination at the simmering inner colors held captive by the tubes of light. He had never noticed the signs before in quite that way. They had merely been there. Something he passed by or was driven into or walked through without seeing. Until today. Somehow today he saw the artificial neon lights as quivering fireflies in the descending darkness. He realized that he had never been this far out before. He passed the last landmark he remembered, a boys' store in a shopping center where his mother had taken him the week before to look for his bar mitzvah suit. The still mannequins in the golden light of the store window stared back at him silently as the bus sped by.

Turning to his right, Ricky scanned the face of his seat-mate with half-closed eyes. Arvis sat very still, staring straight ahead. His hands moved restlessly in his lap, his fingers playing mindlessly with the frayed rope belt that circled his overalls. Why the belt? Ricky thought absently. Then he noticed that one of the straps of the tattered white denim overalls hung loose and disconnected on Arvis's chest. His eyes strayed to the flannel shirt, which was faded into an almost indistinguishable blend of dark colors. The two top buttons were undone and the third was missing. On the man's exposed chest, tiny black hairs curled into a soft blanket. Resting in the center of this rhythmically rising field of curly black hair was a small silver medal. But as Ricky stared at the tarnished silver piece, he realized that it was not a medal but a letter. It looked like some of the Hebrew letters he was trying to learn for his bar mitzvah—foreign but delicately shaped. Two sloping arms hung down from a tarnished silver chain, one arm longer than the other. I wonder if he's Jewish, Ricky thought. Or Greek. He doesn't look Jewish and I don't recognize the letter. But Daddy doesn't look Jewish

either. So maybe Arvis is like him. Doesn't look Jewish but is. He smiled to himself. That doesn't mean much either. There's a lot of that crap I just can't learn. It's a pain. He sighed. It was good to be away from all that for now. He felt cut off from the prodding and the schedules and the lessons. He felt buoyantly free. But where were they going?

Ricky had seen the last movie house go by minutes before. He had never been to the zoo. His family just didn't do things like that. At least, he didn't remember any zoo. But the zoo was supposed to be in the center of the city. He looked up into Arvis's face and waited a few minutes before saying, "Hey, Arvis. That was the last movie out here."

Arvis trembled out of his reverie, suddenly looking at the young boy next to him as if seeing him for the first time. "Yeah?"

Ricky nodded. "Yeah. The last one. And the zoo is the other way, I think."

"Is it?" The tall man shrugged and then turned toward Ricky and smiled broadly. It was a young, confidential, conspiratorial smile, rarely seen on the faces of men. It wrinkled his face and twisted his nose into tiny folds. His white teeth stood in sharp contrast to the bushy black hair surrounding his open mouth. Ricky felt the impact of that grin, felt he recognized it and understood it, and shyly smiled back.

Arvis leaned his face closer to Ricky's and whispered, "I decided to forget about the movies and the zoo. We'll just play it loose. Have a night out. Just you and me."

Ricky felt Arvis's thigh press firmly against his smaller body. He tried moving away ever so slightly, but suddenly realized that he was wedged firmly against the side of the bus and could not change his position. He glanced nervously out the window and then turned back to Arvis. "It's getting dark. I really have to get home soon. Or call."

The man scanned his face carefully and then spoke in a careful slow monotone. "We'll be getting off soon. Then you can call."

Ricky nodded and settled back into the hard seat, his back beginning to ache slightly as the squeezed muscles strained to maintain his position.

Most of the other passengers had left the bus. Ricky saw a thin, wrinkled black woman peering over at them from her seat across the aisle. Her furrowed hands lay intertwined in her lap, and her stained linen pocketbook rested underneath. Her face as it stared in his direction was expressionless. Her eyes darted from his face to Arvis's and back again.

Ricky nodded to her and smiled. Her face remained impassive, unchanging. Only her eyes opened slightly. Finally Arvis felt the riveting gaze of the only other bus passenger and he turned his head and glared at her. The old woman kept her dark face fixed on the man and his young companion. She seemed impervious to Arvis's angry look.

Finally Ricky heard Arvis's voice roll out of his mouth like the bark of a dog. "What you looking at?"

His voice rumbled across the aisle to the staring woman. She did not answer but continued looking at them without averting her fixed gaze for a second.

"What do you think you're looking at, old lady?"

Still there was no answer as the bus lurched away from a curb, causing the old woman's hand to grab at the worn pocketbook to steady it on her lap. But her eyes now did not leave Arvis's face.

"Look, ma'am, it's very disturbing to be stared at. My brother and me are taking a ride into the country. Kindly leave us alone."

The woman did not move. Her eyes continued to shuttle back and forth between the two figures across the aisle, the young boy sitting wedged into the corner of the double seat, the older man pressed against him with almost one third of the seat unoccupied. Her eyes slipped down to the vacant space and lifted again to the man's face. Her jaw set and she was about to speak when the bus suddenly stopped and a thin, cracking voice filtered back from the front of the bus.

"Your stop, Maude."

She turned quickly, stared out the window for a second, turned back to look at the other two passengers. She sat very still, her passive face suddenly working as if she were chewing gum, her jaws grinding. Her hands tightened on the pocketbook. Arvis's body tensed. He arched forward in his seat, suddenly releasing Ricky from the tight hot pressure of his body. Ricky saw the high muscles bulge underneath the white denim as Arvis slowly lifted himself off the seat. The woman sat still, her lips moving up and down, the muscles around her mouth tight and quivering.

"Hey, Maude. Did you hear me? This is your stop. I can't sit here forever."

The old woman rose slowly. Arvis rose also and bent, tense and alert, his body half turned, poised to move. Shuffling slowly, the old woman made her way in short arthritic steps toward the front of the bus.

As she approached the front door, the fat, sallow face of a young man peered out from behind the clouded glass panel. "Everything all right, Maude?"

She stopped for a split second, half turned toward the back of the bus, and then nodded perfunctorily and slipped wearily off the bus. The bus driver waited as he watched her descend and kept the door open until he saw her reach the sidewalk. Then he shook his head quizzically, threw himself back into his seat, shifted gears, and pulled the bus away from the curb. Arvis very slowly unwound back down into the seat.

Ricky watched his tightly clenched hands gradually grow slack. "Hey, Arvis, why did you tell her that?"

"What?" came the laconic reply.

"That you were my brother. That was a lie. You didn't have to lie."

Arvis shrugged. "It was none of her damned business."

"What?" Ricky was confused.

"Who we were. I don't like people messin' in my business. Never did."

Ricky did not say anything. He wanted to ask more, but somehow he felt afraid. Something in the taut, arched, angry form of his companion had alarmed him. He felt a wave of fear creeping up his legs, and they felt weak and shaky. Arvis's thigh was leaning heavily against his leg.

The trembling alerted him. He turned and stared at Ricky. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know," Ricky lied as he stared into the unfamiliar face.

"Your leg's shakin'." Arvis placed his hand gently over the top of Ricky's thigh. Ricky felt the warmth of the other man's hand seeping through his pants, spreading over his legs and groin. He wriggled, but the hand held firm.

"I want to go home, Arvis," he said in a small voice.

"Not yet"

"Please," Ricky begged.

"In a little while," Arvis said softly. He paused and ran his other hand lightly over his beard. "By the way, where do you live, so's I can take you home?"

Ricky quickly told him his street address, repeating it twice so that Arvis would remember. He felt a weight lift from him as he saw himself on the way back home.

“What’s your folks’ names?” Arvis asked directly.

Ricky rapidly gave his father’s and mother’s full names. Before Arvis could ask, he stated his phone number very slowly, saying each number as carefully as possible.

“Why don’t you write it down?” Ricky asked imploringly.

Arvis took a deep breath. “I’ll remember. Don’t you worry. I’ll remember. That was the best thing I did in school—memory work. My folks always said I had the best head for remembering in the family—maybe in the world. You want to hear how good I can remember?”

Ricky nodded eagerly, wanting to hear the familiar numbers and names again. The bus sped through the darkness, pausing at each corner without anyone else coming aboard.

Licking his lips and closing his eyes, Arvis slowly repeated Ricky’s address, phone number, and parents’ names. There were no mistakes.

“How’s that?” He grinned at Ricky.

Ricky relaxed a bit. “Good. Arvis, that was good.”

The tall man rubbed his hand along the inner part of Ricky’s thigh. “I like you, Ricky. Not a lot of people know how good that is—remembering. I can remember everything that ever happened to me—like it was happening now. But a lot of people just listen or make me tell them and then never tell me how good it is. And it is good. Isn’t it?” His hand tightened on Ricky’s thigh, massaging gently.

“Yeah. Really good, Arvis.” Ricky reached down and laid his own hand over the bigger hand on his thigh. Very gently he tried to pull the hand off his pants. But the fingers tightened.

“Don’t touch my hand.” Arvis spoke coldly.

“It feels funny. I don’t like it,” Ricky whispered.

“Just don’t touch my hand. Do you hear?” Arvis’s voice shot out.

Ricky lifted his cold fingers and laid them over his other hand lying protectively over his groin. I can’t move. If I could move, I’d run off the bus. I could call out. But he’s sitting right next to me. What would he do to me if I hollered? Maybe nothing. Maybe he’s not doing anything wrong.

“I gotta get home, Arvis,” Ricky said firmly.

“We’re gettin’ off in a minute” was the calm reply.

Ricky sat rigidly in the seat as the bus silently cut through the black night with the headlights spraying the empty narrow roads. Suddenly a neon

sign loomed out of nowhere in the night. Blinking on and off, the sign announced bo's place into the dark vacuum.

Arvis suddenly rose and reached down and grabbed Ricky's arm very tightly. "Here we are." He pulled Ricky across the seat and stood him straight next to himself in the aisle, his long arm encircling the boy's waist firmly. He led Ricky to the front of the bus, nodded to the driver, and before Ricky could turn to look at the bus driver, pushed him down the three front steps of the bus into the pebbly, sand-covered roadway.

As they stood watching the dim red back lights of the retreating bus as it passed into the dark street ahead, Ricky felt the arm of the tall man circle his waist again and hold him firmly.

"Be careful. There's not much light here," Arvis said softly.

Arvis gently guided his young friend toward the blinking light which was about half a block off the narrow country road. Ricky shivered slightly as the chilly spring breeze ruffled up the short sleeves of his shirt. He became aware of the thick underbrush on either side of the dirt road that led up to the brown clapboard shack with the soft golden lights glowing from the two front windows into the deep cavern of darkness through which they were walking.

"Where we going, Arvis?" Ricky asked.

Arvis leaned down and brushed Ricky's hair off his face, but the breeze blew the blond strands quickly back over the boy's forehead. The tall man stopped and cupped Ricky's face with his large hands, staring into his face. "We're going to get somethin' to eat. Aren't you hungry?" he asked gently.

Ricky's stomach was empty and grumbling. He had sensed this for the last half hour of the bus trip. But he wasn't hungry. In fact, he felt a little nauseated. But he stared back into the relaxed and serene face of the man standing with his hands under his chin and he lied. "Yes, I'm very hungry. And there must be a telephone in there. I can call home."

Standing suddenly so much taller than Ricky remembered from the street corner hours, maybe days ago, Arvis straightened his body and spoke lightly over Ricky's head. "Later. After we eat."

Ricky moved restlessly, his head transfixed in the man's grasp. "Aw, come on, Arvis, let's call now. My mom will be worried."

The hands grasped the chin and held very firmly. Ricky could feel the bones of the man's fingers rubbing into the sloping bones of his own jaw. He couldn't move his head in either direction, and his neck was beginning to hurt.

"I said later, Ricky. After we eat."

"Please, Arvis."

His head suddenly felt as if it were about to be torn off his neck. Ricky sensed himself being lifted slowly from the ground. His mouth was clamped shut. Panic washed over him like a river.

"Do you trust me?" The words echoed into the darkness.

Ricky was terrified. He tried to nod, but his head was paralyzed in the man's grip. Slowly he felt himself being lowered onto the ground. The grip relaxed slightly. Ricky opened his mouth as far as he could. A thin stream of chilled air forced its way over his slightly parted teeth.

"Do you trust me?" Ricky felt the bushy hair of the man's beard brushing against his lips. He gasped for more air. Finally, he managed to croak "Yes" in a strangled voice. Slowly the hands left his face and grabbed his arms from behind. He felt himself being propelled by forward force toward the heavy wooden door of the small roadside restaurant.

"We're going in there to get something to eat. If you tell anybody you don't trust me, I'm going to get very angry. Do you understand?"

Ricky was biting his tongue to keep from crying. He could not answer. His body shook with fright.

"Do you understand?" The voice rose sharply and the hands gripped his upper arms like a vise.

"Yes, Arvis. I understand. Please don't hurt me," Ricky gasped.

Arvis stopped short, holding him, and took a deep breath. He released one of Ricky's arms and reached around to touch the boy's face, feeling the tears sliding quietly down the smooth, hairless surface.

"Hey, friend. I like you. And you trust me. I won't hurt you. Just be good to Arvis. Then he won't hurt you. Then he'll know you trust him." He stood with his body pressed into Ricky's back. Ricky was too terrified to feel the swelling force that was slowly pushing in between his shoulders. "Now make your mind up—hamburger or hot dog."

Ricky moved toward the lights, feeling the fear push him faster than the heavy hands of the strange and frightening man.

A lit cigarette hung loosely from the lips of the fat woman behind the counter, the ash drooping from the end about to fall onto the cracked, grimy countertop. Her heavy arms were brushing the edges of the flat surface as her elbows dug into the dark gray slate counter. She watched indifferently as the man and boy slowly made their way across the narrow long room toward her. Loud jukebox music filled the room, reverberating from the walls. Occasionally the sounds of a woman's shrill giggle mixed with the beating rhythms of the music and were swallowed up in the overall noise. Three dim overhead lamps gave off a muted golden light, barely lighting the room enough for anyone to see across the long narrow expanse.

Ricky turned to survey the booths that were situated along the back wall. His eyes gradually accommodated from the darkness outside to the dusky glow inside the diner. He made out two figures seated close to each other on one bench in the far booth. A bottle of beer and a glass half filled with brown liquid sat near the center of the table. The two bodies were huddled together. He could not separate them in the darkness, but saw an occasional movement punctuated by a rising spiral of female laughter. The rest of the booths on that side of the room were empty. Arvis held his arm so tightly that he could not turn his body around. He twisted his head in the opposite direction. A lone man, old and head bent, mumbled over a glass held between his two knobby hands. His head, white hair unkempt and wild, encircling a large circular bald spot which took on the golden glow of the lights, was nodding as he spoke. Occasionally saliva leaked from his lips and dropped unnoticed into the glass. Against the right side wall Ricky saw a pay telephone. His body automatically strained toward the phone, anxiously and unconsciously trying to move toward it.

Arvis's hand tightened on his arm. "Stand still," the older man commanded.

"There's a phone." Ricky could not point his locked arm, so he jerked his head to the right.

Arvis stared down at him, his eyes cold and hard. "Shut up," he whispered. The forcefulness was threatening.

Ricky shook his head. He was getting groggy from fear and hunger. His thoughts were jumbled together, causing him to wonder if this was real. Was he having a dream? Was he really standing here? He was so tired and frightened that he expected to wake up crying, as he did so often, to find his mother sitting on the edge of the bed stroking him and asking him to tell her

his dream. He never did, but stayed within her tiny thin arms until he fell asleep again on her shoulder and was laid gently down again. When will she come? he wondered. He sank slowly into the firm grip of the tall man next to him, his body sliding downward. He felt his eyes filling again with tears.

“Stand up straight.” The hand squeezed his arm until the pain caused him to wince and the tears began slipping out of his eyes.

The heavy woman grunted and pulled her massive body away from the edge of the inner countertop. Without removing the cigarette, she drawled, “What can I do for you?”

Arvis smiled his white-toothed grin. “Two hamburgers and two Cokes to go.”

“How you want ’em?” she asked blankly.

Arvis placed his free hand on the counter. “Medium.”

She shoved her large frame away from the counter and turned her back to the two customers as she threw two slabs of raw meat onto the greasy dark brown grill. She moved sluggishly toward the far end, poured the Cokes from a half-opened large bottle into paper cups, sloppily placed lids on top, and slid the cups along the countertop until the cups rested next to the grill.

“Onions?” She did not turn around.

“No, thanks,” Arvis answered quickly.

Ricky looked up at the man’s calm face. It looked the same as when he had first seen it earlier that afternoon. Friendly and inviting. Easy to talk to. Different from the face on the bus and the voice in the dark. He reached his free hand over and pulled on Arvis’s worn flannel sleeve. Arvis quickly looked down at him. Ricky could see the expression melt into a hard, fierce stare.

“What?” he whispered.

“Why are we taking them out? We don’t have any place to go.” Ricky tried to keep his voice from breaking.

“I said to shut up, didn’t I?” Arvis hissed. “We have someplace to go.”

“Where?” Ricky implored, hearing his voice begin to whine.

“I said to keep quiet. You’ll see.” The hand tightened even more, causing Ricky’s fingers to begin to tingle as they became cold from lack of circulation. His tears tumbled down freely.

“Stop crying!” Arvis commanded.

Ricky swallowed. "I can't, Arvis." His voice was small and distant.

The woman turned around with a bag in her hand. For a minute she stared at the boy standing erectly by the tall man's side, his eyes wide open and tears running down his face.

"Here," she said, a note of question in her voice.

Arvis reached into his pants pocket and pulled out some bills. Peeling two from the crumpled wad, he handed them to the large woman. She pressed several buttons on the cash register. The noise was almost muted by the loud music blaring from the jukebox. She handed Arvis his change.

"Thanks." Arvis smiled again as he lifted the bag off the countertop.

She leaned her elbows back on the countertop. "What's the matter with the kid?" She jerked her head toward Ricky. Ricky started to open his mouth to speak, but he felt his body rocket with pain as the man's fingernails dug into his arm.

"Oh, nothin'. He's my kid brother. And he's hungry. We're travelin', and whenever he gets hungry he cries like that."

The woman made a face, the fat gathering like soft waves over her cheekbones. "Ain't he a little old for that?"

"Spoiled," Arvis answered softly. "The youngest, and he's a little spoiled."

She closed her eyes as if she understood and then opened them to see the tall man lead the boy quickly through the heavy wooden door into the night. She waited to hear the motor of a car. But there was no sound except the blaring of the jukebox, the mumbling of the old man, and the groaning of the couple lying on the seat in the far corner. Shrugging her heavy shoulders, she picked up the *True Confessions* magazine lying on top of the cash register and began to read.

FOUR

Edward Stern stood stiffly holding the telephone receiver, listening to the repeated ringing, tapping his foot impatiently, anxious for someone to answer. Finally the receiver clicked and a man's deep voice boomed from the other end. "Fairfax Station House. Flaherty speaking."

Edward cleared his throat quickly and began speaking rapidly. "This is Mr. Edward Stern. I'm a partner in the law firm Flynn, Stern, and Prescott. My son is missing. He's gone and we don't know where he is."

The thundering voice rumbled over the phone. "How long has he been gone?"

Edward thought quickly. "Several hours."

"How old is he?" Flaherty grunted. "How do you know he's missing?"

"Well, he wouldn't just take off without telling us. We know that," Edward said slowly.

"Yeah, but there's always a first time, mister."

Edward tensed his jaw. "Not *my* son, sir. He would call."

"Several hours ain't a long time. Have you checked all his friends? He could be over at their house and forgot to call home." The policeman's voice was becoming patronizing.

"Not *my* son, I said. My wife and I are deeply concerned that he is missing. He didn't show up for his guitar lesson and he *loves* the guitar. We don't know what could have happened to him." Edward heard the anger and tension in his voice.

Dorothea sat at the kitchen table, her head lowered on her arm, her clouded eyes turned upward to stare at her husband tightly clutching the telephone receiver. Her hands were knotted in front of her, the knuckles white. She was straggling to hold herself together, pull her body and mind into a functioning unit despite the mounting fear and the circulating alcohol.

The policeman coughed abruptly and said in a distant, uninterested voice, "Look, mister, we get a lot of calls every day about kids being missing. Most of 'em turn up by the time they're ready to go to bed."

Edward's throat felt constricted as he tried to control the rising rage in his voice. "How can I convince you that my son is gone? He's missing. You've got to start looking for him."

Flaherty waited a long time before responding. "What's the kid's name?" His voice had a resigned and dull tone.

"Ricky Stern," Edward said quickly.

"His full name."

Edward paused, confused for a brief second. "Oh. His name is Richard Edward Stern. But he goes by the name Ricky all the time."

"Thanks," Flaherty commented dryly.

"Will you start looking for him right away?" Edward pressed, his voice rising.

"Give me your full name, address, and phone number."

Edward stated the information and waited. There seemed to be an interminable pause as he heard the policeman type the information out.

"Where was he last seen?"

Edward turned to Dorothea, whose face was buried in her elbow. He spoke gently. "Dotty, do you know where he was last seen?"

She looked up, her eyes glazed and frightened. She stuttered at first as she tried to answer. Finally she whispered, "He had left the ball game to deliver his papers. He was on his way to Summit and Clarendon, I guess." Her voice drifted into deep breathing.

Edward relayed the information and waited again. Finally the foghorn voice barked, "Okay, how many times has he done this before?"

"Never!" Edward screamed into the telephone. "Damn it, I told you he has never gone away without telling us. Don't you understand?"

"Take it easy, mister. Most of these kids come home sooner or later," the policeman droned.

Edward banged his fist helplessly against the wooden doorjamb. "Listen to me. I want you to start looking for my son this minute."

"Why don't we wait a little while, Mr. Stern? I bet you he'll be home before dark," Flaherty urged evenly.

Edward opened his mouth in muted frustration, but waited several seconds before answering. "Listen, officer, if you look outside, you'll see it's dark already. We waited an extra hour before calling you. Now will you put somebody on the case, or do I have to come over there?"

There was a long pause. "Look, mister, I'm only doing my job. If you want to speak to the sergeant, I'll connect you. But our rules are to wait awhile before we start hunting down missing kids."

Edward nodded. "Let me speak to him."

The “hold” button was depressed and Edward stood holding a dead receiver for several minutes, staring at the blank kitchen wall next to the telephone. Finally the high-pitched voice of another man burst upon his ear. “Sergeant Weeks.”

“Sergeant, this is Edward Stern. My son is missing. And I can’t seem to get any action at your place.”

“Tell me about it.” The voice was calm, soothing.

Edward repeated the details as well as he could remember in the mental confusion of his anger and frustration.

A brief silence followed.

“Describe your son, Mr. Stern.”

Edward tried remembering his son’s features and found himself searching desperately to remember exactly what the boy looked like. A sickening, guilty feeling washed over him. He heard Dorothea’s dull, muffled voice coaching him. Finally he haltingly completed the description.

Garry Weeks remained mute for a long period. Then he said decisively, “Bring his latest photograph down here to the station house as soon as you hang up. I will alert all the officers who are circulating this shift to start looking for your boy. If he does not return by morning or we do not locate him throughout our area by this general search, I will assign special policemen to the case.”

Edward sighed. “You do believe me?”

Weeks asked simply, “What do you mean?”

“That Ricky is missing.”

“Of course, Mr. Stern. Why else would you be calling?” Edward leaned his throbbing head against the wall. “Thank God.”

“Bring that photo right over.”

“Yes.” Edward heard the phone click and the dial tone return. The search was begun.

Arvis guided Ricky to the right of the dirt road which led to the country street beyond. Ricky soon felt the tall weeds brushing against his pants legs. Rocks and stones made it difficult for him to walk, so he stumbled frequently. Arvis lifted him easily and, holding his arm as tightly as before, guided him through the underbrush. A twig scraped across Ricky’s face and he jumped.

“What’s the matter?” Arvis stopped and asked.

“Something hit me in the face,” Ricky whimpered.

Arvis sighed. “Just a branch. Be careful.”

Ricky resisted moving. “How can I be careful if I can’t see? Arvis, where are we going?”

The man waited a minute before answering. “I thought it’d be fun to take our stuff into these here woods and have a picnic outside.”

Ricky felt his body being urged forward, but he tightened his muscles as hard as he could and stood still. “A picnic in the middle of the night?”

Arvis laughed mirthlessly. “What’s wrong with that? Why do picnics always have to be in the day? I’m a night person. I like picnics in the night. So will you.”

“I’m not sure, Arvis. This is getting crazy. I think it’s time to start back home. I’m not really hungry.” For the first time Ricky heard his voice burst with mild anger.

“But I am, friend. I’m really hungry. And when your friend’s hungry, you gotta go along with him. Right?”

“I’m not so sure anymore,” Ricky said belligerently.

Arvis dropped the bag onto the ground and suddenly pulled Ricky toward him, holding him tightly against him, gripping his body with tremendous pressure. Ricky felt smothered and immobile. He felt the steady pounding of the man’s heart against his temple as he turned his face to the side in an attempt to catch his breath. Arvis held him for several minutes. Finally he spoke down to the blond head beneath him. “You are my friend, Ricky, ain’t you? You are my good friend?”

Ricky wanted to shout, “No! Take me home!” But he knew from the tight vise of the man’s body that something was terribly wrong. He was in danger. And he had to be very careful. Watch his words. Watch the other man’s words. Try not to get him angry. Something terrible might happen if he did. He was frightened, but he had to remain as calm as possible. He now knew that Arvis could hurt him—if he wanted to. Ricky had to make sure he wouldn’t want to. He would play along until he could get away. Somewhere along the journey something had gone wrong. All Ricky knew was that he could get hurt and he had to do what was necessary to keep that thought out of Arvis’s mind.

“Yes, Arvis. I’m your friend. Please let me go.” He felt the man loosen his hold. Ricky moved to the side and sank down onto the damp earth. “How about here, Arvis?” he asked.

“No” was the definite reply. He felt the man pulling him up to his feet and begin dragging him, stumbling and jerking, through the tangled, weedy stone-covered earth under his feet.

They moved very quickly, Ricky gasping for air as his feet scraped and dragged along the forest floor. Finally Arvis stopped. Trees—illuminated by a rising moon—hung their moist early-spring leaves down in a semicircle. The earth was reasonably flat except for vines and an occasional patch of wild grass. Shade from the trees had retarded the spring growth of the underbrush at this circular spot.

“Here.” Arvis grabbed Ricky’s shoulders and gently pushed him downward until Ricky felt himself seated on the wet spongy earth. “Lean up against that tree,” Arvis ordered. Ricky leaned back and felt the mossy moisture seep into the back of his shirt. He was so exhausted that the dampness seemed a relief from the hurried and frantic rush through the woods.

Arvis took the hamburgers and Cokes out of the bag, handing Ricky his and placing his own at his feet. Ricky’s eyes had adjusted to the gloom and he could make out the entire scene clearly. Arvis sat propped against a tree at his side, opening the greasy plastic that covered his hamburger, tossing it carelessly to the side. He pried the lid off the cup, raised it quickly to his lips, and drank the liquid in loud gulps. He bit into the hamburger and turned toward Ricky, who had not moved to open his food. “Eat,” Arvis said softly.

Ricky sighed. The nausea was rising in his throat. “I’m not hungry, Arvis.”

“I said eat.” This time the voice was not unlike his father’s, concerned but definite.

Ricky unwrapped his hamburger, took one bite, and chewed slowly. He sipped the Coke, praying that he would not vomit.

“Shitty hamburger,” Arvis remarked as he crumpled his cup and threw it at his feet. He leaned over and began untying the laces of his scuffed boots. Ricky sat watching as each lace gradually unwound. Pulling with a grunt, he took off each boot and placed it carefully at arm’s length on his right side. He yanked off his socks and methodically placed each one in a boot, stuffing it into the toe. He wiggled his toes, a grin creeping easily over his youthful but worn face.

“That feels good. Nothin’ like takin’ off your shoes after a long day.” He looked over at Ricky staring at him. He continued to smile. Ricky stopped chewing and forced his mouth into a shy grin. The boy nodded as if he agreed, then he resumed chewing on the tasteless rubbery meat in his mouth.

Arvis watched him silently for a minute. Finally he spoke. “Why don’t you take off your shoes and socks too?”

Ricky shook his head urgently. He turned his face away so that he could spit the food out onto the ground next to his head. As he turned back, he saw that Arvis had risen and was stretching his arms skyward. Ricky sat very still. Finally the tall man looked down at the boy, his face suffused with an expression of warmth. He slowly walked over toward the tree against which Ricky was leaning. Ricky pressed his back tightly against the tree and his hands grabbed for a stick or a twig. But all that his fingers felt was the tendrils of vines and the slippery moist blades of tall, thin grass. Arvis knelt at the boy’s feet and very slowly and gently began to unlace the blue-and-white tennis shoes. Ricky reflexively pulled his foot away. Arvis reached out and took the short slender leg in one firm hand and brought it back toward him silently. Ricky sat very still as he watched his shoe come off his foot. Arvis slipped the sock off Ricky’s foot, allowing his hand to linger over the soft calf that began just above. Then he moved to the other foot, just as gently and slowly untying, removing, touching, holding, removing. Finally both feet were free. He sat down at the boy’s feet and clasped his knees between his arms.

“Wiggle your toes. It’ll feel real good.”

Ricky dumbly began to wiggle his toes, feeling the tension in his body tighten the muscles in each toe. His feet felt stiff and inflexible. But he kept them moving almost frantically.

Suddenly Arvis laughed lightly. “I said wiggle ’em, not shake ’em loose.”

Ricky stopped the almost maniacal movement of his feet. Arvis peered to Ricky’s left and saw the chewed remains of the hamburger lying on the ground next to the boy’s head. He pointed his finger at the grass. Ricky stiffened with fear.

“They were pretty bad, weren’t they? I had trouble gettin’ mine down. I used to make a hell of a better burger than that.” He paused and seemed lost in thought.

Keep up the talk, Ricky thought. Listen and talk. Keep the man talking so he won't do anything to me. "When did you make hamburgers, Arvis?" he asked quietly.

Arvis sighed. "Oh, about five years ago. After my dad died. We were living in Kansas then. We moved around a lot, my family did. Every year or so. But he died in Kansas. He worked for this company and they kept him on, but they moved him a lot. 'Cause he drank. But they kept him on. Movin' him to smaller and smaller towns each time he got real bad. At least he wasn't outta work. But it sure was hard on my sister and me."

Ricky thought quickly. "You got a sister?"

"Yeah." Arvis wiped his mouth absently with the back of his hand. "She's ten years older than me. We never was real close. She was always like another mother. If you know what I mean?"

"Yeah. I think I know," Ricky said steadily.

"You got any brothers or sisters?" Arvis asked.

Ricky shook his head.

"An only kid, huh? Geez, you sure don't act like an only kid. But then I knew somebody once—knew him real well—and he was an only kid. And he was great. Never acted spoiled or like an only kid. He was my best friend once." He stopped and looked out into the darkness, his eyes drifting backward, leaving Ricky and the wet earth for a few seconds. "Yeah, he was a great person."

"You haven't seen him again?" Ricky manufactured the question.

Sighing deeply, Arvis shook his head. "No. I told you we moved around a lot. We lost track."

Ricky rubbed his hands around the grass, grabbing handfuls of vine. "Do you miss him?"

Silence hung over the two shadowed figures. Arvis stared at the boy and his eyes raked the young face repeatedly. He did not speak. He took his hands from around his knees and stared for a few minutes at his dirty broken fingernails. Then he turned back toward Ricky, running his eyes over the rigid figure propped up against the tree. He turned his eyes downward and unfastened the rope belt that he wore around his waist. The loose clasp swung momentarily in the dark. As he bent over, the two-pronged medal dangled crazily in the night air, only to settle back against his chest as he straightened. He laid the belt next to his buttocks.

Terrified, Ricky stared at the belt lying on the ground. His eyes refused to leave the stained rope with the tarnished buckle and return to Arvis. He spoke to the earthen floor. "Take me home, Arvis." His voice was softly pleading.

The man rose and stood tall and forbidding over him. Arvis lightly touched Ricky's head, but the fingers were dancing a strange dance. Ricky's scalp prickled and his head nervously began shaking.

"Not yet, friend. Maybe later. But not yet" He spoke without emotion.

Maybe later. Ricky's mind skidded crazily over the words. Why maybe? What does he mean by "maybe"? Sit still, he commanded himself. Don't move. Keep asking questions.

"How long did you work in the hamburger place, Arvis?" he asked.

Arvis reached into the pockets of his overalls and fumbled around slowly. Finally, he pulled a ball of twine from the pocket and bent down and placed it next to the belt. He stood up and placed his hands on his thighs.

Ricky watched the ball of twine roll slowly toward the belt and stop. His thoughts suddenly went out of control. He started to scream.

Arvis quickly moved over to him and very gently placed his large hand over the boy's mouth. "Don't holler, Ricky. Trust me. You won't get hurt if you trust me. Just do what I say. Arvis won't hurt you." He took his hand from the boy's trembling mouth. "Besides, nobody'll hear you. We're pretty far in the woods here. But don't holler. It makes Arvis very nervous." He stopped and slowly undid one clasp of his overalls, the bib suddenly falling down like the leaf of an envelope. "Understand?"

Ricky watched the hanging overall top with horror. He looked at the man's face as he repeated the question: "Understand?"

Ricky nodded dumbly. Arvis quickly slipped out of his overalls and unbuttoned his flannel shirt and tossed it to the side. He stood naked in front of the boy. The muscles on his corded arms were taut, as were the small ripples of muscle that quivered on his flat, hairy abdomen. His penis was short and thick and had a hood over the top. Ricky watched the man's genitals with terrified fascination. He had never seen a penis like that before. He was different. His had a round top, but this man's was hidden.

Arvis ran his fingers over his abdomen in a slow rhythm. Finally he reached his penis. He rubbed it slowly and it swelled in his hand. Ricky stared at the growing penis. He's going to jerk off. Ricky sighed inwardly. All he's going to do is jerk off. I'll look away. And when he's finished,

maybe then I can talk him into taking me home. I'll turn my head and look the other way. But his eyes did not leave the moving fingers as they slowly played on the foreskin. Arvis closed his eyes and sighed. His head bent forward. He's going to come, Ricky thought. So fast, I take much longer. But he looks like he's going to come now. Still the boy could not take his eyes away from the massaging fingers.

Suddenly Arvis stopped. He took his hands away and glanced down at his swollen penis. He knelt and reached over toward Ricky. The boy quickly pulled away. Arvis grabbed his shoulder and pushed it hard against the tree, knocking the breath out of the boy, causing his head to fall back and strike the trunk. Ricky felt slightly dazed. He closed his eyes for a second, opening them only when he felt the man's hands opening his belt.

"Don't, Arvis. Please don't," the boy pleaded.

Not answering, the man unzipped the fly on the boy's pants and quickly pulled them off. He reached up and began tugging at the boy's knitted shirt, but it would not come off. His face hardened. "Raise your arms," he ordered.

"Look, Arvis, you don't need to do this. Just jerk off and I won't say a word. Leave me alone. I won't even watch." Ricky was crying.

"Raise your arms." The voice held menace of the possible consequences.

Ricky raised his arms and felt his body moved forward from the tree trunk. His shirt was ripped off his body and thrown onto the grass next to him. The cool night air hit his thin chest, and he felt his skin tingle and his nipples harden. Arvis hooked his hands on Ricky's undershorts and pulled them off. Ricky glanced down at his naked body. The small dark brown mound of hair around his small penis was the only growth he had. He reached down and laid his hand over himself. Arvis very gently but firmly pulled his hand away. Ricky shook his head, crying, sobbing, as he felt the coarse fingers of the older man begin to touch his penis and scrotum. The fingers worked slowly and methodically. Ricky turned his face away in embarrassment as he felt his penis swell and stiffen. He hated himself for the excitement that he couldn't shake away. His head moved vigorously from side to side, but his body refused to obey. Finally he calmed himself and stared at the moving fingers of the other man.

At almost that moment, Arvis's hands left Ricky's body and returned to his own. Ricky watched with morbid interest Suddenly Arvis's head

flung forward and Ricky saw the spiraling, arcing white fluid shoot toward him. He tried to move away, but his chest and neck were splattered with the other man's semen. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to wipe it away but was afraid to touch it. He sat silently as Arvis sank backward into the grass. He lay very quiet for several minutes.

Ricky did not move. The semen slid slowly down his hairless chest and his eyes followed the trickle without his body reacting. Why aren't I more afraid? Why am I just sitting here? Maybe I could run away, into the woods, toward the diner if it's still open. But he did not stir.

Arvis finally sat up and moved the back of his hand over his forehead. He stroked his beard softly for a few seconds while he looked at Ricky. Then he rose and walked a short distance into brush to the left.

Run, Ricky screamed to himself. Don't even pick up your clothes. Run. But he sat still, waiting under the tree, his back pressed lightly into the soft green moss.

The tall man returned, his hands full of clumps of wild grass. He knelt over Ricky and very gently wiped his semen off the boy's chest and abdomen. Still, Ricky remained quiet. When Arvis was finished, he started to rise. Ricky grabbed his hand and brought it slowly up to his neck where the sticky moisture still remained. Arvis looked into the boy's face and nodded. He lost himself again in the underbrush and returned quickly with more grass. Methodically he wiped the boy's neck. He ran his large rough hands over the neck very slowly. Slowly they were circling the thin neck. Ricky shivered. Am I afraid? raced through his mind. He could not answer.

Standing back from the naked boy, Arvis looked over his head for a moment lost in thought. Then he bent down and lifted his belt off the moist ground. He wound the belt around the boy's legs and tied it tightly, clamping the two feet firmly together.

Ricky watched in desperation. He had known. "Don't, Arvis. It's finished. Let me go home."

Arvis shook his head. "Not yet."

"Please. It's cold out here." Ricky tried to touch something inside the older man. Nothing seemed to be there.

"You won't be cold. You'll see." Arvis began winding the twine around Ricky's wrists.

Rage was rising within Ricky, an anger that he had never experienced, a feeling of being subordinate, a loss of control, being forced to obey and

do what someone else demanded. He was surprised at the sensation. He had always done what others wanted, always been the one to please, to appease, to give in. But now he was furious at his inability to control. This angered him more than the cold and the fear. He shouted at the top of his lungs, “No! God damn it, Arvis. No! I won’t be tied up!”

“You have to be. You’ll run away.”

“I promise I won’t.”

Arvis smiled and continued twisting the twine around the boy’s wrists. Ricky finally leaned forward and spat in the older man’s face. His spittle clung to Arvis’s beard. Arvis tightened the twine until Ricky screamed out in pain.

“Do you trust me?”

Ricky continued screaming.

“Do you trust me?”

Ricky gasped and nodded his head. The twine was secure. Arvis gently turned Ricky over on his side. He rose and brought his flannel shirt over to the nude figure. Ricky felt Arvis press himself into his back as he lowered himself next to him. The warmth of the big man’s body flooded the boy’s chilled skin. Ricky tried wriggling away, but Arvis’s arm reached out and encircled him. Ricky stared at the hair curling on the older man’s arm. His body lay tense and tired. He felt the flannel shirt fall softly over his shoulders. He tried breathing in long, steady breaths. Suddenly his mother’s face swam before his eyes. He saw her high cheekbones and thin face and short, disheveled dirty blond hair. He wanted to reach out to her, but his hands ached from the tight noose. They could not move. He began to cry very softly.

After a minute he felt the hairs from the beard of the man cradling his naked body press into his back. He’s kissing me, Ricky thought wildly. Arvis placed his lips on the heaving soft flesh of the boy’s back and kissed him several times before laying his head on the earth and closing his eyes.

Ricky continued crying. As he drifted off into a restless, chilled sleep, he heard Arvis’s voice murmur into his back, “Good night, friend.”

FIVE

Wally MacGinnis lifted his short stocky body off the kitchen chair and walked sleepily toward the stove. He touched the chrome pot and quickly withdrew his fingers. Ready, he thought. He lifted the pot, carried it back to the table, and slowly poured himself a cup of coffee. He set the pot back on the stove and opened the refrigerator, frowning as the cracked porcelain door groaned when he swung it open. He took a small carton of cream off one of the shelves and poured some into his coffee. He replaced the cream in the refrigerator and pushed the heavy door closed, being careful not to disturb the stable hardware holding it precariously in place.

Sipping his coffee, he scanned the front page of the Saturday *Washington Post*. As he scanned the front-page headlines, his eyes caught a small black banner: Virginia boy missing. Mac read the details of Ricky Stern's disappearance—the hysterical sentences by the boy's mother; the terse statements by his father. That name was vaguely familiar. He worried over where he had heard it before, but the only thing he could come up with was the fact that he knew the name.

Sounds like my kind of case, he thought wryly. The lost boys and the cats up in the trees. That's where they send me now. No more big robberies or riots. The little stuff. But it beats sitting on my ass in the station house all day like all the other old guys, answering the phone, writing reports, waiting out their time with stomachs bulging out more every day, their voices bored.

He rubbed his eyes. Maureen hadn't slept well last night, and that meant he had gotten little sleep. He yawned and stretched his short thick arms. He patted the bulges in his middle and sucked in his abdomen as hard as he could, but some of the layers of fat refused to completely disappear. Shit, he thought, it was that goddamn doctor's fault. If I could work out. But the police doctor had forbidden it after the last time when he complained of those chest pains and Weeks had made him go to the doctor's. Fuck him, Mac thought. I'd rather be dead than fat and sitting on my ass like those other poor old bastards down at the station.

He poured another cup of coffee and listened carefully for sounds of Maureen stirring, but the house was still. The small semidetached shingle

bungalow carried sounds like bullets exploding in an empty auditorium. At night he would lie next to his snoring sick wife and listen to the groaning and creaking alongside his head from the bedroom in the house next door. The sounds kept him awake, hearing every noise, waiting for the next, wishing he were the one in that bed, knowing approximately when the final cry would pierce the paper-thin wall and cause his tense body to shudder with longing and regret. Mac suddenly slammed his cup down on the table. I wish those fuckin' youngsters would move the hell out.

He got up and walked to the small curtained kitchen window. Good day, he thought. Bright and clear. How can I use up the hours? Weekends always troubled Mac. There were so many hours to live through until he could get back to the excitement of the station house on Mondays. He usually wasn't a weekend cop. Too old, they thought, his mind commented bitterly. Well, those young fuckers should know that sixty-two wasn't old ... he wasn't waiting out the next three years ... he could piss with the best of them. He turned back to stare out the window.

He carried his cup over to the sink, and as he washed it out, he heard sounds from the bedroom. He quickly poured a cup of coffee, added two heaping scoops of sugar, and stirred vigorously, blowing at the hot liquid, trying to cool it.

"Mac!"

He smiled. "Yeah?"

"Where in the hell are you?" the voice from the bedroom demanded.

"I'm in here screwin' the Queen," he shouted.

"Oh, shut up, and come in here." The voice was tired.

Mac walked across the small kitchen and entered his bedroom. His wife lay flat on her back staring at the ceiling. She turned her head toward him. "Help me out of here."

Mac nodded and walked to the edge of the bed. He pulled the sheet slowly away from her body, closing his eyes briefly so he wouldn't have to stare at the wasted left arm and leg. Her nightgown had risen over her abdomen and her wrinkled dry skin hung in loose folds from her thighs and belly. He gently reached over and pulled the pink nylon back over the shrunken body.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it." He placed his arms underneath her back and pulled her over toward the edge of the bed. Then he tensed his thighs and feet and

lifted her off the bed, cradling her in the short sharp angle of his burly arms. Her feet, one thin and limp, the other soft and atrophied from disuse, hung like puppet's legs from the edge of his arms. Her head leaned against his barrel chest.

"Careful, damn it!" she hollered.

"Have I ever dropped you yet?" he barked.

She made a face. "There's always a first time."

"Look, if you don't stop that shit I'll drop you on your fuckin' head."

Mac's voice was soft and easy, running in counterstreams to his words.

"Just you try," she retorted.

He chortled in a low, coarse laugh. "Don't tempt me, Maureen." Mac placed her tenderly into the wheelchair that sat several feet from her side of the bed. He straightened her nightgown and reached behind her to pull a robe off the hook directly over her head. Carefully, Mac slipped her arms into each hole and pulled her thin body forward to bring the robe behind her. Raising her slightly, he drew the bottom underneath her.

"Try tying it yourself," he said.

She stared down at the loose robe strings that lay in her lap. She looked up at him and shook her head. "I'm too goddamn tired."

"Come on, Maureen. The therapist said you have to start doing more. He's about to give up on you. It's been two years now."

"Fuck him."

"Come on, try tying the belt."

Maureen shoved her head forward and hollered into his belly, "Stop these goddamn games and tie the belt."

Wearily Mac reached down and tied her belt. He wheeled her into the kitchen and placed her chair at the table so she could stare out the window. She looked briefly at the sunlight and turned back to stare at him as he placed her coffee cup in front of her and settled heavily into the opposite chair.

"Two years, Mac. Jesus Christ, I've been a vegetable for two years."

He hadn't heard that for a long time. His throat felt full and he swallowed. "You're no goddamn vegetable."

He thought about Maureen's stroke two years before, the long nights in the hospital, her wasted arm and leg, the sudden change in the active, alive woman, the bitterness and the anger. Mac raised his troubled eyes to stare into her aged, slack face. "You're my old lady."

She didn't answer. Burying her face in the coffee cup, she used her good right arm to steady the cup as it rested on the table. Her left arm lay paralyzed in her lap.

"You need help?"

She jerked her head upward. "I can still drink a goddamn cup of coffee."

"Goddamn show-off. Just wait till I ask again." His voice kept up the bantering, easy warm flow of words.

She finished as much coffee as she could by sipping with the cup on the table and then with a crazily quivering right hand lifted the cup to her mouth. Coffee spilled over her face, her lap, and the table, but she refused to notice as she slowly emptied the cup. Mac watched as he had done for over seven hundred days with pity and admiration. Thank God it's not me, he thought for the thousandth time. And for the thousandth time he experienced the sick aftertaste of guilt as the thought spun through his mind. She set the cup on the table. Mac watched the cup tilt as if it might fall as her hand wavered over the tabletop. But he did not move. Soon the trembling hand adjusted the bottom of the cup so that the thin fingers could release it without the cup rolling over. He smiled across at her. She ran her tongue over the top of her mouth and wet her lips.

"Did we get a letter from Jamie today?"

Mac's jaw tensed. "The mail hasn't come yet."

"Maybe today." Maureen turned to gaze out the window, watching the cotton curtains fluttering in the breeze from the tiny open crack at the bottom.

Mac sat silently, staring at the morning paper as if he were reading it. No more, Maureen. Enough about Jamie. I can't take the same shit every day. The waiting for the letter. No mail. The crying. Let's take a holiday today from Jamie and his goddamn letters. He continued to blindly concentrate on the front page, hoping to block out her voice.

"I just have a feeling we'll hear from him today," she said, staring at him.

"You won't," he said simply.

She frowned. "Why do you have to say such a shitty thing? Maybe we will."

"You won't," he responded without emotion.

“You know so goddamn much.” She was desperately angry. He was logically fracturing her dream, her hold, her reason to sit through the day by the window and wait, immobile but ready. He would not be allowed to do that.

Mac wanted to stop. They would get nowhere. The same arguments, the same accusations, the same crying, the same stroking afterward. He was so fucking tired of it all by now.

“Today we’re going to hear from him,” Maureen stated firmly.

Mac took a deep breath. “Look, Maureen, once and for all, the boy’s gone. Shit, he’s not a boy. We keep calling him that. He’s a grown man. Thirty years old. The man’s gone.”

“He’ll come back. He’ll write,” she said simply.

“After four years?” Mac asked quietly.

“Yes,” she said defiantly. “And it ain’t been that long. I should know.”

It *has* been four years, Maureen, Mac thought. Not as long as the ten years before when they both had struggled with his drugs, standing by as her watch was missing, the television set disappeared, the wallets were rifled, the police kept coming to the door, his friends standing there, faces ashen or turned away, asking about Jamie, telling him they were sorry, whispering so Maureen wouldn’t hear. Those were the long years, Maureen. Not these four. These have been the short, quiet, sick years.

“It does seem short,” he admitted.

“ ’Cause it’s not been four years. And he’ll write. And tell us that he’s got it licked, and that he’s coming back home.” She paused. “If you let him.” There was a fierce accusation in her voice and in her eyes.

I had to kick him out, Maureen, he thought. He was killing us and him too. I had to get him out of my sight. I was going to kill him, Maureen. I had bought a gun. I didn’t want to use my police revolver, so I had bought a gun. I was going to walk in his room one night and shoot him in the head. I thought about it a lot. I had to kick him out of this house, away from me. How could I kill my only kid, my son? So I got him out.

“I’ll let him,” he told her softly.

She smiled weakly. “Thanks, Mac. I don’t bear no grudges. But it’s time.”

He nodded sadly. “Want another cup of coffee?”

The phone rang in the living room. He jumped and hurried into the small dark room. Grabbing the receiver, he lowered himself into the

overstuffed slipcovered armchair next to the phone table. “MacGinnis here.”

The voice on the other end was immediately recognizable to him. Sergeant Weeks. Young, college, efficient but kind—always alert, but a new breed. No stories, no beer with the boys, no jokes. Policing was a job, a management job.

“Hi, Mac. How are you?”

“Good. What’s up?”

Weeks cleared his throat and spoke rapidly. “We got a report on a lost kid. Could be a runaway or a kidnapping. I’d like you to take it. Mind working the weekend? I’ll give you the time.” All came out in a jetstream of words.

Mac smiled. I knew it. The lost-boy cop. Oh, what the hell, it’s something. Do I want the case? The kid knows fuckin’ well I want any case. I want to move, stay away from those goddamn desks.

“Sure. I saw it in the morning paper. The Stern kid. Got anything?”

Weeks paused. “Nothing. The kid just disappeared. Into thin air.”

Mac tried to remember how old the kid was. But his memory wasn’t as good these days as it used to be. He tried to recall the newspaper story but he couldn’t. “How old?” he asked.

“The kid’s only twelve.”

“What’s his old man do?” Mac asked gruffly.

“Lawyer. Big. Only Jew in the firm of Flynn, Stern, and Prescott.”

That’s it, Mac thought. That’s where I remembered that name. I’ve seen the old man in court. Tall, thin, good-looking. Don’t look like a Jew. Smooth, so cool in court. “Yeah. I think I know the old man.”

“Will you take it, Mac?”

So goddamn polite, Mac thought. But the guy was really sincere. He probably wouldn’t think twice if Mac said no. Wouldn’t hold it against him. A whole new fuckin’ breed of cops.

“Yeah. I’ll be right down.”

Mac hung up and hurried into the bedroom to start dressing. He called out to Maureen that he had to go down to the station house on a case and might be gone for a while. She was silent. He pulled on his uniform, adjusted his thick leather belt and holster, and stood straighter as he inspected himself in the mirror. He smiled happily at what he saw. That was

the same person he had stared at for all these years. That was the MacGinnis he knew. Uniform on and ready to go out on a case.

He went back into the living room and dialed the next-door neighbor. Would she look in on Maureen? Feed her if necessary? Just keep an eye on her? Sure, the woman replied. Maureen could never know that Mac paid the woman a sizable sum every week for taking care of her when he was gone. She would crumble from embarrassment.

Stepping into the kitchen, he bent down and pecked the old woman's forehead. She sat still and accepted his quick kiss without response.

"Mrs. Garvis'll look in every so often. If you need anything. Maybe for a little talk or so." Mac spoke softly.

Maureen nodded. "That woman's a saint."

"Have a good day," he whispered to her.

Maureen drummed her quivering fingers. "Watch your stupid self."

"I will, old lady." He smiled.

"By the way, on your way out, check the mailbox, see if there's a letter from Jamie. I really do think that today's the day. I can just feel it."

"I will." Mac smiled as he walked out the front door and moved toward the car in front of the house. He did not bother to stop and look in the mailbox. He knew that Jamie had been dead for eighteen months. Died in a Texas jail. Buried only a mile away from home. He would never write that letter. But Maureen would never have to know.

The main room at the station house was very brightly lit, the glaring fluorescent lights covering the highly polished but worn wooden floor with a luminescent carpet. The walls were freshly painted, and the furniture had recently been stained and covered with new Naugahyde in bright shades of blue. The dull, distant whir of air conditioning kept the remembered smells of past police waiting rooms recessed back into memory. Mac smiled. This was the police of today. Mac felt like an intruding grandfather, too old to kick out and too full of the past to stomach so much of the present without a glint or two of anger and regret.

No one sat on the carefully cleaned chairs along the hallway. Mac took a deep breath as he recalled the huddled, frightened, bizarre figures that had clustered in these hallways during his early days in this building. Now Weeks had issued the warning that the hallways were to be kept clear.

“Lock ’em up or let ’em go, but don’t leave ’em sitting on their asses in the hall,” Winnie had said bitterly when the typed memorandum had been circulated. Mac recalled laughing because Winnie had said exactly what Weeks had written in the letter, but Winnie had used only one sentence instead of two pages.

Mac surveyed the waiting room, Who was behind the desk? He walked a little closer. Leaning down so that his face almost brushed the top of the switchboard counter was Rogers. His thin gray hair was slicked down over his pink head. Curly tufts of ragged hair stuck out from the neck of his frayed gray police shirt collar. Mac made a face. He knew what he was reading. A goddamn comic book. Rogers wasn’t behind that damn switchboard because he had gotten old. He was there because he got dumber every day.

“Rogers.” Mac’s voice was short and loud.

The gaunt face jerked up and stared blindly for a minute before Mac’s features assembled into a recognizable picture. Rogers smiled immediately without knowing at whom he was staring. Finally Mac came clearly into focus.

“Shit, Mac, it’s only you.”

“Who in the hell did you think it was?”

Rogers shrugged. “Thought it was Weeks. You sounded just like him.”

“Balls, Rogers. Weeks never raises his goddamn voice,” Mac growled.

Rogers sighed. “Well, he could. And if he did, that’s what he’d sound like.”

“This goddamn place is deserted.”

“Whatcha doin’ here on a Saturday mornin’, Mac?” Rogers asked, his forehead wrinkled.

“Weeks called me in. It’s a lost kid,” Mac said quietly, suddenly feeling sad about the way he disliked this ignorant fumbling cop sitting behind the switchboard. He can’t help himself. It isn’t his fault that the force is too goddamn chickenshit to kick his ass out or pension him off. In the old days ... His mind wandered. Suddenly he started to laugh.

“Whatcha laughin’ at, Mac?” Rogers asked suspiciously.

Mac wiped his eyes. He suddenly realized that when he had come onto the force, every second cop was probably as dumb as or dumber than Rogers. Goddamn, how times have changed, he thought. How I’ve changed. Jesus, those guys were my best friends then. And now ... No shit, look

what's happened to me. Damn you, Weeks, he thought in a sudden good humor, you're winning. You're finally getting to Mac.

"Whatcha laughin' at?" Rogers said again.

Mac chuckled but did not answer. He strode out of the waiting room and very slowly began to climb the stairs to Weeks's office.

"This is the kid." Weeks reached across his desk and handed a picture toward Mac. As he took the photo out of the younger man's hand, Mac saw the clean filed fingernails. Polish? Mac wondered. Could be. They shine like it. He turned his attention toward Ricky Stern's face staring up at him from a family candid snapshot.

Mac nodded. "Good-looking."

"Yeah." Weeks spoke clearly and knowingly.

"Sergeant, anything about the kid?" Mac pushed his tongue into his cheek as he studied the clean-cut features of the twelve-year-old boy smiling up at him. You never can be sure, Mac thought. "Anything sound ... funny?"

"No, Mac. This is an unusual kid. Everybody says he's great. Never been in trouble. Really good grades. Friends. Teacher in tears. Parents claim he's not in any trouble, not angry at them. No reason to run away. But he's gone." Weeks laid his manicured hands flat down on the clean desktop.

Mac pursed his lips. "Yeah. Vanished into thin air." He hoped he didn't sound too sarcastic. Damn kid was probably on a bus leaving town with his best friend, like the last runaway fifteen-year-old son-of-a-bitch kid who kept him out looking for him for a day and a half. He laid the picture down on the desk. "You know, Weeks, there was no picture in the morning paper. If we're going to get any kind of lead, we gotta feature the kid's picture."

The young clean-shaven man seated opposite him nodded slowly. "Right, Mac. I sent the other pictures over to the newspapers right after I called you." He smiled softly at the older policeman seated awkwardly across from his desk.

Mac stared into his youthful, pleasant face. You don't forget a fuckin' thing, do you? I admire you, you bastard. You're organized; you've got all the answers. Policing is down to a goddamn science, isn't it? But somewhere there's still something else in it. Somewhere there's that something that knowing all the fuckin' answers ahead of time won't help, won't win, won't do the job. What the fuck is that something? Mac

wondered. He unconsciously shook his head. I don't know. But it's there. And this bright son of a bitch doesn't have it. But I do. Whatever the fuck it is.

"What's the matter, Mac?" Weeks asked.

Mac suddenly realized he was shaking his head. He thought quickly. "Something wrong with this one, Sergeant. I just feel it. Something wrong."

Weeks sighed in a resigned and deferential but polite way. "Maybe, Mac. But we have to check it out first before we jump."

"I'm not jumping." Mac snorted. "But I just think this time there's going to be something."

"How about starting on this Stern case alone at first? Check out the parents, neighbors, people who live around the street corner where the newspapers were. The usual. Keep in touch throughout the day. Then the papers'll be out, and maybe then something will break. Maybe then we both can jump." He smiled.

Mac smiled back. Why in the hell am I smiling? he thought. He's a nice, smart, kind young son of a bitch. I guess that's why. He lifted his heavy body out of the armchair, adjusted his holster, and picked up the picture. He looked at Weeks, who nodded. Mac palmed the picture, opened his coat, and slipped the snapshot into his inside coat pocket.

"I have my two-way radio, Weeks. Call me when you're ready to jump." He winked and laughed. The younger man smiled quietly back at him and nodded again as the door to his office closed behind Mac.

Edward Stern sat stiffly in the dining-room chair staring straight ahead, refusing to look into the policeman's face. His lips were slightly parted and the blood seemed to have left them, so that they resembled chalky white thin lines. His voice had a faraway nasality. Mac wondered if the man was aware that he was sitting so close by his right side.

"Mr. Stern, are you all right?" There was no answer. The man breathed slowly through the narrow slit of his bloodless mouth, his chest rising rhythmically. To Mac, Edward Stern looked unconscious with his eyes open, not unlike some of the very battered patients he had to question in the intensive-care units of the hospitals after a gunshot wound or a knifing—right before they died.

Mac reached over and touched the cool fingers that were tightly intertwined and resting uncomfortably on the table in front of the rigid man.

Suddenly Edward Stern twitched, shook his head, and turned abruptly to stare at Mac, looking as if he had awakened from a deep sleep. "Sorry, Mr. MacGinnis, you asked me a question ... and I forgot what it was." He tried to lose the tremor in his voice.

Mac kept his hand resting over Edward Stern's clenched fingers. Ricky's father did not resist or move his hand. He stared at Mac, trying desperately to keep the beefy policeman in focus.

Mac cleared his throat and repeated, "Would you know of any reason for Ricky to have run away?"

Edward shook his head. "No."

"Had you or your wife had any fights with him? Or had he done anything wrong—here or at school?" Mac persisted.

"No." Edward continued to shake his head wearily. "Ricky is an unusually good boy."

Mac nodded blankly. "Yeah. But did he have any problems?"

Edward Stern frowned. "No, Mr. MacGinnis. Ricky did not have any problems. He is our only child. He is loved. He is about to be bar-mitzvahed in a month, and he's been very excited about that. He is doing brilliantly in school. He has lots of friends ... plays ball. He's a perfect little boy."

"He's not a little boy, Mr. Stern. He's twelve years old," Mac commented.

Edward Stern looked right through MacGinnis. "To us—Dorothea and me—he's still a little boy, and he's ours, and we want you to find him—find who took him." His voice was getting nasty and high-pitched.

"Why are you so sure he was kidnapped?" Mac asked.

"For the fifth time, Mr. MacGinnis, Ricky would not run away." Edward Stern was totally out of patience. His nerves were no longer under control of his will. He felt himself slipping into an almost uncontrollable rage. Anger engulfed him as if he were drowning. Gasping, he spat at Mac, "Stop asking me these stupid goddamn questions and go out in your car and start looking for him."

"Where, Mr. Stern?" Mac asked calmly.

Edward looked around wildly. "I don't know. Anywhere. Outside. He's got to be out there. Somebody has him out there. Just go out and find him." He stood up suddenly, realized that his legs were so weak that he could not stand without stumbling, and sank down into the chair again. His voice now whispered, pleading, "Please."

Mac decided that there was little information left of importance in Ricky's home. But he was curious that he had not yet met Ricky's mother, Dorothea Stern. There was no sound of another person moving about. The clock read noon and the house was otherwise silent.

"Where's Mrs. Stern, did you say?"

"I told you before that she's upstairs sleeping. The doctor came by and sedated her. This has been very hard on her. Ricky's her only child. I hope she holds up. Please don't make me wake her up." Edward Stern faced the policeman. He ran his long trembling fingers through the sides of his hair in an abstracted nervous gesture. "I've told you everything that she could tell you."

Mac rose and moved slowly toward the front door. "If you get any phone calls, hang on and try to get to us as soon as possible. Write down anything and everything that might be said. Don't leave the house. Stay near the phone—and the mail."

"You see, even you know he's been kidnapped." Terror clutched Edward's voice.

Mac gritted his teeth. "No. Just being real thorough, Mr. Stern. Do you understand?"

Edward nodded.

Looking up the staircase, Mac remarked, "I hope Mrs. Stern is going to be okay."

Following his gaze, Edward wrinkled his forehead and nodded. "She'll feel better after her sleep. We both have faith in you people. We have to."

"Yeah." Mac turned to the door. "I'm leavin' now. We'll do our best. Keep in touch frequently. Don't let anything happen without calling us. And for God's sake, if he comes home, please remember to call us." Mac recalled an all-night search for a kid who had been sound asleep in his own bed.

Edward nodded impatiently. "Of course we will."

"Tell the missus to call us if you left anything out." Mac opened the door and carefully made his way out of the quiet home.

Edward Stern stood still at the bottom of the stairs staring up the long flight with a look of helpless bewilderment. Oh, God, Dorothea, he thought. How could I tell that man that the boy's mother was lying on her bed upstairs dead drunk, so drunk that she was comatose—unconscious—so she wouldn't have to face the big problems that always followed the little

problems. Dorothea had found her way out, her temporary solution, until someone else would come along and make it right again. Edward felt the familiar sense of anger at her retreat and his frustration at his inability to follow her.

Two five-year-old boys chased each other across the lawn giggling loudly and veered onto the pavement at the corner, brushing up against the policeman's pants. One looked up briefly and ran quickly by. The other waited behind so that the chase could continue. Soon the peals of childish laughter filled the calm suburban air again and rolled in waves back toward the solitary man whose rumpled uniform clung to his stocky frame. He returned to his vague survey of the pages of a small lined notebook. There was very little written on the few pages that he turned slowly with his veined fingers.

Mac had canvassed the neighborhood where Ricky Stern had been seen last, where the neat piles of newspapers had been left behind. Knocking on doors had yielded only blank stares or shaking heads or curt negative replies. No one had seen Ricky that day. Oh, yes, they knew the boy who delivered their papers. He collected from time to time. But they did not remember seeing him that day.

Did your child? Mac would ask patiently. The long wait. The simply stated questions to the child. The careful wording. The description. The flashing of the candid photograph, Ricky smiling up at the young face. Finally, the shaking, small head. No. I know him. But I don't remember. Where is he? What happened to him? With these questions, the mothers' different faces would change quickly and concern would spread across them with the same dark stain. The children were quickly ushered out of the room with instructions about being careful when they played. The "Watch out for strangers" said with sudden fervor.

The "Is that all?" which followed clearly signaled that Mac was to leave. He had brought something unpleasant, something very frightening, into their homes, and they wanted it out as quickly as possible. And he would feel himself guided toward the door.

His pages were full of useless random information, most of it not even related to Ricky Stern or the day he had disappeared. He rubbed his sleeve across his forehead. What a fuckin' hot day for April, he thought. Probably going to rain. He stared up at the clear, almost cloudless sky. The sun's

glare disturbed his eyes, causing them to water, so he quickly looked down. Where in the hell do I go now? His folks don't know a damn thing. The people around here didn't even see him. His kid friends all tell the same story. Left in the fourth inning of the Little League game to go and deliver his papers. Left by himself. No, he didn't say he was going anywhere afterwards. All blind alleys leading nowhere.

A car drove up to the corner and pulled suddenly to a stop. A tall sallow man slipped out of the front seat and ran around to open the door on the other side. He pulled a pile of newspapers out of the back seat and, tugging and heaving, threw them heavily down on the cement sidewalk. He closed the door, turned, and saw the policeman. "Hi."

Mac nodded pleasantly.

"You on the Ricky Stern case?" The man pressed his face toward Mac.

"Yeah. You know him?"

The man nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm the guy he ran papers for. That's why I'm here. Got to deliver 'em myself tonight. My name's Carswell. Bob Carswell." He extended his hand.

"The kid pretty unreliable generally?" Mac asked casually, ignoring the outstretched hand.

Carswell cocked his head. "Where in the hell'd you hear that? He was a real good kid. The best kid I had on my route. In fact, I put in his name for a prize just the other day. Ricky Stern wouldn't just walk away. I know that. Not Ricky."

Mac sighed. More of the same shit. Another blank page.

Carswell knelt and pulled a penknife out of his back pocket, cut the thick twine, and watched it snap open and release the tightly bound papers. He opened the front page and pointed his finger toward the bottom.

"Look here. This is his picture. It's on the front page here. Jesus, it sure does make you feel funny seeing him staring up at you like that and knowing he's gone—God knows where." Carswell laid the paper on the sidewalk and began putting the others into piles alongside. Mac walked over and stared at the smiling face of the missing boy looking up at him with open, trusting eyes and grinning at him warmly from the printed page. Where in the fuck are you, kid? he thought. Give me a clue—anything. I hate like hell going back to tell Weeks that there's nothing out here. Mac stared at the face for a few seconds, then decided that it was time to get

back to the station house, now that the papers had hit the street with the boy's picture on the front page.

Weeks was writing furiously on a lined pad of yellow paper with one hand and clutching the phone receiver tightly against his left ear with the other. He did not look up, although Mac knew that Weeks sensed he had come into the room. He spoke into the phone with a hardly noticeable breathless edge of tension that stirred Mac to move forward several steps.

"Let me repeat your address. Sixteen Pine Street. About three miles past the city line. Is that right?" Weeks paused and listened, his eyes riveted to the paper. "There's no doubt in your mind that it's him?" Again a short wait, ended by a sigh by Weeks. "Okay, Mrs. Watkins. I'm sending a policeman named Mr. MacGinnis to visit you and get all the details." Weeks looked up at Mac. His eyes were wide open, the pupils slightly dilated. He nodded as if confirming Mac's presence. "He'll be leaving my office in about five minutes. Please stay put. And Mrs. Watkins, please don't tell anybody what you told me till Mr. MacGinnis gets there." A short pause. A fleeting smile. "Yes, ma'am, he'll have to be wearing a police uniform. That's rules. But he'll try not to be too conspicuous." Short pause. "Right. Have your grandson there. That would help." A nod. "Thank you, ma'am, very much. This could be so important to the boy."

He hung up and took a deep breath and quickly turned his head toward Mac, his face taut, his eyes open and cold, and his jawline more tense than Mac had ever noticed before. Shit, Mac thought, he almost looks like a cop right now. An old-style cop. Mac stared at the sergeant's wolflike intensity with concealed amazement and a twinge of delight.

"I think we've got something, Mac."

Mac nodded casually. "Sounded like it"

"Old lady. Sounds black. Saw the boy on the bus going out into the country."

Mac made a knowing face and tilted his head. "Alone?"

Weeks shook his head sharply. "No. A tall bearded older guy was sitting next to him. The old lady said she thought he had the kid pinned against the seat. But she isn't sure."

"Uh-huh. Figures. What else did she say?"

"She thought the guy acted funny. And he hollered at her." Weeks checked his yellow pad.

Mac sat down. "Why?"

"For staring at him and the kid. He seemed really upset. Then she got off."

Mac stared at Weeks. "This is it Sergeant."

Weeks nodded. "Look. Go out there. Get all you can. Particularly the description. Then we'll go through the files and call in the artists and send it out."

Mac rose and started out. He stopped and turned toward Weeks. "The kid's parents?"

"Not yet" Weeks's voice now was calm and very steady.

Mac waited. "How come?"

"I don't want any excitement in the beginning. I'm thinking about the kid. I want to keep him alive." There was a long silence between the two men. "If he's still alive."

Mac closed his eyes for a brief second, nodded, and walked out of Sergeant Weeks's office carrying the jagged piece of yellow paper with the address penciled on it.

SIX

Ricky felt the twine cut into his wrists as he tried to turn in his sleep. The sharp pain rode like an electric shock up the thin muscle sheaths of his arms, reaching his shoulders with an aching thud. He opened his eyes and saw the hazy early-morning sun weaving rays through the leaves of the trees over his body. Patches of moist grass were bathed in the eerie blend of dampness and diffused light, giving the clearing the look of a partially developed color photograph, slightly washed out but gentle and soft. He lay in the same position he had been in when he had drifted off into a troubled sleep. His legs were drawn up behind him, bound tightly by the rope belt. But the flannel shirt was missing and his naked body was uncovered. The cool air caused him to shiver. His skin was covered with gooseflesh. Suddenly the chill reached his head and he sneezed loudly, the sound reverberating in the deathly silence of the wooded area.

He pushed his body with all his strength and tilted himself enough to fall over onto his back. He stared up into the leaves hanging down heavily over his head laden with the moisture of the early-spring morning. Ricky rotated his head back and forth. He was alone. Arvis was gone. There was no one else in the small clearing. He called out softly, "Arvis?"

His voice barely scratched the surface of silence. There was no response. He called louder, "Arvis?" He waited. But no answer came back to him.

I'm alone. He's left me here alone. No one can hear me. Suddenly Ricky felt frightened. He had no idea where he was, and he was alone and unable to move. He called out as loudly as he could, "Arvis."

Suddenly the vision of the older man returned, with the memory of the hairy body touching his, and he smothered his cry and felt a strange elation mixed with fear. But the feeling of release was only momentary, and he began to whimper. He twisted his wrists as hard as he could, but the twine only burned and tore his flesh. The rope belt was so tight around his ankles that his toes tingled in the moist grass. He wiggled his toes but could not restore the impaired circulation. He stared down at his naked body writhing on the earth and was unexpectedly ashamed. He had stared at his nude skin so often in the past months, fascinated by the changes, the newness, the

smooth but firm rising mounds of muscle and fat. He had loved to run his fingers over the nipples and feel them harden. Awakening with an erection, he would lie for long minutes stroking and luxuriating in the wildly warm pleasures flowing through his body. He had probed every opening, explored every corner of his body. And now he watched that same body writhe with almost the same sensual abandon as it tried to free itself. He could not suppress the feeling of strange delight that kept crashing against the continuing sense of urgency and fear.

Finally he realized that he could not loosen his bonds. Laying his head back against the mossy bark of the tree, he closed his eyes and drew in several deep breaths and tried desperately to think through what he could do. Nothing came. All he could see in his thoughts was his shoes lying carelessly thrown to his right side with his socks underneath. He was unable to think of any way to get himself home—away. He was trapped here forever.

He started to scream. He could not stop. His screams continued until his voice became hoarse and his breath came with difficulty. Finally he stopped and stared blindly ahead, his tears falling helplessly as the sun rose above his head and the brilliance of the daylight suffused the clearing.

He closed his eyes and rubbed his blond hair against the tree in frustrated anger. Damn him, he thought. Leaving me here. Like this. What did I ever do to him? I'll die here. Nobody'll find me. I'll scream and nobody'll find me. Never. Damn that Arvis. He tried thinking about his mother and father, but he could not bring their faces into his thoughts. All he could picture was Arvis's face as he crouched across from him, his head thrown back, his penis shooting streams of white fluid toward him. Damn him. It isn't fair. Leaving me here like this. I did what he said. Why did he leave me? Again the face exploded into his thoughts as he recalled the cold anger in the man's bearded face when he had grabbed him by the jaw and lifted him off the ground outside the diner. Come back, you bastard. I'm not afraid of you. Come back and untie me. Arvis, come back. Where are you? Arvis?

"Hi, kid." The voice of the older man startled Ricky. He opened his eyes to see Arvis standing over him, fully dressed, with a white bag in his hand.

Ricky bit his lip, and silently the tears streamed down his face.

“Whatcha cryin’ for?” Arvis asked as he knelt and laid the bag on a grassy mound of earth.

Ricky did not answer. He did not want to tell the man the truth.

“Hey. I asked you whatcha were cryin’ for.” Arvis reached over and clasped the boy’s thigh firmly in his hand.

Ricky pulled away angrily. “I thought you left me,” he said, his face turned away.

Arvis chuckled. “You missed me?”

Ricky shook his head. “Don’t be stupid. I didn’t miss you. I couldn’t get loose.”

Arvis stood up and walked quickly over to where Ricky lay propped up against the tree. He reached his hairy arm down, and quickly slapped Ricky very hard across the face so that the boy’s face swung sharply in the opposite direction.

“Don’t ever call me stupid. You hear?” he growled.

Ricky turned back and stared at the unrelenting look in the heavy-lidded eyes. He stared calmly back at the man without crying or speaking for a minute. Then he spoke in a loud, clear voice. “You are stupid.”

Arvis hit him again equally hard. Ricky’s head bobbed back and forth for a minute and then righted itself. He stretched his aching neck and stared back into the bearded face. “Hit me again, Arvis. Go ahead. Hit me again.” His voice was quietly hysterical.

The older man pressed his lips together and frowned. “Come on, Ricky. Stop talking like that. I don’t wanna hit you.”

Ricky ground his teeth together for a second and tried moving his numb feet. “Why not?” he challenged.

“ ’Cause,” Arvis said, his head down.

“Why not?” Ricky persisted.

“ ’Cause I like you. And I don’t want to hurt you.”

Ricky lay quietly as the man knelt and opened the bag and took out a paper cup, removed the plastic lid, and released a cloud of steaming vapor into the morning air. Arvis sipped the coffee slowly, watching Ricky.

Ricky sniffled and arched his back. “Untie me, Arvis,” he ordered.

“Why?” The older man kept drinking.

“Because I want to get dressed.”

“I don’t want you dressed. I like you like that.” The man kept sipping the coffee and staring at the squirming naked body of the boy.

Ricky thought for a minute, then nodded. "Okay I won't get dressed. But I want to eat. And my arms and legs are killing me."

"You goin' to run?" Arvis looked at him over the rim of the cup.

"What?" Ricky wasn't sure he understood.

Arvis sighed. "If you're gonna run, I'll catch you. And I'll hurt you. But if you don't run, you'll be all right"

Ricky understood. "I won't run, Arvis. Do you hear? I won't run."

"Sure?" The older man put down the coffee cup, straddled the boy's legs, and placed his hands around Ricky's throat pressing lightly. "Sure you won't run?"

Ricky nodded, pressing his chin into the thick fingers that were almost choking him. "I promise," he whispered.

Arvis leaned over and untied the rope belt and slowly and methodically removed the twine from around the boy's wrists. The raw red lines on the wrists stood out from the otherwise pale flesh. At several points, tiny streams of blood trickled from cuts in the wrists. Ricky stared unbelieving at his torn sore wrists and finally leaned over and gently rubbed them in the cool moisture of the grassy earth.

"Look at that, Arvis," Ricky said, pointing to his wrist.

The tall man shrugged as he moved away from the boy and opened the white bag again. "Has to be, kid."

Ricky shook his head. "No, it doesn't."

"What do you mean?" Arvis looked up quickly.

"I said it doesn't have to be."

The man smiled. There was boyish pleasure and excitement in his eyes. "You mean it?"

Ricky wasn't sure what had softened the man but he nodded, hoping to avoid the belt and twine again. "Yeah, I mean it"

Arvis took out a container of milk and a small corn muffin from the bag. He stretched out his hands toward Ricky. "Here's your breakfast."

Ricky took the milk and muffin and ate and drank eagerly until he emptied the carton of milk and finished the stale muffin. "Where'd you get the food?"

"At the diner."

"Same diner?"

Arvis frowned. "Yeah. Why?"

Ricky shrugged. "Didn't they think it was funny that you were still around?"

Arvis stared at the boy, puzzled. "No. The old lady from last night wasn't there. Some old guy was. Why? What're you thinkin'?"

"Nothing." Ricky drew up his legs and began rubbing his ankles.

Arvis moved closer. He sat on the ground opposite Ricky. "I asked you whatcha were thinkin'."

Ricky waited a few seconds before answering. "They're going to be looking for me, Arvis."

There was silence in the clearing. Arvis lowered his head and rubbed the back of his neck. Ricky watched him very carefully. In the distance the flutter of wings could be heard, and a few droplets of water fell from the leaves above onto Ricky's head. But he did not move.

Finally Arvis looked up, his face full of pain and anguish. "You're right, kid."

Ricky pressed harder. "So you better let me go. Give me a little money and let me go home."

"No," Arvis said calmly.

"What do you mean, no?" Ricky felt colder and suddenly desperate.

"I ain't takin' you home. But we ain't stayin' here too much longer neither."

Ricky dug his fingernails into his shins as he clutched his legs, trying to stay calm. "Where we going?"

"Don't know yet" was the low, rumbling reply.

Arvis unhooked his single overall strap and slipped out of his pants. He unbuttoned his flannel shirt and tossed it aside. He bent over and pulled his shoes off. Ricky moved to his left and started to rise.

"Sit still," Arvis said softly but firmly.

Ricky lowered himself against the tree, his wet buttocks sliding slightly as he reached the damp grass. He watched Arvis's naked body as it moved to rest next to his, the broad shoulders pressed against the same tree trunk and the long muscular hairy legs stretched out on the grass well beyond his own.

Arvis turned to him. "Did you have enough to eat?"

Ricky smiled weakly and nodded. "Yes."

"I don't eat much for breakfast now, so I didn't buy much."

Ricky talked lightly, nervously, moving ever so slightly so that his moist skin was not pressing against the other man's body. "How come?"

"How come what?"

"You don't eat much breakfast?" Ricky asked casually as he quickly started shooting side glances around the clearing which was now bathed in the full morning sunlight. Light pierced the heavy foliage from all sides, but no pathway could be seen. No road was visible. No houses, no poles, no signs of life stirred other than the two of them.

"When I was in the slammer, the food was so bad, I stopped," Arvis said matter-of-factly.

Ricky looked at him. "The slammer?"

"Yeah. Jail. There all I could get was those shitty scrambled eggs. You know—watery. So I just got used to drinkin' coffee and that's all." Arvis leaned his head back against the tree and closed his eyes. At the same time with his left hand he reached over and held Ricky's thigh firmly in his grasp.

"What were you in jail for?" Ricky asked as his eyes focused on the thick fingers circling his thigh.

Arvis wet his lips. "The first time was for stealin'."

"You been in more than once?"

Arvis laughed hoarsely. "Yeah. I been in a lot of places."

Ricky swallowed. "What do you mean?"

"I just mean I been kept in a lot of places."

"Why?"

Arvis looked at the boy. "You sure are curious, kid."

Ricky felt compelled to keep on talking. "Well, Arvis, I just want to know you better."

"No shit." The older man laughed out loud, the sounds swallowed in the morning stillness. Ricky felt the hand slip up toward his groin. "Yeah. Tell me about it"

"You wanna know everything?"

The hand was touching his penis and running lightly through his soft thin pubic hair. "Yeah, Arvis. I'd like you to tell me everything. Right now." Ricky was breathless.

The hand stopped for a minute and rested quietly on the rim of the boy's pelvis, palm up and fingers unclenched. Arvis stared softly into the sunlight, his eyes unseeing, his lids unblinking as he spoke.

“I don’t know why I stole. I didn’t have to. My folks had money. But I was lonely. We moved around so damn much. And my old lady didn’t give a shit about me. And my old man drank. After I left my good friend, I just couldn’t make many new friends. I was kind of alone if you know what I mean. Nobody could of been as close as my old friend. He was like my brother. But he wasn’t. You know?”

Ricky nodded. “Yeah. I think I do.”

“Well, when we split, I tried makin’ new friends in the next town and then in the next, but it always ended up the same way.” Arvis cracked his knuckles and stared down at his hands.

“What way?” Ricky asked.

“I always started playin’ around with them. But they were different. And they’d stop seein’ me and tell the others. And they’d call me queer, and stupid stuff like that. So I stopped tryin’.”

“Why did you do it, Arvis?” Ricky asked. He was becoming caught up in the man’s story.

“What?” Arvis turned toward him, perplexed.

“Play around, like you said?” Ricky asked.

Arvis stared at him as if he were very dumb. “ ’Cause I wanted to.”

“Oh,” Ricky did not know what to say. “But they didn’t.”

Arvis nodded. “Right. They didn’t. He did. But they didn’t. So I stopped havin’ friends.” He reached behind him and rubbed his fingers clean on the wet bark of the tree. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Ricky thought quickly as he felt the hand begin fondling him again. “How did that get you into stealing?” he asked quickly.

Arvis shrugged. “It was somethin’ to do.”

“And you got caught?” Ricky asked, hoping to keep up the flow of conversation.

Both hands were now stroking his body. “Yeah. You don’t get tossed into the slammer unless you get caught, kid.”

The man’s hands continued to caress the boy. He tried to squirm away but was pinioned by the tight grasp of the man’s hand on his buttocks.

“Please, Arvis,” Ricky whispered, “don’t.”

The older man did not seem to hear. His breathing was heavy and coming out in short gasps.

“Arvis, tell me about jail. What was it like?” Ricky asked.

There was no answer.

Ricky tried to grab the heavy hand of the older man. He hollered at the top of his voice. "Arvis, let's stop and talk! Tell me what jail was like!"

The older man opened his eyes wider and his lips parted for a second. Suddenly he reached out with both hands, grabbed Ricky by each shoulder, and threw him over on his stomach. Ricky tried desperately to right himself, but he felt the whole weight of the big man on his back. His chest was pressed tightly into the wet dirt. His face was pushed up against the slimy bark of the tree so that the rough surface was tearing at his lips. He was having trouble breathing. He felt his legs being spread apart. The pain returned, and his back arched upward. The man's hand slammed the boy's back hard, forcing his chest tightly against the forest floor.

He heard the man's voice coming in gasps as the words pressed into his ear. "Jail was like this, kid."

Suddenly pain shot through his body causing him to groan and flail his arms. Strong fingers grabbed his arms and pinned him down to the ground. The pain was so intense that his head felt light and dizzy. He heard himself screaming, but he wasn't sure if the noises he heard were his own.

"Stop!" he screamed. He tried pulling away, but the strong arms held him tighter and his movement only increased the force of the thrusting pain. Suddenly the man shuddered and shoved himself hard against Ricky's back. The thrusting stopped and the man lay immobile over Ricky, his weight overwhelming. The two of them lay like that for several minutes. Ricky suddenly realized what had been happening, and he started to cry.

Arvis eased himself backward onto the earthen floor and stared at the prone body of the naked boy.

Ricky cried out in terror, "Oh, God, I'm bleeding. I'm full of blood. Am I going to die?"

Arvis came over and knelt beside him and rubbed his fingers in the grass. He pulled out grass and wiped away the blood and semen dripping from the corners of the boy's damaged small rectal opening. Ricky tried to squirm away from his fingers as they rubbed, but Arvis held the boy gently against the earth. "Lay still. The bleeding will stop," Arvis said softly.

"You sure?" Ricky asked in a very small frightened voice that melted into the earth.

"Yeah. I'm sure. It was like that with me the first time. I'd never done it before. Jail was my first time." Arvis spoke calmly and steadily. He finished wiping off the boy and lifted him gently off the ground, and

cradled the trembling, pale body in the hairy concave of his chest and arms, rocking for several minutes.

Ricky lay dazed and semiconscious in the man's arms. He felt the warmth of the man's chest and the frantic beating of the man's heart, but the overriding feeling was the burning pain. Suddenly he lost control of his rectal sphincter. He awakened suddenly and looked down. "What happened?" he asked, terrified.

Arvis laid him down in a clean area of the clearing. He covered him with his shirt and overalls. Ricky watched with stunned bewilderment and pain as Arvis rubbed his soiled arms in the grass and leaves. He scooped up earth in the palms of his hands and covered the boy's feces and remnants of his own semen that lay on the ground near the tree trunk. He moved quickly, and soon the area was completely covered.

The tall man walked back to the boy. "Sometimes you can't hold it in when it's over—particularly at first"

Ricky stared at him in disbelief. Finally he spoke. "You shouldn't have done that"

"What?" Arvis asked.

Ricky swallowed. "What you did to me."

"Why not?"

Again Ricky found himself stunned and speechless. He could not think of a reply. Nothing that he had been taught would help him tell this man why he didn't want him to hurt him again. "Because it hurts."

Arvis nodded. "It always hurts the first time. It won't hurt next time. I'll get something to make it feel better next time."

Next time! Ricky thought, Oh, God, does there have to be a next time?

Arvis lay down next to the boy and threw his arms around him. He hugged him tightly. Ricky tried to lie very still.

"Tell me you love me, Ricky," Arvis said slowly.

Ricky shook his head. "I want you to take me home now, Arvis."

"I said, tell me you love me." The arms pressed tightly against the boy.

"You did it. You did what you wanted. Now take me home. Or let me go home," Ricky said fiercely.

Arvis grabbed the blond hair and pulled it back. The boy's head jerked backward and his mouth opened wide. He begged Arvis with his eyes to let him go. The older man faced him eye to eye and spoke into the boy's face.

“Did you hear me? I said tell me you love me. I just fucked you and I want you to tell me you love me.”

Ricky shook his head slightly and thrust his tongue out of his gaping mouth.

Arvis grabbed the boy’s throat with his other hand and began pressing hard. “Listen, boy, I killed another kid down in Georgia not so long ago. I’ve killed a kid before that. I ain’t kiddin’. I did. Now, don’t shit around with Arvis. Do you hear?”

Ricky knew that the older man was not lying; his eyes had the cold glint of truth. He knew that Arvis could kill him if he wanted to. Suddenly Ricky realized that he was not bargaining for his body. He was begging for his life.

“I love you, Arvis,” the boy whispered.

Slowly the older man released the boy’s hair, turned his face around, and kissed him full upon the mouth. He held him tight and hugged him, trembling.

“I want you to love me, kid. Please. Don’t ever stop. I don’t want to hurt you. I want to love you and have you love me. It’s been such a long time.”

Ricky swallowed through his sore throat, rocking on his haunches so he would not have to place his torn buttocks against the earth, repeating over and over again in a soft, monotonous litany, “I love you, Arvis.”

He was lost in his mumbling incoherency. His fear had now escalated to uncontrollable proportions. He rocked back and forth, with his knees occasionally brushing the damp ground, his head bent forward, and his blond hair falling unkempt and stringy, his arms folded in front of his chilled body, clutching his chest. He was holding on to himself tightly as if he were falling, slipping from the rim of a cliff’s edge. He realized that he was in the midst of a living nightmare, very different from the transient night fears of his past. Those could be soothed away by warm arms holding, voices softly soothing, lights on, closets opened to show they were empty, long walks next to the tiny figure of his mother down the dimly lit hallway and into her bed for the rest of the night. But now he could not reach those exits. He could not touch those arms, hear that voice, take that walk. He was alone with his nightmare. He had to wake and walk alone. It was his and only his terror.

But the real terror lay in his being the slave. He had to find a way, some way, to deal with his fright, his danger—this strange, dangerous, but fascinating and different man. He won't kill me, Ricky thought, if I can learn how to manage him—manage us—become a part of what is happening to me until someone can rescue me from this nightmare and hold me and tell me I'm safe again. His head moved forward until his face brushed lightly against the blades of rough grass upon which his knees were now resting. I may never be safe again, he thought. Never again. Unless ... unless ... But answers did not come to his unspoken question. He sat with his eyes closed, his rocking slowing down, his arms still winding around his body, waiting for the man to make the next move.

Suddenly he felt his right leg being gently pulled out and he sat quickly on his burning buttocks, crying out softly as his torn flesh touched the earth. As he opened his eyes, he saw Arvis clumsily trying to pull a damp sock over his foot. He watched with dumb fascination as if the foot belonged to a stranger. Gradually the sock was pulled up over his ankle. He did not move as Arvis put on the other sock.

Then Ricky heard himself say in a hollow voice, "What are you doing, Arvis?" He knew he cared, but at the same time he felt no emotion about what was going on. He was in the middle of an unreal fantasy that he was trying to deny.

The man looked up and smiled easily. "You get over your spell?"

Ricky nodded sadly. "What are you doing?"

"Gettin' you dressed." Arvis pointed to the pile of Ricky's clothes now arranged neatly at his feet. Ricky noted now that Arvis was completely dressed—his cord belt pulled tightly around his waist, his broken overall strap tucked carefully into the pocket of his flannel shirt, the Greek emblem hanging loosely in the bright sunlight as he bent over Ricky's legs.

"Where are we going?" Ricky asked quietly.

Arvis looked up again. "Away from here."

Ricky leaned forward slightly. "Where, Arvis?"

"I ain't tellin' you yet." He picked up Ricky's shirt and said, "Lift your arms." His voice was a soft and gentle entreaty. Ricky automatically obeyed. His arms felt heavy and sore as he raised them above his head. Arvis grunted slightly as he lowered the T-shirt over the boy's head.

Light suddenly dimmed before Ricky's eyes as it slid over his face, but he felt no concern, no fear. Soon the collar was pulled carefully over his

head and the sunlight burst onto his frozen face with renewed heat. He looked down at his shirt as it clung wrinkled to his body. "I can dress myself," he said dryly.

Arvis looked at him for a long minute. "You sure?"

Ricky nodded. "Yeah."

"Did I hurt you bad?" Arvis whispered.

Ricky stared into the clouded eyes that searched his face. The mouth moved slightly, causing the beard and mustache to quiver.

"Yes" was all Ricky said.

"Sorry," Arvis said, his face averted slightly.

Ricky pulled on his undershorts. "Please don't hurt me again."

Arvis stood up and reached out and grabbed Ricky's hands in his. He pulled the young boy to his feet. Ricky stood still, waiting. Arvis slowly drew him toward him and held him close for a minute and then let him go. Ricky could feel the older man trembling as the large body hugged his own. He sensed that Arvis had laid his cheek upon the top of his head. But he stood very still. Finally Arvis let him go.

"I don't mean to hurt you. But it happens. I'll try not to." Arvis bent down and handed Ricky his pants.

Ricky slipped into them and slowly finished dressing. He turned toward Arvis, who was leaning up against the tree trunk watching him. "I'm dressed," Ricky said simply.

"Yeah" was all Arvis said as he stared at the young boy.

Ricky returned his gaze—calm, direct, without feeling, blank but quietly defiant. Finally Arvis looked away and scanned the grassy earthen floor, kicking up small clouds of dirt with his boots.

Ricky finally spoke. "Today's Saturday."

"Yeah. So what?" Arvis looked at him.

"I'm supposed to be in *shul*," Ricky said quietly.

Arvis frowned. "What's that?"

Ricky probed for an answer. Finally he said, "A Jewish church."

"I thought so."

"What?" Ricky asked, confused.

"That you was a Jew." Arvis nodded.

Ricky watched the man for a second and then asked, "Why?"

Arvis shrugged. "Your name. Then you was cut. But a lot of guys get cut when they're babies now. And there's just somethin' about you."

“What?” Ricky pressed.

“It’s hard to put into words. Somethin’ strong. Like you know what’s up. Most Jews know what’s up. That’s why they make so damn much money.” Arvis pressed his hands together.

Ricky took a deep breath. “Do you hate Jews?” He felt he had to know. It would make a difference.

“Hell, no. I worked for a couple. They was pretty good to me. It was always me that fucked up, not them. You know, got picked up by the cops, then they had to let me go. But I didn’t hold no grudges. They had to. I knew that.” He folded his arms.

Ricky smiled abstractedly. “I’m glad you don’t hate Jews.”

Arvis shrugged. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want you to hate me,” Ricky said softly.

“Why?” Arvis took a tentative step forward. The tone of his voice was almost boyishly hopeful.

Ricky breathed deeply and thought carefully before answering. “Because I don’t want you to kill me, Arvis, like you did the others.”

Arvis looked down, and when he spoke his words were directed toward the ground. “I won’t ... if you trust me.” He stopped and waited, but Ricky did not respond. He simply stood staring at the tall stooped form of the older man. Finally Arvis continued. “Just don’t cross me up. Stay with me. Do what I say.” Again he paused and waited. But the only sound in the woods was of the light morning breeze rustling the early-spring leaves on the branches over their heads. “Did you hear me?” he asked urgently.

Ricky bit his lip. “Yes,” he said very softly.

“Now I don’t want you to talk about that anymore. You hear?”

Ricky heard the discomfort in the other man’s voice. He remained silent.

Arvis spoke hurriedly. “I didn’t mean to do them others. But they didn’t listen. It wasn’t all my fault. You understand?”

Still Ricky refused to answer. Arvis began pacing back and forth in the clearing. He spoke again, this time his voice tinged with anger. “Don’t talk about them anymore. You hear?”

“Yes.” Ricky’s answer was short and direct.

Arvis scanned the trees and the sunlight overhead and stretched. “Let’s go.” He extended his hand and grabbed Ricky’s firmly by the upper arm

and began leading him toward the right. His thick fingers crushed the boy's aching arm muscles.

"Arvis." Ricky stopped as he felt the hand tighten.

"Yeah. What the hell's the matter?" the older man grumbled.

"You don't have to hold me so tight."

"Whatcha mean?" The man's eyelids lowered.

"You don't have to hold me at all. I won't run away," Ricky said calmly.

Arvis let his grip loosen slightly. "How can I be sure?" he asked.

Ricky smiled as warmly as his fear and pain would permit. "I trust you, Arvis. Don't you trust me? After all this?" He bent his head in the direction of the forest bed where they had lain the night before.

Arvis turned his head, following Ricky's gaze, the meaning sinking in very gradually, the sunlight lighting up the clumps of torn grass and the mounds of the earth that Arvis had made to cover the evidence of the night's activities. He turned back to the boy and slowly released his hold. "Yeah, I trust you. Until you make me not," he said very quietly.

"I won't, Arvis. I promise," Ricky said pleasantly and easily, his heart pounding.

Arvis stopped and wrinkled his forehead as he studied Ricky's face. He leaned over and placed his lips over the boy's mouth. Summoning all his strength, Ricky pressed his lips back against the soft moisture of the man's lips and the scraggly hairs of his mustache. Arvis stayed against him for several seconds. Then he pulled away and his bearded face broke into a sudden excited grin. Ricky smiled back, his eyes focusing upon the uneven ridged edges of the man's teeth.

"Okay, Arvis. Let's go." Ricky extended his hand to indicate that Arvis should lead the way. Arvis gleefully grabbed the boy's hand in his own and began to move through the green leaves, vines, and tufts of wild grass toward the road, so far away that no sounds of traffic could be heard for the first half hour of their hand-in-hand walk. Only their shadows moved with them as they pushed aside the underbrush to make their own path to the country road and civilization.

SEVEN

As Mac drove along the same streets for the third time, the signs on the corners became increasingly more difficult to read as the evening dusk settled in. He paused at an intersection and squinted to read the directions written in Weeks's careful handwriting on the sheet of paper. Turning into a similar yet different street, he saw the familiar name on the lamppost sign. He rode slowly down the street until he came to the number that was on the paper, then continued past several houses before parking the car. He trudged the distance back, his breathing labored, his legs feeling heavier than usual, his shirt collar rubbing against the perspiring nape of his neck.

The mailbox bore the name Watkins on the side, the K peeling slightly off the rusting black-painted metal. The grass on the lawn was uneven, the spring patches of early growth, tufted and full, mixing freely with the bare patches of dead and trampled winter grass. Fresh paint brightened the white front door; the hardened droplets on the knob and splatters on the steps suggested a trembling hand had held the paintbrush. As the front door opened slightly, he realized how tired he was.

A tall light-skinned young black man stood staring at him from a narrow opening. His dark eyes, set deeply in a smooth handsome face, ran up and down the policeman's form. He waited a time before speaking. "You the cop?"

For a moment Mac forgot that he was wearing his uniform and was about to answer. Then he automatically looked down and remembered his blue coat and pants and the thick heavy belt with holster.

When Mac didn't reply, the youth turned away and called back over his shoulder, "The cop's here."

A woman's voice could be heard from inside. "Well, Willis, let him in."

The young man swung his head back, frowned slightly, then opened the door wide enough for Mac to enter. He stepped aside only a very short distance so that Mac had to step by him sideways to avoid colliding with him as he walked into the dimly lit hallway.

"Straight back." Mac heard the voice from behind him, and he stood still for a second. Slowly the young man closed the door with a sudden

burst of noise.

“Don’t slam that door, Willis,” the woman called out from the room at the end of the foyer hallway. “Show the policeman in.”

Mac waited, but the young man did not move. Finally Mac walked slowly toward the room beyond. As he entered, the living room suddenly surrounded him. The room was small but so cluttered with furniture, tables, lamps, pictures, and mirrors that he felt closed in. There was hardly any breathing room within the area. Seated on a chintz-covered sofa in the center of the room was a small wrinkled old black woman, her hands tightly folded in her lap, her apron tightly wound around her thin waist, her bedroom-slippered feet too short to reach the floor.

Mac smiled at the woman. She did not return his smile but nodded slowly. “Come in, policeman.” She pointed to a chair to her right.

Mac entered and lowered himself slowly into the deep crevices of the old overstuffed chair.

“My name’s MacGinnis, Mrs. Watkins.”

“Good to meet you,” the old woman spoke dryly.

“Thank you very much for phoning. It could be a real help.” Mac spoke warmly.

Again the old woman nodded without changing the expression on her lined dark face. Finally she pressed her lips together and peered out into the hallway. “Willis?” There was no immediate response. She turned to Mac. “Did you park away from the house?”

Mac nodded. “Down the street”

“Good,”

Willis sauntered into the living room and stood next to the arm of the sofa. The old woman looked up and smiled at the young man. Mac saw her face change expression for the first time. The wrinkles crisscrossed her face like lines on crumpled black cellophane.

“This is Willis.”

Mac took a breath and smiled feebly. “Hello, Willis.”

The young man stood impassively watching the policeman. He did not acknowledge the greeting. The woman reached out and touched the young man’s light brown hand. Willis looked down and softened his gaze, taking her hand into his own and holding it lightly as they turned back to face Mac, “Willis is my grandson. He’s in law school,” the old woman croaked proudly.

Mac took a deep breath, hesitating to comment, afraid of shattering the delicate connection that had somehow motivated this woman to contact the police. He sensed that the wrong word, the wrong expression, the wrong intonation might ruin his chances of getting the description he wanted so badly. He ran his tongue against the corner of his mouth and spoke evenly. "Could you tell me a little bit about the man and the boy you saw on the bus?"

Willis lifted the old woman's hand to signal her to wait for him to lead. He broke his silence with clear, crisp words:

"Is there a reward?"

Mac shook his head automatically. The thought of reward had not entered his mind. Weeks had said nothing about "buying information." He turned from grandson back to the grandmother. "There is no reward yet, Mrs. Watkins. But there could be. I just haven't talked to the family about anything like that yet. It might frighten them."

Again the young man's hand lifted the older woman's fingers causing her mouth to open and then quickly close.

"Well, you'd better begin to think about it. Because my grandmother will say nothing without a promise of a reward." The young man's face was calm and impassive. There was no emotion or bitterness in his tone, just the simple statement of fact.

They're slipping away, Mac thought. I'm losing them. I'm losing the whole fuckin' thing. I'll have to go back and tell Weeks that I lost it.

He waited a minute and then turned toward Willis. "I guess the most I can promise is to tell the kid's parents about your grandmother ... and suggest that she deserves a reward. But it's up to them. The police don't give rewards."

Willis's response was immediate. "We know that very well." Now there was a quicksilver bitterness in his rapid-fire words. Willis paused and then continued. "But my grandmother can't bank a cop's promises." He challenged Mac with his cool stare.

Mac shrugged. "Well," he drawled very slowly, "if the kid is found dead, there won't be anything for anybody, will there?"

Willis smiled at him. He nodded. "You're a smart cop. You know just what to say."

Sighing, Mac just shook his head slowly. "No, Willis. I'm just a cop doing his job. I don't think I'm very smart. Just telling the truth as I see it."

The old woman twisted her head upward to study her grandson's face. The smooth brown jaw moved in rhythm to his thoughts. The crowded room was silent. Finally he let go of his grandmother's hand and folded his arms across his chest. "Call the parents."

Mac stared at him. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes. The phone's in the kitchen. Call and tell them it's five hundred dollars for what my grandmother knows." Willis watched the heavy man struggle to straighten his body.

"Willis, this is blackmail." Mac tried not to sound angry. His throat was constricting with increasing rage.

The young man laughed softly. "Call it any damn name you want. I call it a reward."

Mac watched the old woman as she stared at the stoic face of the young man, whose expression showed firm, unflinching determination. Mac rose and made his way toward the kitchen and dialed the station house.

The phone rang several times, and finally a familiar voice answered. "Fairfax Station House."

Mac whispered, "Winkie, let me speak to Weeks."

The voice called back, "Who's speaking?"

"Winkie, it's Mac. Don't ask questions. Just get me Weeks."

Mac waited until he heard the soft, precise sound of Weeks's voice: "Weeks."

"Hi, Sergeant. Mac here."

"What's up?" Weeks's tone was brisk and impatient.

"They want money. The old lady's grandson wants five hundred to spill."

Weeks took an audible deep breath and then answered quickly. "Tell them we'll pay it."

"I told them I was callin' the kid's folks."

Weeks snorted. "Fine. Tell them the kid's folks'll pay it"

Mac frowned. "But Sergeant, we don't know that"

"Right. We don't. But they don't either. For sure."

"I don't understand," Mac whispered.

Weeks spoke very slowly with an edge of irritation in his voice. "Promise them what they want. But get the goddamn description. We'll worry about any promises we make later. Right now let's worry about that

kid. But get your ass back there and get that information.” He hung up before Mac could say anything more.

Mac hung up the phone, feeling a wave of embarrassment and anger sweep over him. He was being treated like a fool, and he was also being forced to lie to get evidence.

Back in the living room Willis and his grandmother had not changed their position.

“Well?” Willis asked softly.

Mac nodded. “Mr. Stern says to tell you he will mail your grandmother the money in the next mail.”

“The full five hundred?”

Mac sat down slowly and kept his face on the old woman. “The full five hundred.”

“How do I know to believe you?” Willis stared at the perspiring policeman.

“You don’t—any more than I’m certain I can believe her, but I’m going to try,” Mac said.

Again the room was still. Finally Willis lowered his lithe frame onto the arm of the sofa and placed his arm around his grandmother. The old woman had begun to play absently with the hem of her slightly soiled apron. He looked down at her gray head and spoke slowly. “Go ahead and tell him.”

She looked up. “You sure?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Mac quickly reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a small notebook and pencil.

“Please start at the beginning, ma’am.”

“Mrs. Watkins!” Willis spoke sharply.

Mac nodded wearily. “Mrs. Watkins.”

The old woman began to describe the bus ride. Softly and carefully, Mac asked questions and wrote furiously as the story and the description flowed from the woman. He marveled at the uncanny memory she had for detail. She recalled sentences spoken, skin textures, clothing to the smallest button. He had great difficulty keeping up with the rapid, breathless outpouring of words. Finally she was finished. Mac read his notes, trying desperately to be certain that he had everything, knowing that he would

probably not be able to return for more information. After the next day's mail, this source would be as dry as a riverbed after a six-month drought.

He asked if the old woman would listen to what he had written.

She leaned forward to catch his words, her head nodding in agreement as he read her statement back to her. "That's it," she said.

Mac got up, flipped his notebook shut, and pushed it into his inside coat pocket. "Thank you, Mrs. Watkins. You've been a great help."

The old woman nodded without changing her passive, staring expression.

Mac turned to Willis. The young man stood straight and tall, the woman's hope and her protector. He did not move as Mac went toward the hallway. He just said, "We're expecting the reward."

Mac looked at him. How innocent we can be, he thought. How full of courage and piss and guts. And how naive. How strong he wants to be for her.

"I know, Willis," Mac said. "The morning mail. The next day at the latest."

He quickly let himself out of the house and hurried down the street to his car, trying to ignore the slight twinge of shooting pain in his heaving chest. He had no problems finding his way out of the housing development. Fear and excitement gave him the natural instincts to turn around the right corners through the early night darkness and find the highway within minutes.

At the station house Weeks greeted him with a perfunctory nod indicating a vacant chair. He ran his long fingers across the empty center of the walnut desk surface with the neatly stacked piles of papers carefully arranged along the rim, then with his evenly filed fingernails he began beating a nervous tattoo on the wooden surface as Mac eased into the straight wooden chair. Weeks watched him adjust himself into the chair, pull the small notebook out of his pocket, and flip to the heavily inscribed pages.

"Wait one second, Mac," he cautioned. He reached over and buzzed the intercom. "Winnie, send Blickstein into my office."

The voice squeaked back, "Now?"

Weeks stared patiently at the intercom. "Yes, Winnie, now. He's in the side waiting room."

"Yes, Sergeant"

“I want Sol to listen to everything you have to say,” Weeks told Mac. “He can be sketching as you talk.”

Sol Blickstein was the police artist who sketched faces from witnesses’ descriptions. His sketches came amazingly close to the real person if the observer was accurate and precise with his details of the facial characteristics of the person being sought. Mac had often marveled at how many of the young man’s sketches came close to being photographs, but this was the first time that Mac had actually worked with the artist, who was usually reserved for major manhunts.

“Were you able to get a full description, Mac?” Weeks asked casually.

Mac nodded. “Yeah. After I called you, I promised them the reward. And the old lady talked. She had a great memory. Really complete for an old lady like her. Damn smart nigger.”

Staring at Weeks’s face, Mac regretted the word the instant it left his mouth. The younger man’s face became a wash of different shades of red. Two veins began pulsating in his forehead almost instantaneously. He folded his hands quickly on the desktop, and Mac saw the whitening of the clenched knuckles.

“Mac, listen, don’t ever use that word in this office—in this station house—again, as long as I run it” He paused. “Do you understand?” His voice was low and clear. Cutting into the silence like an oar slicing cleanly through water.

“Yeah. Sorry,” Mac answered quietly.

“Did they question you about the money?” Weeks’s anger had quickly ebbed. He was composed and probing.

“Yeah. The grandson did. He’s a law student. Looks after the old woman. He’s the one who demanded the payoff.”

“When did you say it would get there?” Weeks asked casually.

“In tomorrow morning’s mail. They’re going to be mad as hell.”

Weeks smiled easily. “It will be there either Monday or Tuesday. Remember, Mac, tomorrow is Sunday. No mail.”

Mac stared at the other man. He thought maybe he had heard wrong. What had Weeks just said? “I don’t understand, Sergeant,” Mac said hesitantly.

“They will get their five hundred, like you said, in the mail.”

Mac stammered, “But ... Weeks,” forgetting the necessary formality of the title.

Weeks ignored the omission and sighed. “I called Stern after your call and told him we had a lead. I then told him that the people expected a reward. He only asked how much. Stern took the woman’s name and address. He’ll send the money today.”

Mac looked at the younger man in disbelief. “You mean, you actually got them the money—the reward?”

Weeks frowned slightly and said, “Didn’t you think I would, Mac?”

As Mac stared with a mixture of incredulity and admiration into the unblinking eyes of the man opposite him, the office door opened and Sol Blickstein entered, his hands full of charcoal pencils, drawing paper, and erasers. Weeks placed him opposite Mac and waited a few seconds while Sol got his equipment ready.

“Okay, Mac, let’s have it.” Weeks leaned back in his swivel chair, closed his eyes, and prepared to listen.

Mac began to read very slowly. Occasionally Weeks would interrupt him to ask about possible points he had not written down. Sol stopped him and asked him several times to repeat small but crucial items of description. The reading took over an hour with the interruptions and long pauses. Finally Mac was finished. He felt drained. He was about to close his notebook when he heard the voice of Weeks command him to attention.

“Don’t close the book. Start from the beginning and read it all over again.”

Mac gulped and started to read the story from the beginning. Again Weeks and Blickstein interrupted, probed, dissected, until he finally finished. He sat with the open notebook in his lap, waiting.

“Well, Sol?” Weeks asked quietly.

Sol stared for a few minutes at the work on the drawing paper in front of him and then turned it toward Weeks. “This is what I hear,” he said.

Weeks stared at the sketch, which Mac could not see from his position. Slowly the drawing tablet turned his way and he faced the portrait of a shaggy, youthful but dissipated, not quite handsome bearded man. He felt a strange sensation that the man had emerged alive from the fabric of his story.

Weeks stood up quickly. “Good, Sol. Let’s see if you got anything.” He walked around the desk and faced Mac. “Mac, pull the child molester file and start looking very carefully for look-alikes. I’ll send this sketch out over the teletype to the other states. Maybe we can pick something up.”

He turned to walk quickly from the room. At the door he stopped as if he had forgotten something quite important. He turned and smiled warmly at Sol. "Thanks a hell of a lot, Sol. Great as usual. Now go back to your kid's birthday party. Tell your wife I'm sorry. Can I send her some flowers?"

Sol blushed. "Oh, hell, Garry, you don't have to do that." Mac stared. He had never heard Weeks called by his first name before. "She didn't have to let you come down here on a Saturday night either. Especially this Saturday night. Thanks again." He left the room. Mac knew that Blickstein's wife would get flowers.

When Sol had gone, Mac picked up the phone on Weeks's desk, looked at the sergeant for permission, and dialed slowly after getting the outside line.

A full-throated woman's voice quickly answered. "Hello."

"Flora, Mac here."

"Hi. You're out late."

"Yeah. And I probably will be out later. Big case."

"No kiddin'. Which one?"

Mac tried to hide the pride and excitement. "The Stern kid. The one who's missin'. Would you go over and tell Maureen. Let her know I'm okay but I might be late—could be out all night. So if you'd help her eat ... and put her to bed. Don't forget her medicines. Oh, and Flora—" He paused.

"Yeah?"

"Don't let her talk you into lettin' her sit up all night 'cause she's embarrassed about letting you undress her and lift her into bed. Even if she resists, just lift her and put her into bed. You hear?"

"Yeah, Mac."

He swallowed. "Sorry to give you so damn much trouble, Flora."

"Hell, Mac, I don't mind. You've been good to me. And you're payin' me besides."

He nodded silently. "Right," he said and hung up without saying goodbye.

Weeks looked impassively at Mac's back as he turned and left the room.

For three hours after the charcoal drawing came back from teletype Mac slowly studied the faces in the files of previous suspects of child molestation. He compared the faces, trying to picture the clean-shaven faces with beards and mustaches when even the slightest resemblance flickered

across his mind. The pile was thick and dated back for years. One by one he studied the eyes, ears, noses, lips, trying desperately to match the staring photographs with the charcoal drawing resting in his lap. Soon the faces began to blend into one another. The fat began to resemble the thin, the young grew older as he stared longer at the glossy prints. He became dejected and his back ached. Just three or four more and then I'll stop for a while, he thought. Nobody even looks like that goddamn drawing. Maybe the black lady was making the whole fuckin' thing up to get the money. Another picture slid from his lap onto the cluttered floor. He's not in here, Mac thought. It's a wild-goose chase. The son of a bitch's picture isn't in these files.

Suddenly he was staring into the face of a young man who smiled at him through separated jagged front teeth. His face was clean shaven and his hair was cropped very close. But the eyes drew Mac to move his face closer to the photograph. The same vivid wild look and the same long lean features. He tried mentally to fill the smooth features with dirty, scraggly hair. He placed Blickstein's sketch side by side with the slightly wrinkled photograph. Arvis Moore stared back at him from both pictures. There could be no mistake. This was the man. He was holding the image and the name of the man who had kidnapped Ricky Stern in his hands. His pulse began racing and he felt his mouth quickly become dry with excitement.

He studied the two faces, and the longer he stared the more they became one. He said the name, Arvis Moore, to himself over and over, trying to remember if he had heard it before. But nothing returned to his memory. The man was thirty-two years of age. He had been born in Virginia but had moved around, according to the card. Two jail terms—one for stealing, the other for child molestation. Three stints in various state hospitals, two months, three months, the last for two years. Few jobs—short-order cook, construction work, car mechanic. High school education. Last time he was in Maryland was about eighteen months ago. Father died. Mother living in California. Sister—whereabouts unknown. Mac picked up the sketch and Moore's file and walked into Weeks's office. Weeks was on the phone talking quietly; he looked up and waved Mac closer.

"What was that last name? Moore? Give me the complete information." Weeks began writing furiously on a yellow pad. Finally he stopped. "Yeah. A kid up here. Name Ricky Stern. Missing a day and a half approximately. Seen with Moore on a bus in Virginia last night. If you hear

anything, let us know. And alert your policemen. But I doubt that he'll come back around your way." Weeks listened. "Of course, if we find him, he'll be charged here and then you can have him. I hope we don't have the same charge you have." Again a brief pause. "Thank you. We'll keep in touch."

Weeks hung up the phone and looked up at Mac, who slid the photograph across the smooth desk surface. Weeks looked at the picture and studied the file; he beckoned for the charcoal drawing, scanned the two faces, and then lifted his eyes toward Mac. "That's him," he said simply.

Mac nodded. "Who was that on the phone?"

"The Georgia police. As soon as they saw the sketch, they recognized it. The guy they want is named Moore too. But John Moore. Wanted in Georgia for murdering a twelve-year-old boy."

"Jesus." Mac shivered.

"I think we can give this picture to the papers. But, Mac, I don't want anybody to know he's wanted for murdering that kid in Georgia. You understand?"

Mac tried processing the thought. Weeks could see the machinery sluggishly turning over in the older man's mind. He waited. Mac sat quietly. Finally Weeks spoke. "Mac, the parents of the Stern kid will go wild. They could do something crazy like hire private detectives who will mess up our search. But the big thing is not to scare Moore. Don't let him know he's been found out in Georgia. Maybe that way we can get the Stern kid back alive."

Mac sighed. It was so damn clear. Why in the fuck couldn't he think that through himself? He resented having to be told by Weeks. And yet the younger man had merely stated the obvious. There had been nothing patronizing nor deferential in his simple explanation.

"What do you think our chances are of that, Sergeant?"

"By this time, I think we're probably looking for a dead boy." Weeks took a deep breath. "But that's between you and me, Mac."

"Mac, I want you to pick another policeman to work with you on this case."

Mac looked up, combing Weeks's face to try and read the reasons behind the request.

"This is a very difficult case, Mac. Two policemen are safer than one. This guy has killed a child before. He'll feel trapped. I can't send one

policeman out on this job. But if I send too many, there is a real chance that we'll blow the whole thing."

Mac moistened his dry lips. He felt his back begin to ache again. It had been a long day. "I guess you want me to pick one of the young cops?" he finally asked quietly.

Weeks shook his head. "Not necessarily. This is your case. You pick the person who works best with you—who you think will help the most. You know the case. Think it over."

Mac listened with a feeling of deep affection for this man. Weeks must know that Mac would select one of the younger, more vigorous cops to work with him, to do the tough legwork, to protect him and the kid when fast young trained reflexes might be needed. But he had given Mac the dignity of the decision for himself. And Mac knew that if he made the wrong decision, picked one of the older cops, Weeks probably would say nothing—would silently worry and watch.

It took Mac only a few seconds to answer Weeks. "I think I'd like Mike Androtti."

Weeks jotted the name on the yellow pad without commenting or changing his expression. Then he looked up at Mac and smiled. "Good choice, Mac." He suddenly frowned and contemplated the intercom. "It's Saturday night. Mike is single and thirty-one. I'm afraid we might have trouble finding him."

Mac smiled. "If he's not at home, I think I might be able to locate him."

"Well, if not, don't hesitate to get him up during the night."

"Look, Sergeant, if I don't get him now, he might not be home during the night."

"You're right, Mac. I forgot. Well, if you can't find him, get him in the morning. Would you be willing to work through the night? Tracing the old woman's story?"

Mac nodded.

"How about your wife? Is she taken care of?" Weeks asked simply.

Mac was stunned at the man's question. This was the first time Weeks had ever mentioned Maureen. He was not even aware that Weeks had overheard the telephone call.

"Sorry to pry, Mac," Weeks said gently. "But if your wife needs help, maybe we can find some. It's been a very long time since you've been on

such a big case, and it may keep you away from home for long hours ... nights. You know what I mean.”

Mac nodded dumbly. Finally he managed to answer in an embarrassed voice, “Thanks, Sergeant, but a neighbor lady will look after my wife. It won’t keep me from staying on the job.”

Weeks nodded. “Good. Now try and find Androtti. I’ll stay here tonight and keep in touch with you by car radio.”

“You’ll be here all night?” Mac frowned.

Weeks smiled and shrugged. “Hell, Mac, you might want to talk to somebody at three in the morning.”

Shit, Mac thought, sergeants took their calls at home, especially on Saturday nights. And this young guy is going to sit in this fuckin’ office all night waiting to hear from me.

“I could call you at home, Sergeant Weeks,” Mac offered.

“Mac, I just missed a theater curtain five minutes ago. All I’ve got in my apartment is me and my television set. My friends will go out and get drunk after the show. So unless you want me polluted or bored to death in my apartment, I’d appreciate it if you’d let me stay here and keep up with this case.”

Mac became aware of the rising sense of excitement and vitality coursing through Weeks. He’s living through this goddamn case, he thought. This is his fuckin’ life. He’s getting a real high on this—like me. The son of a bitch isn’t that different on the inside than the rest of us used to be. It’s only the outside.

“Sure.” Mac shrugged. “Suit yourself. I’ll call in frequently,” he said as he left the sergeant’s office.

He found a telephone book in a deserted office and looked up Mike Androtti’s home phone number. After signaling Winnie at the desk for an outside line, he dialed slowly, praying that Mike would be at home, that he wouldn’t have to track him down at one of *those* places. The phone rang at the other end, but no one picked up the receiver.

Shit, Mac thought. Which one of those goddamn bars will I find him in? There are so fuckin’ many of those kinds of places in this goddamn area; he could be in almost any one of them. He looked up “Bars” in the Yellow Pages, and slowly and painfully he tried remembering the places where Jamie used to go, urging his weary brain to recall names as his finger moved slowly down the column of small print. Which ones were which?

He recognized two names almost immediately and scribbled the numbers on the desk blotter. I'll try these first, he thought, and I can ask them the names of the other hangouts. They all know the names of the others. It's only the people who never go to these places who never know about them.

Jamie had known them all.

Mac began dialing the first number on the blotter. He muttered a plea under his breath that he could locate his new partner, Mike Androtti, quickly at one of these possible places that the young man would go on the prowl for friendship on a lonely Saturday night.

EIGHT

Arvis suddenly stopped in the center of a thick clump of low bushes and looked around. For several seconds he shaded his eyes and turned his head in all directions. Ricky held on to the coarse hand and stared up at the moving head. His feet had begun to hurt from the attempt to keep up with the long strides of the bigger man. The muscles in the backs of his legs were aching and drawn tight from the half-running gait he had tried to silently maintain without falling.

“Are we lost, Arvis?” he asked in a small voice.

The tall man did not answer. He took several deep breaths and continued to peer into the distance in all directions. “Shit,” he muttered.

“We’re lost, aren’t we?” Ricky asked again.

Arvis took several steps forward, dragging the startled boy by the hand so suddenly that he collided against the man’s side. But Arvis did not seem to notice. The tall man separated several tall weeds and stared between the moist fronds. His face suddenly broke into a grin. “There it is,” he said happily.

He pulled on the boy’s hand gently, and together they made their way between the tall weeds for a short distance and then suddenly burst out onto a dusty sunlit country road. The road curved snakelike in both directions. Ricky couldn’t see around the bend either way for any great distance. He was at a different place than he remembered from the dark night before. There was no blinking sign announcing “Bo’s Place” anywhere in sight. Only the two figures stood squinting in the sudden total sunlight of the open road. No cars could be seen coming in either direction as they stood staring at the quiet countryside and the winding dirt road.

“What are we going to do, Arvis?” Ricky asked as he gently slipped his hand out of the grasp of the older man. He rubbed his palms together lightly.

Arvis looked down at him and smiled easily. “Hitch a ride,” he answered in a calm voice.

Ricky frowned. “Where?”

Pointing his finger toward the right, Arvis answered, “There.”

“Where’s that?” Ricky asked.

“North,” Arvis replied.

“You sure?” Ricky asked quietly.

Arvis nodded. “Yep.”

Ricky bit his lip before he said, “Arvis?” He hesitated, afraid to go on.

“Yeah?” The man was a few steps from him, staring at him.

“Is that in the direction where I live?” His voice was tremulous.

Arvis shook his head, “No.”

Ricky stood silently, knowing that he should not pursue the question any further. He still felt the aching in his buttocks and his legs as he stood quietly, feeling the heat of the morning sun slowly bake his moist clothing and dry his damp skin. He stared down at the pebbles that lined the edge of the road.

Arvis’s voice carried over toward him. “What’s the matter, kid? I thought you wanted to stay with me. Don’t you want to stay with me?” The voice grew insidiously more insistent with each phrase.

Ricky froze. His neck felt the rays of the sun but he felt cold and clammy. His head began to throb with the hint of sharp pain at the temples. He finally looked up at the bearded man and attempted a weak smile. “Oh, I do, Arvis. But I was just thinking. Monday is school. I really can’t miss too much school,” he said as lightly as possible.

Arvis kicked the nearest pebble, sending it skimming along the flat, dirt-packed road past Ricky, who watched the crazily dancing stone with fascination and dread.

“Shit. School is shit. It ain’t worth thinkin’ about”

Ricky shook his head. “Gee, I like it. I’m very good in school, Arvis. I don’t want to miss it.” He tried to sound as earnest and sincere as he could.

“Believe me, kid, school is pure shit. I did real well too. I was gettin’ the best grades in the class. Me and my friend. When we was in high school. Then I got pulled out in the middle of my third year. Went to another school in another city. Nobody gave a shit for me there. So I didn’t study. And I quit goin’. My mom caught me one day and beat the livin’ piss outta me. So I finished. Barely got the hell out. But what good did it do me? So I got out. So what? I couldn’t get a decent job no matter where we moved. Slinging hash. Once I fixed cars. School didn’t do shit for me. You’ll see.”

Ricky watched the tall man move restlessly as he spoke, his body defending itself against the pain of the past. The air was charged with the

vibrations of the strange man's thoughts.

He risked the next question. "How about your friend? The one you're always talking about. How did he do?"

Arvis stopped still in his tracks, his body ceased all movement. He stared at the boy with dead eyes. His lips moved almost soundlessly as Ricky moved closer so he could hear the answer.

"He did fine. We never saw each other again. But I know he did real well."

Ricky stared at the rigid figure of the tall man. He could not stop his questions. "How do you know?"

"Because I do. He was special. Now I said school was shit. And if I say it's shit, then that's what it is. And I don't want to talk about it anymore. You hear?" Arvis took a threatening step toward the boy. Ricky nodded quickly and held up his hand reflexively as if to ward off a blow. Arvis raised his head and seemed to be listening to something in the distance. Suddenly from around the left curve a car appeared. It sped quickly by as Arvis held out his arm to signal the car to stop. As the small new Datsun careened around the curve and disappeared. Arvis yelled after it, "Fuck you."

Ricky felt a little weak, his head was starting to spin with the beating of the headache. He thought he might fall down. Stumbling slightly, he tried walking toward Arvis but his legs seemed strangely detached and lifeless. He could feel his knees trembling somehow but he did not feel associated with the movement.

"Arvis. I'm sitting down over there," Ricky said, pointing to a large rock by the side of the road.

"Stand up here beside me," Arvis ordered.

Ricky stared into the determined, stern eyes above the well-formed nose and the untrimmed bushy beard. He walked slowly over toward the rock and sat down. "I said I was sitting down here," he said softly but clearly.

Arvis stared at the boy and then he shrugged. "Then sit" was all he replied.

Again a sound rumbled from the left and grew in volume as a small pickup truck turned around the corner and approached the two figures by the road. The truck slowed as the young sandy-haired driver peered out at the bearded man thumbing a ride. About ten feet down the road the truck

stopped, its gears ripped quickly, and it backed crazily up, causing Arvis to jump to Ricky's side. The freckled young driver smiled and said "Git in." His twang echoed across the country greenery.

Arvis grabbed Ricky's hand and pulled him toward the pickup truck. He nudged him into the seat and pulled himself in beside him.

The driver stared at the two of them and grinned rather wildly. "Where you goin'?" he asked finally.

"North," Arvis replied.

"Well, ah'm goin' in that direction. I'll take you a little ways." Ricky had some trouble understanding the slurred speech. The words ran together like thick molasses and seemed often to get locked between the yellowish teeth that flashed from the pale face.

"That's just fine with us," Arvis said politely.

The car did not move. The young man kept staring at the two of them. "My name's Billy. What's yers?"

Before Ricky could answer, Arvis answered quickly. "This here's my brother Andy. and my name's Johnny. We're hitching back to our place in New Jersey."

Billy whistled through a wide gap between his front teeth. "You all're a helluva ways from home, ain'tcha?"

Arvis smiled easily. "Yes, we are. Ran out of money on a little vacation down to Luray."

"No kiddin'. That's bad, man. I know. I done that. Did ya see the caverns?" The voice rose and fell with laconic, monotonous rhythm.

"Yeah. That was why we came. Real pretty," Arvis answered.

Billy stared down at Ricky. "You like 'em too, Andy?"

Arvis reached over under his folded arm and pinched Ricky very hard so that the boy jerked away. His voice pressed toward the boy. "Did you like the caverns, Andy?"

Ricky nodded. "Yes."

Arvis smiled apologetically. "The kid's tired."

Billy nodded and reached beneath the front seat and pulled out a brown paper bag, the neck of a bottle sticking out from the crumpled top. He winked at Arvis and lifted the bottle to his lips and took a deep swallow, then he reached across the confused boy and offered the paper bag to Arvis. Arvis took the bag; and Ricky watched as he raised it to his lips but did not swallow, his throat moving falsely as he exercised his adam's apple.

Lowering the paper bag, Arvis wiped his dry mouth with the back of his hand.

“Real good, Billy. Thanks.” He handed the bag back. As Billy reached under the seat to place it back to its hiding place, Arvis spoke softly. “I guess we should be drivin’ now.”

Billy blinked his eyes lazily and belched. “Right. Ah’m set now.”

Ricky felt the pickup truck suddenly lurch forward and felt Arvis’s arm move quickly to his chest to prevent him from hurtling into the windshield. The truck careened off the shoulder and onto the road and picked up speed as it skidded around each winding curve.

“Where you headed, Billy?” Arvis asked.

Billy laughed in a silly giggle. “Goin’ ta see mah girl frien’.” He paused and opened his eyes a little wider as he wildly pulled around the Datsun that had passed the two hitchhikers before, barely missing the side of the little car. Ricky closed his eyes and heard the thin, loud bleating of the foreign car’s horn as the pickup truck accelerated and sped on down the road. When he opened his eyes, the truck was veering from side to side and Billy was laughing foolishly.

“Actually ah’m going’ ta git laid. Every Satiday mawnin’, her folks go out to market. And she’s all alone in the house. And ah come an’ get my rocks off. She thinks she’s mah girl. But all she is is my Satiday fuck.”

Arvis looked down at Ricky, whose face was drawn with fear. The pickup truck was speeding down the country road with reckless abandon. The drunken driver was weaving across both lanes of the road without concern, his fingers beating rhythmically on the steering wheel.

“Would you like me to drive for a while?” Arvis asked.

Ricky looked up at him and smiled.

Billy shook his head. “Naw, ah’m fine. Feelin’ no pain. Don’t worry ’bout any cars comin’, cause hardly nobody uses this here road.”

“I was just thinkin’ I wanted to get your ass to that girl’s house in one piece,” Arvis said with purposeful calm.

Billy chuckled. “It’s her piece ahm thinkin’ ’bout right now. What a pussy, Jesus. I jes hope I don’t get too fuckin’ drunk to git it up. That happened a coupla times awready.”

“Then let’s leave the bottle where it is,” Arvis suggested.

“Aw, shit, ah think ah’d rather git drunk then git laid sometimes. Ya know the feelin’?”

Billy looked quickly in Arvis's direction. Suddenly the driver's blurred eyes came into focus and the quick fleeting look of frustration and pain was vivid. But the look rapidly faded and he turned back to groggily lean forward to try and make out the road ahead.

"Yeah," Arvis said gently. "Whiskey takes things away for a long time. But sex only last a little while, and then it's all back again."

Billy turned to stare at the bearded man. "Shit, ya got it. That's jes it. Man, you sure do talk good. You know how ta use words good."

"Thanks," Arvis said calmly.

"Bet you is from some kinda college, ain'tcha?" Billy asked.

Ricky was getting slightly nauseated from the weaving of the truck and was afraid he might vomit soon if it didn't stop.

"Yeah. I work at a small college in Jersey."

"No shit. I knew it. Me, I work on the ole man's farm. I stopped in the sixth grade 'cause I was dumb. But ah'm good with mah hands. Real good." Billy stared down at his hands as the pickup truck started to leave the road. Arvis grabbed the wheel, reaching across Ricky's rigid body, and pulled it quickly, putting the truck back on the road.

Billy realized that he had momentarily lost control of the truck but refused to acknowledge that Arvis had interceded. His hands brushed Arvis's fingers aside and clutched the wheel until they whitened under the pressure. But still the truck swerved from side to side along the narrow road. Suddenly an old blue Dodge loomed large over the approaching hill. The pickup truck continued swerving. The oncoming car honked loudly. The truck swung wildly and appeared to be headed directly for the other car. Arvis reached over to grab the wheel. Ricky stuck his hand in his mouth and cried out silently, afraid of Arvis if he hollered, afraid of the impending crash, paralyzed by the combined fears. Billy seemed to see the old Dodge at the last minute, and he pulled the wheel sharply so that the two vehicles barely missed each other. The Dodge had skidded over to the outermost shoulder of the narrow road and pulled to a complete stop while the pickup truck sped on, now riding the middle of the country road.

Ricky took a deep breath and heard his voice booming out in the cabin of the truck. "Let us out here, Billy."

Arvis turned his head sharply and started to reach his arm over toward the boy; but Ricky raised his hand as if to still the approaching hand, and Arvis slowly lowered his arm, staring at his young companion.

“What’d he say?” Billy hollered out, the loudness of his voice trumpeting through the fog inside his head.

Arvis leaned across Ricky and gently touched Billy’s sleeve. “My brother ain’t feelin’ too good. Would you let us out right here?”

Billy blinked several times and turned to stare at the ashen, pinched face of the young boy. Convinced that the boy was about to get sick, he veered the truck over to the side of the road onto the wrong shoulder and flung his door open, scrambling out. Suddenly Arvis’s door flew open and Billy stood beckoning him to get out.

“Git him out before he pukes in the truck. It’s my ole man’s truck and he’ll beat the shit outta me if anybody pukes in here.” He kept waving his arms wildly.

Arvis slid out of the seat and reached up and lifted Ricky out and down onto the ground. Ricky sank into the light brown dusty earth on the road’s shoulder, his head spinning, his legs weak, his stomach turning over with violent waves of nausea. Billy slammed the passenger’s door shut and tripped several times as he shuffled around to the driver’s side. He pulled himself up into the seat and, with tires screeching and dust rising in thick swirls to cover the faces and clothes of the two hitchhikers, Billy drove the pickup truck away from them with maniacal speed without saying another word.

Arvis coughed several times from the settling dust. Ricky lay covered with dirt on the side of the road, his body trembling, his mind gradually clearing as the wild ride in his head ground to a halt. He closed his eyes and laid his head down on the rocky ground, brushing away the pebbles by turning his head from side to side. He lay there for a few seconds before he felt his body being lightly dusted by the coarse, heavy hands of the other man. Arvis’s voice came to Ricky, forcing its way into the boy’s exhausted, frightened cocoon.

“You okay, kid?” Arvis continued brushing him gently, turning him over slowly, and then lifting his back so that Ricky’s head was resting against his hairy chest. Ricky felt the silver metal pressing into the side of his head, the two arms almost burning an impression into his pounding skull. Arvis’s voice became urgently concerned. “Answer me, Ricky. You okay?”

Ricky nodded his head slowly, trying not to increase the pounding pain. Gradually he opened his eyes and stared into the frightened face of his

companion. He turned his face away from the man's chest very slightly.

"I asked if you was all right." Arvis tried to be firm, but the thread of concern could not be hidden.

"You want me to say it?" Ricky asked wearily.

"Shit, kid. Say it if you mean it. Are you feeling bad?" Arvis now sounded impatient.

Ricky sighed. The nausea was slowly letting up, the waves lessening and the frequency ebbing. The pounding in his head softened but refused to leave completely. He felt his legs becoming stronger, his knees no longer trembling violently.

"I've got a bad headache, Arvis. That was a terrible ride," Ricky said out loud, his words directed toward the forest beyond the two men.

"Do you want to go and lie down in there?" Arvis pointed toward the bushes.

Ricky shook his head violently. "No."

"You scared I'll hurt you?" Arvis asked quietly.

Ricky bit his lip to keep from crying. He nodded. His face remained turned away from the man's chest. He waited for the blow of an open hand or the twisting or the pressure. But nothing happened. He felt the man breathing slowly and deeply.

"If I promise not to touch you, will you go and lie down for a few minutes?" Arvis asked.

Ricky turned to look at the bearded man. His voice returned in firm resolve. "Only if you promise."

"I said I would." Arvis sounded wounded and annoyed.

"You'll leave me alone?" Ricky asked clearly.

Arvis nodded.

"Then carry me over there," Ricky ordered.

Arvis silently lifted the young boy in his arms as if Ricky weighed almost nothing and slowly carried him through the outer bushes to a damp but open spot a few feet into the woods. The big man laid the boy down and then slipped off his shirt. Ricky watched him with mounting rage. But Arvis merely rolled his flannel shirt up into a round ball and laid it on the moist ground. He returned to the boy, lifted him again, and gently laid his head on the crushed shirt.

"Rest," Arvis ordered.

Ricky closed his eyes and lay silently, taking deep breaths, trying not to think of his situation, urging his headache to abate, listening as an occasional car sped quickly by on the road beyond. He did not feel sleepy. His body and mind were exhausted. The aching in his buttocks had stopped and the strength in his legs had returned. He lay in the same position for a long time, allowing his thoughts to float freely without regard to his current danger. He thought about his bar mitzvah lessons and his grandmother's Sunday night dinners and his newspaper route and the last Little League game and the last hit he made just before leaving the ball field and the free and thrilling sensation of running around the bases and the warmth of his mother's bed on the frightening dark nights and the excitement of his hand shooting into the air in the noisy classroom and the flushed feeling of answering correctly and the joyousness of handing his report cards to his mother and watching her face suddenly lose its masklike sadness and break into rare smiles of pride. These images rode on the clouds of his thoughts and settled comfortably on his head, soothing, caressing, gentling him. There was so much he refused to think about—people, times, events—when and where there were no comfortable, soothing moments.

Occasionally his father's face would drift into his thoughts, but he quickly brushed away that image. The discomfort of his relationship with him burned and stung him more than any other. He felt so inadequate with that man, so inferior, so much a failure, no matter what he did. Every time he looked into his father's eyes, he felt his own sense of failure. Somewhere, sometime, he thought, I did something wrong. But he refused to worry about that again today. He had spent so many hours in the past years worrying and wondering about his father. But today he had to get rid of his pounding, tight head, so he pushed the memories of the unpleasant things out of his mind and focused on the softer, lighter, happier things that he could remember. And he allowed himself to become engulfed in these thoughts, drifting with them, riding easily on the crests of pleasure, the warmth, the remembered happiness. And very slowly, with lessening tension and strain, eyes closed, sounds of rustling leaves, birdsong, and the whirring of wheels as his background music, the headache gradually disappeared. Finally he felt sufficiently relaxed to open his eyes.

Arvis was sitting several feet from him, his legs drawn up and his arms draped carelessly around his knees, his eyes resting softly on the boy's form. He made no move as Ricky's eyes opened and the boy rolled off the

shirt-pillow and slowly raised himself up into a sitting position facing the older man.

“How you doin’?” Arvis asked quietly.

Ricky smiled slightly. “Better.”

“I’m real glad,” Arvis said simply, not moving.

“How long have I been resting?” Ricky asked.

Arvis shrugged slightly. “I ain’t got a watch. But I would guess about an hour or so.”

“Thanks for letting me,” Ricky said simply.

Arvis nodded. He pressed his lips together so that his beard tilted slightly upward and creased his cheeks. He continued to stare at the boy. “You don’t have to thank me. You’re my friend, ain’tcha? Wouldn’t you do the same for me?”

Ricky stared at him as the question slowly seeped into his thinking. Would I? he thought. Or would I run away? If I ran away, where would I go? That’s not the point, he thought. I could just run away. But would I? Of course, I would, he thought. But the nagging doubt made his heart pound slightly and his head begin to feel dizzy again. He brushed aside the question and quickly nodded.

“I thought so. See. What did I tell you? We’re gettin’ to be good friends. Ain’t we?” Arvis had a return of his boyish simplicity. Ricky had the feeling that he was talking with a kid from one of the lower classes in school. He sighed and shook his head in agreement for the second time.

“Ready to go?” Arvis asked.

Ricky paused and frowned. “We going to hitchhike again?”

“Yeah,” Arvis said matter-of-factly.

“Arvis, do we have to?” Ricky pleaded softly.

“I ain’t got too much money and we gotta eat. So we gotta hitch rides.” Arvis made a gentle face of comradeship, waiting for instant understanding.

Ricky blinked a few times and haltingly asked, “You don’t need a lot of money, do you, Arvis? We won’t be eating that many times.”

Arvis leaned forward. “Whatcha mean?”

“Aren’t you going to be letting me go soon?”

The older man’s face fell into the sagging contours of disappointment. “No.”

“How long, Arvis? Please tell me how long,” Ricky pleaded.

“A long time, kid. Until I'm finished with you—one way or another. You know what I mean?” There could be no doubt about the threat in the words or in the tone of the voice. Ricky understood and his frozen facial expression told Arvis that he knew what he meant.

“Now let's go.” Arvis walked over and extended his hand. Ricky reluctantly took it and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet and guided out of the clearing to the roadway a short distance beyond.

“Stand back,” Arvis ordered. “It'll be easier to get a ride with only one of us showin'.”

Ricky stood in the shadow of a fairly tall oak tree with leaves that created an umbrella of shade over him, almost completely hiding him from sight. Arvis walked briskly to the side of the road and stood waiting for the passing cars. I'll never get away, Ricky thought. I'm going to stay with this man for the rest of my life. The thought of the duration of his life suddenly caused him to tremble. Oh, Mother, he thought, maybe it would be safer if I did stay with him a long time—until I find a way to get home—or he'll kill me. But how long is long? And what does he want from me next? And where am I going? Again his thoughts began to crash against his head, creating a growing ache as his eyes focused on the tall man in dirty wrinkled overalls with his arm outstretched standing by the side of the road.

Several cars went speeding by, ignoring Arvis's outstretched hand. He followed them with his eyes, his lips forming silent obscenities. Ricky leaned up against the tree trunk and tried relaxing in the cool shade of the overhead foliage. But his body was still tense and coiled despite his attempts to turn his thoughts from the possible danger he faced. The tall figure standing in front of him carried Ricky's immediate future in his mind and his hands. Ricky watched him restlessly pacing the road's edge, occasionally looking back to make certain Ricky stood in the appointed place, nervously bending his head to listen for sounds of approaching cars. The threat to Ricky's life was contained within those dirty overalls. The danger to his body rested inside the clothing as well. He had known that and survived that. But the specter of his possible death was still unknown to him. He worried because somehow he no longer felt totally afraid. What he was experiencing was the sensation of being unsettled, of not knowing how it would all end, what he was expected to do, where he was going, what all of this meant. As the hours passed, he was becoming increasingly confused by the ambivalent feelings he had about Arvis himself. At one moment he

hated him. Within the passing of a second he could feel the man's pain and frustration, fall into his helplessness, want to reach out and touch him. But the man was his enemy. And yet there were increasingly frequent moments when he had great difficulty seeing the tall man in that adversary light. As he lay cradled in his arms in the woods moments before, he had felt a strange security that only came during those terrible winter nightmare hours when his mother's warm breasts had pressed against him. Ricky was becoming almost as fearful of himself and the confusion in his own mind as he was about the dangerous unpredictability in the mind and body of the older man. What's the matter with me? Ricky wondered.

A black Lincoln Continental cruised by. The man behind the wheel stared at Arvis as he passed. The car began to slow down about twenty feet away and carefully backed up to pull alongside the tall muscled man by the side of the road. A well-groomed fortyish, rather handsome man leaned his head out of the window and smiled at Arvis.

"Hi, Lambda." The man's face creased into an inviting grin as his eyes cruised up and down Arvis's figure.

Arvis returned the smile. "Hi."

"Where are you going?" The man moistened his lips.

Arvis continued to smile. "North."

"Nowhere special?" The words were casual and easy.

Arvis shrugged. "Just toward the north. Toward Jersey."

"That is a lambda medal, isn't it?" The man pointed to the medal hanging from the tarnished chain around Arvis's neck.

"Yeah." Arvis nodded.

"How would you like to ride with me?" The question whispered more like an invitation than a decision.

Arvis nodded quickly. "Love to. Where you goin'?"

"Washington. Lots of miles. Plenty of time." Again the studied bantering. Ricky could hear both men in the stillness of his shaded retreat. Their words sounded strange and the tone was foreign.

"I'm game," Arvis said. "Just hold tight for a minute."

"Sure. Anything you say." The man opened the passenger door slightly and eased back into the driver's seat.

Arvis ran over to where Ricky was standing. He grabbed his arm. "Let's go." He dragged Ricky out of the shadows and quickly threw him into the front seat, jumped in, and closed the door.

The man in the driver's seat stared incredulously at the young boy. "Who in the hell is this?" he asked angrily.

Arvis smiled winningly. "My little brother."

"Am I supposed to take him too?" The voice was shrill and impatient.

"Yeah. Please. I can't go without him." Arvis almost cooed at him.

The man frowned. "Listen, stud, that wasn't what I had in mind."

"I know," Arvis said. "I know I disappointed you with Andy here. But please. We gotta get to Jersey."

"Shit, man, I don't run a goddamn chauffeur service. I stopped to pick you up. Pick *you* up. Not transport you and your goddamn brother. Now get the hell out of the car."

Arvis looked panicked. He flashed an angry glance at the man, then looked at Ricky. But he didn't move.

The man kept his hands on the wheel and stared straight out of his windshield. "Come on. Move out."

Arvis moistened his lips. "How 'bout if I put my little brother in the back?"

The man turned to stare at Arvis, who flashed a conspiratorial grim back toward him.

"Okay. Put the kid in the back. And make him stay there. Tell him to look out of the goddamn window." The man refused to turn and look at Ricky.

Arvis opened the door and coaxed Ricky out of the car. He quickly unlocked the back door and motioned Ricky to get inside. "Sit in the corner and stare out of the window during the ride. Do you hear?"

"Why, Arvis?" Ricky was bewildered at what was going on. But he was relieved to leave the front seat, where he had been wedged between the strange bantering, stilted conversation.

Arvis grabbed his arm and pressed very hard. Ricky felt the familiar pain riding up toward his shoulder. "Just do what I say."

Ricky pulled away. "Stop hurting me, damn it." He was shocked by the intense anger in his voice.

"Please, Ricky." Arvis was softly begging now.

Ricky stared at the pleading face of the bearded man and decided that it was safer to ride with this confusing man who sat in the driver's seat than to be left behind with a furious, denied Arvis who could suddenly erupt into anger and attack him in the stillness of the country road. So he slipped into

the back seat onto the soft black leather cushions in the corner of the car and stared out of the wide window at his side. Soon he felt the engine pitch increase and saw the clump of bushes and his tall oak tree disappear as the car pulled away and moved smoothly down the highway. Voices drifted back to him from the front seat.

“What’s your name?” Ricky recognized the new man’s soft, modulated speech.

“Johnny,” Arvis said quietly.

“Mine’s Ronald. My friends call me Scotty.”

“I’m partial to nicknames. Had one once.”

“Yeah?”

Arvis began humming, the tune almost unrecognizable from his guttural nasal tones. The man’s eyes left the road for a minute and searched the face of the bearded man. Arvis stared straight ahead, humming the tuneless melody.

Finally the man spoke. “What do you do, Johnny?”

Arvis shrugged. “Work in a florist shop in Jersey.”

“No kidding,” the man retorted. “I’ve got a roommate who’s a florist. That’s really a coincidence. Where in Jersey?”

There was a momentary pause. Ricky leaned slightly forward to hear Arvis’s reply.

“Atlantic City.”

“Great place in the summer. At least it used to be. Haven’t been there in years.”

Arvis hummed again, then stopped. “Yeah ... a really great place.” There was a brief silence as Ricky watched the trees and tall weeds pass monotonously by. Then he heard Arvis ask, “What do you do?”

“Work for the government.” The man spoke softly, his words barely drifting behind him into the back of the car. “State Department.”

“No shit.” Arvis whistled.

Scotty laughed and repeated, “No shit. That’s where I work. When I’m not playing.”

Again the car was filled with the breathing of the two men in front. Finally Scotty turned toward Arvis and said something in a voice so low that Ricky could not hear. But Ricky watched as Arvis slowly moved over toward the man in the front seat. Soon the two were sitting shoulder to shoulder. Ricky stared at their shoulders and the backs of their heads. In a

little while Arvis looked down and moved his shoulders. The driver lifted his body slowly for a few minutes and then slid back down in the seat. The car continued at an even steady pace. The man turned toward Arvis and whispered something. Suddenly the man's head turned quickly toward the back of the car, but Ricky had anticipated the move and turned rapidly to stare out the window. The man turned back to look at Arvis.

Ricky heard Arvis speak a little more loudly. "I can't. I'd have to take the goddamn overalls off. And the kid would see."

The man cursed. "Shit."

Ricky watched as Arvis turned slightly toward the driver. His shoulders moved very slightly as his arms worked out of Ricky's sight. There was no sound in the car. Finally the driver whispered again to Arvis. Arvis shook his head vigorously.

"Why not?" Ricky heard the driver's voice erupt with irritation.

"Because if I lower my head, the kid will see me. Damn it, he's my brother."

"Fuck him," the driver whispered.

Arvis straightened his shoulders. He moved away from the man. "Cool that talk."

The car slowed down perceptibly. The man at the wheel turned slowly and stared at Arvis. "Do you want this ride?"

Arvis nodded. He moved closer to the man again and began moving his shoulders. Ricky watched the two men with curiosity but finally became bored and turned to look out the window. Suddenly the car swerved, knocking Ricky onto the floor. The car stopped on the side of the road and Ricky lay huddled on the floor of the back of the car. He heard the driver suddenly call out in an intense whisper, "I'm coming." Then silence. Ricky stayed in the same position until he heard the same voice suddenly call out to no one in particular, "Shit. All over my goddamn pants. My new goddamn pants."

Then he heard Arvis respond, "Hell. That's your problem man. You did it. Not me."

The man laughed coarsely. "You're right, Johnny. You did your part. I'm the one who messed up mine." He continued laughing.

Ricky now realized what had been going on in the front of the car. Arvis had jerked that guy off. Right in the front seat of the car. How sickening, Ricky thought. How in the hell could Arvis do something like

that. While the guy was driving. What a crazy bunch of people I got hooked up with. Getting jerked off in the front seat of a moving car. The idea of jerking off another guy didn't shock him. He knew guys in his class at school who boasted all the time about their "circle jerks," but these were grown men and in the front of a moving car. Slowly he realized that someone was staring at him. He looked up from the floor and saw Arvis's face peering down at him.

"You okay, kid?" Arvis asked anxiously.

You stupid asshole, Ricky thought. Jerking that strange guy off in the front of this car while he was driving. You could have gotten both of us killed. All three of us. He stared back at Arvis and made a face. Arvis suddenly realized that Ricky knew and he blushed. Ricky pulled himself up off of the floor and wiggled back into the corner, turning his face away from Arvis to look out the window.

"I asked if you were all right," Arvis called back to him.

He looked at Arvis, his jaw set in anger. "Yeah." His voice was low and nasty in tone.

Arvis finally turned around in the front seat. The driver turned toward him as he started up the car again. "The kid knows?"

Arvis shrugged. "Yeah."

"Sorry. Do you think he just found out?"

Arvis mumbled, "What?"

"That you was gay?" the driver asked clearly.

Arvis shook his head. "No. He knows."

"You ever make it with the kid?" the man asked.

Arvis barked, "Lay off, will you."

"No harm, Johnny. I made it once with my cousin. It was fantastic. Except he's really straight and wouldn't do it again. I think it scared the shit out of him. 'Cause he liked it so damn much." He laughed the coarse, husky laugh again.

They rode in silence for a while. Ricky stared at the scenery, which seemed never to change—trees, bushes, small houses, dirt roads. He felt angry at Arvis but could not focus his feelings. He shouldn't give a damn what the man did—after what he had done to him. He felt angry ... but what else did he feel? He refused to put it into words, so he contented himself with the sense of helpless rage at the stupidity of the whole thing.

Voices interrupted his thoughts. "When did you come out?" the driver asked Arvis.

Arvis took a deep breath. "When I was in high school. My best friend. My only friend."

"Still?" the man questioned curiously.

"Still my best and only friend? Yeah. The only one."

The driver shook his head. "You live with him?"

Arvis snorted. "I haven't seen him in over fourteen years."

"And he's still your best friend?" The driver seemed not to be hearing Arvis very well.

"Still. Wherever he is."

"Jesus" was all the driver said.

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Then the driver spoke. "I came out in the army. Want to hear all about it?" He turned slightly toward Arvis, who had slipped over to lean against the door.

"No," Arvis said shortly, "I don't."

The driver fell into hurt silence and Arvis stared out the window as they sped along. All of a sudden the sound of sirens broke the stillness, and up ahead they saw the blinking red and blue lights of an accident. The driver moved the car cautiously toward the few cars which were backed up behind the police cars and the ambulance. As they drew nearer, Ricky moved forward on the back seat to peer over the front and stare out the window. Smashed up against a large tree trunk, with the engine still smoking, was the old pickup truck in which they had been riding only an hour before. The driver's door was crumpled into folds of metal, and pressed between the folds of the crushed door and the accordion front of the smoking wrecked truck was the dangling still form of the pale sandy-haired young man, his head hanging lifeless and bloody out of a thin opening between the door and the engine. His arms hung limply from the truck cabin, swinging slightly with the boneless flexibility of the dead. The policeman were trying desperately to pry the door open so that they could remove his body. The ambulance driver leaned up against the door of his car, relaxed, inactive, casual, waiting to receive the body. His work was clearly that of transportation and not emergency. The young man was obviously dead. Arvis gasped slightly as they passed the scene. He turned in his seat to stare at Ricky, whose face had become drained of all blood and was chalky white and perspiring. The boy began to cry very softly.

“Jesus, what a smashup! The kid looks dead,” the driver remarked as they cruised by the scene.

Arvis barely managed a “Yeah” as he continued to stare at Ricky’s riveted gaze. Suddenly Ricky saw himself lying out of that car door, the lifeless dangling arms, the staring eyes, the paralysis of death. Now he knew what it looked like, and his own body hung, drained of heartbeat and breath, dangling from that smoking car wreck. He turned away and met Arvis’s eyes. His tears streamed down his ashen face. All he could do was whisper, “Please,” to the bearded man, but Arvis could not hear over the sounds of sirens and shouts. He saw Ricky’s lips moving, but he could not make out the words.

“What’s the matter with the kid?” the driver asked.

“I guess the accident scared him,” Arvis said quietly.

The driver turned around when the car had to stop a few feet beyond the scene of the accident. He stared into the frightened face of the young boy. “Hey, kid, forget it. Everybody has to die sometime. Just be glad it wasn’t you.”

Ricky moved his lips silently. I am, his lips said. I am. I am glad. Forgive me, but I am glad. But it could be me. Arvis, it could be me. Please, Arvis, please. Ricky sat back in the seat and closed his eyes. But the sight of the dangling dead young man would not leave, so he opened them again and stared mindlessly as the ride continued and the countryside gradually began to change to suburbs. The three men rode in utter silence for many miles, each lost in his own thoughts.

Finally the driver spoke. “We’re getting close to Washington. I’m riding downtown. Do you want me to let you off someplace where you can hitch another ride?” He sounded more formal as the city loomed into view.

Arvis nodded. “Yeah. That would be great.”

They rode through downtown Washington. Ricky had been there once before on a class tour, but now the sights of the monuments, the Capitol, the museums were unimportant and meaningless to him. He stared with dull disregard at the famous buildings as they passed. The driver would occasionally call out the name of a famous landmark, but neither Arvis nor Ricky would turn his head to look at the building. The car finally began to pass through the fringes of the city; and the broken windows, the fallen bricks, the dirty clothes on twisted lines became the landscape. Very soon the car came to a halt.

The man announced very officially, "This is New York Avenue. Try thumbing here. This will get you to the highway going to Philadelphia."

Arvis looked around to get a perspective of where they were. Ricky stared dumbly at the passing cars and dilapidated buildings. He felt numb and angry. Arvis started to open his door. The man reached over and touched his flannel shirt on the cuff.

"Look, buddy, I'd let the kid try and get the rides here. The way you look, I think you might not get picked up here. If you do, it might be by the Washington cops. Understand?"

Arvis nodded his head. "Thanks for the advice."

"And thank you for the job." The driver winked at Arvis, who frowned and slipped out of the car. He opened the back door. "Get out." Ricky did not move. Arvis barked, "God damn it, I said get out." Still Ricky remained curled in the corner of the back seat. Arvis reached in and grabbed the boy's left shoulder. He dug his nails through the fabric of the shirt into the skin. Ricky felt the pain but did not move. Finally Arvis moved his upper trunk into the back seat and lifted the boy off of the leather cushion and carried him to the street, shaking him so hard that Ricky's legs slammed down firmly on the sidewalk. The driver leaned back and pulled the back door shut. He stared at the two figures standing angrily facing each other on the busy Washington intersection, quizzically shook his head, looked down at his stained pants, started to laugh in his husky rasping voice, and quickly drove away.

"Stand up straight," Arvis demanded.

Ricky stood up straight "Why did you do that?" he asked with bitterness.

"What?" Arvis questioned.

"Jerk that guy off." Ricky stared belligerently into Arvis's face.

Arvis turned red. He lowered his head slightly and mumbled, "We needed the ride."

"That was sickening. You didn't even know the guy," Ricky spit out at him.

"Hey." Arvis's eyes started to flash. "Watch out who you're talking to."

Ricky flared his nostrils. "I'm not scared of you, Arvis. Not here. Not anymore."

Arvis looked at the boy with surprise. “Just wait. I’ll give you plenty to be scared of.”

“I’m waiting, Arvis. Nothing you do to me anymore can scare me. Do you hear? Nothing.” Ricky’s voice was trembling. He was so unsure of himself that he thought he might wet himself. But he watched as the big man’s face softened and his eyes closed. Something in the expression on the older man’s bearded face gave Ricky courage. The look of sudden helplessness that quickly flashed across Arvis’s mouth told Ricky that he might be able to fight this strange man for control—and win. The thought came and went quickly. But the sense of combat seemed to remain. Ricky took a deep breath as if he were racing on the half-mile track at school trying to pass the moving feet flying in front of him.

Finally Arvis spoke softly. “I’m sorry. I had to. But I didn’t want to make you mad. And we needed the ride. Don’t be mad at Arvis.” He was truly contrite.

“Just promise not to hurt me.” Ricky took deep breaths to force out the ultimatum.

Arvis thought for a minute. “That’s all I’ll promise. That I won’t hurt you. But I won’t promise about anything else.”

Ricky understood what the other man meant. But he had got the promise he so desperately wanted. He realized that he could not count on the promise—that it would mean nothing if he did not do what the older man demanded of him—but hearing Arvis say the words gave him back some of the lost control, the lost power, the lost sense of his own destiny that had frightened him since he met the man hundreds of years before.

“Now what are we supposed to do?” Ricky demanded.

Arvis turned his head to look at the traffic. After a minute he pointed to a spot in the street. “Stand over there. Do you know how to hitchhike?”

“Yes,” Ricky answered.

“Well, get over there and start thumbing. I’ll wait back here. Get us a ride.”

Ricky walked quickly over to the crowded street corner with the rapidly moving traffic and stood just over the curb. He raised his arm and began waving nervously. Finally he settled his hand and merely extended his thumb. Then he looked at the drivers of the cars and he started to smile—a soft, winning, inviting boyish smile. At first the smile was forced and

fixed, but slowly he felt easier, freer, and his face widened into an exhilarated grin.

NINE

The phone next to Dorothea Stern's head began to ring incessantly, rudely forcing entrance into her restless alcoholic sleep. She turned away from the sound, burying her heavy head into the pillow, trying to simultaneously shut out the afternoon sunlight and the insistent bleating of the phone. But the sound persisted. Edward must have gone out, she thought groggily. She considered allowing the phone to ring until it became as exhausted as she felt, and then possibly it would stop. For a moment she pulled the pillow around her ears, but her senses knew that the phone was still ringing and would not stop. Maybe it's Ricky, she thought suddenly, and with great effort she reached out and removed the receiver from the hook.

"Hello." Her voice was syrupy with sleep and alcohol.

"Baby, is that you?" Dorothea recognized the soft frightened voice of her mother.

"Yes, Mom, it's me." She rubbed her aching eyes and tried moistening her parched lips with her dry tongue, tasting the residue of her uneasy sleep lingering with a bitter film inside her mouth.

Her mother's voice was tremulous and breathless. "Have you heard anything?" Dorothea shook her head. Nothing, she thought. He's vanished into thin air. My one connection with all of you has been cut. He's gone and I'm alone.

"No word since you called last time, Mother. It's only been an hour."

She could picture the short heavy woman seated by the phone, twisting a wet handkerchief in her small pudgy fingers, calling and receiving calls from Dorothea's three brothers from nearby states and all of the other relatives, her mother telling and retelling the tragedy with sobs, pauses, embellishments, adding her ideas, her conjectures, the grandmother frightened, saddened, but fully occupied for the first time in months by Ricky's disappearance.

"Please let me come over, baby," her mother whispered.

Dorothea flinched, "No, Mom. The best place for you is home."

"Why?" The question begged for kindness.

“I think I can handle this better if I’m alone.” Dorothea said the words as evenly as possible.

“Is Edward there?” Direct but cautious.

“I don’t know,” Dorothea replied honestly.

Her mother took a short breath. “What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I’m in my bedroom. When you rang I was sleeping. He didn’t answer the phone. So he must have gone out.” Dorothea sometimes felt as if she were talking to her child, not her mother. There was a short pause, a moment for Dorothea to wipe her eyes free of the mucus of sleep and run her fingers briefly through her damp, stringy blond hair. She waited for her mother’s inevitable question.

“Have you been drinking again, baby?” Her mother barely spoke the question.

Dorothea smiled weakly. The ritual never ceased. The preformed answers spun out of her with computerized predictability. “Yes, Mother, I have been drinking. Can we drop the subject?”

“Oh, God, baby, why now?” The question hung around Dorothea’s fuzzy head.

“Why not now? Can you think of a better time?” she asked with exhausted bitterness.

Her mother started gulping. Dorothea recognized the overture to fully orchestrated sobbing. “Oh, sweetheart, you have to stop. Can’t Edward help you stop?”

Dorothea felt suddenly angry. “Listen, Mother, I will stop drinking when I damn well feel like it. I certainly don’t feel like it right at this moment. And, for the hundredth time, Edward and I are barely existing together. He couldn’t help me across the street the way things are. Now lay off.”

The sobs started slowly, the sounds coming in small intermittent snuffling waves.

“Why can’t we talk, baby? You always cut me off. Please let me come over. I’m worried to death about Ricky.” The pleading accelerated.

Dorothea stood by the bed, her small thin figure fighting desperately to remain upright on her sluggish, quivering legs.

“Look, Mother, do me a favor. Stop calling me ‘baby.’ I’m sick to death of it. Call me any goddamn thing but that.” She paused.

The response was a soft and pitiful “All right.”

Dorothea felt no response; nothing in the tender and expectant voice of the older woman warmed or moved her. She knew she should feel like hell at what she was saying, what she was doing to her mother. But her resentment toward this woman ran so deeply within her, so embedded within her every fiber, that she had conditioned herself not to feel, so that the negative angry feelings would remain safely passive and hidden.

"I don't want anybody here. If I did, you would be the one I would want." Dorothea was trying desperately.

"I think I understand." Her mother had ceased crying and cleared her throat.

You don't, Mother, Dorothea thought. You don't understand my world, the whole world out here. You can't comprehend why being married to a successful lawyer, living in a big house in the suburbs, and belonging to a country club are simply not enough. You believe that is all I should want. I grew up believing that was all I should want. And now I can't live with the reality that it all adds up to shit. It doesn't mean a fucking thing. I am miserable, but I still have the residue of your education that tells me I should be happy; and if I'm not then it must be my fault.

"Dorothea?" her mother asked quietly.

"Yes, Mother," she answered.

"Is it crazy if I plan on our regular Sunday dinner? I mean, you know Ricky loved to come here on Sundays. Could I cook dinner for tomorrow night?" The woman was searching for answers.

Oh, God, oh, dear God, Dorothea thought. He's gone, and she's preparing Sunday dinner. I must be going crazy. These things cannot be real, cannot be happening to me.

She sighed and, after practicing mentally, answered in an easy, level voice, "That would be fine, Mother. I feel certain Ricky will show up today. And he'll be looking forward to dinner at your place tomorrow night."

The older woman's voice brightened. "That's what I thought."

"Goodbye, Mother." Dorothea felt a wave of nausea rising from her abdomen, the bitter taste of bile lapping at her tongue.

"Goodbye, Dorothea," her mother said reluctantly. "Call me immediately when you hear."

"I will," Dorothea replied and quickly hung up the phone. She ran barefooted across the thick blue carpet, flung the bathroom door open, and sank to her knees, barely lowering her head over the toilet bowl before she

began to vomit violently. She felt the sensation of spewing out the whole of her life into the shiny white porcelain bowl.

Edward Stern had walked slowly through the back garden, looking guiltily at the deserted swing set which he had cemented into the ground for his only son years ago. He watched the spring breeze move the rusted chains and metal seat slightly to and fro with a barely audible squeaking sound. He tried to picture in his mind the boy resting on the swing seat, his legs dangling, his head thrown back as the wind caught his blond hair. But the image would not surface because he could not remember ever seeing Ricky that way. He walked over to the swing and gently pushed the seat so it swung loosely and wildly, the rusted chains jangling crazily with creaking reluctance against the light breeze.

What can I remember? he thought. So damn little. Silent dinners together. Occasional arguments. The evanescent sight of Ricky's delighted face directed toward someone or something else. Reprimands. Jealousy at his closeness to Dorothea. Allowances handed out reluctantly and then stopped when he took the required job, the newspaper route. Where did we meet together? Edward thought. When did we touch? He mouthed the words ruefully—almost never. My son is gone. And my life is almost unchanged, undisturbed, unaltered. The emptiness in my life still remains but has not grown since yesterday when he left.

He moved away from the swing and stared at the small rock garden Dorothea had avidly designed and planted several years ago. The tiers of earth had been washed away by heavy rains, and the surface ran almost straight downhill. The carefully placed rocks were almost all lying in haphazard piles at the bottom of the incline. Weeds had overtaken large patches of the earth, crowding out the planned design of flowers which Dorothea had labored over with such love and dedication when they had first bought the house. For a brief moment he mourned the loss of her garden, knowing what the untended disarray and weeds meant. Where we have come, he thought with self-pity, how little we have.

The sound of the phone ringing stirred Edward out of his musing and he hurried toward the house. As he reached the side door and opened it, the ringing stopped. He walked into the kitchen, pulled the coffeepot out from the Mr. Coffee machine, poured himself a cup, and sat silently drinking the black coffee and staring at the unfamiliar kitchen in his home.

Dorothea washed her face and stared at herself in the mirror. The high cheekbones rode like protruding saddles under her dull blue eyes with the faint but definite darkening halfcircles underneath the lower lids. Her cheeks hung from her bony, thin face like loosely secured fleshy drapes, moving slightly inward as her mouth opened and she inspected her tongue. Swollen, she thought. And slightly red. Did I take my vitamins like the doctor suggested? Her mind was still too cloudy to remember, so she reached into the medicine cabinet and pulled out several bottles, dumped the multicolored pills into her small hand, tossed them into her mouth, and bent down to drink the cool water from the running faucet. Straightening up, she tried smoothing down her tangled ashen hair, but strands and clumps of it refused to budge. Dorothea searched the bathroom for a brush.

She suddenly became aware of the odor of her vomiting and shoved the bathroom door open even wider. Finding no comb or brush in her untidy bathroom, she moved slowly to her bureau, where she located a hairbrush. Pulling the plastic fibers of the brush through her hair, she felt the sudden sharp pain in her scalp as hairs ripped out of wet, tangled clumps into place. She did not cease combing as her eyes filled reflexively with the pain. Her strokes heightened in vigor, her scalp tingling with the pain of the brushing, her eyes losing their dull numb surface and beginning to come alive. She finished and quickly applied lipstick and powder to her face.

Finally she was satisfied with the mirror's image and she moved away. After carefully thumbing through the dresses hung in her closet, she selected a simple dark blue button-down-the-front shirt dress. No jewelry, she thought. I've always hated jewelry anyway. But none today. Suddenly she had a strong urge to pull off her wedding band which hung loosely from the thin finger of her left hand. But she held back the impulse. She slipped her engagement ring off her right hand and put it in her jewelry box. After she had buttoned the dress and slipped into low-heeled dark blue shoes, she stood before the mirror and inspected herself. My word, Dorothea, she thought, you look almost alive. Almost attractive. Just like you're almost a wife and now almost a mother. It all fits, she thought. She would never reach the finish line of anything. That was why Ricky was gone. He had been her finish line. And now he had been taken away. "Go downstairs, Dorothea," she said out loud. "Go down the stairs and keep on running."

She touched the mirror very gently, but all she felt was the cool surface of glass. Smiling ruefully, she stepped back, turned, and walked silently out

of the bedroom, down the hallway past Ricky's empty room, where she turned her face in the opposite direction and went down the long flight of stairs to the first floor.

Passing the kitchen, she saw the solitary figure of her husband seated at the table staring blankly into space. She took a deep breath and walked in. "Have you heard anything?" she asked simply, her voice slightly husky.

Edward looked up, mildly startled out of his vacant reverie. He stared at her for a long time as if he had trouble bringing her face into focus. She stood silently, waiting. Finally he cleared his throat lightly and answered. "The policeman on the case was here." He spoke in a dull, empty monotone.

"And?" she questioned.

"He said they didn't have anything yet."

Dorothea nodded and poured herself a cup of coffee. She sat across from him sipping the black coffee and staring intently into the drawn, haggard face of her husband.

He looked away but could feel her eyes boring down on him. He spoke very softly. "Dotty, I'm sorry you had to call me there."

She shrugged. "Don't be." Her voice was strong and unemotional. She sipped her coffee with even, steady movements. Her hands clasped the cup resolutely.

He turned toward her. "Well, I am. And I don't know what to say about Ricky." He said this in a stumbling, agonized voice.

"We'll start off by saying he's gone. He didn't run away. I know him and I know that. So he was taken." She finished her cup of coffee and poured another.

He searched her face for clues as to where she was coming from. Her mask of makeup and bony flesh did not move. "Are you sure?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, I'm sure," she replied.

"I think you're right. I was afraid to think so. But you're right."

"I know I am," she said evenly. "And there is one thing I want you to know." Her voice did not change pitch or tone.

He leaned forward. "What?"

"If he's dead, I'm leaving you. He could very well be dead. We have to face that. At least I do. And if he is, you and I are through." She sipped her coffee very slowly, watching his face.

Edward simply nodded. He did not answer. He looked down at his fingers as he gently laid them in his lap and folded them tightly, holding on very firmly.

Her voice reached over to him. "Did you hear me?" There was a mild impatience in her tone.

He looked up into her face and smiled feebly. "I heard you."

There was silence. Dorothea sipped her coffee. Edward swallowed and tightened his clenched fingers. He watched his wife lower the empty coffee cup, sit back in the chair, fold her hands in her lap, and look directly and silently into his face. He tolerated her scalding stare for several seconds before speaking.

"And if he's alive? If he's found alive?"

She did not answer at once. Her eyes continued to strip layers of flesh from his face. Edward felt his cheeks burning under her direct gaze. When she spoke, there was a detached, resigned weariness in her voice.

"I'll probably stay," she said. "He needs a father now more than I need a husband."

He felt as if he had been slapped very hard across the face. His eyes stung and his head felt jarred and unsteady. "I feel so fucking inadequate, Dotty," he said to her, his body slipping down in the chair.

She rose and looked down at him. "Edward, that's because you are," she said quietly and walked out of the kitchen.

They sat silently in separate rooms, quietly floating on the surface of their thoughts, moving infrequently, slumping gradually, then quickly straightening, coughing occasionally to break the painful silence, minds drifting, then suddenly tensing as one or the other crashed against the reality of why they were sitting and waiting for the unknown call, the unexpected visitor on a deceptively sunny April Saturday afternoon.

The phone rang suddenly, the noise reverberating throughout the mourning house. Dorothea jumped up from her chair in the living room, knocking her knee against the coffee table, overturning a crystal vase of freshly cut flowers, sending the water spilling over the plush carpet as she rushed toward the urgent ringing. Edward stood up slowly from the kitchen chair, his long cold fingers pressed firmly against his crumpled pants, watching Dorothea darting by him, waiting, terrified, but unable to reach out and touch the phone which was within his arm's reach.

“Hello,” Dorothea shouted into the phone.

The studied, calm voice of a man slowly filtered through the receiver. “Mrs. Stern?” the steady voice inquired.

“Who is this?” Dorothea literally screamed.

“Ira London calling.” The tone was carefully professional.

Dorothea’s face fell into folds of exasperation. “Rabbi. It’s you.” She could not hide her disappointment.

“Yes. I’ve just heard about Ricky.” He stopped cautiously.

Dorothea bit her lip impatiently. “What do you want, Ira?”

The drawling tone continued. “I want to know if there’s anything I can do.”

Ricky’s mother closed her eyes for a brief minute and took several controlling breaths. “No, thank you, Ira. We’re waiting to hear from the police.”

“Everything will be all right, Dorothea,” the rabbi said, trying a deep, husky voice of reassurance.

“How in the hell do you know that?” Dorothea said loudly.

Edward turned his head to stare at his wife angrily.

“I don’t.” Ira London sounded distressed.

“Neither do I,” Dorothea said dully.

“I wish I knew what to say, Dorothea.” The rabbi’s voice was now desperately searching for phrases.

“Listen, Ira, I understand,” Dorothea commented dryly. “They don’t teach you about kidnappings in rabbinical school. Just hang up and hope to God Ricky will be at that altar in three weeks to be bar-mitzvahed. And that you won’t be coming to a funeral instead.”

The young rabbi gasped. “Don’t talk like that,” he managed.

“That’s the way I always talk when I’m sober, Ira. You know that. I see things like they really are.” Dorothea was becoming belligerent. The alcohol’s numbness was wearing off and her nerves were raw and exposed.

Edward grabbed the receiver from his wife’s shaking hand and shoved her gently away. He cleared his throat and spoke softly into the receiver. “Thank you for calling, Ira. We will keep you informed. Goodbye.” Edward slowly hung up the phone without waiting for the rabbi’s response. He turned toward Dorothea and said firmly, “Go back into the living room. I’ll answer the phone from now on.”

Dorothea looked at the wan, pinched face of her husband and flared her nostrils. "Fuck you, Edward," she said numbly and she slowly eased by him and returned to the dimly lit living room.

A black Cadillac pulled into the circular Stern driveway. A gray-haired dignified-looking woman opened the car door and carefully slipped off the front seat. Closing the car door quickly, Helen Stern paused for a moment. Her face was impassive, the lips closed and pressed lightly together, the chin straight forward, the neck long and thin, her hair, meticulously coiffed. She walked around the car in short decisive strides, the skirt of her beige wool suit stretching as her long legs pressed against the fabric with each step.

She approached her son, who had heard the car stop and stood by the open front door.

"Edward," she said simply, bending her head toward him.

He kissed her cheek slightly and she moved past him into the house. He stood for several seconds in the early evening air before reluctantly turning and entering the large room, closing the door behind him.

When he entered the living room, Helen was sitting in the chair he had occupied; she was staring at Dorothea, who returned her gaze directly. Edward walked around the coffee table and sat at the opposite end of the sofa, facing his mother.

"What have you heard?" she asked, smoothing down her skirt.

"Nothing much," Edward replied obediently.

"I can't believe that child could have disappeared into thin air." The statement was a fact.

Edward shrugged. "It appears that way, Mother."

She turned her head angrily toward him. "Have you hired private detectives?"

He shook his head mutely.

"Good Lord, Edward. I'll pay for the detectives," she snapped.

Edward tried not to look at Dorothea as he answered. "I can afford it, Mother. But the police said it might increase the danger."

Helen Stern frowned. "I don't believe them."

At that moment, the phone rang again. Edward bolted from the sofa like a coiled spring. Dorothea moved forward in her seat on the sofa. Helen

Stern sat watching both of them. Edward was almost running toward the kitchen as he heard his mother's cool voice. "Answer the phone, Edward."

Dorothea watched Helen Stern's eyes roam over her as they both sat silently opposite each other. Edward's muffled voice could be heard in the kitchen.

Helen took out a cigarette, lit it, blew smoke toward the ceiling, and then spoke evenly to Dorothea. "Are you sober?" The voice was direct and probing.

Dorothea did not move. She was straining to hear Edward's voice. "Yes," she answered simply.

Helen inhaled her cigarette again. "Are you sure?" The words were mixed with cigarette smoke.

"Would you like to smell my breath?" Dorothea asked peevishly.

Helen turned away. "Don't be disgusting, Dorothea."

"That's hard for me, Helen," Dorothea said sarcastically.

The two women sat not talking, faces averted from each other, self-consciously studying inanimate objects in the room as Edward's voice drifted in from the kitchen.

Finally he hung up and hurried back into the living room speaking loudly as he entered. "That was a Sergeant Weeks. A black woman thinks she saw Ricky in a bus. She wants money. Five hundred dollars. I told him to give her anything. They don't want us to do anything. Just wait" His words sped by the two women.

Dorothea suddenly felt her composure fading as panic began creeping over her entire body. "Was he alone, Edward?" she asked hesitantly.

Edward stared at the floor and murmured, "No." He moved to the sofa and sat down, his knees trembling.

Dorothea sat stunned. It was what she had feared. She didn't have to ask for the rest. But she heard Helen's voice cut through her silent fright.

"Who was with him?"

"An older man," Edward said softly.

Helen Stern moved uncomfortably in her chair. "That's serious, Edward."

"I know, Mother," he said quietly.

"Well, do something. For God's sake, stop sitting there like a goddamned ninny and do something," she ordered in a mildly hysterical voice.

“What do you want, Helen?” he asked, looking dumbly at her.

“Private detectives,” she demanded.

Dorothea rose from the sofa suddenly. Her voice quivered with rage. “There will be no private detectives. The police think he could be killed more readily if the man feels pressured. Edward just said that. I will not have my son killed because you want private detectives.”

Helen spoke to her in a patronizing voice, the forced gentleness suggesting Dorothea’s inability to comprehend. “I don’t want Ricky killed, Dorothea. I want him found.”

Dorothea looked at the poised, calm older woman for a long moment and then turned to stare at Edward, whose body slumped in the sofa, his head bent over and his arms hanging limply at his sides.

“Helen, if twenty years ago you had been where I am now, I doubt very much if you would have cared if Edward was found dead or alive. I care.”

The older woman’s face sagged. The loss of composure told Dorothea that Helen had been deeply shocked by her words. Helen’s body shook and her hands moved restlessly in her lap. “How can you say that?” she whispered.

Dorothea pulled her body up so that her tiny frame stood very straight. “Because it’s true. You know it’s true. I know it’s true. And, God forgive him, so does Edward.”

Dorothea took a deep breath in the uncomfortable silence. Suddenly she felt very tired, an overwhelming fatigue that she had been running from. But she forced herself to speak again. “Edward’s father died when he was three, Helen. Somehow I think I can understand what that meant to you. But tell me why I feel like Ricky’s father was never born at all.” Her voice was cold, dull.

“You’re a bitter woman, Dorothea.” Helen Stern’s voice was hollow and her eyes had a trapped look of helplessness as she looked up at her small daughter-in-law.

Dorothea paused and said evenly, “Stick to real estate, Helen. You know houses much better than you know people.”

Helen looked away quickly from the piercing stare of her daughter-in-law. “When his father died, I had to find something to do,” she said almost apologetically.

Dorothea sighed. “You made the wrong choice, Helen. You had a son.”

Edward Stern began to cry very softly, his hands covering his face. The noise was like a muffled plea for mercy, begging them both to stop.

Helen bit her lip and finally spoke to the younger woman in a voice filled with regret. "I hate you for saying that, Dorothea. I will never forgive you for that."

The younger woman listened to the choked sobs at the other end of the sofa. She pointed at Edward Stern. "That's the result, Helen. And I have to live with him."

Dorothea brushed quickly past the rigid body of the older woman, walked into the kitchen, poured herself a cup of coffee, and slowly climbed the stairs to her bedroom.

Helen Stern sat, flushed and angry, staring with wonder at the sobbing, heaving body of her son, unable to move from her chair to touch or hold him.

TEN

The tall well-built young man pushed open the heavy unmarked pale orange door easily and walked into the dark interior. The pulsing music immediately pounded in his ears. His eyes adjusted to the dim foyer. He walked several feet to the few stairs that led upward into the main area. As he entered the high-ceilinged wide room, the blinking lights on the dance floor to his left cast strangely changing shadows over his long handsome face. Glancing over his left shoulder, he saw the crystal ball above the dance floor glittering with the alternating green, yellow, blue, and orange lights. The mirrored sphere spun wildly, shooting off rays that splattered the human figures moving on the wooden floor with colors that quickly washed away, blending into different rainfalls of iridescent drops. The illuminated bodies gyrated and whirled to the throbbing music as the patchwork of colors kept changing.

The man stopped, turned his body fully, and looked at each of the dancers, his eyes moving from undulating slim and tightly covered hips up to carefully dipping and arching shoulders. His wide blue eyes searched their mercurial faces as their bodies continued moving relentlessly to the music.

I don't recognize anyone out there, he thought and turned to scan the long bar on his right. He stood at the far end of the bar near the door. Men lined the bar, bodies pressed closely against one another. A few sat in pairs, heads turned intently toward each other in conversation or silent communication. Others leaned over the bar, elbows dug into the scarred damp oak surface, staring absently into half-filled or empty glasses, their eyes rising to run along the faces positioned up and down the bar, searching for eye contact, and, finding none, returning to concentrate dully on the glass with which they sensed at least some transient, intimate connection. Several men stood with their backs to the bar, drinks in hand, leaning against the wooden edge so that elbows were riding the wooden rim easily, shoulders were thrown back, and tight pants jutted forward, accentuating the straining thighs and groins. The only part of their bodies that moved at times almost incessantly, was their eyes, which darted, paused, discovered and uncovered, lingered, quickly moved on. Periodically two glances would

lock and ask a silent visual question, followed then by a cautious smile, usually first on one face and then the other. If the smiles collided, mingled, excited, movement would then begin. One man would drift casually toward the other. Other eyes watched this slow, predictable, familiar, sensuous ballet with varying reactions—some with bored recognition, others with envy, a few with resigned depression and a sense of personal failure. As the pair would drift together, the crowd of male eyes would lose interest. They would sip their drinks and wait for the next coupling to momentarily ignite the room with the brief but unmistakable glow of promised sexuality.

The man who had entered and was staring at them stood six foot two inches tall, his shadow accentuating his muscular lithe body. Eyes caught and held him immediately, watching his masculine form move with athletic grace, noticing his classically attractive mature, rather swarthy Italian features, following him as he passed, devouring his firm thighs, narrow waist, and full, hard buttocks. The bar was unusually crowded and noisy because it was Saturday night so the man had to run the gantlet of the staring men before finding an open area at the opposite end of the bar.

As he passed two men lounging against the middle of the long bar, beer cans in hand, eyes riveted on his lightly loping athlete's walk, he heard one husky voice whisper, "Isn't that Mike Androtti?"

Mike slowed down and lit a cigarette.

"Who the hell is Mike Androtti?" was the slightly drunken reply.

"He was a pitcher on the New York Yankees. Several years ago."

"Never heard of him." Slurred and disinterested.

"He wasn't big" was the whispered response.

"Well, he's big enough for me, baby." The drunken friend giggled foolishly.

"Sure as hell looks like him." Mike heard the soft conjecture. There was a brief silence before the man continued. "I didn't know he was gay." His voice was husky and surprised.

"You never know. Anybody could be" was the cryptic thick-tongued retort of his friend.

Mike smiled grimly. He thought he had heard the last of those remarks. He had been off the pitching mound for three years and away from the big leagues for five. How in the hell did they still recognize him? He had never been famous, not even well known, and as a pitcher during his early promising career he was good but he was certainly far from ever being

great. Strange, he thought, I attract more attention now than I ever did when I played major-league ball. He smiled with irony as he leaned up against the bar, remembering how he had envied his teammates who always had kids waiting for their autographs outside the locker room. The frenetic excitement when they would walk out and catch the eyes of the youngsters. He never felt that thrill. Occasionally a little boy would ask him to sign an autograph book or a program as a way of passing the time until the favorite, the popular baseball hero, emerged from the players' dressing room. He would linger over his signature, savoring the moment, feeling the impatience of the waiting child. Mike had been a relief pitcher. Some years he won more than he lost, saved more games than he threw away. Particularly in those very early years. But he had never achieved the fame he had dreamed of as a young player, had longed for during those initial years.

He moistened his lips. How distant that all seems now, Mike thought as he moved up against the firm edge of the bar. How trivial. But then it had seemed so very important. He sighed as he remembered lying awake in Holiday Inn hotel beds listening to a snoring teammate, unable to sleep, wondering if the kids, the newspaper writers, all of the fans, knew about his secret. If that was why they refused to make him the star he so wanted to be then. He rubbed his hands together easily. No more sleepless nights, he thought. No more fucking baseball games. No more knots in his stomach as he faced a hitter, no more sore elbows, no more empty, unrealistic, foolish young dreams of the Baseball Hall of Fame. All behind me now except the occasional whisper "Isn't that Mike Androtti?" on the street, in the station house, in the bars.

Two young men worked furiously behind the bar, replacing drinks, picking up change, dumping ashtrays, ringing up money on the loud cash register, moving rapidly down the expanse of the bar. Their bodies seemed always in flight. One was small, dark, and muscular. He wore a form-fitting tee shirt that showed off his carefully exercised and fully developed chest with the small hard nipples and the firm flat abdomen. His denim Levi's were tight and smooth across his taut thin lower body. His crotch bulged outward from his pelvis in an obviously lewd gesture of defiance and invitation. Catching Mike's eye, he smiled and nodded from the middle of the bar, indicating that he would be over to serve Mike very soon.

Mike became aware of the humming noise around his head. Voices rose and fell in baritone excitement. Bodies shifted position constantly, stirring the room into perpetual motion. He glanced to his right. A heavysset florid older man in a suit and tie played with his full glass of brown liquid, moving the base in wet circles, glancing frequently in Mike's direction out of the corner of his eye. Turning his body very slightly, Mike took a step in the opposite direction to his left. Having received the message, the man looked away and the furtive glances ceased.

"How's my favorite cop?" José's whispered voice struck Mike's ear as he moved, so Mike could not be sure where the voice was coming from.

He turned quickly, startled, and then saw José. "Not so fucking loud." He made a face.

"Sorry, handsome." José winked. "How are you?"

Mike winked back at the small dark young man leaning toward him from the other side of the bar. "Great. How about yourself?"

"Busy as shit. Every D.C. gay is in this place tonight. And drinking like crazy queens." José scowled.

Mike answered with casual ease, "Stop bitching. It's good for business."

José made a face and spoke shrilly. "Who the fuck cares? I don't own this place. I only work here."

"Yeah, but look at all the cruising you can do when you're busy." Mike smiled mischievously and waved his hand toward the congestion of shifting male bodies.

José laughed. "Hell, Mike, you know I don't cruise when I'm on the job."

Shaking his head, Mike responded with a deep throaty laugh. "The fuck you don't."

"Oh, come on, Mike," José protested.

Mike looked down at José. "Then why in the hell would you wear a cock ring to work?"

José flushed and followed Mike's gaze to the prominent bulge in his pants. "Can you tell?" he asked sheepishly.

"I can tell." Mike nodded.

José smiled broadly, his capped white front teeth suddenly exposed. "Yeah, brother, but you've been down there. So you should know." He winked at Mike.

“You see, you can’t give it up even when you’re behind the bar.”

José wrinkled his forehead. “I don’t get you.”

“You’re cruising me right now,” Mike teased.

José nodded. “Shit, Mike I’d cruise you if I was drowning.” He paused. “Any chance tonight?”

Mike looked at the thick black curly hair and the youthful Puerto Rican face. Sudden rapid memories flashed by, momentarily stirring his thoughts and causing him to reflexively tighten the muscles of his thighs.

“Maybe, José. We’ll see. You get off so damned late.” Mike was hedging. José knew it. The young Puerto Rican wiped off the bar in an effort to look busy as he kept his eyes focused on Mike’s chiseled features. “For you I’ll get a goddamn headache and leave early.”

Mike tilted his head. “And lose your job. I’m not worth it.” José started to protest. Mike spoke quickly. “We’ll see. Later. In the meantime, how about getting me my drink?” Mike touched the moving brown right hand accentuated by two gaudy silver rings. The hand stopped the vigorous rubbing and rested, absorbing and enjoying the warmth of Mike’s palm.

“A vodka martini. On the rocks. Olive. Very dry.” José paused. “Right?”

“You’ve got a good memory, José,” Mike bantered.

José nodded. “That’s my fuckin’ problem.” He walked away and started pouring the vodka into the ice-filled glass. He quickly added the few drops of dry vermouth, dropped in the olive, and stirred. Carrying the glass, he picked up a napkin deftly between two fingers of his other hand and placed the glass and napkin in front of Mike.

“Here. On the house.” He smiled broadly again at Mike, flashing his very white teeth.

“Uh uh.” Mike shook his head and put two dollar bills on the bar. He leaned over and cupped José’s ear in his hand and whispered teasingly, “You know cops can’t take bribes.”

José made a face as Mike’s hand fell away from his head. “You know, you are a real motherfucker, Mike. I must be crazy.”

“We all are. Just a little,” Mike said simply and started sipping his drink as José hurried away carrying his money.

Mike felt the vodka gradually warming up his body, his muscles relaxing, his mind slowing down from its usual high-speed pace, his defensiveness and discomfort ebbing away. No matter how often he went

into a gay bar, his heart pounded and his body tensed until after the first or second drink. He kept telling himself that he was out now, that he didn't have to sneak around any more corners, that he was freer, less vulnerable than he was when he was playing professional ball. But he never felt fully convinced. Being a policeman didn't help. He still had to hide his homosexuality from the other men on the force. In essence, he was still in the closet, still hiding out. Reporters wouldn't give a damn any longer; newspapers wouldn't jump to tell his secret to an astonished and angry sports world. Those days were gone. But he loved being a cop and he didn't want to lose his job because they found out they had a "queer" on the force.

Mike knew that none of his friends in the bars would ever inform on him, basically because hardly anybody knew that he was a policeman. Only José knew, and he was aware only through a fluke, a coincidence. José had bumped into Mike in the station house in Virginia purely by chance one night only days after the two of them had slept together. José had been traveling north with two friends and had been arrested for reckless and drunken driving after a minor car accident. Mike remembered the stunned look on José's face as they had passed each other in the station-house hallway. José, his face bruised and beginning to swell around the eyes, bloody streaks on his flowered silk shirt, stared incredulously at the tall handsome man in the blue uniform who stepped aside in the station house to let him pass. They had instantly focused on each other, the immediate recognition curdling fear in Mike's gut, causing his face to break out in tiny beads of perspiration. José had stopped walking and gaped at him. The policeman leading José and his two friends had moved down the hall with the other two men, leaving José behind. Standing next to Mike was Wally MacGinnis. The two policemen had just returned from investigating a case in their district of a knifing that had begun as a routine domestic quarrel. Mac had been grumbling about the paperwork the two men now had to complete because the man had stabbed his wife, when José passed them and stopped, staring at Mike.

"Mike, is that you?" Mike remembered the frightened dismay in José's soft melodic voice. Mike had halted. There was no sense in running away or ignoring his small dark friend. He could not predict what José might do. So he stopped dead in his tracks.

Mac had paused as he sensed Mike slow down, and he leaned against the station-house wall watching the two men.

“Yes, José. It’s me,” Mike had said softly, his voice trying to hint to his friend that he was in serious danger.

“Jesus Christ, Mike, you’re a cop.” José had spilled the words across the hallway floor in drunken amazement. He had squinted at the tall man to be certain that the liquor was not creating illusions, nightmares in his blurred mind. Mike could visualize vividly José’s distorted brown face, so different from the smooth effervescent look he usually wore in the bar.

“Yeah, José. You must be surprised.” Mike had swallowed and tried to be casual.

José had continued to look at Mike without speaking, then quickly switched his gaze to the flushed stocky policeman who was shifting his position restlessly against the wall, surveying the scene being acted out by the two young men. Turning back to Mike, José had seen and read the obvious concern on Mike’s face: the tight thin lips, the small glistening beads of perspiration covering the young policeman’s entire face reflecting the eerie glow of the overhead fluorescent lights. José had laughed dryly. “Shit, nothin’ surprises me anymore. Ciao.” He had waved and moved quickly to join his two friends and the policeman who stood waiting for him. Mike had stood rooted to the spot, watching José stumbling down the long hall.

There was a tense, uncomfortable silence. Mike felt a pulse beating in his neck. He turned toward Mac and looked helplessly at him.

Mac’s face was moving slowly as he chewed gum, expression unchanged, revealing nothing; but slowly his voice emerged tensely: “You know that guy?”

Mike nodded. “Yeah.” He waited, the quiet hanging heavily over the two men. He leaned back in an unconscious return to the pitching mound.

Mac grimaced. “I recognized him too.”

“You did?” Mike gulped and wrinkled his forehead, feeling lightheaded.

Mac nodded grimly. “Yeah. He works in a gay bar in D.C. He’s one of the bartenders.”

Mike did not speak. His body felt pinioned against the wall. Every muscle was paralyzed into stone. He tried but could not move. All he could do was wait. The ball had suddenly left his hand once more. He felt the sudden release and he was looking toward Mac, who stood frowning at the plate, waiting for him, in control of his future. The same petrifying tension

overtook Mike as it had so often on the mound when the pitch meant success or failure, his loss or his win, victory or shame. Mac did not seem to be conscious of the personal agony sweeping over the young policeman who had become his uncommon station-house friend.

As Mike stood at the bar watching José rushing from outstretched hand to the cash register, he sensed himself reliving the entire episode as if it were happening for the first time.

Mac had sighed. "I knew that bar. My Jamie went there a lot. He used to fire up and go in there and raise all kinds of hell and then pass out. They'd go through his wallet and call home. Soon they knew him and they'd call when he walked in the fuckin' door. I asked them to. I told them I was a cop. Not to call my friends. I'd go down each time and get him, carry him home." He paused and sighed wearily. "I been in most of the gay bars in Washington."

Mike wiped his moist face with the back of his hand. "I didn't know Jamie's gay," he said gently.

Mac looked into Mike's face with interest. "Jamie *was* gay. Remember I told you—he's dead."

"Oh ... yeah," Mike stuttered, still not making an effort to move his leaden body, feeling a wave of embarrassment that he had forgotten the shared confidence of the older man, drowning in his own sudden personal terror.

There was a thoughtful pause, then Mac said calmly, "I didn't know you was, neither."

Mike heard the words. Mac had not phrased them as a question. Denial was not offered as an escape. The older man had stated what he felt was an accepted fact between them now. I can't run anymore, Mike thought. The pretending is over. I can't hide and shake with fear another goddamned day. And I can't lie. Not even if the man asks me, I can't lie anymore. The hallway walls had seemed to press closer against the two stationary figures.

"Nobody else does, Mac," Mike said as calmly as he could.

Mac coughed huskily and turned his holster slightly as he looked downward. Slowly his face lifted. His eyes were bright. "It's not anybody's goddamn business," he barked and quickly grabbed the young man's upper arm very gently and started him walking down the station-house hallway. Mike remembered that the effort to bend his legs had been overwhelming,

and the hall had seemed endless and without any exit during that short trembling walk.

Mike finished his martini. His mind was so full of the flashbacks of that transient moment almost a year before that he didn't notice the man who was staring intently at him from across the room on the edge of the dance floor and then moving toward him.

José came over to where Mike stood. "Another one?" he asked, noticing Mike's faraway staring face.

Mike nodded absently without blinking. Mac has never said a word, Mike thought, lost in his past. He has never mentioned it again. As many times as we've worked together since then, he's never said another word to me about my being gay. He jumped slightly as José pushed the filled glass up against his inert hand.

"Wake up from your dreams, baby." José's voice was lightly playing with him. "What's his name?"

Mike thought of the question for a second, began to relish the innuendo behind José's words, and suddenly laughed out loud, his dark straight hair falling forward over his drink as he lowered his head in mirth.

José shook his head. "You are motherfuckin' crazy, Mike." He darted away.

Mike suddenly became aware of the eyes of a man focused on his back. The sensation of being watched was part of the heightened sensitivity which hung over the bar like an electrical current. He turned around very slowly and faced the flickering smile on the man's face. "Hi," he said easily.

The attractive older man nodded shyly.

Mike smiled warmly and edged over to make a place beside him at the rim of the bar. He motioned casually for the man to join him. Slowly the stranger made his way toward Mike and placed his glass down on the bar.

"You're a new face," Mike commented comfortably.

The man flushed slightly. "I don't come in here too often."

"I didn't remember seeing you before. And I'm a regular here, I'm afraid." Mike felt himself forcing the conversation.

The other man remained silent. His eyes left Mike's face for a brief moment as he nervously glanced around and then quickly took a long drink of the golden liquid in his glass.

Mike touched the man's hand very lightly. "You're not very used to all of this, are you?" he asked gently.

"No" was the brief, tentative reply.

"You haven't been out very long, have you?" Mike pressed quietly.

The other man smiled sheepishly. "Does it show?" he asked, his voice taking on the timbre of more relaxed conversation.

Mike laughed warmly. "Yes. It glows in the dark."

"I was trying to look like a veteran." The man returned Mike's laughter.

"A gay veteran. That's wonderful. I think I'm just beginning to qualify for that myself," Mike said lightly, moving his body closer to his new companion so that their shoulders were touching. The man did not move away.

"My name is Fritz," the man announced.

Mike nodded. "And mine's Mike. Don't worry about last names. We don't ask around here the first time."

"It is my first time," Fritz admitted.

"In here?"

"In any place like this," was the terse response.

Mike sighed. "You'll get used to it." He paused. "Can I help you?" The question hung meaningfully in the smoky haze.

"Yes," Fritz answered quietly.

Mike stared at the light band of skin on the man's left hand where a ring had been but was no longer. Fritz's eyes followed Mike's down to his hand resting on the bar. He blushed. "I'm married," he said haltingly.

Mike smiled easily. "I knew."

At that moment the phone on the wall just inside the bar at the end of the rows of bottles began to ring. Mike watched José turn and look momentarily at the ringing instrument, both hands full of napkins and moist glasses. The other bartender was leaning on his elbows talking to another thin long-haired boy at the far end of the bar and did not turn toward the noise. José slipped the glasses and napkins onto the bar and rushed toward the phone, wiping his wet hands on his tight pants. He lifted the receiver, smothering the persistent, rhythmic sound. His voice could be heard speaking in low tones into the receiver, but his words were absorbed into the clouds of noise drifting around the bar.

"Shall we go to my apartment?" Mike asked very directly.

Fritz nodded shyly. He lifted his glass and drained it. Fritz turned to follow Mike, who was moving away from the bar quickly when the sound of José's voice stopped them. "Mike."

The young policeman twisted his head around with some annoyance to stare into José's face.

"Phone for you." José extended his hand holding the receiver.

Mike was confused. He had difficulty relating the ringing phone in the bar to himself. "Who knows I'm here?" swept across his mind as he walked toward José and took the receiver. Fritz stopped midway along the bar, saw Mike take the phone, and slowly began walking back.

"Hello." Mike's voice was deeply concerned.

"Mike?" Instantly Mike recognized Mac's guttural tone.

"Yes. Is that you, Mac?" Mike asked, suddenly feeling a cathartic wave of release loosen his clenched fingers.

"Yeah. Hey, listen, I'm sorry as shit to call you there, but somethin's up." Mac was breathless and excited.

"What?" Mike waited.

"I'm on the Stern kid case. We just got information that makes it look like it's a kidnapping, and Weeks wants us to take the case. Right now." Mac spoke quickly.

Mike took a deep breath. "You mean you want me?" he said gently.

"Yeah." Mac's voice was subdued.

"Right now, Mac?" Mike turned back to stare at Fritz's expectant face.

"Yeah, Mike. I'm real sorry." Mike recognized the urgency and pleading in Mac's voice. Mike held the phone for a second. He knew he didn't have to go. Weeks never insisted that his men work on off hours unless they volunteered. He could get out of it. He could refuse Mac. But he owed him a lot. And he liked the old bastard. They were strange allies. And he knew the old man needed him. That was obvious by the rasping voice on the phone. He paused and looked into the holes in the receiver and then back at Fritz, who raised his eyebrows slightly.

Mike twisted the phone in his hand. Admit it, you fool, it's not just the old man. You love being a cop. It's the only time you really feel alive. No doubts. No bullshit. No sore arms or lost innings. A uniform to hide behind, crawl into, use as a shield against the rest of the fucking world.

"You there, Mike?" Mac asked as Mike put the phone against his ear.

“Yeah, Mac. I’m here. I need to get my uniform on. Pick me up at my house in an hour. You remember where I live?”

“Of course.” The old man sounded slightly hurt.

“See you then.” Mike hung up the phone.

He walked back to Fritz, who rested his body lightly against the edge of the bar. The flickering lights from the dance floor, the rising and falling crests of male voices, the clinking of glasses, the hazy fog of smoke surrounded his older friend and created a frame for his portrait. It was a portrait that Mike had painted so often and with so many different faces and bodies in the last few years that one face had blurred into the next. Fritz had become one of those faces. Mike felt detached and unrelated as he approached his new friend.

“I can’t go, Fritz. I have an emergency,” Mike said shortly.

“Somebody else?” Fritz asked with resignation.

“Yes. Somebody else,” Mike answered quickly.

Mike reached out and clasped Fritz’s shoulder firmly. “Maybe I’ll see you in here again.”

“I doubt it,” the forty-year-old blond man whispered, his voice steady.

Mike stared at him for a second. “I’m not so sure.” He released his grip on the man’s shoulder. Mike waved to José, who stuck out his tongue, and then he moved with the balanced coordination of the alert athlete past the twisting heads and the whispered comments, down the long bar corridor. Mike heard and noticed nothing as he walked preoccupied out of the bar to his car parked on the nearby gravel lot.

ELEVEN

Mike heard the short insistent blast of the car horn as he adjusted his holster around his narrow hips. The giddy, slightly drunken, somewhat forced laughter and noise drifted through the paper-thin walls from the apartment next door. She's having a party, Mike thought quickly. He smiled to himself. She's stopped asking me. Probably because her old boy friend slipped next door to go to bed with me the last time I went to one of her crazy get-togethers. Poor kid, Mike mused. How in the hell could she know? He kept her going for eighteen months ... and then with the guy right next door. She didn't even speak to Mike on the elevator when she found herself trapped in the slow-moving compartment with him. Her eyes would flicker over his face for a brief second, almost asking why, then quickly turn away to stare straight ahead at the solid doors. Never a word anymore. Mike thought momentarily, I shouldn't have done it. It was a lousy thing to do. But, shit, she's thirty. She should have known. He paused for a second to listen to the rising expectancy in the frantic voices filtering through the wall. Better luck next time, Molly, he thought. You're not a bad broad, just an overanxious thirty-year-old single woman.

The horn bleated out again. Mike pictured Mac leaning his impatient, coarse hands against the wheel of the police car, muttering quietly to himself. I'm coming, you old fart. He smiled. You're the one who crapped up my Saturday night. So hold your water for a minute or two. He walked toward the door of his small efficiency apartment, passing the framed picture of himself, arm raised, ball in hand, Yankee uniform wrinkled and sweaty under the arms, face contorted in tense concentration, the tall thin body twisted and rigid from the waist down. Hi, chump. He winked as he moved past the glossy print. You really thought you were hot shit. Playoff game. Ninth inning. You saved the fucking game. He sighed. So what? They lost the goddamned playoff series anyway. And where are you now? Wearing a cop's blues and slinging a gun around your waist and running out on a Saturday night to track down a kidnapped boy with a sixty-two-year-old cop as your sidekick. You want to go back? Mike paused for a moment in front of the picture as the noises from next door cascaded around him. Not for one fucking minute, he thought, and he frowned as he opened the

door to the hall and left the urgent sounds of the heterosexual games behind him as he entered the opening elevator doors.

“Where the fuck were you?” Mac grunted as Mike slipped in beside him.

Mike reached over and tapped the upper arm of the old man and said lightly, “Making myself beautiful for you.”

Mike’s smile drew the two men together, the casual warmth slowly enveloping the disheveled older man. Mac’s grimace dissolved into a relaxed grin.

“Shit, if you did, you’re the only one left,” he retorted.

Mike looked into the sagging, dull, aging eyes. “Come on, Mac, you know you’re still the biggest cockster on the force.” His voice was teasing and informal.

Reaching over to turn the key in the ignition, Mac sighed. “Yeah, in my fuckin’ dreams.”

“How about in the john too?” Mike laughed.

Mac took his hand off the key. “You been spyin’ on me again?”

Mike’s face crinkled into a wide, gleeful expression. He felt at home again. These were the easy games to play. Mac was a perfect partner. There were no risks, no dangers, no secrets, only the quiet understanding between two men, whose ages could have made them father and son. Mike leaned back and laid his head on the leather top of the seat.

“You just got hairy palms, that’s how.” They both chuckled and then fell silent. Mac reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a copy of Blickstein’s drawing of Arvis Moore. He scanned it briefly and then thrust it toward Mike.

“This is what the guy is supposed to look like. The guy who was seen with the kid,” he said seriously. “This photograph is Moore without the hair.” Mac shoved the wrinkled glossy print across the seat.

Mike stared at the photograph without speaking for a long time. He turned it around at different angles several times and lightly ran his fingers across the paper as if trying to feel the man’s features.

“Ever see him before?” Mac asked.

Mike shook his head.

“Me neither. We have a line on him though. Weeks got a call from Georgia. Looks like the same guy they’re lookin’ for. Killed a kid down there.”

Mike was silent, staring at the face on the paper. Finally he asked softly, "He killed a kid?"

"Yeah. One we know about so far," Mac replied.

"Jesus," Mike whispered. "Are they sure?"

Mac nodded. "Yeah. Pretty messy, huh?"

Mike took a deep breath and turned away. Finally he said in a faraway voice, "The Stern kid may already be dead."

Shrugging, Mac turned the key in the ignition and started the car. The noise of the engine filled the car for a second before dying down. Both men remained silent, listening, thinking, waiting. Finally the car jolted forward and began to move away from the curb. "Yeah. He sure as shit might be. And we're goin' to have to watch our own ass. This guy is probably nuts."

"He must be sick," Mike answered softly.

They rode for several blocks without speaking, Mac staring intently at the dark fluorescent road, and Mike's head bent, his eyes focused on the charcoal drawing of the man's face lying in his lap.

Finally Mac spoke without turning his head to look at his passenger. "Mike, I hope you're not pissed 'cause I called you there," the older man said apologetically.

Looking up slowly, Mike shook his head slowly before answering. "No, Mac. It scared me for a second, but once I heard your voice I knew it was okay."

Mac's face softened into a grateful expression of acceptance. "Thanks," he commented quietly, still not moving his forward gaze.

The car turned several corners and was moving out of the city.

"Where we going, Mac?" Mike asked.

Mac took a deep breath. "To a place in the country."

"What's up?" Mike asked.

Mac quickly glanced toward the younger man and then turned to pay attention to the highway traffic moving slowly in front of them. "We got this description from an old black woman who was on a bus with the kid and the guy. She recognized the kid from the papers. Right after I called you, a bus driver called in and told Weeks that he had let the kid and the guy off at a stop pretty far out in the country. There's a restaurant out that way called Bo's Place. Weeks said we should try there first and then go through the woods around there."

“You mean we’re supposed to hunt through those goddamn woods at this hour?” Mike frowned.

Mac smiled. “You scared?”

“You’re fucking right, I’m scared. I never was much good at camping out. I used to throw up a lot”

Mac laughed. “When was that?”

“When I was thirteen and my mother made me go to this camp for a month. I hated the damn place. And I especially hated the camping out,” Mike commented.

“So you’d upchuck?” Mac smiled.

Mike laughed. “The first few times. After that they’d let me stay back in the bunk.”

“Didn’t they make fun of you?” Mac asked, his eyes shifting toward Mike.

Mike sighed softly. “Hell, no. I was the star pitcher that month. The best damn ball player they ever had at that two-bit camp. So I got away with it.”

“How come your old lady made you go there?” Mac questioned curiously.

“My mom was a pretty smart old lady. I think she suspected that something wasn’t altogether right with her baseball player. So she sent me there to toughen me up—to make a man out of me,” Mike replied sardonically.

Mac continued directing the car along the straight road out of town. “Did it help you?”

There was silence for a brief period before Mike replied. “Well, what do you think?”

Mac shrugged. “Depends on how you look at it,” he said softly.

Mike reached over and pressed his hand against the older man’s taut shoulder. “Mac, you really are a nice son of a bitch. You know that?” He let his hand drop.

The older policeman did not respond. The road began to narrow as the car moved farther out of the suburban area into the wooded country. Finally the old man turned his head, his eyes bright, his worn face intentionally severe, his voice teasing. “Listen, kid, you upchuck on me in those damn woods and I’ll rub your fuckin’ face in it.”

Mike smiled and quickly answered, "I hear you." He turned his face to look out of the window as the darkness gathered around the moving car, the number of street lights lessening quickly as the wooded country sped by.

The obese woman stared at the drawing for a long time. Her elbows pushed forward, the pendulous fat swinging like a frame around the periphery of the charcoal drawing. Her face moved slowly and methodically as she chewed the last bite she had taken of the greasy hamburger sitting on the plate in front of her. Finally she swallowed and ran her grimy hand across her wet mouth. Wrinkling her nose, she nodded. "I seen 'em," she drawled.

Mac waited. Mike spoke finally in a sharp direct voice. "When?"

Her puffy eyes ran up and down the firm young handsome policeman. "Yesterday."

"What time?" Mike asked with an added note of authority in his voice.

"Don't rightly recall." She challenged the young man.

Mac moved over toward the counter and lifted his frame onto one of the stools. He grunted and smiled. "Hard for us big folks on these two-bit stools." He stared at her easily.

She looked over at him and nodded. "Ain't that the truth."

Mac nodded in return and rested his hands, folded loosely, on the counter. "What kind of coffee you serve in this place?" he asked comfortably.

She shrugged slightly. "Good coffee."

"Well then, how's about two cups for the youngster and me?" He played with her lightly.

She stared at Mac, with a barely perceptible change in expression flickering across her face. Mike noticed the sudden coquettishness lift her thick cheeks and open her swollen eyes.

"Cops ain't my favorite customers," she taunted softly.

Mac smiled a half-smile, his head tilting barely an inch or two in her direction. "If I took this uniform off, I'd just be another guy."

She shrugged halfheartedly. "You'd still be a cop."

Mac moved his head back and forth as if he were seriously considering her remark. "Yeah. But you wouldn't know. And I bet you wouldn't care." He answered with a flippancy that startled Mike who stood watching the two heavy people playing out the strange dialogue.

The woman lifted her elbows off the counter and pushed herself back from the edge. She moved her huge body heavily toward the stove, where the aluminum coffeepot sat with the brown drippings running in dried streams over the surface. Mike moved toward the counter and sat several seats away from Mac, turned halfway around in his direction. Soon the woman lumbered back, setting one cup of black coffee in front of Mac and sliding the other toward the area where Mike was sitting. Mike had to scissor his body to reach over and pick up the cup, concerned about moving too close and interrupting Mac and the woman.

Mac lifted the coffee cup to his lips and sipped. "Good," he said out loud.

Mike drank his, tasting the bitter burnt taste, and almost choked. But he swallowed and nodded in agreement. They continued drinking slowly, the empty diner filled only with the occasional whirring sound of flies before they settled on the unwashed surfaces. The fat woman watched Mac slowly drinking his coffee with pretended disinterest.

Mac took another swallow. "What's your name?"

No change in the fat woman's face. "They call me Mamie."

"What is your name?" Mac asked, appearing genuinely interested.

The woman scowled. "None of your damn business."

"You're right," Mac said. Mike forced his mouth to remain closed. "But supposin' I wanted to know." Mac's voice had acquired a low, seductive tone that almost made Mike laugh out loud.

"Clara Henry" was her short reply.

Mac smiled warmly. "Can I call you Clara?"

"Suit yourself." Mike could see the woman pressing her massive breasts tightly against the counter edge as she leaned toward Mac, completely forgetting that Mike was sitting to her right.

"Well, then, Clara, how about givin' me a break for starters?" Mac asked simply. "I need to know about the kid and that guy. What time were they in here?"

"The guy in trouble?" She squinted.

Mac nodded, "Yeah. Kidnappin'."

"No shit!"

"Yeah. And it's ass if I don't find the kid before he kills him." Mac laid his hands palms down on the counter, very close to the woman's beefy fingers. Mike suddenly noticed that Mac had slipped off his wedding ring.

The woman stared at his hands. Then she looked up into Mac's open, inviting face and spoke. "They was in last night. Round eight or so. Could of been later. I never pay much attention to the time. Anyway, he bought burgers for him and the kid. Told me the kid was his brother." She stopped and closed her eyes as if that might help her slow mind remember the events more clearly.

"That's a real big help, sweetheart," Mac said coaxingly. "Can you remember anything more?"

She finally opened her eyes. "Yeah. The kid was cryin' and the guy says that the kid was tired and spoiled. And then the two of them left in a hurry."

Mac moistened his lips. Mike watched with fascination. Mac's whispering voice reached out and enveloped the attentive woman. "They took the stuff out?"

"Yeah," she answered. "I thought they was going in a car. But I never heard a car after they was gone. I remember wonderin' about that now."

"That's beautiful." Mac let the words sink in very slowly before speaking again. "Did you see them again?"

She shook her head. "No. I close up at two. I never saw him again." She pointed to the face on the paper lying carelessly on the counter to her right.

"Where do you think they could have gone?" Mac asked gently.

She thought for a few seconds before replying. "Well, they could of hitched a ride. Or they could of gone into the woods."

"Which woods?" Mac asked. The question hung precariously in the air, both men waiting for the answer to fall over them.

Clara was getting tired of the questions. She moved her obese form restlessly and swatted at a fly with an irritated gesture. "The only woods is to that side of this place." Her fat arm pointed toward the right. "They's pretty deep woods."

Mac lifted one hand and gently patted the woman's fingers. He gestured to Mike to pick up the drawing, reached into his pocket, and threw three quarters down on the countertop.

The fat woman watched him with narrowing eyes. "Where you goin'?"

"I got to look for that guy," Mac said simply.

"When you comin' back?" she asked directly.

Mac shrugged. "Probably after I find him."

She grimaced for a brief second and then emitted a prolonged “Sheeeet.”

Mac smiled with a tight, hard grin and winked at her. “You’re right, sweetheart. Every one of us is full of it. Sometimes.” He motioned to Mike and they hurried out the front door of Bo’s Place.

Mike reached into the glove compartment and pulled out two large flashlights. Handing one to Mac, he whistled. “Mac, you’re too much. You had her eating out of your hand.”

Mac sighed. “Poor fat broad. That wasn’t what she was wantin’ to eat. I wonder how long it’s been since she’s been laid.”

“She sure took to you, buddy.” Mike poked him in his heavy round stomach.

Mac made a face. “Listen, Mike, I’m about the best she can hope for. And she knows it. And so did I. It wasn’t hard. It was too fuckin’ easy. And sad.” He pressed the switch and the flashlight suddenly threw a weird straight beam of light into the darkness that separated the two men. Mike did not say any more. Mac’s words were filled with his own personal sorrow. Mike hoped the silence would bury the other man’s inner reflections. The flashlight in Mac’s hand began to inspect the ground that led from the diner, quickly moving toward the right, focusing in that direction.

“There’s the woods she was talkin’ about,” the older man commented.

“Sure as hell looks like it,” Mike said quietly.

“Yeah.” Mac stood still.

Mike shivered in the late-night chill. “He— They might be in there.”

Mac suddenly swung the flashlight into Mike’s startled face. “You ready?” he asked directly.

Mike nodded. He frowned at the disturbing light in his eyes. “Of course I am.”

“Then let’s move,” Mac urged as the flashlight swung back toward the woods and the two light beacons began moving through the peripheral underbrush.

The two men worked their way very slowly through the weeds, vines, trees, and thick bushy ground cover in the woods. They walked side by side, sweeping the earth with their lights, kicking over logs and dead branches, occasionally hurriedly flashing their beams overhead as a

birdsong or an owl sound alerted them to life breathing above their heads. Once a sudden rustle of leaves just beyond their searching beams caused both of them to instantaneously flick off their flashlights almost simultaneously, creep ahead, and ignite the area beyond with light, blinding and paralyzing the foraging raccoon with the unexpected brightness. Turning off the flashlights and laughing together, they listened as the tiny animal scurried away from the two strange blue-uniformed intruders. For one hour they surveyed, searched, probed, prodded, uncovered, sweated, swore, brushed leaves and vines from their faces, stumbled over the treacherous underbrush, unexpectedly bumped into tree trunks, occasionally collided with each other, at first apologizing, finally dismissing the formality and separating to move forward deeper into the woods. After the hour, Mac felt winded and overwhelmingly fatigued.

He paused. "Can we rest?" he asked.

Mike breathed deeply. "Sure. I'm glad you suggested it"

"You tired too?" Mac asked, surprised.

Mike was feeling particularly alert and awake, his tense body responding positively to the chilly night air, the need for dexterous footwork, the nervous energy of the search, the sense of companionship with the older man. He was neither tired nor afraid. He felt a strange sense of urgency about their mission. These deeply embedded motivations had triggered him into an aliveness, a sense of purpose, a sickening combination of fear and anger, a wave of nervous electricity that completely obliterated the time, the dark, the realization of fatigue.

And yet he heard the meaning behind the question being asked by the older policeman. "Of course I'm tired too. What do you think? We've been hauling our ass around these woods for over an hour. Anybody would be tired." A small, repayment, Mike thought. Very small but something he could give back to the old man.

They sat on their haunches in the thick underbrush, breathing slowly and silently, not speaking, for over fifteen minutes. Finally Mac's voice, still obviously fatigued and now hoarser than usual, exploded through the cricket noise. "Okay. It's time to get going."

Mike sprung up. "Right. I feel rested."

"Me too," Mac lied.

The two men continued exploring for another fifteen frustrating minutes and were beginning to become edgy with each other, cursing

slightly and muttering if the other dropped the flashlight or stumbled over a fallen branch, when they suddenly walked into a round oasislike clearing in the woods.

Mike's light immediately picked up the grease-stained paper wrapper lying on the ground. He walked quickly over and picked it up. "Somebody's been here recently," he said simply.

Mac walked over and inspected the paper. "Yeah. Hamburger paper."

The lights painted the earth's surface with their beams, stopping, moving on, returning, suddenly shifting toward the lingering brilliance of the other's beacon. The grass had obviously been crushed by bodies within the recent past. A mound of chewed meat and bread lay in sharp contrast to the moist green plant life just to the right side of a large oak tree. Both men knelt and inspected the material. They stared into each other's faces without speaking. They knew. Words were unnecessary. They found the spot where Arvis Moore had brought the Stern kid. They had been here within the last twenty-four hours, probably immediately after leaving the diner.

Each man separated for the next part of the search, flashing his light into corners, inspecting grass, running fingers down moist, mossy tree bark, scooping up earth to probe for evidence, hoping desperately not to come upon a mound of freshly turned soil that might be cradling the body of a dead boy. But neither man saw anything else for a long while. Mike walked to the periphery of the clearing and observed several clumps of grass lying strewn about against the stems of large green forest fronds. He knelt down and lifted the clumps of torn grass into his hands. At once he noticed the red clotted blood matting the blades of grass together. His nose told him that there was also feces mixed in with many of the other clumps of torn grass lying at his feet.

"Mac," he called softly.

The old man hurried over as fast as his weary legs would bring him.

Mike held out his hand, showing the other policeman the bloody evidence. "Blood on the grass," he said softly. He placed some of the grass into a small plastic bag that Mac silently pulled out of his coat pocket.

Mac slipped the sealed bag back into his pocket. He made a face. "I smell shit," he said roughly.

Mike nodded. "Yeah."

Mac felt the understanding hit him very hard across the face. He turned a pained expression toward Mike. Mike's face was frozen into a mask of

anger. He refused to look up.

“He’s raped the kid.” Mac answered his own question.

Mike moistened his lips and lifted his eyes to stare straight ahead into the blackness of the night forest beyond.

“Mike, he’s raped the Stern kid. Maybe killed him,” Mac said insistently.

The younger policeman nodded, his mind agreeing with the diagnosis but his thoughts running away from the older man at a pace faster than words.

“Let’s go further into the woods, Mike. Who knows what we’re gonna find.” Mac rose. Mike continued kneeling, his hands fondling the bloodstained grass.

“Mike,” Mac urged.

Mike did not move. Finally Mac walked over and lightly pressed his hand onto the younger policeman’s shoulder.

Mike’s voice rose slowly and painfully upward to engulf the old man. “The son of a bitch.”

Mac turned away, flipped on his flashlight, and led the way for the two men deeper into the woods.

TWELVE

Ricky stood on the corner of New York Avenue and North Capitol Street in the nation's capital, smiling expectantly, feeling a little frightened, his arm extended, his thumb protruding outward, beckoning the cars as they slowly filed by in the gradually heightening Saturday evening traffic. His blond hair, tousled and still curled at the edges from his perspired sleep, highlighted his soft, round, youthful features, giving him an angelic appearance totally incongruous with the firm stance and the protruding thumb. Several drivers eyed him suspiciously, slowed down momentarily, then speeded up, wary of the doubt which Ricky created in their minds. The muscles in his raised arm wearied after a few minutes and he dropped the arm to his side.

"Hitch," he heard Arvis snarl from his guarded station several feet away. He turned and stared at the bearded older man, who watched him carefully.

"My arm's tired," Ricky said simply.

"I said hitch," Arvis hissed.

Ricky looked at the anxious face and shook his head. "When I'm ready, I'll start again. Now stand there and be quiet." His voice was clear and direct.

"Shit," Arvis muttered as he shoved his restless hands into the frayed pockets of his overalls and grimaced in a resigned and irritated manner.

Ricky waited several extra minutes after he had felt the muscles loosen in his right arm, testing the other man. He heard nothing coming from Arvis waiting behind him, standing very still in the early-evening breeze. His hair whipping lightly around his forehead, Ricky savored the sense of self-control, feeling on an equal level of dominance as the strange impatient man pacing in his shadow. Finally he raised his right arm again.

Very soon a late-1960s red Ford Mustang with Pennsylvania license plates slowed down and stopped. A gray-haired middle-aged woman leaned over and opened her passenger door. "Where are you going, young man?" she asked directly.

"North. Toward New Jersey." Ricky repeated Arvis's words.

"All by yourself?" she asked, her face quizzical.

Ricky shook his head. "No, ma'am. My older brother is with me."

"Where is he?" she asked, turning her head to scan the area.

Ricky pointed in Arvis's direction. "Over there."

The woman surveyed the tall disheveled bearded man lingering in the background of the intersection. Quickly she shook her head and reached over to pull her door closed.

Ricky moved speedily to grab the door as it swung. He was now standing in the street. He peered in at the gray-haired woman and flashed his most winning smile. "Please, ma'am. I want to get home to my mother. Please." His soft, gently boyish voice pleaded.

She stared at the young face, then her eyes darted in Arvis's direction, squinting as the angle of the last shards of daylight pierced her vision. Arvis seemed to fade into the haze and she was confronted by the begging, clean-cut attractive young boy. Sighing, she nodded.

Ricky rapidly turned and beckoned to Arvis, who sprinted over toward the car. Ricky pulled open the back door. "Get in the back, Arvis," he ordered.

Arvis peered at him hesitantly for a second, then folded his tall body into the back seat. After closing the rear door, Ricky slid into the front seat.

He turned toward the quiet, curious older woman and smiled again. "Thank you, ma'am. Arvis and I are very grateful. Right, Arvis?" he called lyrically.

"Yeah. Thanks, missus." Arvis managed to sound halfheartedly appreciative, despite a trace of belligerence still circling the periphery of his words.

The woman craned her neck to turn around and stare at him. "How come you let your little brother get the rides?" she asked directly.

Arvis bit his tongue gently. Finally he answered in a soft and controlled voice. "'Cause he's better at it than me."

"I can see why," she snapped. She pressed her foot on the gas pedal, and the car inched back into the slowly moving caravan of cars leaving the city to ride northward.

Ricky turned his head around to stare into the flushed, angry face of his companion. He could see the veins protruding on the man's forehead and sensed the inner fury that boiled so dangerously close to the surface. Silently he mouthed the words "Take it easy." Arvis watched the boy's lips

and made a sour face; but as Ricky continued to stare at him intently, he finally grudgingly nodded his head.

“I can take you to Philadelphia. That’s where I live,” the woman said, peering forward at the congested highway.

“That’ll be just fine, ma’am,” Ricky said quickly before Arvis could open his mouth to speak. The bearded man threw himself back against the leather seat in the back of the car, folded his arms, and stared at the soft strands of blond hair curling from Ricky’s head over the edge of the front seat. He felt isolated and alone in the back of the car, and this made him restless and infuriated. He began tapping his foot and humming softly to himself to try and quell the desire to lash out physically to rectify his humiliation.

They drove silently through the slowly moving traffic until the car was on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. Here the traffic thinned out gradually and the woman was able to pick up some speed and drive with less exacting attention. Finally she turned to the boy and commented, “I can leave you off in the center of Philly or on the exit to the Walt Whitman Bridge. Whichever you prefer.”

Arvis began to move his body forward to lean against the front seat and speak when he heard Ricky’s clear, high-pitched voice respond.

“Near the Bridge will be fine,” he said simply.

Arvis reached his hand over the seat and silently grabbed several clusters of blond hair between two of his fingers and twisted sharply. Ricky felt the pain shooting through his scalp into the inside of his head. He gasped audibly and then swallowed the sound as the woman turned her head sharply in his direction. Arvis’s fingers hastily slipped unnoticed off the back of the seat.

“Anything wrong?” the woman inquired, obviously concerned at the sudden pallor and tension in the boy’s face.

“No, ma’am. But I was just thinking that the center of the city would be better. If you didn’t mind,” he said sweetly, smiling at her broadly.

She smiled back warmly. “Of course not. It’s not that far out of my way.” She passed another car and returned to the right lane before speaking again. “You certainly have excellent manners, young man. It’s a pleasure in this day and age.”

Ricky drew his legs up firmly against the seat, the solid support giving him the sense of stability and sanity which ebbed and rose in unpredictable

waves as he recurrently realized the bizarre journey he was taking and the presence of his dangerous, threatening companion. "Thank you, ma'am."

Arvis grimaced and settled back against the upholstery, his foot tapping wildly and his nasal humming rising so that it could be heard in the front of the car. Ricky heard the weird atonal sounds first and was twisting his neck to try and warn the older man to be still when the woman suddenly turned her head from left to right trying to locate the source of the eerie noise. Ricky saw her head lean backward as her ears picked up Arvis's wild, crazy humming.

She quickly turned to look at Ricky with the beginning of fear and concern flooding her expression. "What's that horrible noise?" she asked softly.

Ricky coughed loudly, hoping to alert Arvis, but the rhythmic tapping and the rasping, grating non-musical human sounds persisted as Arvis drifted more deeply into his inner troubled thoughts. Finally Ricky leaned over toward the woman, who had to swerve to miss sideswiping a passing vehicle. He spoke very softly, hoping Arvis would not hear.

"That's my brother. He's not all right. If you know what I mean." Ricky tried to look pitiful, half closing his eyes and drawing down the sides of his mouth.

The woman took in a short, rapid breath, her hands tightening on the wheel. "Is he dangerous? You know what I mean?" she whispered almost hysterically.

Ricky spoke quickly and gently. "No, ma'am. Just slow. He wouldn't hurt a fly. He's the gentlest person I know." He choked audibly as he uttered the comment.

"Oh, God, that's a relief." She sighed. "I never pick up hitchhikers. But when I saw you, I thought you could be one of my students. And then when he got in the car—" She stopped and tightened her hold on the wheel, and Ricky felt the car accelerate and move quickly through the outer lane.

Ricky moved uncomfortably in his seat. He sensed that the woman was driving much faster than she was accustomed to and that she was not in full control of the old Ford, which now rattled and quivered under the demands of the acceleration. "You're a teacher?" Ricky asked casually.

"Yes. I teach at a private special school in Philadelphia," the woman replied automatically.

“What school, ma’am?” Ricky asked politely, hoping to cause the frantic woman to relax and slow down the speeding car.

“Bancroft,” she replied shortly, staring ahead as the old Ford sped by newer cars on their right, causing drivers to momentarily peer toward the car hurtling past them.

Ricky gulped and felt the fear of speed tighten his stomach for the second time that day. The sudden image of the dangling dead body of the sandy-haired young man hanging with limp, lifeless arms from the smoking pickup truck shot through his mind; and he pressed his legs more tightly against the seat to steady their trembling.

“Oh, I know several kids that go to a private school in D.C. It’s called Friends,” he said in a slightly quivering voice.

The woman continued to push the old car as quickly as possible toward Philadelphia as the strange atonal humming persisted drifting against her from the back seat. After a few minutes she turned briefly toward Ricky and asked dryly, “How come you know so many boys in D.C.? I thought you said you came from New Jersey.”

Ricky panicked for a second. He heard the humming and felt the heavy boot tapping up against his seat. He knew that he could not tell the truth or he would pay the consequences. And so might the woman. He could not predict what Arvis might do if he became aware that this woman shared the secret of Ricky’s forced journey.

The words tumbled out. “We lived in D.C. for several years, ma’am. We just recently moved to New Jersey. My brother and I were visiting friends. That’s why we were hitching from there.”

“Oh, I see. Why did you have to hitch?” the woman asked.

The humming had stopped, but neither front-seat passenger was aware of the silence and attention from the back seat.

Arvis stared at the back of their heads and waited to hear Ricky’s answer. His hand slipped into his pocket and pulled out the thick cord that had tied Ricky’s feet the night before, and he twisted the rough cord tightly between his two hands.

“My brother lost all our money,” Ricky said easily, turning his concerned boyish face toward the woman.

She shook her head. “Well, if he’s as slow-witted as you say, you never should have given the money to him in the first place,” she said firmly, her voice rising toward the end.

The quivering indicator on the speedometer moved slightly more toward the right as Ricky felt the car picking up even more speed. Arvis grunted loudly. Ricky jumped slightly, knowing the ominous meaning of the sound. The woman listened, clucked her tongue, and gently shook her head. Ricky turned his head around to stare into Arvis's burning eyes. He saw the cord twisting frantically within the bearded man's hands. His knees weakened and his lips trembled. No, he mouthed silently as he shook his head vigorously. Please. No. His lips accentuated the silent plea. Arvis continued to stare at him with his nostrils flaring and his wild eyes wide open and searching Ricky with the intense fire of his anger.

The coarse thick hands continued turning the cord. Arvis slid over toward Ricky. He raised his arms, the cord now pulled taut in his fists, and leaned forward. Ricky could almost feel the cord around his neck as he saw it coming toward him. He frantically nodded his head in the direction of the woman driving the car, but Arvis's anger had completely dissolved any ability for him to perceive the reality of the situation. All that existed in his life at that moment was himself and the boy in the front seat who had called him retarded or crazy. He was unaware he was riding in a speeding car or that any hysterical middle-aged woman was pounding the gas pedal in an effort to get him out of the car as quickly as possible. It was Arvis and Ricky. And Ricky had said the wrong thing, the worst possible thing. Ricky had made him mad. Maddier than he had been for many months. Since he had been with that struggling boy in Georgia who had called him an idiot, a stupid queer, and other names that had not penetrated his mind because he was beginning to press tightly on the boy's throat at the time. Ricky had told the woman he was dumb, retarded. He had heard it. And he was going to teach him a lesson. Nobody called Arvis Moore those names anymore. Nobody. The panic on Ricky's face slowed him down for a second. This face was different than the others. This face had said nice things. He could really like this boy. But he had to be punished. He had to learn. The arms moved forward as Ricky's mouth opened to scream.

Suddenly Arvis stopped. He scanned the terrified face of the young boy. He felt his heart trumpeting within his ears. His strong hands felt awkward and weak; the cord slipped into a slack, limp connection between his relaxing fists. Arvis became confused. He could not understand or cope with the waves of concern and shame that engulfed him as he looked at the frightened expression on Ricky's face. It had been years since he felt this

intense inner reaction, years since he had cared enough to resist the impulse to hurt, punish, strike back. It was an uncommon feeling for him, one that erupted from his past, when he was a boy with his special friend. And now he sensed the same overwhelming force overtaking him again, the consuming need to love and be loved, the forgiving and the asking for forgiveness, the shame and the panic. That intense inner feeling over which he had so little control had suddenly engulfed him again, returned from the past, stilled his rage.

As Ricky watched with horror Arvis's hands moved toward him, his mouth begging silently for mercy and reason. Arvis's body slackened, his hands crumbled into useless fists, and the cord slipped from his hands and fell to the floor in the back of the car. Ricky stared and saw the cord fall, the man sagging in the seat, the eyes lowered, the lips trembling slightly above the beard; and the boy knew. He realized that the immediate danger was gone. He also sensed the subtle shifting of controls between the two of them. Ricky sighed deeply and leaned over the seat. Arvis was slumped in the back seat, his face averted from Ricky's, his head bent, hands hanging limply over his knees.

Ricky whispered, "Thanks, Arvis." His voice was soothing.

The bearded man gradually raised his clouded eyes to stare at the young boy. He tried to smile but the result was a pained crooked grimace. Ricky could sense the agony and the hope mixed in uneasy combination. Arvis did not speak. He nodded slowly, acknowledging Ricky's approval. It was not enough. He had regained something that he had lost but had not wanted to return. The feeling had brought him too much personal pain and suffering the first time, during the years before, and now it had returned without his bidding. Arvis wished it gone but knew it would not leave. He too sensed the shifting of dominance and feared his subjugation to the young boy in the front seat.

"Pick up the cord, Arvis," Ricky ordered softly.

The bearded man stared at him dully for a second, then obediently bent down and picked up the loose cord, staring at the slack rope lying in his palm.

Ricky whispered, "Give it to me to hold, Arvis."

Arvis extended his hand automatically, and Ricky gently took the cord from the older man. He smiled at Arvis with a reassuring look, hoping to defuse Arvis's embarrassment and humiliation at his loss of power. But the

smile was unnecessary. Arvis leaned back and closed his eyes. He was exhausted. Arvis Moore prayed silently to himself that someone would find him as soon as possible before he had to suffer for a second time.

“Everything all right?” the woman asked nervously.

Before Ricky could answer, the blinking lights of a police car could be seen reflecting in the rearview mirror, and the woman swerved her car over onto the soft shoulder.

“My God, I’m going to get a ticket,” she said to no one in particular.

Arvis’s eyes flew open and his body became rigid and stiff as he moved into the dark corner of the back seat. He grabbed his legs at the calves and pressed his muscles tightly. Ricky turned quickly and stared into the bearded man’s numbed expression. Arvis stared back, his eyes darting about crazily from the front window to the young boy, his uneven teeth pressing into his lower lip. There was no message in Arvis’s eyes or frozen face, merely an urgent waiting, a determined attempt to accept the inevitable, a preparation for a forever repeating personal tragedy. Ricky said nothing. His expression remained impassive. He turned and stared out of the driver’s window, waiting for the policeman to arrive.

Finally a face appeared. The scowling expression made it very clear that he meant business. He poked his head slightly into the open window and looked at the gray-haired woman sitting behind the wheel. “Lady, where do you think you’re going?” The sarcasm was thick and overbearing.

She smiled feebly. “Philadelphia,” she answered in a tentative voice.

“At that speed, I thought you might be heading for the moon.” He paused, savoring his wit. Then he frowned more severely. “Lady, you were doing seventy-five in a fifty-five zone. Did you know that?”

The woman looked into his severely set face for a second, quickly turned to stare at Ricky, whose eyes were fixed on the policeman, then swung her eyes back to the window and stammered, “No ... I mean, I think so ... Yes.”

“Your license,” the policeman barked.

The woman reached across Ricky, opened the glove compartment, and pulled out two small colored cards and handed them to the policeman. He nodded and attached them to a clipboard on which the traffic ticket sat waiting to be completed. The man wrote quietly. The woman licked her lips and watched his hands as they held the clipboard and scribbled her

indictment. She seemed completely absorbed in the process of being condemned and appeared to forget temporarily that she had two passengers.

Ricky concentrated his eyes on the policeman. This was his chance. He knew it. He also knew that Arvis was exquisitely conscious of that moment as well. Ricky knew that he should be screaming out his name, shouting his danger toward the man in the uniform standing just several feet away from him. He would save him, pull him out of the car, take him away from Arvis, carry him back to his home. All he had to do was shout, scream, open the door and run out of the car onto the soft sandy shoulder of the road to where the policeman was standing, pull on his sleeve and tell him that he had been taken by that man sitting in the back of the car. That's all that he had to do. The time was now. He had to act now or he might never have another chance.

He sensed Arvis's taut presence in the back of the car. The electrically charged vibrations of the bearded man's fear and silent pleading pressed and burned his back so that Ricky shifted his weight in his seat. He heard the increased rate and depth of Arvis's breathing behind him. The presence of the older man enveloped him. The woman seemed oblivious to everything else except the policeman's moving hand on the clipboard. Ricky reached to his right and felt the door handle. It rested cold and hard in his small hand. Twist it, his mind ordered. He started to turn the metal handle but stopped midway through the motion as he felt Arvis's hand lightly touch the back of his blond head. Shivers traveled like rivulets up and down his body. The warmth of the man's hand traveled through his head and down over his face. His hand fell away from the door handle.

Ricky turned to stare into Arvis's terrified face. The woman was so absorbed in the moving hand of the policeman that the shifting of the boy's body in the seat drew no attention.

Arvis whispered to Ricky, "Don't turn me in."

Ricky continued to stare at the ashen sweating face of the bearded man.

Please, Arvis's mouth said silently again.

"Let me go," Ricky said softly. Arvis began nodding but his teeth bit his lip.

"Do you know what they'll do to me?" the hoarse voice whispered into the boy's ear.

Ricky shook his head. He was too consumed with his own ambivalent feelings of flight to process the immediate danger facing his companion.

“Jail. Or worse. They’ll put me back in jail. Don’t do that to me,” Arvis begged in a soft groan.

“Why not?” Ricky whispered insistently.

Arvis brought his hands together in prayer. They trembled against each other. “I’ll do anything you want. But don’t turn me in now,” he pleaded.

Ricky sensed a wave of power and domination that excited him. As he stared into the strained, disheveled face in the back seat, the young boy also became overcome with the blinding, unshakable realization of Arvis’s dependence and need for him at that moment. The unfamiliar but strangely satisfying combination of reactions shattered his resolve.

“Will you stop hurting me?” Ricky asked with a soft but defiant voice.

Arvis moaned under his breath. “I’ll do anything you want.” His face was pressed against the back of Ricky’s head.

What’s the matter with me? the boy thought. Something must be very seriously wrong with me, raced through his mind as the trembling from the bearded man’s lips stirred the highly sensitive charged skin behind his right ear. He knocked the bearded man’s face away from the back of his head with a forceful push of his hand, and he heard Arvis sigh heavily as he sank back into the recesses of the back of the car.

The policeman was handing the woman her ticket. “Keep your eye on that speedometer, lady, or you’ll lose your license.” His tone was gruff.

She nodded vigorously as she reached to slip the cards and the ticket into the glove compartment. “Yes, officer.” Her voice was apologetic.

Ricky suddenly heard his own voice erupting from inside his body, bursting forth with a high, piping, urgent sound.

“Officer,” Ricky literally shouted.

He heard Arvis’s barely audible groan come from the back of the car.

The policeman turned to stare at the young boy in the front seat. “Yeah, kid?” His tone was impatient.

Ricky exploded. “My name is Ricky Stern.”

The officer stared for a second as the young boy sat with his mouth gaping open, unable to push any more words past his frozen lips. The woman turned to stare at the boy, her face wrinkled in a look of bewilderment. Ricky heard Arvis begin to hum crazily but very softly in the

back seat. He tried to say more. He imagined himself shouting, I was kidnapped; but the words never realized sound in the stillness of the car.

Ricky suddenly pictured Arvis being dragged out of the car by the policeman and beaten on the side of the highway. The man's hoarse cries rushed through his troubled mind. Ricky could not face the possibility of being responsible for dropping Arvis into that unknown world. "Anything you want," Arvis had whispered. Ricky prayed he meant it as he stifled his voice inside his tight throat.

Finally the policeman shrugged and said in an offhand manner, "Yeah? Well, that's nice, kid." He turned on his heel and quickly walked away. The woman turned the key in her ignition, started the engine, and carefully and slowly pulled off the shoulder and back onto the highway. Ricky sat stunned and immobile in the front seat, watching the countryside pass, expecting the policeman to reach in and pull him out. He silently begged the policeman to come back and recognize him and save him—from Arvis ... and himself. Suddenly he heard the nasal atonal wild humming begin again in the back of the car. Ricky's body collapsed back against the seat and the boy closed his eyes, seeing the dead young man dangling, hanging, falling, calling out to Ricky, asking him to save him as the car cruised along the parkway toward Philadelphia and the unknown.

About fifteen minutes later, when they reached the center of Baltimore, the schoolteacher ground her car to a halt in front of the Greyhound bus station. She turned toward Ricky and spoke in a rush. "You get off here. This is the Greyhound bus station. I'm not taking you any farther."

Arvis growled in a low voice. Ricky smiled weakly and leaned toward the woman. "Why, ma'am? You said you were going to Philadelphia."

The woman ground her teeth together for a few seconds then answered in a tight, low voice. "I don't want him in my car any longer," she said softly.

"He won't hurt anybody," Ricky pleaded.

She shook her head. "Look, I work with handicapped children. Your brother is different than that. I don't know what it is, but he frightens me. And I want him out of my car." She turned toward Ricky so he could see the terror in her glazed eyes. "Please. Please get him out of here."

Arvis had heard. Ricky could sense the wild humming coming closer toward the back of his head. The woman also listened to the rising pitch of the eerie sound. Her body became rigid with fear.

She stared at the boy anxiously, her head cocked slightly toward the back seat, where the humming had died out and only the man's steady breathing could be heard.

Ricky turned his head quickly and caught Arvis's eye. He nodded and opened the passenger door in the front of the car and began edging out. "Come on, Arvis," he said gently.

The bearded man stared out the window, his eyes sweeping over the congested and dirty streets. "Where in the hell are we?" he growled.

The woman gasped as his hoarse, tense voice exploded in the car. "You've got to get out here. This is the bus station in Baltimore. I've decided to stop here for a few hours. Please get out," she urged Arvis, her voice straining to remain calm.

Ricky was out of the car and opened the back door. "Arvis," he said directly, and the older man lifted his body from the leather seat and bolted out of the car onto the street and stood staring at the flowing mobs of moving people on the sidewalk.

Ricky looked into the car before closing the back door. "Thanks, ma'am," he called. "Sorry if we gave you any trouble."

He closed the back door firmly and spun around slightly as the car jumped from his grasp and catapulted away down the busy street. The boy turned to the tall man and grabbed the sleeve of the flannel shirt. "Let's get on the sidewalk," he urged.

Arvis allowed himself to be led off the rim of the busy street onto the sidewalk. The two stood side by side. As buses pulled up in front of the building and belched out hordes of harried passengers, Ricky and Arvis stood absorbing the urban pulse with a mixture of bewilderment and awe.

"What are we going to do?" Ricky looked up at Arvis.

Arvis reached down into his pocket and pulled out the crumpled roll of money. He frowned and spat on the pavement. "Take the fuckin' bus to Philly."

"We could hitch," Ricky offered.

Arvis shook his head. "I don't trust you hitchin'. You got too big a mouth. On the bus, I can sit right beside you."

Ricky sighed. "Okay, Arvis. Who's going to get the tickets?"

"You and me. We're going together. I ain't leavin' you alone."

Ricky smiled. I could have gotten away, Arvis, when the policeman stopped us, he thought to himself. But as he stared at the tall man, he

realized that Arvis had forgotten that already.

The two companions walked slowly into the station. Arvis bought the tickets and they stood on the bus platform until the bus pulled in and they climbed aboard. During the ninety-minute ride on the thruway Arvis and Ricky sat side by side not exchanging a word, each lost in his thoughts. Finally the ride was over. They left the bus and hurried out of the station onto the Philadelphia streets.

Soon Ricky's eyes caught sight of a man drifting through the waiting crowds at a city bus stop, his arms waving copies of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. The sight of the newspapers gave Ricky a sudden wave of uneasiness, bringing back the memory of the last time he had held the folded papers in his own hands, on the sunny afternoon street corner in Maryland. As his gaze caught the familiar newsprint, he experienced a quick return to that moment that seemed so long ago, when the nightmare with Arvis had not yet begun.

The newsman shuffled by them, waving the front page of the paper in front of their faces. Suddenly Ricky caught sight of something in the newspaper that chilled his blood. He reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a few coins, and handed them to the newsman. He felt the newspaper thrust into his open hand.

"Whatcha doin'?" Arvis asked defensively.

Ricky ignored the question and scanned the front page of the Philadelphia paper. Staring back at him was a recent snapshot of himself and an artist's drawing that was a remarkable likeness of Arvis. He suddenly felt exposed. He was sure that every eye had turned and was staring at him. He turned quickly to try to capture the gaze of a stranger, but no one face was looking in his direction.

"What's the matter?" Arvis inquired, beginning to sound concerned.

Ricky held up the paper. "Look." He held the pages as steadily as his shaking hands would permit.

Arvis stared for a long moment and then whistled softly between his separated front teeth. "Jesus. They got our pictures on the front page," he said in disbelief.

Ricky stared up at him with impatience. "Of course they do. Act smart, Arvis. Remember you kidnapped me."

Arvis frowned. "The hell I did. You came with me to do something wild."

Ricky stood very still for a minute. He had gone with him. And he had not run away when he might have, nor had he signaled the policeman except for telling him what his name was. He no longer was being held by force. So was he really kidnapped? Or was he a willing companion? Somehow he felt himself somewhere in between. But where that somewhere was he was not sure. And why?...

"Don't let's argue. You're here and I'm here. And I didn't want to be, but I am. So don't get mad," Ricky ordered softly.

"Okay. But let's not hear any more of that kidnapped shit," Arvis grunted.

"That picture of you looks almost like you, Arvis. Anybody could recognize you. And me too," Ricky pointed out.

"You think so?" Arvis frowned as he studied Blickstein's sketch blown up on the front page.

"Yeah. I think so," Ricky said impatiently.

Arvis turned from his study of the newspaper and looked imploringly at Ricky. "What are we gonna do?"

Ricky frowned and answered angrily, "What do you mean 'we'? What are *you* going to do? You're the one who's in trouble in this thing, not me."

The bearded man stared at the boy, and his face gradually collapsed into an expression of defenseless terror. "I don't know what to do," he said pleadingly.

"You could let me go. And then you could run away," Ricky challenged.

Arvis shook his head. "No."

"No?" Ricky echoed.

"No," Arvis repeated. "I want you." He paused and then added simply, "And you don't wanna go."

Ricky stamped his foot loudly on the cement sidewalk causing several people standing nearby to shift their gaze briefly in his direction. "The hell I don't. What makes you think that?" He did not want to hear these troubling thoughts spoken aloud.

"I know," Arvis said quietly. "I always know."

"That's not true," Ricky said petulantly.

Arvis smiled a conspiratorial grin. "Suit yourself."

There was a shifting silence as the two avoided looking at each other. Finally Arvis spoke. "I could shave."

Ricky did not speak for a few minutes. Finally he turned and looked at the bent head and the eyes that moved restlessly over the ground, skittering occasionally to steal a glance in his direction. He could not help smiling at the hangdog manner, the open plea for sympathy, the obvious searching for Ricky's support. The need for Ricky to care for him was inscribed all over his body.

"You could," Ricky said easily.

Arvis lifted his head. His eyes crinkled and shone. His face gradually opened into a jubilant grin. He reached across the distance between the two and gently clasped the boy's shoulder. "It is a good idea?" he asked boyishly.

His expression made Ricky laugh, though he sensed that the laughter would be the prelude to more expectations, an invitation which he was too frightened and timid to extend. But he could not hold back the giggling as the tall man began rubbing his hands together at the imagined cleverness of his very simple plan.

Ricky nodded. "As good as any."

Arvis thought for a minute. Then he grabbed Ricky's arm and propelled him out of the crowd and began walking with him south along the sidewalk.

"Where are we going?" Ricky asked hurriedly between breaths as they almost ran down the street.

Arvis smiled broadly. "A drugstore. The first one," he sang back to the young boy skipping by his side trying frantically to keep up.

Arvis pulled out his crumpled wad of dollar bills and peeled off several and handed them to the disinterested pale blond girl behind the drugstore cash register. She slowly ran her lacquered fingers through several wooden compartments, pulling out coins until she finally had counted out the correct change. Laconically she lifted each item from the counter and tossed it into the large brown bag and stapled the top of the bag together with the sales check from the register. Ricky stood quietly next to Arvis watching the familiar ritual. Nodding perfunctorily, she shoved the package toward Arvis. He smiled routinely, hugged the package to his chest, grabbed Ricky's hand, and urged him quickly out of the brightly lit drugstore.

Arvis seemed strangely jubilant. He moved with rapid jerky movements, turning his head frequently to shoot excited glances in Ricky's

direction. His hand was moist with nervous energy as he lightly clasped Ricky's fingers. The air around the older man seemed charged with a frenzied impatience that made Ricky extremely uneasy and uncomfortable.

"Where are we going, Arvis?" Ricky asked.

Arvis whistled happily between his teeth. He chortled as if he were hiding a precious secret. He refused to answer the boy.

Ricky pulled on his hand. "Arvis, I asked you where we were going," he repeated more insistently as he felt his smaller body being dragged by the strong, vibrant force of the agitated older man.

Arvis stopped in the middle of the street in heavily congested, slowly moving traffic. He stopped whistling and stared down at Ricky. His face creased into a broad grin. "We're goin' to a motel," he announced proudly.

Ricky winced. He had not expected anything like that. The thought of going to a room with Arvis sent splintering shivers throughout his body. He pictured himself locked into a room with the unpredictable bearded man and he trembled visibly. Inside a room there would be no place to run, no place to hide. But quickly his body settled down and the trembling stopped.

"Why?" he asked evenly.

Arvis chuckled, quite pleased with himself. "You'll see," he said, giggling.

I know I will, Ricky thought wearily. If only seeing were all there was.

THIRTEEN

The two companions walked briskly down the street, crossed several busy intersections, and finally stopped in front of a Holiday Inn. Cars pulled in front of the main door, and people climbed out lugging suitcases and carrying garment bags.

Arvis took Ricky's hand firmly and walked him into the main lobby. "Sit in that chair and don't move," he ordered softly.

Ricky squeezed the tall man's hand as firmly as he could. "Stop telling me what to do."

"Hey, come on. Just sit there for a minute or two," Arvis pleaded.

Ricky frowned and walked over to the overstuffed black leather chair with the nailheads of gold around the seams and settled his small body into the sagging upholstery as Arvis moved toward the registration counter.

Within ten minutes Arvis was back with a key in his hand. He smiled at the boy, who stared blankly back at him.

"Okay, let's go," Arvis whispered.

Ricky sighed and pushed himself out of the chair and followed the tall overalls and black bushy hair through the lobby toward the elevators. They stood silently side by side among a crowd of chattering middle-aged women waiting for the elevator. Finally the doors of an elevator opened behind them. Ricky felt himself being almost carried through the steel doors. He was crushed against the back wall by the entering bulk of women as all of them tried to push into the small compartment. Several could not squeeze in, but they held their ample bodies against the elevator doors, preventing them from closing, talking frantically while searching for another elevator door to open. Ricky could feel the anger mounting in the man standing by his side. He closed his eyes and prayed for another elevator to come quickly. He was terrified of Arvis erupting into violent anger on the crowded elevator, creating hysteria and panic among the unaware elderly women. Finally he heard the doors closing and he opened his eyes in time to watch the numbers above the front doors announce each approaching floor. Finally the elevator stopped. Ricky heard Arvis's voice bellow throughout the tightly compressed steel box.

“We’re gettin’ out here. Move your behinds.” His rough voice echoed against the green metal walls.

Ricky heard a few suppressed gasps as the women cringed and backed away, clearing a path through which Arvis led Ricky out of the elevator. Ricky’s face burned with the embarrassment of the moment. He listened to the closing of the elevator doors and the beginning of a high-pitched response to Arvis’s comment. Soon the sounds faded and the two stood in the carpeted hallway.

Arvis stared first at the key, then at the numbers tacked on the wall. “This way.” He pointed and started moving down the hallway.

Ricky did not move. Something prevented him from following the other man. He knew that he must move, but a final shred of resistance pulled him back from walking on the tall man’s shadow moving down the motel hallway toward the unknown room. Arvis sensed that he was not being followed. He turned around and stared at the frozen boy. He strode back, his face distorted into a grimace. “What the fuck’s goin’ on?” he said.

“I’m not going into that room with you,” Ricky said defiantly, his jaw set.

Arvis stared at the boy in disbelief. Ricky stood in the hallway, his eyes wide, his mouth set. Arvis moved toward Ricky.

Ricky lifted his hand. “Stop. Don’t come any closer to me.”

Arvis froze. There was silence between the two for several seconds. Then Arvis frowned and his expression gradually faded into a look of disappointment.

“Aw shit, Ricky, I thought you’d like this. It’s fancy enough, ain’t it?” Arvis seemed confused.

“Yeah. It’s fine, Arvis. But what’re you going to do to me?” Ricky faced the reality of the locked room. He was struggling for control.

Arvis stared at him. “I’m not sure, friend.” He paused. “But you know I won’t hurtcha ... like last night. Didn’t I promise?”

“You must keep that promise,” Ricky commanded loudly. “Do you hear me?”

Arvis was silent, looking at the boy staring into his eyes, challenging him. Finally Arvis lowered his head and nodded.

“Well, I keep my promises. Now come on.” He touched the boy’s face easily and jerked his head. Ricky turned to look at the closed elevator doors

that did not open again and then slowly followed Arvis down the carpeted hallway.

Inside the room Arvis jumped up and down on the quilted double bed in gleeful leaps. Ricky stood watching him, trying to hide his smiles at the man's clownish behavior.

"Ain't this the best?" Arvis sang as his body bounded in the air.

Ricky nodded.

Arvis beckoned to the boy. "Come on. It's fun. Jump with me." He threw his head back and laughed with abandon.

Ricky jumped up lightly, his tired body landing off balance and falling into Arvis's thigh. The tall bearded man reached around and easily circled the boy's waist and lifted him with him as they trampolined on the bedsprings. Arvis was exuberant, his head thrown back, his mouth open, peals of delighted glee erupting from his lips. Gradually the buoyancy and rhythm caught Ricky up in the movement. He began to push himself against the soft mattress, lifting his own body off the quilt, the sensation of rising and falling, the crazy irrational behavior, the gradually quickening abandon loosening his body and his tongue. He found himself trying to match his movements with those of Arvis. Together they bounced on the gradually sagging mattress. Their arms swung wildly above their heads. Soon Ricky's light boyish laughter mixed with the coarser hoarse sounds of hilarity coming from the older man. Finally Ricky slipped, and both fell awkwardly onto the soft bed cover, laughing and panting and breathlessly gasping between gulps of air. They lay there side by side for several moments. Ricky could feel the man's body lightly pressed against his own. He did not move. Suddenly he felt the man's hand cup his face, and he watched as the bearded face moved closer to his own.

Arvis kissed Ricky very lightly on the forehead. "What a real good friend you are," the older man whispered.

Ricky did not answer. He stared into the probing eyes and read the adoration that blazed in the deep dark pupils. He focused on those eyes as they bored into him, and he allowed himself to sink deeply into them until he had lost all sense of time and place. He lingered in this safe harbor for a few seconds before he felt Arvis jump up and throw himself off the bed. Ricky quickly sat up as Arvis scooted around the bed, picked up the brown drugstore bag, emptied the contents on the bureau counter, and held up a scissors, razor, and a can of shaving cream.

“Come on in the john and help me shave,” Arvis called.

Ricky smiled. “You really going to do it?”

“Fuckin’ A. I’m gonna be a new man. Nobody’ll recognize me.” He laughed. “Come on in.” He sauntered into the bathroom.

Ricky heard the faucet turn and water begin to run. Small wisps of steam began to drift out of the bathroom door. Arvis was standing over the sink, his face circled by the rising steam from the hot-water faucet, his right hand holding the scissors as he cupped his cheek in his left. Slowly he snipped at the unruly beard, cutting chunks of wiry black hair from the surface of his face. The beard and mustache were carefully trimmed shorter and shorter. Then the man covered his face with the steaming faucet water and spread the white foamy shaving cream over his mouth, chin, and neck. He lifted the razor and took short firm strokes as he shaved off all the hair on his face. Ricky watched with hypnotic fascination as the hot water washed the white foam and chunks of hair down into the porcelain bowl and down the drain. Finally the almost compulsively intense labor was over and the man took a small white towel and dipped it in the hot running water. Slowly he wiped the lather off his face and turned his face upward to stare at himself in the mirror. He seemed preoccupied at the image being reflected back at him.

Finally he spoke in a softly reverent tone. “My God, I look like I did when I was a kid.” His voice quivered slightly.

Ricky could only see his profile. He was very curious to witness the transformation. But Arvis would not turn around. He continued staring into the mirror.

“How long have you had a beard?” Ricky asked.

“Probably a year or two after I got out of jail the first time. I don’t remember. But a long time. I haven’t seen this person for a long time,” Arvis commented with awed amazement.

Ricky was becoming increasingly curious. “Well, let’s see,” he urged.

But Arvis continued staring. “Where have you been?” he asked the mirror. He seemed lost in the rediscovery of himself. He ran his rough hands lightly over his face, caressing the clean-shaven cheeks, skimming the firm chin, stroking his naked neck. “Where did you go?” he whispered. He turned toward Ricky and faced him.

Ricky gasped softly. The man looked ten years younger. His face was attractive, his high cheekbones setting off the gaunt handsomeness of his

solid jaw line and full sensuous mouth. The eyes still held the fires of madness flickering unpredictably like gutting flames, but the rest of the face was that of a young business executive or professional man. The long thin attractive face was not very different than his own father's, Ricky thought. The hair was different but the faces were almost the same.

"Well, what do you think?" Arvis asked shyly.

Ricky moistened his dry lips. "You look great, Arvis."

"You mean it?" the older man asked sheepishly, blushing slightly.

Ricky nodded. "You might even say you were handsome." The words came easily.

Arvis turned away for a second. "It's been a long time since anybody told me that." He paused and rubbed his eyes self-consciously. His face was turned away from Ricky. "Other guys used to tell me that all the time."

Suddenly he stopped talking and looked at the young boy. "Let's cut this crap now." His voice was harsh.

"Okay," Ricky said quickly, catching his gaze, moving slowly out of the bathroom doorway, and walking steadily across the motel room to the window to look out onto the parking lot. Cars moved like toy machines in and out of small rectangular spaces as he tried concentrating on the street way below rather than on the soft footsteps of the older man as he moved closer behind him. Ricky felt the man wrap his thick hairy arms around him and press his body against his back. Arvis laid his smooth cheek against Ricky's ear. He reached across the boy and pulled the cord that drew the drapes closed. Ricky felt the room fall into darkness. The man's hands began running slowly over his chest and down the front of his pants. Ricky continued standing with his back to Arvis as he bent away from the stroking hand that gently pulled him against the hard, firm body with the swelling groin.

"Let's get undressed," Arvis said into Ricky's ear.

Ricky gulped. "Arvis, could we wait a little while?" he bargained.

"No. Now. I'm ready now," Arvis said into Ricky's ear.

"Arvis, please," Ricky pleaded softly.

The older man groaned slightly. "Please what?"

"Please wait," Ricky whispered.

"No" was the quick harsh reply as the hands began undoing the boy's belt and unzipping his pants.

Ricky felt his pants sagging down to his knees. "Don't hurt me," he begged.

"Trust me" was all he received as a reply.

Very slowly Arvis undressed the young boy until Ricky stood totally naked with his back still toward the older man. Ricky stared at the thick brocaded patterns on the drapery material as the sounds of the older man removing his clothes filled the motel room. Soon the room was still and Ricky felt the increasing heat as the man's body approached his. First he felt the rough hands lightly skim over his skin, causing his body to tingle reluctantly. Then the hands began stroking his tiny nipples until they firmed and hardened and began to hurt as Arvis rubbed and massaged each one deftly. And the hot excitement began to overtake the reserve. Ricky felt his penis harden and the muscles in his entire body tense. The boy took several deep breaths as erotic floods swept over him. The man lifted the boy and carried him easily to the bed, where he laid him down on his back. Ricky closed his eyes to shut out the stained ceiling and the naked body of the clean-shaven man hovering over him ...

Ricky lay drifting in the semiconscious aftermoment of sexual release, realizing that he had never experienced any sexual climax to equal the one he had just had. The thought stilled his tingling skin and caused his pulse to remain unusually rapid. The thrill, the abandon, the pleasure, should not have happened. He was guilty. He had stayed to experience this moment. But what was he? Why did he want to do this? He shuddered as he thought of the possible answers, and he buried his face in the pillow by pulling forcibly away from the clinging mouth and turning on his side.

"You okay?" he heard Arvis whisper.

He nodded, his burning face still buried in the pillow.

"Boy, you sure dug that," Arvis said proudly, his rasping voice scraping against Ricky's exposed nerves.

Ricky shook his head vigorously in the pillow. He refused to allow the man to look into his distorted, agonized face.

Arvis coughed. "Jesus, friend, if you didn't like it, I can't imagine what you'd be like if you did." He chortled softly to himself.

Ricky lay very still, his back turned toward the older man, who suddenly grabbed the boy's shoulders and pulled him forcibly around so that he faced the wide-open piercing eyes of the older man. Arvis pressed the skin on the boy's shoulders until his fingers dug deeply into the soft

yielding flesh. "Tell me you liked it," he ordered. Ricky stared at him. Don't make me say that, Arvis, the boy's eyes pleaded. Please don't force me to admit that. Let that idea die inside of me. "Tell me, Ricky," the rasping voice demanded. Ricky stared blindly into the ruggedly handsome face of the strange man who had changed his life so dramatically and so threateningly in the last forty-eight hours. He moved his lips silently. Don't, Arvis, please. Oh, God, please don't make me say it out loud. Then I can't ever take it back. Let me keep it inside my head so it can shrivel up and die there. Let me die inside, Arvis. Or kill me now. But don't make me tell you the truth.

The older man pressed his body tightly against the boy's shivering naked form. "Ricky, don't lie to me. Tell me the truth. You loved it, didn't you?" There was silence as the boy sagged against the firm muscular body of the older man. A thick hairy right hand tightly gripped the back of the boy's neck and drew the head back so Arvis could stare into Ricky's face. The strength and force of the hand sapped the last shred of the boy's denial. "Tell me you loved every minute of it, kid," the man demanded.

Tears streamed down the boy's face as he began nodding his head. "I did," he cried softly. "I did." Arvis looked at him and smiled a crooked leering grin and then laid Ricky's limp head against his shoulder. The boy felt the man's hands begin to rub his back as he fell asleep from the exhaustion of the long day. Ricky's mind drifted into unconsciousness as he prayed for someone to find him and save him from himself.

FOURTEEN

The two policemen combed their way through the thick green foliage and underbrush in the Virginia woods. They moved slowly and methodically, always together, rarely speaking, bending to turn a rock or lift a log, pushing aside the heavy network of vines that frequently obstructed their path. They alternated the flashlights in an attempt to prolong the life of the batteries. Everywhere they searched, the deeper into the woods they went, the more untouched and untrampled the area appeared. After two more hours of assiduous, arduous plodding through the thick forest greenery, the men sat down on their haunches and looked at each other with fatigued, frustrated glances.

“Nobody’s been this far back,” Mike finally said.

Mac nodded. “He must’ve stayed in that spot and then left.”

Mike lit a cigarette, offered one to Mac, who shook his head. The smoke from Mike’s cigarette filtered like mist through the cobwebs of vines and leaves surrounding them. The glow from the tip of the lit cigarette cast dusky shadows over the sharp prominences of Mike’s handsome face. He smoked silently as the two men tried to shake their aching fatigue.

“Let’s go back to the car,” Mike said as he stamped out the cigarette on the moist dark earth.

Mac grunted. “Shit, it’s such a fuckin’ long way back.”

Mike walked over and placed his hand on the older man’s sagging shoulder. “We’ll take our time. Just stop whenever you’re tired.”

Mac reached up and laid his own hand momentarily over the young man’s. They stood like this for the very briefest of time before Mac shoved his body forward and said quietly, “Let’s go.”

It took the two cops more than an hour of steady walking to find their way back to the road where they had parked the car. The sign that had blinked “Bo’s Place” was now dark, the neon tubing cold in the night air. They climbed into the police car and both sighed as their weary bodies settled into the leather upholstery. Finally Mac lifted the receiver on the car radiophone and pushed the button several times before a far-away clipped voice split the silent night stillness inside the car.

“Who’s on the phone?” the disembodied voice bleated.

Holding the phone in his hand, Mac blinked tiredly once before answering. "MacGinnis here with Androtti."

"Right," the voice echoed. "Stay put. Weeks wants to talk to you."

Weeks. Both men stared at each other, and Mike glanced at his wristwatch. It was three o'clock in the morning. And Weeks was still there. Mike lit a cigarette and opened the car window to blow the smoke away from the older man.

Mac watched him with a relaxed interest. "You smoke too fuckin' much," he said simply.

Mike looked at the lit cigarette and then back at the lined, craggy, heavy face of his companion. "I know," he said, resigned. "It's tough to quit."

"It's not good for you," Mac commented.

Mike flicked his ashes out of the window. "Does the smoke bother you?"

"No." Mac shook his head. "I just wish you wouldn't smoke. That's all." He caught himself sounding intimate, almost paternal, and choked slightly on his words, resulting in a brief light cough.

"It does bother you," Mike observed and put the cigarette out in the car ashtray.

Mac did not respond as he watched the ashes turn from reddish orange to a faded black in the open metal tray.

Suddenly Weeks's voice filled the police car. "You there?" The calm, clear words sounded fresh and relaxed.

"Yes, Sergeant, we're here," Mac answered simply.

"Well, what's happening?" A slight impatience in the voice, an edge of anticipation.

Mac motioned to Mike asking if he wanted to talk. Mike shook his head. Mac pressed the phone closer to his mouth and began talking rapidly.

"We're out here in Virginia. Where the bus driver left them off. The guy was with the kid in a diner out here. Bought hamburgers. He took the kid into the woods. Mike and me found out where. There was a place in the middle of the woods. We know he was probably there because we got some hamburger paper. Fresh. And, Sergeant ..." He paused for a minute to catch his breath and collect his thoughts.

"Yes. Go on," the anxious voice called back to him.

“Mike and me found some dried blood on clumps of grass. And some shit on grass too. We’re pretty sure he raped the kid. Whether the kid’s alive is another story.”

There was silence at the other end of the radiophone. Mac could picture the manicured nails drumming slowly on the shiny desktop and the calm face staring upward at the ceiling. Both policemen waited for the voice to return.

“He might be,” the voice said almost to itself. Then it stopped for a second.

Mac frowned. “Sergeant?” he called into the mouthpiece.

The voice returned immediately. “We just received a call from a motel on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. Called the Parkmore Motel. About midway down. The night clerk checked in a bearded man and a kid about three hours ago. Afterwards he was reading the night’s paper and called the station when he read about the Stern kid. That could be them. Check it out.” The voice issued the order without tightening the easy flow or the friendly tone of its words.

Mac squinted his burning eyes. He turned toward Mike who made a dour face. “Now, Sergeant?” Mac asked hesitantly.

“Right now, MacGinnis,” the voice said calmly.

Mac swallowed. “It’s three o’clock in the morning, Weeks,” he said, beginning to lose control of his voice as the waves of sleep and muscular exhaustion took command of his mind.

“I can tell time, MacGinnis,” Weeks replied very calmly.

“We’re shot,” Mac sighed.

“I know, Mac. And I’m sorry. But the kid could be dead in the morning.”

Mac nodded wearily and looked quickly at Mike, who shrugged. “We understand.”

Weeks waited a few seconds, then spoke clearly. “Let me talk to Androtti.”

Mike wrinkled his forehead as he took the speaker out of Mac’s hand. “Androtti here.”

“Hi, Mike. How you holding up?” Weeks asked gently.

“Okay, I guess tired as shit. But I’ll make it” Mike spoke easily.

“You both will. And I appreciate it. Keep in touch with me.

“We will,” Mike answered.

“Mike, remind Mac to call home in the morning,” Weeks said, and then the phone in the police car went dead.

The two men stared at each other for a second before Mike hung up. He settled back in his seat as Mac turned on the engine and eased the car out of the diner’s parking lot and onto the gravel country road.

They drove in silence for a few minutes before Mike heard Mac’s voice drift softly over toward him. “I guess I’ll never figure the guy out.”

Mike turned. “Who?”

“Weeks,” Mac said simply.

Mike thought of the calm, enigmatic, orderly man who commandeered their lives as policemen. He had never tried analyzing him before, had merely followed his instructions. But Mac’s comments caused him to delve into the collected images inside his head in an attempt to try to create a total picture of the man behind the voice on the car phone. But he only could come up with fragments, not the total person. The complete Weeks was elusive, out of his mental reach.

“Me neither,” he finally remarked in the moving police car. “He’s hard to figure.”

“Yeah,” Mac grunted.

Mike smiled ruefully. “But then so am I.” Mac turned his head quickly to catch the bruised look in the younger man’s eyes. He turned quickly away. He had seen that expression too many times before in his own home. And his mind was too tired to cope with the avalanche of bitter memories which that look could start without much effort. Suddenly Mac felt closer to the young man sitting on his right than he had to any other person during the last few years. He felt an unspoken, almost unexplainable bond between them that was stronger than the fragile ties to his world that had kept him going through the past few painful years. Some of the confusion by his fatigue began to leave him and he started tapping the wheel softly as he guided the car toward Washington and the parkway beyond.

In a little under two hours, the police car pulled up into the crowded parking lot of the Parkmore Motel. The red neon sign shone brightly against the black velvet backdrop of night. The policemen climbed out of the car.

Mac smiled at his partner. “You fell asleep.”

Grinning sheepishly, Mike nodded. “Sorry.”

“Shit. I was glad to see it. No sense both of us being up,” Mac called across the top of the car.

Mike rubbed his eyes. "I'll drive the rest of the way if we have to do more tonight."

"Let's hope this is it. Are you ready? Gun and all?" Mac asked briskly.

Mike stared down at the gun resting in his holster. It was loaded and ready. But was he? He had never had to shoot anyone during the three years he had been on the force. He had waved the gun around a lot—keeping drunks in line as they lunged toward him, calming unpredictable hysterical burglars or rapists—but he never had had to fire a shot at anyone. Staring at the gun, he wondered if he would be using it against this person. What a strange and bizarre first time, he thought bitterly.

"Well, is it loaded?" Mac barked.

Mike nodded. "Yeah."

"Good. Come on." Mac led the way into the motel lobby. The small bespectacled night clerk jumped up from his magazine as he saw the two men in blue uniforms enter the deserted, silent, dimly lit lobby. He leaned over the edge of the registration counter, waiting impatiently for the cops to cross the carpeted lobby floor.

Mike reached the desk first. "You called in the report?" he asked evenly.

The short nervous young man nodded his head, wetting his lips. "Yes, officer."

"Well?" Mike asked directly.

"Well," the night clerk began hesitantly, his glasses bobbing slightly when his face changed expression rapidly as he told them his story. "This older man and this boy comes in here tonight and the older guy registers and don't include the boy. I sees this and asks. He tells me the kid's his son. I gives them a room and figures nothin' more about it until I reads the papers after the desk gets quiet. And, whammo, there's the story of the bearded guy and the kidnapped kid. Well, I don't have to tell you guys how excited I gets. And I called the station house right away."

Mike nodded. Mac lingered quietly in the background. Mike pressed. "Did he look like the drawing?"

The glasses slipped up and down. "Oh, yeah. Pretty much."

"And the boy?" Mike asked.

The young clerk frowned. "Well, I didn't get too good a look at the kid. But from where I was standing, it sure as hell could of been him."

"They went right upstairs?" Mike inquired.

The young man scratched his head. "Don't think so. I think they might of gone into the coffee shop."

"You're not sure?" Mike inquired gently.

The young man blushed, ashamed that he had not performed his heroism in a perfect manner. "No, sir, I'm not sure."

"It really doesn't matter," Mike said, smiling.

The small nervous man's face erupted into a relieved smile. "Oh, good. They're in room 324. I have another key to the room right here." He held out the key in his quivering hand. "Do you want me to go with you?" His voice was softly begging to be included.

Mike shook his head. "No. But thanks anyway. This could be dangerous."

The young man bit his lip and then squeaked, "How's about if I sign somethin' that says you all are not responsible." He peered over his glasses, his eyes shifting from one policeman to the other.

Mike could hear Mac's light cough in the background and knew that the old man was trying very hard to suppress a laugh. Holding up the key, Mike shook his head. "Sorry. But we really can't. We're under orders to work alone."

The young man's face fell in disappointment, the glasses sliding down toward the tip of his large hooked nose. He grimaced and then growled. "Try not to frighten the other guests."

Mike smiled despite his attempts at seriousness. "We'll shoot him very quietly."

"Shoot him?" the young man squeaked as the two cops made their way toward the elevator. They heard the clerk hurrying around the desk toward them as the elevator doors opened. They entered and as the doors were closing, the wide-eyed face appeared in the slowly narrowing gap.

"Oh, God, please don't shoot him in here," the voice called as the doors closed.

The policemen rode the elevator in silence, each lost in his momentary thoughts. Finally the doors opened on the third floor and the men quietly exited. Mike beckoned as he quickly read the signs and made his way down the hall. Soon they were standing in front of room 324.

"Don't knock," Mac whispered. "He could hurt the kid."

"But we don't have a warrant," Mike retorted softly.

“Fuck the warrant. You probably don’t need them in motels anyway,” Mac argued.

Mike scowled. “Weeks could burn our asses.”

Mac set his jaw. “My ass. I just made the decision. Is that clear?”

Mike opened his hands as if he couldn’t argue. Mac slipped the key into the lock very slowly, trying not to grate one metal against the other. Finally he stopped as the key rested firmly in the slot. His thick fingers then reached out and turned the key very easily as he pressed the palm of his other hand against the door. The lock sprang with an audible snap. Mac stopped. He looked at Mike, who made a face and slipped his hand down over the gun in his holster. Mac’s hand pushed firmly against the motel door and it eased open, creaking softly. No chain was on. Mac turned toward Mike and smiled. The door was wide open now and the two men stared into the dark room. Mac reached into his back pocket and pulled out his flashlight and turned it on, flickering the light over the wall until he saw the light switch.

“You go in. Pull out your gun. And stand facing the beds,” he softly instructed Mike. The younger policeman slipped into the room, squinted as he tried to make out the beds and avoid tripping over unseen furniture; and he finally planted himself at the end of the twin beds with his gun held uneasily in his right hand. He nodded toward Mac.

Suddenly the room was flooded with light. In one bed a young boy with jet black hair which tumbled over the white pillow slept with his thumb lingering on the edge of his lips. The serenity of his sleeping face looked out of place in the brightly lit room. He stirred. In the other bed, lying on his back, snoring lightly, was an older man with a neatly trimmed mustache, the covers pulled up under his chin, his arms resting in bent angles by his side. Mike stared at the sleeping pair for a few seconds as Mac walked into the room.

The man bolted upright in bed, staring at the two policemen. His face became pale and his mouth flew open. He blinked frequently as the uncomfortable light insulted his sleepy eyes. Mike stood with his gun drawn, saying nothing. Mac placed his hands on his hips, his chubby fingers playing lightly over the gun in the holster. The man peered into the muzzle of the gun and croaked, “Oh, my God, policemen!”

The two uniformed men said nothing.

“She sent policemen. I can’t believe it. She sent the police.”

The boy moved in his sleep and reached his arm out toward the other bed. But the man did not notice as his own rigid body and blinking eyes confronted the two figures looming up at him from the end of his bed.

Finally Mike spoke softly. "What's your name?"

The man gulped. "Robert Crandell. Two l's," he said almost automatically.

"And the boy?" Mike asked.

"He's Bobby Crandell. My son. He's called Chipper." The man was leaning forward in the bed, his mind and body gradually getting acclimated to the strange scene around him.

"What are you doing here?" Mike asked gently.

The man cleared his throat. "Listen, officers, I know why you're here. But I couldn't get him back any sooner. My car broke down in the desert near New Mexico and we had to wait to have it fixed. And I didn't call her because I thought it would be okay. I knew I would get him back before spring vacation was over. It just didn't work out that way." He spoke very softly and quickly, his face contorted in conflicting flashes of anger and concern.

Mike tilted his head slightly. "Who is 'she'?"

"My wife. The one who called you." The man wrinkled his forehead.

"Why would she call us?" Mac's rough voice startled the man, who shivered slightly before peering beyond Mike and seeing the other policeman.

"Because I took Chipper on vacation. And I'm bringing him back late. And because she's a bitch. That's why. Because she's a real bitch and hates every minute that the court says I can have with him." He was angry now, his nostrils flaring and his fists tightening into bloodless balls of clenched fingers.

"Do you have identification?" Mike asked.

"Yes." The man jumped out of bed and reached the dresser by skirting the drawn gun, making as wide a path as possible. He grabbed his wallet, opened it, and shoved it toward Mike. Mike stared at the New Jersey driver's license which corroborated the man's identity.

The boy in the other bed opened his eyes and stared blankly into the blinding light. "Daddy?" he called.

The man went past the policeman and knelt by the boy's bed. He reached over and stroked the soft straight black hair on the top of his head.

“It’s okay, Chipper. Everything’s okay. Go back to sleep.”

The boy did not turn his head but touched the man’s arm and closed his eyes and appeared to drift back into sleep.

The man looked up at the policemen. “Please don’t frighten him. Just because his mother and I hate each other. Please. I promise to get him back to her by tomorrow as early as I can.” His eyes pleaded with the tall thin form of Mike Androtti, who stood over him.

Mike slowly slipped his gun back into the holster. Mac moved to his side. Finally Mac’s grating voice was heard in the room. “There’s been a mistake. We’re on the lookout for a boy who’s been kidnapped. We got a false report that your son was that boy. We’re sorry we frightened you.” His voice was contrite and soft. Mike stared down at the worn, dusty motel carpet.

“You mean his mother didn’t send you?” the man asked, bewildered.

“That’s right” was all Mac answered.

“There’s been a mistake?” He persisted in his questioning.

“Yeah. And we’re sorry.” Mac extended his hand toward the man kneeling by the sleeping figure of the boy.

The man rose and grabbed the older officer’s hand and shook it firmly. “We’ve been through so much. Chipper and me. I just thought this was another one of her stunts,” he said.

“No. This was one of *our* dumb stunts,” Mac said apologetically.

Mike felt his mouth become dry and his tongue heavy. He wanted to escape from the oppressive brightness of the room.

Mac let go of the man’s hand. “We’ll leave now. But get that boy home soon,” he said gently.

The man nodded wearily. “I will.”

“Good night,” Mac said softly as he touched Mike’s arm and moved toward the door. Mike followed the older policeman, refusing to look back at the middle-aged man standing in his undershorts between his son’s bed and his own and staring with confused wonder at the two nightmare figures leaving his motel room.

“Good night,” the man whispered just as the door to the room was pulled shut.

The two policemen stood staring at each other outside the room.

“I feel like such an asshole,” Mike said softly.

Mac shrugged. “It’s all part of the game. A bad tip.”

“But we frightened that poor bastard to death,” Mike argued.

“He’ll get over it.” Mac retorted. “We all do.”

Mike frowned. “He could report us.”

Smiling, Mac shook his head. “He won’t.”

“Why not?” Mike asked.

“Because of the kid,” Mac said simply.

Mike sighed and nodded his head. “Did you see the fear in that guy’s face?”

Mac nodded grimly. “She must be a real bitch.”

“Who knows, Mac? Maybe they both are,” Mike said quietly.

They moved away from the door and walked toward the elevator.

“We gotta call in,” Mac grumbled.

“Right.” Mike nodded.

“What the fuck time is it, anyhow?” Mac asked.

“About five.”

“Jesus Christ. Five A.M. in the goddamn morning and we’re chasing squirrels in the fuckin’ park,” Mac snarled. Mike smiled to himself. The remembered past language of the old-time cop frequently slipped into Mac’s conversation particularly when he was tired or stressed.

As they passed the desk, the young desk clerk leaned toward them.

“Wrong man,” Mac barked as he passed the expectant face.

“You sure?” the young man piped.

Mac stared at him while Mike watched.

“Does a chicken have lips?” Mac parried.

The young man squinted behind his glasses. “What in the hell does that mean?”

“Well, does it?” Mac chuckled softly.

“I don’t know.” The glasses were sliding.

“Think about it awhile. Now let me use your phone.” Mac walked behind the counter and picked up the telephone. He turned to the bewildered young man. “Get me an outside line,” he ordered.

The phone at the other end was picked up after the first ring.

“Let me talk to Sergeant Weeks,” Mac said evenly.

“I’m not sure he’s here. Who’s calling?” Mac recognized the voice of the oldest guy on the force, Sammy Flagel.

“It’s Mac, you shithead. And I’ll bet you that Weeks is sittin’ in big fuckin’ office,” Mac challenged.

Mac, you old bastard. It's five A.M. What the fuck would Weeks be doing here?"

Mac grunted. "Shut the hell up and ring his office."

Sammy rang the sergeant's office. Weeks picked up the phone.

"Sergeant Weeks." The voice was beginning to wear thin with fatigue.

"Sergeant, it was a false alarm. Just a guy with his kid. Scared him 'cause he's late gettin' the kid back to the wife. Divorced."

"Damn," Weeks swore softly.

Mac was surprised. He had never heard the younger man curse before. "Sorry, Weeks."

"You did just fine, Mac. How are you feeling?" Weeks was genuinely concerned.

"Tired as hell," Mac admitted.

"And Mike?"

"Even young ball players get tired, Weeks. His ass is draggin'." Mac winked at Mike, who smiled back with real affection.

"Okay. Tell the guy there to put you up for a few hours of sleep. But call in about nine. We have another lead." Weeks was talking slowly and distinctly into the phone. This was the way the man gave orders, Mac thought.

"What's the lead?" Mac could not help asking, his involvement in the Stern case now so complete that the merest suggestion of a clue, a lead, a tip excited him.

Weeks was silent "You both need sleep. I'll tell you in the morning."

Mac knew that once Weeks made up his mind there was no chance of changing it. He shrugged. "If you say so."

"I do" was the calm response.

"Okay, I'll call in at nine." Mac was about to hang up.

"Mac, I'm going to stop by your home on my way in about seven-thirty tomorrow morning. Do I have your permission?" Weeks spoke without emotion or feeling. He was asking a simple direct question.

"Why?" Mac asked, amazed.

"To tell your wife where you are and to help get her started in the morning." Again the statement of simple fact.

"But the next-door neighbor should be there," Mac argued, confused and concerned at this intrusion into that walled-off part of his life.

“If you don’t want me to tell her you’re okay ...” Weeks commented, stopping at that point.

“I’ll call her,” Mac retorted.

“I want you to sleep,” Weeks said calmly.

Mac paused, then finally he answered. “You can go. She’ll be real glad to meet you. But ...” he stopped, not knowing how to go on.

“Yes?”

“She’s pretty helpless, Weeks.” Mac’s voice was low and his face was flushed.

“I know, Mac. Now may I stop by and reassure her?”

Mac took a deep breath. “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll hear from you and Androtti at nine. Sharp.” The phone clicked off and rested dead against Mac’s ear. Mac sat holding the silent receiver for several minutes stunned that he had permitted Weeks to enter his private life. Mike saw the confused face of the older man and waited stoically in the motel lobby for Mac’s bad news to reach him so he could react. Finally Mac rose and walked over to him.

“What’s the matter?” Mike asked.

“Nothing,” Mac answered. “I’m just dead beat. Weeks said to sack out here till nine.”

Mike nodded. “You sure you’re all right?”

Mac grunted. “If you young guys don’t stop asking me that damn question, I’m goin’ to break a couple of heads.” He turned away.

Mike said softly, “I’m going over to get a key to a room.”

He moved away as the older policeman bent his head.

Both men lay in their beds desperately trying to fall asleep, but their senses were so stimulated and alert that sleep refused to engulf them totally. Mac repeated his nightly fantasy games of sexual adventure, but rather than relax and numb him as if he were post-orgasmic, he felt unusual arousal and paradoxical wakefulness.

Mike tossed and turned, his thoughts rushing up like geysers carrying scenes from his youth—faces, places, happenings—many he had hoped were forever buried in the locked closets of his past. But this case had unlocked the images.

“I can’t sleep,” Mike whispered into the darkened room in an almost childlike entreaty.

Mac heard. He cleared his throat and his deep throaty voice rasped, "Me neither."

"My body is so damn tired but my head is jumping," Mike said somewhat louder.

"Mine too. This fuckin' case is getting on our nerves," Mac grumbled.

Mike sighed. "But I'm not thinking about the case or the kid. The weird thing is I'm thinking about myself and things I haven't thought about in years."

Mac turned on his side toward the younger man. "Want me to turn on the light?"

"No," Mike whispered quickly.

Mac lay silent for a long time. The darkness had always hidden his own fantasies. He could understand the welcome covering the night pulled over memories as well. Finally he spoke gruffly but gently trying not to sound too intimate, too close, trying not to frighten the young man away.

"You want to talk about it?"

"I wouldn't know where to begin," Mike sighed.

Mac coughed softly. "Anywhere's fine with me."

"There's so much," Mike said reluctantly.

The silence that followed was so long that for a while, Mike suspected that his roommate had fallen asleep.

"Tell me how it was you knew you were gay."

Mike smiled sadly in the darkness. Why is that always the first question? he mused. Conversations with people he cared about always seemed to begin on the first truly serious, personal level with that question. As if it were necessary to exorcise that curiosity before the relationship could move a step in any direction. He took several deep breaths and began talking in a calm, thin, tired voice.

"I guess you might say it started in high school. I had an older sister, eight years older than me. My folks were really much older. I think I came as a real surprise to my mother. Not a really welcome surprise, I don't think. But she mothered the hell out of me. And so did my sister. Always on me, hugging me, touching me, doing things for me. I was spoiled as hell. And my dad seemed so distant. We had very little to talk about. I think he resented me. Saw me as taking his wife away from him. I didn't see it then, I just thought he didn't give a shit. But I see it now. Anyway, in high school I met this guy and we became really close friends. We both tried out for the

baseball team. I knew I could pitch. I used to practice by myself in the back yard for hours. It was kind of like escaping. If you know what I mean.”

Mike stopped, his thoughts going back to that time. He could feel the sun as it beat down on his young back where he stood in the small back yard, throwing the ball against the crudely drawn circle on the taut canvas ring.

“Yeah. I know. Everybody runs away. Some guys drink like shit. Others shoot up,” Mac commented gently.

Mike nodded in the darkness. “That’s it. That’s what it was like.” He paused and tried collecting his thoughts. They were tumbling into crazy patterns that had no chronological logic but were crowding together, years stumbling over decades that existed before and after. Finally he tried to go on.

“We both made the team. I was the big pitcher. He was in the outfield. He wasn’t great but he played a lot for the team. We shared a lot of the same things. And we’d sit on my porch and talk for hours. I never felt so close to any other male person in my life. He became so important to me that if I didn’t see him, like on Sunday, I’d get sick in my stomach.” He was finding the telling of this story increasingly difficult at this time.

Mac’s breathing was even. “How old were you?”

“We were both about sixteen. And the one thing we thought we really had in common was hating our old men. His drank, and I imagined that mine didn’t give a shit about me. It took a lot of years before I knew that that was a lot of adolescent crap. By then he was dead. My dad.” Mike stopped. He felt his eyes fill and burn. Maybe he should stop.

“Go on,” the older man urged.

Mike waited for the bitter taste to wash out of his mouth before starting again. “We were curious about sex and things like that. But neither one of us had had any experiences. So we’d make up stories about crazy sexual things to tell each other. I think that’s how it all started.”

Mac grunted.

“Well, one night, we were lying in the big double bed in his house telling each other stories before going to sleep when one of us touched the other. I can’t remember which one of us it was. It doesn’t matter. Both of us had been thinking about it for months. Naturally we were both hard as rocks. And that was the first night.”

“What happened after that?” Mac asked quietly.

Mike sighed. "For him, not much. He got scared. I didn't see him much after that."

"And you?" Mac whispered.

"I wasn't scared. Shit, I was delighted. I felt like I had come home." Mike took a deep breath. "For me that was just the beginning."

"What ever happened to ... what's his name?" Mac leaned toward the other man.

"Buddy ... he's married. I think, with kids. He wasn't important, Mac. Not in the long run. He just helped me get going," Mike said wearily.

"And never with women?" Mac questioned.

Mike laughed dryly. "Everybody straight always asks me that. Yeah. I've balled women. But it doesn't do the same for me. I'm a real homosexual. Mac. No swinging both ways."

"It must have been hard for you on the ball club," Mac commented.

Mike sighed, thinking, I can't go through that now. Enough is enough. Too many memories will drown me. "Yeah. But there were other guys on the clubs who were gay and we'd find each other. We'd know."

"No shit. Other guys playing professional ball were fags?" Mac asked.

Mike winced slightly but quickly recovered. The word cut into him like a spear, but the wound healed quickly in the darkness. "Yeah, Mac. More than you'd believe. If they weren't dedicated homosexuals like me, then they'd like to try both ways. Quite a few were married with kids."

"Jesus," Mac whispered.

Mike smiled in the anonymity of the night. "Strange fucking world, eh, Mac?"

Mac sighed. "Yeah. Why does it happen, Mike? I keep wondering why it happens to a kid."

"Becoming gay?" Mike asked evenly.

"Yeah. I think about it a lot because of Jamie. What was it that made him that way? Was he born that way or did Maureen and me do things wrong with him?" The old man's voice was distant and withdrawn.

Mike ground his teeth together lightly before answering. "Hell, Mac, I don't know. I'm no shrink. For me it was probably a different reason than for Jamie."

"I tried to understand him," Mac said softly.

Mike sighed. "I'm sure you did."

“But he wouldn’t let me. Maureen never knew. I saw to that. But he shut me out.” He stopped. Then Mike heard his heavy body shift closer to the edge of the bed facing him. Finally the older man’s voice reached over to him. “I understand you, Mike. And I like you. Why couldn’t it happen with him?”

“I’m not your son, Mac. It’s easier.” Mike’s voice shook slightly.

Mac did not answer. The only phrase that kept spinning through his numb brain at that moment was *I wish you were*. As he lay silently on his side, his fantasies slowly drifted out of his mind. He felt at ease and slipped into a deep sleep.

Mike heard the old man snoring. Until the phone rang at eight-thirty in the morning, he lay awake listening to the thick snoring and heavy breathing of the old man in the next bed and thinking back to the days when anything seemed possible but nothing really was.

FIFTEEN

Ricky opened his eyes. He had no idea how long he had been sleeping but he felt rested and relaxed. The room was bright with the light of a lamp from across the room. He yawned and stretched and wondered what day it was. Why hadn't his alarm gone off? Maybe he had overslept and would be late for school. Occasionally he would forget to set his alarm and nobody would wake him and he would have to hurry and wash and run the distance from his house to the school. His eyes searched the table next to the bed for his clock. But there was no clock there. The lamp looked unfamiliar. He swung his head around to survey the room and quickly felt a shattering sense of displacement as he failed to recognize anything in the brightly lit room. This was not his room. Where was he? He shook his clouded head for a second and sat up in the bed. Instantaneously, he saw Arvis sitting in the chair directly across from him, fully dressed in his flannel shirt and overalls, the newspaper lifted to hide his face. Ricky realized where he was and who the man was in a sudden rush of recognition. His sense of relaxation vanished and he clutched his naked legs tightly. Slowly the paper lowered and the clean-shaven man looked at the boy sitting upright in bed, his undressed body draped in shadows from the lamp by Arvis's chair. The older man smiled, the uneven teeth with the wide space between the front two now appearing unreal in the attractive shaven face.

"Sleep good?" the man asked.

Ricky nodded, his face remaining unresponsive.

"You really sacked out. Happens a lot after you have a good come," the man remarked easily.

Turning his face away slightly, Ricky felt his face flush. He said nothing.

"Ain'tcha gonna talk?" Arvis asked curiously.

Ricky shook his head. He didn't know what to say to the man who had pushed him so far. He felt embarrassed and guilty. His face burned and he crouched in the bed to hide his exposed, vulnerable body from the older man's view. Arvis continued to stare at him for a few seconds, then shook his head lightly and lifted the paper again, hiding his face. Ricky turned his head to stare at the furniture in the room. As his eyes wandered, he caught

sight of his clothes lying scattered in front of the closed drapes. He lowered his head and buried his face in the protection of his knees, trying to forget what had happened.

Finally he lifted his head and spoke nervously. "How long did I sleep?"

Arvis brought the paper down and thought for a few seconds. "Near to an hour."

Ricky stared at him, still uncertain what to say or do at this point.

"You hungry?" Arvis asked.

The young boy nodded.

Arvis pulled his long muscular frame out of the chair and folded the newspaper carefully on the seat. "Me too. Let's go out and get somethin' to eat."

He bent down and scooped up the boy's clothes that were lying on the motel carpet and tossed them toward him on the bed.

"Get dressed," he ordered.

Ricky reached for his clothes and, not moving from the top of the bed, squirmed to put them on.

Arvis watched him and started to laugh. "You can get outta the bed. I ain't gonna bother ya," he said, chuckling.

Ricky blushed but continued to try pulling his pants on while sitting on the bed. Finally he gave up and slid off the bed and pulled up his pants and zipped his fly. He turned toward Arvis. "My shoes?" he asked.

"There." The man pointed next to the bed.

Ricky quickly slipped them on. "I'm ready," he said.

"Good." Arvis took a comb out of his back pocket that had several teeth missing, walked over, and gently ran it through Ricky's disheveled blond hair. He stepped back and looked at the boy. "You're lookin' good now," he said happily.

Ricky bent his head.

Arvis took the boy's arm and moved him toward the door. "It's chow time, old buddy," the older man called, and the two left the motel room and entered the carpeted hallway.

The man and the boy sat at a table in a nearby McDonald's silently eating hamburgers and drinking Cokes. Arvis watched the quiet boy with

interest. Finally he stopped chewing and spoke to Ricky. "You're awful quiet."

Ricky shrugged but did not answer.

"You ashamed?" Arvis asked softly.

Surprised by the question, Ricky did not move for a few seconds. Then he nodded. Arvis took another bite, chewing vigorously as he gazed at the uncomfortable boy. After he swallowed, he remarked, "Ain't nothin' to be ashamed of. Good sex ain't nothin' to get all upset over. Whatcha worried about?" Arvis leaned on his elbows and moved his face closer to Ricky's.

Ricky turned away for a second. Then he pushed the half-eaten hamburger on the plate away from him and looked up at Arvis. "I shouldn't have done it," he said mournfully.

Arvis arched his eyebrows. "I made you do it. Kind of. What you mean is you shouldn't of liked it so much." He gazed at the boy as the color rose in the youngster's face.

Ricky gulped. "I guess that is what I mean."

"Shit. So you liked it. Why not?" the older man asked easily.

"It's wrong," Ricky said softly.

"Who says?" The tone of Arvis's voice had become defensive.

Ricky pressed his lips together. Finally he spoke. "Everybody."

"That's where you're wrong. A lot of people are doing it." Arvis frowned.

Ricky wrinkled his forehead. "A lot?"

Arvis nodded. "Yeah. I know of a lot of guys."

"You do?" Ricky was searching for reassurance.

"Yeah. Guys I met in jail. Guys I met in bars. Everywhere I go, there's guys who like doing what we did." Arvis finished his hamburger.

Ricky tried to follow the logic in the man's argument. It was the reassurance that he so desperately needed, but somehow the threads of the theory would not hold together for the young boy.

"Finish your hamburger," Arvis ordered.

"I'm not hungry, Arvis," Ricky whined.

Arvis touched his hand. "Eat it for Arvis," he said easily.

Ricky looked into the melting eyes of the older man and took a deep breath. He reached out and took a bite of the cold hamburger and tried chewing it. Very slowly he finished the meat, washing it down with gulps of watery Coke.

The older man smiled. "Good boy." He patted Ricky's hand.

They sat staring at each other for a few seconds. Ricky's mind was slowing down to a willing acceptance of where he was. If he did not think about his mother and his home, he could allow the hours with Arvis to just happen to him. It was when the thought of his real life intruded into this living unreality that Ricky felt the overwhelming pangs of homesickness and worry over what he was doing and where he was. Then the impact of the strange journey with the older man, the sexual confusion, and the ambivalence at leaving created such fear and self-loathing inside him. But for the moment he was able to push these thoughts out of his mind as he sat across from Arvis in the familiar atmosphere of a McDonald's restaurant munching the usual hamburgers and drinking Cokes.

Arvis tapped his fingers on the table. "Tell you what let's do," he said expectantly.

Ricky automatically flinched. "What?" he asked, slightly fearful.

"Let's go see a movie," Arvis shot at him with anticipation.

"A movie?" Ricky asked in astonishment.

"Sure," Arvis said. "It's early. I was lookin' in the paper and there's a good Bruce Lee movie up the street. It's an old one I seen before. But it's real good. You'll like it."

Ricky relaxed. He would be safe inside a dark movie house. "Who's Bruce Lee?" he asked.

"You gotta be kiddin'? You don't know who Bruce Lee is?"

Ricky shook his head. "No."

"Jesus. Where you been? He's the Kung Fu guy," Arvis said. "You sure you never heard of him?"

Ricky decided to lie. It was the safest. "Oh, yeah. Now I know who he is."

Arvis smiled. "Sure you know. You just forgot." He rose and beckoned for Ricky to follow. They walked out of the restaurant and stood for a second on the downtown street corner. Arvis looked in several directions. Finally he spotted the theater marquee.

"Hey. It's right up the street. Let's go." He grabbed Ricky's arm excitedly and pulled him across the busy intersection, past the couples and men in pairs cruising down the Saturday night downtown streets of Philadelphia.

The black woman stared at them for a second before pressing the buttons that slid their tickets toward them. She counted out the change from the wrinkled bills that Arvis had pushed toward her behind the glass enclosure. Arvis grabbed the tickets and motioned Ricky to follow him into the large theater lobby where a wizened old black man tore the tickets and dropped them into a large cracked wooden box. Several young black men lounged in the outer lobby, laughing loudly and occasionally slapping hands as they moved restlessly to a silent beat. The ticket taker turned once or twice to look their way, but he made no move to quiet the raucous noise. One of the black youths, his hair in tightly bound corn rows, jerked his head in Arvis's direction as the tall broad-shouldered white man entered the lobby followed by the young boy. He pointed a crooked finger toward the pair. "What's the white mother fucker doin' in heah?" he said loudly.

Arvis did not seem to hear. His eyes stared straight ahead and he moved past the small black ticket taker into the dark interior of the theater. Ricky scampered to catch up to him, fearful of being left behind in the lobby.

After passing the refreshment counter, where several black men lounged against the glass-topped counter talking in low rolling lilting tones to the attractive young black girl behind the candy stand, Arvis moved to the right aisle and slipped into the last row. Ricky tried following him, but the sudden darkness of the inside of the theater after the bright marquee had confused his vision and he stumbled and fell against the seat along the aisle. Arvis jumped up from where he had just sat down and rushed over to him and grabbed him as he was about to fall. Ricky felt the firm arms of the older man clutching him tightly and literally lifting him into the row, slowly depositing him into a tattered, uncomfortable seat.

"You okay?" Arvis whispered.

"Yes," Ricky hissed back.

"Sure?" Arvis questioned.

Ricky nodded. Arvis slid down in his seat, his long legs inching up on the seat ahead so that his knees peaked just over the rim of the chair in front. Ricky sat adjusting his eyes to the inside of the massive theater. There was a very large crowd. Almost every person was black. Ricky wondered if Arvis knew this but decided that if he did know, he probably wouldn't care. So he said nothing. The screen flickered with the bright and dark shadows

of people moving, and the dubbed voices echoed throughout the theater with a reverberation that sent off tiny, almost imperceptible echoes.

Ricky concentrated on the screen. The tall Oriental man moved across its wide surface with athletic grace. His torso was uncovered, demonstrating cascades of rippling muscles over his chest and arms. His face changed expression very little, but the camera lingered over his limpid, sensuous eyes, which focused upon the audience each time he was about to confront the other person on the screen. The effects were apparently intoxicating to the audience. They stirred. Whistles could be heard piercing the silence of the filled seats. Voices shouted out at the brown muscular man moving across the screen, his feet lashing out to attack an enemy. "Rap 'im, baby." screamed a woman's husky voice. "In the fuckin' balls, Bruce" came quickly behind from a man on the other side of the auditorium. "Kill the white bastard" echoed throughout the theater. Ricky moved uncomfortably in his seat and turned to stare at Arvis.

Arvis was resting with his head thrown back slightly, his shoulders up against the back of his seat, his eyes welded to the man's muscular body and the violent actions flashing across the screen. His legs were wide apart, no longer resting on the seat in front of him. He was slowly rubbing the firm swelling in his groin with his right hand. Ricky stared with curious fascination at the staring eyes, the open mouth, the rubbing hand. He turned back to look at the screen to see what was causing Arvis to become so sexually aroused, but he could not see anything that he could interpret as being the cause. Bruce Lee sweated and kicked, his chest glistening, his arm muscles bulging, his feet sending the other men sprawling on floors or flying off building roofs. The violence kept up unabated as did the catcalls and loud shouts of encouragement from the large audience.

Ricky turned back to look at Arvis. The movie bored the young boy. It was constant repetition of the same thing. Bruce Lee always won the fights, his legs shooting out like pistol shots to decimate and cripple his opponents. Arvis's eyelids were partially closed, mere slits, but Ricky was certain that he could see the screen. He had unzipped his fly and his right hand was actively massaging his hard penis inside his pants. Ricky sensed that Arvis was acutely aware that he was watching him. Suddenly Arvis turned to Ricky and croaked in a hoarse whisper, "Go in the john and get me some toilet paper."

Ricky jumped out of his seat, sped to the sign that read men, and pushed open the door. A young black man leaned against the dirty tile walls smoking a cigarette and blowing out rounded puffs of smoke. An old black man was pressed into the urinal, his head down. The young black watched Ricky with interest as the boy ran into the men's room.

Seeing an open stall, Ricky rushed in and started unrolling the toilet paper. He wrapped the coarse tissue around his hand until he thought he had enough. When he turned around, the young black man was standing in the door of the stall blocking his way. He leaned up against the doorjamb staring at the young white boy, whose hand was bandaged in toilet paper. He took a last puff on the cigarette and flicked it past Ricky into the toilet.

"Whatcha doin'?" the black man asked.

The toilet flushed beyond them and Ricky heard the other man push open the men's room door and leave.

Ricky stood very still. He tried to answer but couldn't find his voice.

"I asked you whatcha were doin'." The black man moved closer.

"Getting some toilet paper," Ricky replied.

"Why?" the man questioned.

Ricky stuttered, "My friend wanted it."

The black man laughed shortly. "Shit." Ricky stood mutely watching as the black man continued to inch toward him and pulled the toilet stall door closed behind him.

"You was jerkin' off, wasn't you, white boy?" The black man leered.

Ricky shook his head. "No, my friend wanted it," he whispered. Ricky moved backward, wedging himself in the corner between the toilet bowl and the wall. He could not move out of that spot without coming in direct physical contact with the other man.

"How 'bout letting me jerk off your little white thing? And you can give me some head after that." The man reached out to grab Ricky. Ricky gasped and pressed himself against the wall. He raised his arms and whimpered, "Stop." One hand reflexively flew over his face; the toilet-paper-bound hand covered his groin.

The black man smiled and moistened his lips. "Come on, white boy. Black cock is real special." The black man began to unzip his fly.

Suddenly Ricky could not stand the cumulative terror another minute. He opened his mouth and started screaming with a force and vengeance that

rocked the walls of the tile room. His shrieks were loud, piercing, almost continuous bellows that filled the men's room to overflowing with noise.

The black man shifted nervously and moved to reach for Ricky to cover his mouth.

Ricky threw his head back and heard himself calling "Arvis, help, Arvis." He steeled himself for another assault on his body. As he stood wedged into the corner of the stall, his eyes closed, his mouth open, screaming, he heard a familiar voice in front of him.

"Get away from that boy, man." Arvis's voice was cold and hard as steel.

Ricky opened his eyes and saw Arvis's towering form behind the bending body of the black man. The black man straightened up and turned halfway around. "Who are you, you mother fucker?" the black man spat out.

Arvis set his jaw. "I'm his old man," he said directly.

The black man squinted his eyes. "His real old man?" He looked skeptical.

"No. Just his old man," Arvis said meaningfully.

The black man turned to look at Ricky crouching in the corner and then back at the tall man in the overalls. He smiled foolishly. "Ah see. He's savin' it for you."

"Yeah. Now put your pecker back in your pants. And get out," Arvis ordered with menace in his voice.

The black man fumbled and zipped up his fly. "Don't order me around, okay. Just don't do that."

Arvis did not blink as the black man slipped his hand in his back pocket. He spoke calmly. "Leave the shiv in there. And do us both a favor and get outta here now."

Ricky remained paralyzed in the corner of the stall. His body bent slightly and his eyes darted back and forth between both men. He felt his heart breaking out of the thin rib cage in his chest. The black man stared at Arvis for a long time, then spat on the floor at his feet, brushed past the tall white man, and left the men's room.

Arvis slipped into the cubicle and reached and pulled Ricky out of the toilet stall. He tore the toilet paper out of the boy's hand and turned the small shaking body around so that it faced the door to the lavatory.

“We’re gettin’ the hell outta here,” Arvis said quietly as he steered the young boy through the door out into the back of the theater and then out into the lobby past the crowds of black people lining up for the late Saturday night show and into the street. Just under the blinking luminescent marquee he stopped and stared at the boy. Ricky tried smiling at him, but the result was more like a choked grimace. Arvis shook his head. “You sure do get into a peck of trouble,” he growled.

Ricky nodded. “Thanks,” he whispered.

“Shit, Ricky. Didn’t you think I’d do somethin’ like that for you?” Arvis sounded hurt.

Ricky closed his eyes against the bright marquee lights. “Sure I did. But thanks anyway,” he whispered.

Arvis acknowledged the thank you with a brisk shake of his head. He threw his arm around the boy’s shoulder and together they moved down the street. “We’re goin’ back to our room,” Arvis said.

Ricky tightened his hands into a fist. He could not be sure whether that was good news or bad at that moment. His head was reeling from trying to figure out what was safe and what was dangerous for him during these last hours. Everything seemed upside down, inside out. Most of all, he was totally out of balance. He wondered if he would ever feel in control and balanced again.

Arvis bought two cans of soda and filled the ice bucket from the ice maker down the hall. He filled two glasses with ice and poured the soft drinks in each glass. Ricky sat, limp and passive, in the chair next to the table in the corner of the room. He stared ahead, seeing nothing, reliving the fear that had cornered him in the men’s room of the movie house. The strange loud voices hollering at the moving body on the screen continued to echo within his head. He was adrift from the time and the moment. Arvis placed the glass down next to him on the table and sat in the other chair and began drinking his soda. Ricky did not move. His young face was washed free of all expression, his eyes glazed over, his arms hung loosely over the arms of the chair.

Arvis watched him intently. “I just put your soda down,” he said quietly to the young boy.

Ricky did not answer but continued staring straight ahead.

“Ricky.” The older man barked the name. The loudness exploded in the room. The boy started in the chair and turned, his eyes wide with

sudden fear, toward the older man.

“What?” Ricky asked in a small voice.

Arvis pointed to the filled glass. “Your soda.”

Ricky reached over and sipped the liquid slowly.

“Listen, kid, don’t be mad at Arvis. I didn’t want that thing with the nigger to happen.” Arvis leaned toward him.

Ricky shook his head. “I’m not mad at you, Arvis. Honest, I’m not. I’m just scared. Everybody scares me now.” The boy’s eyes filled, but he refused to cry.

Arvis frowned as he gulped more of his drink. “Even me?” he asked cautiously.

Ricky nodded mechanically. “Yes. Even you. Maybe especially you, Arvis.” His voice was dull and lifeless. “But you want to know something funny?” The voice wavered.

“What?” Arvis put his glass down on the table.

Ricky closed his eyes, pressing the lids tightly together. “I scare me the most. I’m scared the most by myself. And I don’t know why.”

“I do.” The older man’s voice was deep and sonorous, the coarseness momentarily gone.

“You do?” Ricky opened his eyes and stared at the man who sat looking at him.

Arvis nodded. “Yeah.”

“Why?” Ricky asked, beseeching a rational response.

“I ain’t good with words so I ain’t sure I can explain. But here goes.” Arvis paused briefly. “You don’t know why you’re lettin’ me take you with me and do the things to you and likin’ it and not runnin’ away. That scares the shit outta you.”

Ricky nodded. “That’s exactly it, Arvis. How’d you know?”

The older man lowered his eyes. “I ain’t so dumb, Ricky. Really I’m pretty smart. Just nobody ever gave me a chance to show it. Not for a long time.”

Ricky took a deep breath. “Did you ever wonder about yourself? Like I am now, Arvis?” he asked.

Arvis shook his head. “Naw. I knew from the first time.”

They sat in the same position, not moving, not looking at each other for a very long time. After many minutes Arvis rose and slowly unsnapped his one overall hook and let the filthy clothing sag down to his knees.

“Let’s go to bed,” he said quietly, his eyes averted.

Ricky moved off the chair and quickly took off his clothes, leaving on his undershorts. He pulled the covers off the bed and slipped in on the side nearest the window. Arvis was undressing very slowly, folding his clothes methodically over the chair.

“We should take a shower tomorrow, don’t you think?” he said as he laid his clothes on the chair.

Ricky followed the slowly moving man with his eyes. “Good idea, Arvis,” he said evenly.

Arvis nodded. Soon he was totally naked and he turned toward the bed. He walked around to the opposite side of the double bed and slid in under the covers and lay on his back staring at the ceiling. Ricky heard him sigh very deeply. He moved over slightly so that his body lay directly against the heat of the mature man’s flesh. Arvis did not seem to notice. His eyes continued staring at an insignificant place on the ceiling above. Ricky reached down and laid his small hand over the man’s coarse, calloused hand. Arvis did not move. Ricky turned partially on his side so that he faced the nude body of the man, who averted his gaze very slightly. The boy slipped his hand under the covers and laid his moist, warm, small hand over the older man’s hairy chest. Arvis turned his face in the opposite direction.

“Arvis?” Ricky whispered.

“Yeah,” the man sighed.

“If you want to, you can touch me.” Ricky’s face burned as he stuttered the words.

Arvis twisted his head around to stare at the young boy. He studied his small features closely. Finally he shook his head. “I don’t feel like it, kid,” he said hesitantly.

Ricky swallowed. “You don’t?” he asked bewildered.

Arvis shook his head again. “Don’t know why. But something’s happening. I just don’t feel like it. Thanks anyway.”

Ricky laid back, his body trembling with embarrassment, his mind furious with rejection. He tried taking deep breaths, but he still felt his muscles tensing, and he turned abruptly so that his back was toward Arvis.

He heard Arvis cough lightly and then gulp a few times. He wasn’t sure what was happening to the older man. Finally he heard Arvis’s choked whisper. “Good night, kid. Get a real nice sleep.”

Arvis and Ricky lay awake for several hours, each staring at opposite walls, before sleep finally took each one out of his own misery.

SIXTEEN

The phone blasted through the groggy morning half-sleep that had finally descended over Mike. He rolled over and lifted the receiver, expecting to hear the anonymous voice of the desk clerk telling him the time. Instead he heard Sergeant Weeks's clear, even voice coming at him from the receiver.

"Good morning. Who's there?" Weeks asked.

Mike cleared his morning throat. "Androtti."

"Sorry to have to get you guys up." Weeks was apologetic.

Mike grunted wearily and quickly looked over at the still sleeping form of the older policeman, lying on his side facing him, the tired, lined, florid face sagging in repose, his breathing heavy, his gray head pressed deeply into the thin motel pillow.

"It's okay, Sergeant. We slept some," Mike said.

"Good. I'm glad," Weeks commented sincerely.

Mike took several deep breaths. "What's on the agenda for today?" Mac stirred in his sleep as if he was becoming aware of the shift in the conversation to business.

Weeks began speaking, his voice having lost all vestiges of familiarity, returning to the computer efficiency and conciseness of his everyday conversation inside the police station. The softness in his earlier tone was replaced by a cool directness and force that crept through the steady and precise flow of his words.

"A Maryland state trooper called in late last night. He had stopped a car on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway for speeding. There was a woman driving. He saw a kid in the front seat. The kid told him his name was Ricky Stern. But the kid didn't tell him anything else, according to the trooper." Weeks paused.

Mike blinked in the morning light and rubbed his eyes. "Then the boy is still alive," he mused aloud. Mac's eyes were now open; and Mike could tell that though the old man had not stirred, he was listening carefully to his side of the conversation.

"Possibly," Weeks answered cautiously. "Or the kid could have been playing games with the trooper."

Mike shook his head lightly. "That's sick, Sergeant," he reflected.

Mike could hear Weeks sigh. "There's a lot of sick people running around, Mike."

"I guess so," Mike reluctantly admitted. "But chances are it is the real kid."

"I hope so," Weeks answered.

Mac lifted himself up very slowly from the bed, the covers falling away from his heavy, short body covered by his crumpled underwear. He ran his hands over his face and softly rubbed the back of his neck as Mike continued the conversation.

"He get the woman's name?" Mike asked.

"Yes. And the Philadelphia address from the ticket. He described the boy. It sounds a lot like the Stern kid," Weeks reflected.

"Was the Moore guy with them?" Mike asked hesitantly.

Weeks paused. "Here's the hitch. The trooper's not sure. He didn't look in the back of the car. Only the kid was in the front seat with the woman. So we don't know. That's one reason I have a few doubts."

Mike nodded. "You want us to check the woman out? Or should the FBI come in now if we think the kid was transported across state lines?"

"You check her out," Weeks answered firmly. "I want to see this case through. Get a pencil and paper."

Mike nodded silently, laid the phone down, and moved quickly out of the bed. He walked over to the dresser and opened the top drawer and took out a piece of motel stationery and a pen and quickly returned to the bed, where he sat crosslegged, the paper and pen resting in his lap. He picked up the phone. "Okay. Let's have it."

Weeks slowly repeated the woman's name from the paper that lay on his desk. He carefully enunciated the address as Mike balanced the paper on his knees and scribbled awkwardly. Mac sat watching his younger companion intently.

Finally Weeks paused. "Got it?" the sergeant asked.

Mike smiled. "Yes."

"Repeat it," Weeks ordered very softly.

I knew that was coming, Mike thought through the clouds of his early-morning fatigue. The double check. The mark of the man. Trust, but only so far. Lead, but wherever possible, leave nothing to the chance of human

error. The man works less like a human being and more like a machine, Mike reflected as he slowly repeated the woman's name and address.

"Right," Weeks answered when he was done. "I called Philadelphia information. Here's her phone number."

Mike glanced at Mac, who wrinkled his forehead. Mike smiled comfortably at the older man. He put his hand over the phone and whispered, "The guy's so damn thorough it scares the hell out of me." Mac grinned, his slack face assuming some form, his features beginning to take shape in the aftermath of sleep.

"Mike, are you there?" Weeks asked impatiently.

"Yes, Sergeant. I was answering a question for Mac," Mike replied.

Weeks began to read off the phone number very slowly. The only movement in the motel room was the rapid activity of Mike's hand as he scribbled on the motel stationery. Finally Weeks stopped. Without waiting to be told, Mike began repeating the number back.

"Good," Weeks said quickly after the message had been repeated.

There was a slight pause. Weeks continued. "Call her after nine and let me know as soon as you talk to her." Mike did not answer. There was no need. Weeks waited and then went on. "Is Mac there?"

"Yeah," Mike replied.

"Let me talk to him," Weeks said easily.

Mike shoved the phone toward Mac, who reached out and took it, pressing it against his ear. "Hi, Sergeant," he croaked in a husky early-morning voice.

"Morning, Mac. Just wanted to tell you Maureen is fine," Weeks said unemotionally.

Mac furrowed his brow. "You saw her already?"

"Yes. I helped her out of bed and stopped by your neighbor's house to tell her you might be a while yet," Weeks replied.

"You got her out of bed?" Mac asked incredulously.

"Yes. And told her what you were doing. She understood." Weeks was calm and even.

Mac swallowed several times before continuing. "Where did you leave her?"

"In the kitchen. By the window. She told me she was waiting for the mailman. Mac, I had to remind her it was Sunday and he wouldn't come." Weeks's voice lowered very slightly.

Mac flushed. "Thanks, Weeks. I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing. She's a fine woman," Weeks commented.

"I know." Mac rubbed his tired eyes. "I bet she got a kick out of a young guy liftin' her for a change," he said smiling.

Weeks's voice returned without changing. "I doubt it, Mac. She talked mostly about you."

Mac sighed. The guy had absolutely no sense of humor, he thought. He doesn't even know when I'm kidding. But what the hell's the difference. Who else would have done what that man did?

Mac pressed his lips together for a second and then rasped quickly, "Thanks, Weeks."

The sergeant did not answer for a second. Then his calm, even voice returned. "Call me as soon as you talk to the woman." The phone clicked dead in Mac's hand.

Mac handed the phone to Mike. After replacing the receiver, Mike turned to look at the older man. "Good morning," Mike said warmly.

Mac smiled comfortably. "You sure?"

"No. But good morning anyway." Mike returned the smile.

Mac stretched. "Okay, if you insist, good morning."

"You want to hear what we have to do?" Mike said easily.

Mac moved his mouth, tasting the dry morning mucous membranes. "If I have to."

"I could leave you behind," Mike bantered.

"You do and I'll break your pretty little ass," Mac grunted.

Mike shrugged. "Can't afford that. So I guess I'll take you with me."

Mac nodded. "You couldn't find your way out of the woods without me, boy. You would've spent the rest of your life upchuckin' there."

Mike laughed. "I'll never live that down."

"Stop fuckin' around and fill me in," Mac answered lightly.

Mike related Weeks's message. Mac listened and nodded filling in the other half of the conversation which he had not heard. When Mike stopped, Mac yawned loudly, lifted himself off the bed, and stood up, his undershorts sliding down slightly from his stocky but firm middle. "Go take a shower while I shave. I'll call after we've dressed."

Mike grinned. "Is that an order?"

"Yeah. And don't use up all the fuckin' soap trying to get beautiful. It won't make any difference to me anyway," Mac grumbled good-naturedly.

“Shit. And I thought I had a chance with you, Mac,” Mike teased.

“Get your ass in that shower, kid.” Mac chuckled.

The two men picked up their hastily assembled shaving kits and made their way toward the motel bathroom. As Mike stood in the shower, he heard Mac’s rough voice call out to him, “What do you think is gonna happen?”

Mike stopped soaping himself for a minute and stuck his head out from the steaming water. “I think we’re gonna find him, Mac.”

“Alive?” the older man asked as he ran the razor over his tough stubble.

Mike nodded. “Yeah. I think we are. Do you?”

Mac turned and stared at him. “No. I think we’re gonna bring a dead kid back to Fairfax.” He turned back to the mirror.

Mike moved back under the shower and let the hot water pour over his head in an attempt to wash away the words that Mac had just spoken.

Dorothea Stern slipped out of bed, noticing wryly that the place next to her on the double bed had not been slept in during the night. She opened the bedroom drapes and lifted the white canvas shade and let the sudden morning sunlight wash over her. Standing still in front of the window for several minutes, she collected her thoughts and carefully reviewed her plans. Glancing at the clock on the bedside table, she realized that she had overslept. She hurried into the bathroom to start her morning with a hot shower.

She dressed very systematically, selecting each article of clothing with care, and then stood before the mirror to brush her darkening blond hair so that it had the semblance of self-determined style. She worked her arms vigorously to comb away the disheveled appearance that had become her trademark. Gradually the strands began to behave and fall into place; and with heightening pleasure she watched her hair assume texture and shape.

She searched the bureau for the dispersed, unused tubes and jars of makeup which had been opened so seldom that several had fallen carelessly behind the bureau. She stooped and retrieved each one, setting all of the various shades and coverings in a row. With meticulous precision, she took each and applied it to her drawn and gaunt face. Slowly she watched a slow but perceptible transformation begin to take place. The shadows under her eyes became absorbed in the coloring of bronzes and off whites that she

applied in thin layers. The prominent high cheekbones stretching like bony crescents through the thin, taut skin of her cheeks softened with the slow and methodical use of facial creams and powders. She slashed her lips with a vibrant red lipstick, momentarily shocking herself with her sudden boldness but smiling finally as she stood back and observed the woman who stared back at her from the mirror. Some of the former beauty of the small blond woman had returned, forced its way through the worn, abused surfaces of her face. She experienced a quickening as she realized that she had not lost everything that she had once owned. A small but significant part of the former Dorothea Stern still remained.

Dorothea filled her pocketbook with the necessary things—lipstick, powder, keys, wallet. She took a sweater from the closet in case the morning air might prove cooler than the promise of the brilliant morning sun. Finally she felt ready. With resolve, she walked out of her bedroom.

Passing the living room, she gazed emotionlessly beyond into the den. The crumpled sheets and empty pillow on the den sofa told her where Edward had spent the night. Cups and glasses and ashtrays full of cigarette butts filled the living-room tables. Dorothea stared at them for a second and then, ignoring them, turned her attention toward the kitchen, where she heard her husband's usual early-morning light coughing. She moved toward the sound and found him sipping a cup of coffee in his bathrobe, reading the Sunday papers. He looked up startled to see her fully dressed, her appearance almost that of a stranger. It had been so very long since he had witnessed the attractive woman underneath the neglected exterior. He did not speak at first, absorbing the sight, remembering, wondering, extremely tired after a poor night's rest.

"Good morning," Dorothea said calmly. She poured a cup of coffee and took quick swallows of the black liquid.

Edward nodded. "Good morning. You're dressed early," he observed.

"I'm going out," she replied simply.

He wanted desperately to ask where she was going, but suddenly he felt extremely shy. The balance had shifted. Edward was not certain that he still retained the privilege of questioning her about where she was going. He finally brought himself to ask the most vital question. "Will you be coming back?" he said softly.

She smiled. "Yes." She paused. "This is not the time for that."

He nodded solemnly and poured himself another cup of coffee. "I'll clean up," he offered.

She shrugged. "Suit yourself." Dorothea finished her coffee and put the cup in the sink without rinsing it out. She turned and left the kitchen without saying anything else and closed the door behind her as she walked out the front door. Edward stared at her departing figure with a sense of helplessness and confusion.

She pulled her car into the parking lot of the police station house. There were very few cars in the lot because of the early Sunday hour, and she found a space very close to the front door. She slipped out of the car and walked resolutely toward the building, her short thin body moving with a sense of determination that was newly discovered.

After inquiring at the switchboard for directions, Dorothea climbed the stairs to Garry Weeks's office. She knocked on the door marked by the man's name and title.

"Come in." The voice was bell-like in its ringing clarity.

Dorothea entered. The carefully groomed medium-sized personable-looking but not attractive man rose to his feet as she entered. He walked around the desk to greet her, extending his soft, smooth right hand. "Mrs. Stern?" he asked as he shook her hand.

"Please sit down. I'm very pleased that you've come down." Weeks spoke earnestly.

She nodded. "Yes."

Dorothea settled into a chair. Sergeant Weeks did not return to the back of his desk but took a chair facing Dorothea. She paused and asked, "Why?"

The man frowned. She continued. "Why are you glad to see me?" she asked directly.

Weeks seemed somewhat surprised and hesitated for several seconds before answering. "My police officers have spoken a great deal about your husband. Not much about you. I've been curious, I guess. And wanted to meet you."

She nodded, accepting his response. "Tell me, Sergeant, what is happening in my son's investigation. I want to know all the details. Everything. Don't hold anything back."

Weeks stared at the attractive woman for a few seconds, appreciating her looks and finding himself particularly taken with her directness. While he scanned her features, she flushed slightly, catching the connotation of the man's pause and his eye contact.

She searched in her purse for a cigarette. "Do you mind if I smoke?" she asked.

"No. Not at all." He watched her light her cigarette with a slightly wavering hand. Finally he said tensely, "May I have one of yours?"

She offered him the pack. He fumbled slightly and gradually extracted a cigarette. Dorothea flicked her lighter, leaned over, and lit his cigarette. He took short puffs.

"You don't usually smoke, do you?" the woman observed.

Weeks smiled, somewhat embarrassed. "No. Only occasionally at parties. I guess it shows."

Dorothea could not help but smile back at the man's unexpected honesty. "It does."

"Your son's case has kept all of us very active. Not much sleep."

"You don't have to apologize," Dorothea said gently.

"You're right. I guess I don't."

"Could we go on to the case?" Dorothea stared into the man's clean-cut sensitive face with a piercing intensity that almost caused the usually composed young sergeant to look away from the staring woman.

Weeks began describing the events in the case from the time the police became involved in very slow and careful detail. He would pause and wait for the woman to ask questions, but she remained silent, watching his face avidly and leaning forward to hear his calm voice, her hands folded easily in her lap. Weeks heard his voice droning on and, for the first time, became acutely aware of the slightly high-pitched timbre and the rather emotionless, monotonous quality and felt a transient flush of embarrassment. He tried varying the quality of his speech but heard his voice waver and crack, and he quickly reverted back to his normal style. He finished the long account by adding the recent report from the state trooper and the instructions to the two policemen to call the woman who had been driving the car.

Dorothea lit another cigarette. She took several puffs as the police sergeant watched her. "You think he's still alive?" she asked as calmly as possible.

Weeks nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Stern, I do."

“And the two policemen? How good are they?” Dorothea asked directly.

Weeks drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. “About as good as we have. They work very well together.”

She stared at his quietly animated face. “How good is that?”

He smiled. For a brief second the woman sounded like himself, the same type of short, direct, incisive questions that avoided all artifice and preliminaries. “They can do the job, Mrs. Stern.”

Dorothea put out her cigarette. “I hope so.”

Weeks slowed down his moving fingers as he noticed the woman staring at his manicured nails tapping in the arm of the chair. “Can you tell me something about Ricky and about anything else at home that might help us?”

Dorothea raised her head a bit, her round chin jutting forward, her eyes shifting from staring at the man seated across from her to glance reflectively out the window. She weighed the possibilities of unburdening herself to this stranger. The thought of unraveling her life in front of this man made her want to rise and run out of the office. But she turned back toward him and noticed the composed efficiency in the man’s face and the clear, intense directness of his gaze. Just enough, she thought. I’ll give him just enough.

“Ricky is basically a good boy. He’s a lot more high strung than most people think. He has nightmares. He wants to share with me, but he can’t always bring himself to do it. That he gets from his father.” She paused. Weeks was sitting easily in his chair, paying total attention to her presence in the room. Dorothea felt herself relaxing under his absorbed gaze.

“Edward and I are having troubles ... marital troubles. Ricky feels this, I’m sure. He and Edward have virtually no relationship. It’s so sad. But Edward locks both of us out. Ricky tries, but it’s no use. So I guess I’ve become more attached to Ricky than I should. He’s got friends and does well in school. There’s no reason for him to run away—or stay away—at least not that I know of.” She stopped. That was enough. Her drinking was not part of the bargain. That would remain her secret. That had no bearing on the case.

“Do he and his father fight?” Weeks asked gently.

Dorothea shook her head. “No. They just don’t communicate.”

"I see." Weeks watched Dorothea light another cigarette with shaking hands. "I'm sorry if this is upsetting you."

She smiled. "Actually I'm calmer now than I usually am. I'm surprising myself."

"Can I help?" Weeks asked sincerely.

Dorothea looked up at the man with interest. "That's very kind. I don't think so." She paused for a moment and then added, "You know I would never have pictured a police sergeant like you. You may be the last person I would have imagined."

The man smiled broadly. "I know. I certainly don't fit the television stereotype."

Dorothea offered him another cigarette, which he took, and she lit it for him. "How did you get here? You must be a college graduate."

Weeks took several puffs. He was very unused to sharing himself. "I am," he said hesitantly. "I majored in sociology at Catholic University. And then got a master's in criminology at Georgetown."

"And you're here?" Dorothea asked, almost as a gentle challenge.

He shrugged. "Jobs in the field are hard to get. And I guess I don't have the image that most people associate with criminology. So I took this job on the police force." He paused. "Actually I'm very contented here. Every day I use a lot of what I've learned."

"Amazing," Dorothea commented. "And if it doesn't embarrass you, I also find it very gratifying."

Weeks frowned. "Gratifying?"

She nodded. "Yes. To talk to a man with your background and know you're handling Ricky's case. That's very reassuring."

Weeks felt himself blush. "Thank you," he stammered.

"How old are you?" Dorothea asked boldly.

"Thirty-five," Weeks quickly responded.

"You look younger." She smiled.

He smiled back. "I know. I wish I didn't. It's hard at times here in the police force to look so young."

She sighed. "I'm thirty-seven. And wish to hell I didn't look fifty."

"You don't," he said simply.

"Thank you. But I do." She shrugged.

He shook his head in vigorous protest. "No."

She stared at him. "What's your name?"

“Weeks,” he said automatically.

Dorothea laughed. “No. Your first name.”

He found himself blushing again. “Garry.”

“You are a pleasant surprise, Garry Weeks. I expected someone very different. I feel very safe with you,” she said easily.

Garry Weeks looked at the woman and realized how few people he had permitted to know him, to reach him, to give him the kind of compliments that this woman was offering him. He was unprepared to respond.

Dorothea rose from her chair. She reached out her hand and waited until his hand grasped hers. She held it for a long minute while she spoke. “May I continue to communicate directly with you until we find Ricky? I would feel so much better if I could.”

Weeks rose and stood holding the small hand in his. “Of course. Just call me directly. I hope we will find him very soon. But don’t hesitate to keep in touch with me. Directly. For as long as it lasts.” He spoke quickly, with an exuberance that startled him.

Dorothea let go of his hand. “Thank you, I will,” she said quietly. She paused and looked at the man standing in front of her. “And please, find my son. Alive.” She gulped and felt herself losing control of her composure. She turned on her heels and walked briskly out of the police sergeant’s office as he called, “Goodbye, Mrs. Stern,” to her departing back.

Mac checked the small piece of motel stationery and began dialing the phone very slowly. The ringing erupted on the other end and continued for several seconds before the receiver was lifted. A female voice answered hesitantly. “Yes?”

Mac said crisply, “Mrs. Howard?”

“Miss Howard,” the voice replied softly.

Mac coughed and waited a split second before saying, “Miss Howard, this is Sergeant MacGinnis of the Fairfax police.”

There was a brief pause. Then the woman’s voice returned. The fear could be heard through the muffled words. “Did you say police?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mac acknowledged quickly.

“What do you want?” Her voice quivered.

Mac replied, “We must talk to you, ma’am. About the people you picked up yesterday on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway.”

“Why?” the woman’s voice cracked.

“We think the kid’s the one we’re looking for. He’s been kidnapped,” Mac shot back at her over the phone line.

“Are you sure?” the woman finally answered after an interminable pause.

Mac frowned. “No. But you can help us.”

“How?” she whispered.

“Describe the boy who was in your car,” Mac commanded.

Elizabeth Howard pressed her thin fingers against her eyes to attempt to force the total recall of Ricky’s face. His blond hair and soft round face swam clearly before her eyes. Very slowly she began to outline his features to the policeman on the other end of the phone. Her voice went on monotonously, each word heavy with the sickening terror of what she knew had been sitting within her grasp the day before. Finally her tired speech halted abruptly.

“Was there a man with him?” Mac asked firmly.

“Yes. There was a man in the back of the car. He said he was the boy’s brother. No. Wait a minute. The boy told me that the man was his brother. Oh, my God, if I had only known.” She paused and Mac heard her take a deep breath.

“Let me describe him to you,” Mac volunteered. “Tell me if it is the same man.” He lifted the drawing off the motel table and detailed Arvis’s features very carefully trying not to forget any of the important aspects that would help the woman remember her dangerous passenger.

“That’s him, I think. I ... I ... I’m not sure. He scared me so much—the man—that I was afraid to stare at him.”

“Why did he scare you?” Mac asked.

The woman sighed. Her voice strained to express her thoughts, which were tumbling over in her mind. “He acted so strange. Humming crazy songs. The boy said he was retarded and that I shouldn’t mind him.”

Mac swallowed. “Did you say the boy told you that the man was retarded?”

Mike sat up from the bed where he had been lying, leaning on an elbow.

Elizabeth Howard stammered, “Well ... well, he didn’t use those terms but he said almost the same thing.”

“Did you take them all the way to Philadelphia, Miss Howard?” Mac said easily.

There was a short pause. “No. I left them off in front of the Greyhound bus station in Baltimore.”

“Why?” Mac asked sharply.

“I ... I ... was scared,” she answered timidly.

“Did the man threaten you?” Mac asked.

“No. Oh, no. He just made these crazy sounds. But he frightened me. He seemed like he was ready to explode. I had to let them off. You understand?” she pleaded.

“Yes. Of course,” Mac answered easily.

“Was he dangerous?” She was agitated.

“Yes, ma’am. We think he had killed a child in Georgia,” Mac said tightly.

Elizabeth Howard screamed. Her piercing voice forced the phone from Mac’s ear and he held the receiver away and stared at Mike, who looked back at him, his face expressionless. The phone clicked as Mac started to return the receiver to his ear. Elizabeth Howard had hung up. She had told them all that she could at that moment.

Mac quickly dialed the station house and asked for Weeks. When the calm voice answered, Mac blurted out, “We reached the lady. She dropped the pair off at the Greyhound bus station in Baltimore.”

“You sure it was the Stern boy?” Weeks asked steadily.

Mac nodded as he replied. “Fits the description to a tee.”

“And the man?” Weeks probed.

“It’s Moore. There’s not a shadow of a doubt.”

Weeks granted audibly. “You know what to do next.” It was not a question.

Mac cleared his throat. “We’re on our way to the bus station.”

There was a long pause. “Find out where they went, Mac.” The phone went dead.

Mac returned the receiver to the cradle and turned quickly to his roommate. “Haul ass, Mike. We got to talk to some ticket sellers and fast.”

The two men grabbed their coats, holsters, and photographs and hurried out of the motel room.

Mike guided the police car into Baltimore, passing through the relatively deserted downtown city streets populated by an occasional figure staggering along an empty sidewalk, lurching his way through the Sunday

morning sunlight in search of a haven to quiet his Saturday night hangover. As the car moved north up Howard Street, the street travelers gradually began to change. Elderly people walked in pairs and groups toward the storefronts along the downtown streets. In the empty store doorways were crumpled human forms sleeping.

“Bums,” Mac grumbled as his eyes caught sight of the reclining men.

Mike shot a glance toward them as he drove. “Sad people,” he remarked.

“Shit, they did it to themselves,” Mac grunted.

“Not always.” Mike sighed.

“I don’t believe in that shit,” Mac retorted. “They could stop drinking. And nobody made them start.”

Mike did not answer for a while. Then he spoke in a low, reflective voice. “Some people can handle things better than others. There was a time when I think I could have sunk that low.”

Mac turned to look at him. “You gotta be kiddin’.”

Mike shook his head. “No, Mac. I started drinking when they shipped me down to the minor league. I felt so shitty about myself. My pitching was getting worse. And I wasn’t being used. And I was still so fuckin’ guilty about being gay. I felt sick about it then. And so I started drinking. Pretty heavy.” He paused. Mac was turned around so that his body leaned toward the driver. “I’d get so drunk that I’d sleep away the entire day and then show up for games exhausted, praying that they wouldn’t use me that night.”

Mac frowned. “How did you stop?”

“I quit baseball. Ran away. Left the team without saying a goddamn thing to anybody. Moved here. I had to start all over again to stop.” Mike spoke quietly.

“Was this before you joined the force?” Mac asked.

“About the same time.”

“But you did stop,” Mac insisted.

Mike smiled ruefully. “Yeah. But I still had something left in me to pick myself up again. Maybe those guys don’t.”

“It’s hard for me to accept that,” Mac said honestly. “I always thought Jamie could have changed if he wanted to. Given up the dope.” Mac waited for Mike’s answer.

“Maybe he couldn’t,” Mike said simply.

Finally Mac spoke in a subdued voice. "Yeah. Maybe he couldn't." Mac stared out of the front window as the car moved closer to the center of Baltimore. After a couple of turns they pulled up at the bus station, double-parked, and went up to a window.

The first ticket seller turned the pictures around and stared at them, shaking his head negatively. He reached up and took the chewed toothpick out of his mouth and made a face. "Nope. Never saw them. Not in here."

Mike leaned over the counter. "You sure?"

The florid man frowned. "Sure I'm sure."

"Who else was on duty?" Mac asked quickly.

The heavy man swung his big body around and looked slowly over the three other men walking aimlessly or resting behind the nearly deserted ticket counter. Finally he pointed to a tall thin black man bent over a counter sipping from a steaming paper cup of coffee. "Him." He pointed his stubby finger. "He was here."

"I want to talk to him," Mike said quietly.

The man shrugged. "Sure." He turned and called, "Chester."

The black man raised his head and stared at the two policemen. The fat man beckoned, and the tall thin ticket seller walked slowly to the counter where the three men were standing.

"Did you sell a ticket to either of these characters?" The heavy man pushed the photographs in front of the man.

Staring at the glossy prints, the black man asked slowly, "When?"

"Yesterday," the other ticket man said. He turned to Mike. "Right?"

Mike nodded silently.

The black man lifted his eyes to stare at Mac first and then Mike. "Yeah."

Mike gasped audibly. Mac pushed his stomach up against the counter railing. Finally Mike spoke. "You sure?"

"Yeah. I thought the big guy was a weirdo when I sold him the tickets. He was lickin' his lips all the time and fingering this here medal around his neck and acting like he had to go to the john. You know, jumping around a lot."

"Was the boy here too?" Mike continued gently.

"Yeah. Standing next to him. Side by side they was. Funny-lookin' pair. Damn right I remember them."

Mike asked in a very clear and slow voice, "Do you remember where they bought tickets for?"

The black ticket seller closed his eyes for several seconds and then his face broke out into a satisfied grin. "Yeah, I remember," he said proudly.

"Where?" Mac barked in a voice louder than he had intended. He gulped in embarrassment.

The black man wrinkled his forehead and surveyed the older policeman's face. He waited a very long time before answering. Finally he spoke haughtily. "Philly."

Mike leaned toward him. "You're certain? He's very dangerous and we have to find him."

The black man lifted his shoulders slightly. "Of course I'm certain. Wouldn't tell you if I weren't."

Mac smiled awkwardly and nodded, inching back a few steps. "Thanks. Thanks very much."

Mike nodded and grabbed Mac's arm as they turned and ran from the Greyhound bus station to the police car. They were in a hurry to call the message in to the man impatiently waiting at his desk to hear their news.

SEVENTEEN

When Arvis opened his eyes, the morning sun caused him to blink in the unexpected glare. He was lying on his side facing the window. The figure of the young boy in the bed next to him was sitting upright, knees drawn up, head down, face turned toward him, eyes staring. Arvis cleared his throat and reached over and touched the boy's shoulder.

"Morning," he said softly.

Ricky did not answer. His eyes bore into Arvis like rivets of steel.

"What's the matter?" Arvis asked sleepily.

The young boy wrinkled his forehead. "I want to talk to you."

"Well, shoot, kid." Arvis's mind was coming into focus.

Ricky took a deep breath. He closed his eyes for a second and began talking before he could finally open them. "Listen, Arvis, I've been thinking. After last night ..." Ricky stopped. His face flushed. He was having trouble continuing.

"Yeah?" Arvis growled defensively.

"After last night, I think it would be okay for me to go home. How about it?"

Arvis sat up suddenly in bed, the sheets falling off his naked body.

"No," the older man said brusquely.

Ricky bit his lip. "Why not?" he asked clearly.

"Because."

"That's no answer, Arvis. I want to know why." Ricky set his jaw.

"It ain't your business." Arvis turned away.

"Tell me, Arvis." Ricky spoke in a firm and direct tone.

"Why should I?" Arvis said belligerently.

Ricky smiled casually. "Because if you don't, I'll run away. You know I probably could."

Arvis stared at Ricky for a long time. He made several attempts to speak but could only make small guttural sounds. Finally he whispered, "Don't run away, kid."

"Why not?" Ricky urged.

"I don't want to say." Arvis sat on the edge of the bed, his back to Ricky.

Ricky moved closer. "You have to tell me."

There was a long silence. Finally Arvis haltingly stammered, "Please don't take off, kid. You're the only friend I got. I need you now."

Ricky stared at the bent back of the older man, his shoulders hunched and his head lowered. He felt a strange sense of power which traveled through his body like an electric shock.

"Say that again, Arvis," he said loudly.

Arvis covered his mouth with his hands and shook his head vehemently.

Ricky waited several seconds and then repeated, "Say that again, Arvis." He commanded the older man to respond.

Very slowly Ricky could hear the muffled words coming out from between the large fingers that covered Arvis's mouth. Each word had the pitiful edge of defeat. "I ... need ... you."

Ricky waited for several seconds. Neither person moved. Finally he reached over and took Arvis's shoulder firmly in his right hand and said in a low but insistent voice, "Arvis, don't you ever forget it." He waited. Then he added, "You understand?"

Slowly the older man began to nod.

Ricky felt his heart pounding as he realized the thrill of control. He tightened his grip on Arvis's shoulder as the excitement of his new position washed over him. Then he moved away from the figure on the opposite side of the bed and jumped easily off the edge on his side.

"Okay, Arvis. It's time to get up now," he said softly.

Arvis slowly lifted his head, stared searchingly into the young boy's eyes, finally understood, and began to smile foolishly with delight.

"Who takes a shower first?" Arvis asked sheepishly.

Ricky rubbed his arms and looked around the room for a second. "You do."

Arvis nodded and walked into the bathroom. As the sound of the shower drummed throughout the motel room, Ricky sat on the slightly faded armchair, his legs drawn up in front of him, rocking slightly, his lips parted in a half-smile.

Arvis walked out of the bathroom, his lower body draped by a white towel with "Holiday Inn" blazoned across the fabric. The hair on his chest curled, and the nape of his neck was still moist with damp ringlets of hair.

His face was shaved. He looked over at the hairless small undressed boy sitting upright in the large bed. "You ready, friend?" he called easily.

Ricky nodded.

"Well, get in there and take a shower. It feels real good." Arvis pointed toward the bathroom.

"Do I have to?" Ricky said, obviously playing games.

Arvis smiled. "Yeah. You have to. You're startin' in to stink. And I ain't traveling with anybody that smells."

Ricky moved off the chair and silently walked past Arvis. He brushed against the towel with his naked body, but the older man did not reach down to touch him. The boy stopped before he went into the steamy bathroom. He watched as Arvis took off the towel and stood naked in the center of the room. Ricky could make out the entire broad-boned, hairy, muscular body in profile. The older man stared down at his body and ran his hands gently over the surfaces. Arvis became aware that he was being watched. He turned quickly toward Ricky and hollered, "Get in there and shower, damn it."

Turning his face away, Ricky edged into the bathroom. Soon he felt the warm water traveling over his skin. He began lathering his arms and chest. As his hands moved over his breasts, the sensation began to arouse him. He slowly massaged his soapy fingers against his nipples, feeling them harden. His soapy hands moved downward and lathered his groin. Slowly he began to rub his slippery hand along his small taut penis. His breathing increased. The image of the older man's naked body in profile with the hands caressing the skin returned to his mind. His hands could not be stopped. The image moved closer. Suddenly he felt the breathtaking moment upon him. He gasped and sank slowly to his knees. He rested there for several minutes, the steam from the shower circling his damp blond head.

Finally he rose from his kneeling position and moved again into the stream of falling water. He quickly rinsed off the shower curtain and watched the soap suds cascade off his body.

"What the hell you doin' in there, kid?" He heard Arvis calling to him from outside the bathroom door. He reached over and turned off the shower faucets. Silence descended within the bathroom.

"I'm done now," he called.

"Okay. But hurry up," Arvis shouted at him.

He dried himself, wrapped the towel tightly around his waist, then cautiously opened the bathroom door. Steam followed him into the motel room.

Arvis was standing by the window, fully dressed in his dirty, wrinkled outfit, staring out the window. He did not turn as Ricky walked into the room. "Get dressed," he order softly.

Ricky did not answer but dropped the towel and quickly slipped into his clothes. As he was leaning to pull on his socks, he sensed the tall man standing over him.

"You didn't dry your hair enough," Arvis said gruffly. He walked briskly into the bathroom and came back with a towel. Carefully, he rubbed the boy's blond hair until he was satisfied that it was dry. He tossed the moist towel onto the crumpled bedsheets. "Here's a comb." He handed Ricky the small black partially toothless comb.

Ricky finished with his shoes and socks and then rose and walked back into the bathroom, where he rapidly ran the comb through his curly hair. Returning to the room, he handed Arvis the comb.

"Do I look okay?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," Arvis grumbled.

Ricky stood very still, staring at the big man who was turning away from him. The boy reached out and grabbed the flannel sleeve. The older man was forced to turn around and look at Ricky.

"Arvis," Ricky said simply.

The man squinted. "What?"

"Did I say something wrong?" the boy asked softly, probing.

Arvis flushed. He shook his head silently.

"Then why are you mad at me?" Ricky questioned.

"I ain't mad at you. But I'm gettin' restless again."

Ricky cocked his head. "What does that mean?" He was too curious to be afraid.

"I'll tell you later. Now let's go and get some food. Eat cheap. My money's running out." Arvis moved toward the door. Ricky followed in his footsteps as the older man closed the motel room door behind them.

In the lobby Arvis searched through a pile of maps until he found the one he was looking for. He stuffed the map in the pocket of his overalls and guided Ricky out of the motel. The two walked a short distance until they came to the McDonald's.

“This okay?” Arvis asked.

“Yes,” Ricky said quietly.

They entered, walked to the counter, ordered, and took the few items to a corner table near the front door. After they had finished eating, Arvis wiped his mouth on a napkin and carried the empty food cartons to the trash can.

“Stay here,” he ordered.

Ricky did not move.

Opening the map on the table, Arvis studied the colored areas very closely. He ran his finger along several black lines. Finally he stopped at one specific point. He smiled silently and nodded his head. He folded the map and stuffed it again inside his overalls. Rising, he motioned Ricky not to move. The boy rested his elbows on the table and laid his head in his hands. He sat waiting to be told the next move in his strange and increasingly bewildering experience with this older man. Arvis walked up to the cashier and asked her a question in a very low voice. She shook her head and began speaking, pointing somewhere outside of the restaurant and making sweeping motions with her hands. Finally she stopped. Arvis’s mouth moved again. The woman nodded. Arvis turned and came back to the table. He stood over Ricky. “Get up. We’re leavin’,” he said calmly.

Ricky stood up slowly but did not move from the side of the table.

“Where are we going, Arvis?” he asked.

The older man grimaced. “Just come with me.”

Ricky shook his head. “No. I told you I wasn’t doing that anymore. I want to know where we’re going. We’re together. Don’t forget that.” The boy’s voice became hard and firm.

Arvis stared at him for a second. Finally he leaned down and spoke in a low tone. “We’re goin’ out to a shopping center in a place called Merion. I got friends who say it’s real pretty out there.”

“Why are we going there?” Ricky persisted.

“I’ll tell you later,” Arvis hedged.

Ricky shook his head and folded his arms. “Now.”

“Aw. shit, Ricky, stop it.” Arvis smacked his fist softly into the palm of his other hand.

“Tell me now.” Ricky stood solidly on the spot, his jaw set, his eyes blazing.

Arvis looked away for a second and ran his right hand across his mouth. Finally he turned back to the boy. "I wanna buy a new pair of overalls so's I can look good. I wanna look good with you," he said sheepishly.

Ricky's eyebrows rose. "You sure?"

"Cross my heart." Arvis made the gesture.

"I thought you didn't have money," Ricky probed.

"I got enough," Arvis grumbled.

Ricky pointed in the direction of the motel. "How are you going to pay for the motel?"

"Shit, kid, I ain't payin' for that." Arvis chuckled.

Ricky frowned. "But you're supposed to pay."

Arvis made a face. "Hell, I do a lot a things I ain't supposed to do. They got enough money." The older man reached down and held the boy's shoulders tightly. Ricky did not wince. He no longer felt the pain from the big man's heavy fingers. "Come on, kid, let's go." Ricky thought for a moment, then turned, causing the hands to fall off his body, and he led the way out of the restaurant.

The two walked several blocks to another street corner where they stood silently side by side waiting for a bus. No one else joined them in the quiet of the Sunday morning. Soon a large transit bus pulled up alongside the curb, the boy and his older companion boarded and paid their fare. Finding the bus virtually empty, Arvis led Ricky to the long back seat, where he sat down and motioned for the boy to do the same. Ricky slid in beside him. The bus lumbered heavily away from the corner and began making turns that would take the pair into Lower Merion.

At that moment, Mike was guiding the police car toward the Philadelphia city line, only four blocks away from the bus stop where Arvis and Ricky had been standing minutes before.

After almost forty-five minutes of silent riding, Arvis rose from his seat and tugged at Ricky's arm. The boy rose automatically and the two left the bus. After the bus pulled away, Arvis turned around and nodded toward a shopping center about two blocks away. Ricky skipped to keep pace with the hurried steps of his companion as they moved in the direction of the stores. Entering the sparsely populated shopping mall, a sudden thought

occurred to Ricky. He stopped. Arvis moved ahead, and when he realized Ricky was not beside him he came quickly back to the boy's side.

"What the fuck's wrong?" There was a decided urgency in the man's voice.

Ricky pointed to the closed stores. "Today's Sunday. Probably nothing's open."

"So what?" Arvis asked.

"I thought you said you wanted to buy new overalls. I bet none of the stores will be open," Ricky challenged.

Arvis shrugged impatiently. "I don't give a shit."

"But you said that was why we came all the way out here," Ricky persisted.

"It ain't," Arvis said shortly.

Ricky refused to move. "Then what are we doing here?"

Arvis's face became bright red. The veins in his neck stood out as he ground his teeth together. "You ask too damn many questions."

"Tell me, Arvis," Ricky demanded.

"Suppose I don't," the older man retorted.

Ricky pressed his lips together and made a face. Finally he spoke. "I won't go with you."

Arvis's eyes widened, and he moved with lightning speed toward the boy. He grabbed Ricky's neck between his two hands and pressed tightly, dragging the boy gasping into the darkened doorway of a closed women's clothing store. "Yes, you will. You're comin' with Arvis. Or Arvis'll kill you. You hear me?"

Ricky did not experience any fear. His neck hurt and he was having trouble breathing, but the terror was gone. "Let go," he whispered.

Slowly Arvis released his hold on the boy. "You comin'?"

"If you tell me what we're going to do," Ricky insisted, placing his fists firmly on his hips.

"You really gotta know?" Arvis asked.

Ricky nodded.

"You ain't gonna like it," Arvis said softly.

Ricky shrugged. "Tell me. I'll decide."

Arvis blocked Ricky's exit from the darkened store doorway. "I told you I was gettin' restless, didn't I?"

"Yes," Ricky said cautiously.

“Do you know what that means?” Arvis pushed Ricky against the glass door.

“I’m not sure,” the boy whispered.

Arvis blushed, his clean-shaven face turning several shades of red. “It means I’m gettin’ sexed up again.”

Ricky stared into the slightly averted flushed face. “I’ve seen you like that. So what?”

Arvis cleared his throat. He hesitated before he spoke. Finally he stumbled over his words. “It means I ain’t hot for you anymore. That’s my trouble. Once I’ve had a guy and he don’t fight me, I lose interest. It’s always good the first few times, but then somethin’ happens.”

Ricky felt his body pressed against the glass, his pulse pounding against the darkened door. Arvis was no longer looking at him but was staring into the window of the store over the boy’s head. Ricky felt embarrassed at his anger. He reached out and hit the older man on the chest, his small fists banging away at the muscular body, which did not move.

Finally the older man’s rasping hoarseness engulfed him. “I’m sorry, kid.” Arvis grabbed Ricky’s pummeling fists in his large hands and by twisting the boy’s arm gently quieted the young man.

Ricky slumped against the corner of the doorway and whispered. “What does that mean, Arvis?”

“I want another kid” was the simple response.

“That’s why we’re here?” Ricky asked incredulously.

Arvis smiled crookedly. “Yeah.”

Ricky became silent. His knees were weak and his skin tingled. “What do you want me here for?” he finally asked in a shaking voice.

“You’re my friend. I wantcha with me. It might be fun. Maybe we can do it together,” the older man pleaded.

Ricky shook his head as if trying to clear it. “Oh, God, Arvis. Don’t say that.”

“Why?” The man frowned.

“Just don’t say it, that’s all,” Ricky whispered.

Arvis continued to hold the boy’s arms. “Will you stay with Arvis?”

“I don’t want to if that’s what you’re going to do,” Ricky said softly.

Arvis tightened his hold. “But will you stay?”

“What else can I do, Arvis? You don’t want me to go, do you?” Ricky asked.

“No.” The older man shook his head.

“Then I’ve got no choice.” Ricky sighed.

Arvis nodded. “Good.”

“One thing, Arvis,” Ricky said intensely.

“What?” the older man frowned.

“You must not hurt this kid like you did me. Do you hear me?” Ricky’s tone was sharp and firm.

Arvis did not answer. His eyes were glazed and staring in front of him, seeing hidden images.

Ricky pulled his sleeve. “Do you hear me?”

Arvis looked down and nodded. “Yes. I will not hurt this boy,” he repeated as a child might mimic a lesson in school. Arvis moved out of the doorway and gently pulled Ricky toward him. He straightened the bent body of the young man and held Ricky’s left elbow firmly with his right hand. In this manner the two began walking through the partially deserted shopping center. A few stores were open. A hardware store was brightly lit with the door hooked open. Arvis and Ricky walked inside.

“Stay here,” Arvis ordered. People milled about holding up screwdrivers, hoses, sandpaper, carrying paint and brushes, walking briskly in and out of the busy store. Arvis melted into the crowd and Ricky soon lost sight of him. He stood alone at the entrance of the store. Strangers passed him going in both directions. There was no thought of running away. Ricky stood silently waiting for Arvis to return. Escape simply did not cross his mind. He fingered several nuts and bolts on cards that hung by the doorway. He watched the light from an overhead fixture reflected off of the shiny metal on the lip of a shovel. Becoming restless, he began to count the paint brushes stacked in a neat row farther up the aisle.

Finally Arvis reappeared, walking slowly, alone. “Let’s get out of her,” he said.

“Okay,” Ricky replied willingly.

Arvis grumbled, “Nobody here.”

Ricky silently gave thanks.

They walked past several more closed stores until they reached a drugstore. Arvis guided Ricky through the front door and motioned him to wait at the magazine counter. Then he disappeared into the many rows of merchandise. Ricky began scanning the covers of magazines, absently

reading the words printed in bold relief against the pictures. He suddenly felt very lonely and adrift.

A dark-haired boy edged by him, his hand darting out quickly to snatch at an article on the counter directly opposite Ricky and tuck it inside his blousy windbreaker. Ricky turned slightly and watched the boy with interest. Camera film found its way into his pockets. Then a few combs. Ricky watched as several expensive lighters fell into the boy's open palm and disappeared inside his coat. The boy was approximately Ricky's age, with jet black unruly hair and an olive complexion. His face was thin, but his features were very well formed for his age. A desperate air of premature adulthood hung around him like a cloak.

As he passed Ricky, he caught the blond boy staring at him.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" he challenged.

Ricky shrugged. "Watching you lift half the store." He spoke without accusation, merely a casual observation.

"You want some?" the boy asked.

Ricky shook his head. "No, thanks. But go ahead. Don't mind me," he replied easily. The boy looked at him with direct candor. "Who are you?" He moved closer to Ricky. "I don't recognize you. You gotta be new around here."

"I am," Ricky replied.

The boy extended his hand and then realized that it was filled with several batteries. He laughed and stuffed them into his pants pocket and put his hand out a second time. "My name's Tony. What's yours?"

"Ricky." The blond boy eyed the newcomer carefully.

"This here store's so easy to rip off. Nobody gives a shit," Tony commented.

Ricky smiled. "You didn't seem to be getting into any trouble."

"Not me, man. I come up here two or three times a week and sack the joint. Then sell the stuff. It's easy as hell." He paused and looked at Ricky somewhat skeptically. "What're you doing around these parts?"

"I'm with somebody," Ricky replied enigmatically.

"Yeah? Who you with?" The swarthy boy inched closer to Ricky.

"A man. He's taking me with him," Ricky answered.

Tony frowned. "You sure don't give a lot, do you? I still don't know what the hell you're doin' here."

"Waiting for a friend," Ricky answered uncomfortably.

At that moment Ricky became aware of Arvis standing several feet away watching the two boys talking. The older man ran his eyes over the dark boy's body and finally his eyes met Ricky's and momentarily locked into place. Ricky knew what was about to happen.

"You better get out of here," he whispered to Tony.

Tony shrugged. "Why? These dummies'll never catch me."

As Arvis began moving closer to the two boys, Ricky felt a cold chill running down his back. He wanted to run, but he could not move. His body swayed slightly as if he was about to fall.

"You okay?" Tony asked. "You gonna faint?"

Ricky straightened slightly and whispered, "No. I'm all right."

"Shit, don't scare me like that. You on somethin'?" Tony came closer.

Arvis was now listening to the boys' conversation. He reached over and patted Ricky's shoulder. Ricky responded dully by announcing to the other boy, "This is my friend Arvis."

Arvis smiled broadly at Tony. Ricky remembered the grin from what seemed years ago on a street corner in Virginia, warm, easy, inviting. Tony searched the older man's face. Finally he smiled back very hesitantly.

"Hi," Arvis drawled.

"Hi," Tony responded.

"His name's Tony," Ricky said numbly, his voice a dull monotone.

"Tony's a great name," Arvis said quietly.

The dark boy frowned. "Great? Shit, it's a common Italian name. I'm a typical wop."

"My name's Arvis." The tall muscular man extended his hand. The swarthy boy took the hand and shook it briefly. Ricky felt himself getting dizzy and stumbled slightly against the magazine rack.

"Watch out," Tony called as he caught the blond boy and helped Ricky balance his body. Tony turned to Arvis. "What's the kid on? He's been fallin' over himself."

Arvis grinned quietly. "Good stuff" was all he said.

"Yeah?" Tony said, suddenly interested.

"Really super shit," Arvis replied.

Tony moved closer to Arvis. "Where'd the kid get it?"

Arvis waited several beats before answering. "I got it."

"No kiddin'. How much is it?" Tony asked, slightly breathless and excited.

Arvis shrugged. "Nothin' for friends."

"You kiddin'?" Tony asked, bewildered.

"No. If you want some, come with Ricky and me and we'll get a high like you never had before." Arvis rolled the invitation off his tongue with careful ease. Ricky stood riveted to the spot, staring dumbly at the other two, comprehending but feeling like he was watching something on television which he could get up and turn off. This could be stopped, shut out, turned off. It had to be, he thought. It can't go on.

But Arvis moved closer to the boy. "You interested?" the older man asked very softly.

The dark boy nodded, hypnotized. "Yeah. Course I am."

Arvis looked around. "You with anybody?" His eyes darted around the counters.

Tony shook his head. "Shit, no. I'm alone."

"Good. Then let's go." Arvis's voice rose with the recognized tone of urgency.

Ricky felt paralyzed on the spot. He started shaking his head and muttering no over and over again.

"Shit. Is he stoned?" Tony stared at Ricky.

"But feeling real good," Arvis coaxed.

The three people stood for the briefest of moments examining one another. Finally Arvis turned to Tony. "You ready?"

"Where we goin'?" the boy asked.

"Into the woods," Arvis said easily. "It's safer there. The cops are lookin' for me."

Tony nodded. He understood. "Okay. Let's go. You sure it's free?"

"Always free for friends," Arvis said lightly.

Ricky coughed and choked. Arvis grabbed Ricky's arm. "Take it easy," he growled.

Ricky nodded blankly.

"Comin'?" Arvis called to Tony as he started leaving the store. Ricky was following the tall muscular man in overalls as if he were a mechanical toy. Tony hesitated for a few seconds and then he began to run toward the two disappearing figures so he could catch up with them. He almost collided with the store manager as he sped out of the drugstore to join his two new friends.

EIGHTEEN

As the three walked out of the shopping center onto the main highway, Arvis turned to Tony. "Do you know a good place in the woods around here?"

Tony thought for a moment. "You mean a place that's off the road?"

Arvis smiled tightly at the dark young boy. "I'm thinking of a spot where nobody ever comes."

Tony looked around, turning his head in either direction several times. Finally his thin swarthy face broke into a grin. "I know just the place."

Arvis gently patted his back. "Well, you can lead us there."

Tony walked several blocks with Ricky and Arvis, who tried keeping pace with the boy's short pistonlike legs that hit the cement walkway with kinetic force. His windbreaker hung heavily over his upper body, swinging with each step. Soon the trio left the main road behind and approached a sparsely wooded area immediately off the highway. Morning light separated the tall trees budding with early spring greenery.

"Not much privacy here," Arvis grumbled aloud.

Tony stopped and looked at the older man. "I told you I would find a place. Stay cool. This is just the beginnin'."

The three walked between the tall trees and quickly found themselves engulfed in a thicker, wilder wooded area. As Ricky made his way carefully through the congested plant life, he had the uncomfortable sensation of having been in this strange forest before, having made his way in and out of the tangled vines and bushes, stumbling, crying, begging to be freed. It was a different state, he realized. A different day. But the woods were the same. And he no longer could be sure of the rules. And this terrified him. Neither of the other two people paid a great deal of attention to him. Arvis would glance occasionally to his side to make certain that Ricky was still there. Tony ignored the other boy, his face ferretlike with avidity to find the spot as quickly as possible.

As they slowly made their way through the woods, Arvis began to hum. Ricky heard the rising tension and impatience in the older man's sounds. He had learned to distinguish the rhythm and pitch of the weird atonal humming noises that the strange man made at times of excitement.

Tony seemed too preoccupied to pay much attention to the eerie sounds. Before very long Tony signaled them to stop. He moved ahead and was gone very briefly. He came back and motioned them to follow him.

Arvis did not move. He eyed the dark young man carefully. "Where'd you go?" he questioned.

Tony shrugged. "To check the spot."

"Why'd you have to check it? I thought nobody ever went there," Arvis said cautiously.

"Sometimes I hide my stuff here. I Just wanted to make sure that the cops hadn't found it out. The stuff is all here. So it's safe," Tony replied easily.

Arvis thought for a minute, then nodded and followed the beckoning boy into the dim clearing beyond the thick green bushes that lay ahead.

When the three entered the clearing, Tony turned around several times with his arms outstretched, his face grinning. "Ain't this a perfect spot?" he chortled.

Ricky's eyes searched the area. Grass grew sporadically in thick unruly clumps throughout the cleared area. A few vines had already been trampled underfoot. Trees hung over the area, shading it into partial darkness in the middle of an unusually bright morning. Piles of stolen merchandise were carefully set around the periphery of the open area. Clothing lay in one area. Ricky recognized another pile of items that obviously had come from the hardware store. Drugstore goods were positioned in several mounds in various spots on the rim of the clearing.

"Jeez, look at all your stuff," Arvis said, surprised.

Tony beamed. "Yeah. Ain't that somethin'?"

Arvis turned his head to stare at each pile. "You been mighty busy."

"Ain't that the truth." The dark boy laughed.

Ricky found a fairly dry area next to a large oak tree and slid down to rest on the ground and wait. He felt the moisture from the damp earth seeping through the material of his pants. But he did not move. The sensation had become a familiar one. He rested his back against the tree trunk and watched the older man and the younger boy and waited. He tried to pretend he was watching the scene through the windows of someone else's home, standing on his toes, peering into a strange bedroom, seeing two people acting out a peculiar but perversely stimulating sexual dance. But the pretense evaporated in the reality of the tall older man whom he

knew and with whom he had moved reluctantly and then willingly to the erotic tempo. He could sit silently and watch; but there was no possibility of removing himself from the immediacy of the impending action. While he seethed with dull rage at being forced to watch himself replaced, he also hoped that the replacement might mean his total release from the older man, and at the same time from himself.

Tony walked around the space several times, obviously waiting for Arvis to make the first move. But Arvis stood silently, his hands in the pockets of his overalls, staring intently at the moving figure of the young Italian boy.

Finally Tony stopped and glanced at Arvis. "When are you gonna break out the stuff?" he inquired anxiously.

"Soon," Arvis said as his hand came out of his pocket holding a cord.

Ricky flinched. He could feel in memory the pain of the cord around his hands and wrists as he had futilely struggled to get free. He wanted to cry out, but he opened his mouth and groaned. Arvis turned quickly in his direction and shot him a menacing look. Tony had heard him. He looked at the blond boy slumped against the tree trunk, his mouth agape, his eyes staring, and the dark boy smiled benignly at Ricky.

"I don't wanna get as spaced out as him. You hear?" Tony remarked.

Arvis laid the cord unobtrusively down on the ground and then rose and began to take off his overalls.

Tony stared at him with mounting concern. "What the fuck you doin'?" the swarthy boy asked.

Arvis spoke very softly. "You gotta take this stuff without any clothes on. You sweat a lot. And sometimes you tear your clothes, it gits so high," he explained as he slipped out of the overalls and started taking off his shirt.

Tony frowned. "Shit. I don't know if I want that kinda shit"

"It's the greatest." Arvis shrugged. "Take it or leave it. It's for free."

"Do I gotta take off my clothes?" Tony asked suspiciously.

"Yeah," Arvis said.

Tony pointed toward Ricky. "Did he?"

Arvis turned his naked body toward Ricky and said, "Tell him you took off your clothes."

Hearing the familiar voice pierce his foggy head, Ricky nodded.

"Tell him." Arvis moved toward him.

"I took off my clothes," Ricky said dully.

Tony paused for a long reflective moment and then slowly began to take off his white tee shirt and jeans. He stood in his tight undershorts which were torn in several places and his tennis shoes. He wore no socks. His dark body was thinner than Ricky's and the muscles stood out in sharp relief against the prominent bony frame. His chest was relatively flat with deep brown nipples, and his abdomen was taut and firm. He shivered slightly and looked toward Arvis. "Okay?" he asked slightly belligerently.

Arvis shook his head. "Shoes and undershorts."

"Shit, man, what the fuck is this? A sex thing or drugs?" Tony stared at the man.

"Take off your tennis shoes," Arvis coaxed quietly.

The boy reached down and kicked off the shredded tennis shoes and stood in the center of the clearing staring at the tall naked man. "Now where's this great shit you're promisn'?"

Arvis moved quickly. He took several large steps toward the boy, grabbed him around the waist, threw him heavily to the ground, knocking the wind out of the startled youngster. The cord was rapidly twined around his struggling wrists as Arvis's heavy unclothed body sat on top of the squirming form. Arvis's mouth hung open and a small rivulet of saliva ran unnoticed down his chin as he twisted and tied the cord very tightly around the boy's wrists. Ricky sat immobile, watching the boy fight helplessly under the massive frame of the older man. He heard the boy's muffled voice coming up from the dirt floor.

"What the fuck's going on?" There was fear and surprise in the usually tough young voice.

"Just keep quiet and you'll be okay," Arvis said loudly.

The boy tried turning his arms but the cord held them firmly together. His feet kicked weakly up against the bare back of the big man straddling his smaller body.

"Listen, if it's my stuff you want, take it. Take the whole fuckin' mess. I can get a lot more. Just don't hurt me. Okay?" The face turned sideways and the mouth moved to plead with the muscular man.

Ricky could see that the boy's struggle had aroused Arvis.

"Whatcha doin'?" the panicky boy cried.

Suddenly Arvis's hand shot down and grabbed the edges of the holes in the seat of the boy's tattered undershorts. With several firm tugs, he ripped the thin material off the boy's buttocks.

“Hey, don’t do that. I don’t play those games. No. Come on,” he pleaded.

Arvis pulled the boy’s legs apart. The boy began to scream with pain, his head thrashing about wildly, his legs kicking in wild abandon.

The frantic resistance appeared to excite Arvis uncontrollably. Ricky watched, his legs drawn up, his arms draped over his knees, his head resting against his hands. He observed every sexually violent movement of the older man and the frantically struggling, screaming, painfully contorted body of the dark boy underneath. And he felt nothing. Ricky searched inside himself for some reaction. But there was nothing there. There was no fear or terror. He could not feel his heart beating. His mind was unusually clear. He could not unearth any deep feelings for either person. No hate. No pity. No anger. Nothing. He touched his face gently with one of his hands. It was cold and moist. Maybe I’m partially dead, he thought. Inside I’m dead and all that remains is the outside shell. He closed his eyes for a minute and opened them only when he heard the hysterical voice of the other boy echo through the woods.

“You bastard,” Tony screamed.

“Shut up,” Arvis ordered quietly. His voice husky and tense, his body still sitting on the boy’s back, now slightly slumped as his strength gradually returned.

Tony spit out several pieces of grass and dirt. “You son of a bitch.”

Arvis moved nervously. “I told you to shut up.” He pressed the boy’s face into the dirt to silence him. Ricky watched impassively.

Tony twisted his head away and came up for air. His mouth was contorted into an ugly grimace. “You fag. You fucking fag.”

Arvis flinched. His body tensed. “Don’t call me that.”

“You’re a fucking faggot. A stupid fucking fruit. Let me up, you queer.” The boy vomited the words out in molten fury.

Ricky saw Arvis reach to his right and pick up the belt. No! his dull mind hollered. Put it down, Arvis. Let him go. You’re finished. Let him go.

“I don’t let people call me names.” Arvis’s voice did not rise; the intensity of his inner rage could only be discerned by the trembling of his words.

The dark boy raised his head and turned as hard as he could to look into Arvis’s face. “You’re a faggot. And a pervert. And a queer. And I hate your stupid guts.”

Arvis slipped the belt around the boy's neck and pulled it tight. The boy's face flushed with surprise at first, but very quickly his eyes bulged as wide as possible and his mouth opened with his tongue protruding. He moved his tied arms spastically while his legs shook violently as his pinioned body tried desperately to pull away from the suffocating noose of Arvis's belt.

Ricky reached his right arm out as if to stop the horrifying tableau, but slowly his arm fell to his side. He did not rise to move toward the two figures. He watched as the boy's struggling head gradually weakened and his legs fell limply to the earth and his arms lay still. The eyes remained open and the tongue now fell loosely from the open mouth. Arvis continued pulling on the belt, his rage unabated, the pulsing veins in his forehead standing out like pounding cords, his neck muscles tightened into thin taut tendons, his back arched like a bow, his arm muscles bulging as he exerted his massive strength against the boy's neck.

"Let go, Arvis. He's dead," Ricky said dully.

The older man looked over at Ricky, who stared back at him with a blank look.

"Did you hear me, Arvis? Let go of his neck. He's dead," Ricky repeated softly.

Arvis stared down at the limp body of the boy as if he were seeing it for the first time. Ricky's words filtered into his brain, and he suddenly let go of the belt and the boy's lifeless head fell heavily to the wet ground. Arvis continued staring at the dead boy for a long period of time. Ricky watched the mounting fear spilling over within the older man, whose hands began to shake as he covered his flushed face with his trembling fingers. Ricky heard his muffled cries but did not move. He sat against the tree, knees up, watching the dead boy and the weeping man as if he were having a nightmare that one merely slept through.

Finally Arvis raised his face and turned to Ricky. "What am I gonna do?" he cried.

Ricky shrugged. His dead voice slipped across the clearing. "I don't know."

"You gotta help me," Arvis pleaded.

"Why?" Ricky asked coldly.

"Please, kid. You gotta. Arvis is your friend." The older man had his hands outstretched toward the boy.

Ricky closed his eyes against the blinding light that suddenly exposed his whole world. Finally he opened them again. Arvis had not moved.

“You did a terrible thing,” Ricky said matter-of-factly.

Arvis nodded. “I know. I done it before. I can’t help it. Somethin’ happens to me when people call me names.” His voice was whining.

“But you did it,” Ricky insisted.

Arvis stared down at the dead naked body of the boy. “Yeah. I done it again.”

“You’re in a lot of trouble, Arvis,” Ricky said in the same monotonous tone. He had not stirred from his position against the trunk of the tree.

“Help Arvis, kid,” the man begged.

Ricky stared at the man. His clinically clear mind printed the picture of the boy lying dead under the naked hips of the man sitting above. The imprint was permanent. It would never wash away. His mental camera continued clicking away. Picture after picture from the last forty-eight hours was etched forever within the album of his mind. He sighed and moistened his dry lips.

“Get up off the body, Arvis,” he said simply.

The older man obeyed, jumping up quickly from the limp, twisted dead body of the black-haired boy.

“Get dressed,” Ricky ordered.

Arvis grabbed his clothes and hurriedly put them on. He tugged on his shoes and then he stood fully dressed in front of the boy, leaning up against the tree, waiting for the next order.

Ricky remained silent. He was suddenly so very tired. His mind continued clicking away with the repetitive pictures of his recent actions, and his body sagged under the weight of the visions and their meanings. He wanted to go back to sleep and relive the nightmare another way. He didn’t want it to end up like this.

Arvis shifted impatiently in front of him. “What does Arvis do now, kid?” the older man questioned urgently.

“I don’t know,” Ricky answered wearily.

Arvis grimaced. “Think, kid. Please think.”

Ricky stared at the dead body lying several feet away. The cord still bound the limp wrists. Blood oozed from the torn anus and bubbled from the gaping mouth. Ricky turned away from the sight. Automatically he answered, “Go get a shovel. You have to bury him.”

“You’re right. Thank God I got you with me.” Arvis moved frenetically.

Ricky stared at him. Where am I? he thought. What country am I in? A boy has just been murdered, and the man is thanking God. Ricky lost himself in his thoughts until he felt Arvis pushing him gently on the shoulder.

“Where do I get the shovel, kid?” Arvis asked, confused.

Ricky replied numbly, “Go back to the hardware store in the shopping center. The shovels are just to the left of the front door.”

“Where will you be?” Arvis inquired anxiously.

Ricky dosed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I’ll be here. I can’t move. Bring the shovel back and then you can kill me too.”

Arvis frowned. “Stop kiddin’ like that. It ain’t funny.”

Ricky stared at the older man, his eyes filling. “I’m not kidding, Arvis.”

Arvis shrugged. “I never can understand you. But I’ll be right back. Stay here.” He turned and fled through the forest underbrush.

Ricky sat staring at the dead boy. The visions of a sandy-haired head hanging down from the truck door off the highway with the police sirens shrieking returned to meld with the vision of this contorted, lifeless body. The boy was lying several yards away from him on a moist green carpet which was heaped up with mounds and piles of his secret stolen property. He ripped you off. Tony. Ricky thought. He’s stolen a lot from me too. But he gave you a way out. Maybe he’ll come back and kill me too. If I ask him very nicely. Then I could leave. Wake up from this nightmare.

“You’re lucky, Tony,” Ricky said aloud to the dead body.

But there was no response as Ricky sat with his knees drawn up and his mind constantly flickering the visions of his own terrifying enigmatic self-destruction.

“Come back, Arvis, and bury us both,” he said aloud and then began to heave and sob uncontrollably in the stillness of the forest morning.

NINETEEN

Arvis ran frantically through the wooded area in the direction of the shopping center. His leg muscles pumped and tightened with his concentrated effort as he forced his body to move as quickly as his fading energy could take it. He turned his head frequently to either side and occasionally stopped suddenly to look behind him. His eyes flickered over the green forest with terror, certain that he heard the sounds of men following him, their voices loud and angry in the choral unison of chase.

His face felt extremely hot despite the coolness of the quiet morning. His whole being was ignited by his inner terror. He wanted to go back and erase the scene he had just left. Instantly he thought of running beyond the shopping center and escaping. But his mind immediately rejected the idea. He had to bury the body the way he had done before. He had to erase the terrible thing which he had done by covering it over with earth. Then it would be gone. He could forget it happened. He hadn't meant to do it. He knew that. The doctors had told the lawyers that he didn't want to do some of the things he did. But nobody believed him. They would think he had wanted to hurt the boy. And he hadn't. But they wouldn't understand. Nobody ever did. So he had to make the body disappear out of his life. And try harder next time. Try harder to keep from hurting people. He could do it, his mind reassured him as he sped madly through the underbrush. He could stop. Without the jails and the hospitals. He didn't need them. All he needed was another chance. Another chance, he kept repeating to himself as he propelled his sweating body toward the cluster of stores just beyond the woods.

Arvis stopped on the rim of the shopping center to catch his breath. A few people walked slowly toward cars sparsely dotting the large parking lot. He smoothed down his dirty white overalls with his moist palms and checked inside his pants pockets to feel the crumpled bills stuffed inside. Finally he began walking with calm determination in the direction of the hardware store.

Inside the store the crowds continued to drift around the merchandise, their voices murmuring in a background hum interrupted by the ringing of

the cash register and the radio playing behind the counter where the thin woman checked the customers' purchases and rang up the money.

The music on the radio stopped abruptly and a male voice began the hourly news. As she rang up the purchases, she listened to the smooth deep voice discussing a recent uprising in one of the African countries that she had never heard of before. A heavyset man laid a large bag of grass seed in front of her. "That's all?" she asked automatically. He nodded. She rang up the sale. The voice on the radio droned on. She heard the man describing the search for a missing boy. The unseen voice urged her to be on the lookout for a man who was thought to have kidnapped the boy. She shook her head. Why would anyone want to do something like that? she thought. Such sick people in this world. The thin older woman listened to the carefully detailed description of the boy and the man in the kidnapping story. The voice paused and then told her about a rise in health care costs. She grimaced slightly as she accepted several screwdrivers and a wrench from a young boy. They're after more of the little bit of money I've got, she thought. Just three more years and they're going to be paying me. She pressed her lips together as she rang up the sale. She nodded absently as she threw the screwdrivers and wrench into a small brown paper bag.

She noticed the broken fingernails on the dirty hands that laid a shovel on the counter. God, don't people have any pride in their appearance? she thought. Music again began to filter through the store. She turned the shovel over, searching for the price. But there was no sticker on the steel tip or on the wooden handle. She frowned. I don't feel like walking the whole length of this store. My feet are too tired, she grumbled to herself. She looked up at the man who stood behind the shovel. "How much was that?" she asked. The man looked startled that she had talked to him. Her eyes caught the glint of the overhead lights reflected from the medal hanging around his neck. Men and jewelry, she grunted to herself. She slipped wearily around the counter and walked toward the front of the store to check the price of the shovel.

As she passed the tall man, she noticed his filthy white overalls and wrinkled plaid flannel shirt. He looks like he slept in that, she thought as she brushed past him. She reached the area where the shovels were placed against the front counter when the radio voice's description of the man being hunted suddenly clicked into place in her head. Dirty white overalls. Flannel shirt. Tall. But the announcer had said he had a beard and mustache.

She looked up quickly from the row of shovels to stare into the face of the man restlessly moving about in front of her counter. She scanned his face. No beard. No mustache. But as her eyes met his stare, she could sense the fear and urgency vibrating from him. His eyes shifted toward the floor. The woman stood riveted, staring at the unkempt, distracted man whose hands had quickly taken hold of the shovel. She knew that he must be the one. She continued to focus intently upon him, trying to decide what she should do.

Arvis saw the woman stop in front of the shovels and turn back and stare at him. He watched her eyes survey his entire body. He felt trapped against the counter. He moved slightly backward and felt his body bumping against the heavy woman standing directly behind him. People seemed to be circling him and crowding in on him while he was caught up against the cash register. He was pinned in and the woman was staring at him. She knew him, Arvis realized. He could tell that she knew him. And probably so did all of the other people pressing against him, surrounding him, locking him into the center of the store. His hands gripped the shovel and lifted it off the counter. He hugged it close to his body and began to walk through the store. The woman watched him approach her, and her eyes widened and her mouth opened in surprise. His feet began to move faster as he saw the front door come closer. He started to run and propelled himself past the staring older woman, knocking lightly against her so that she had to reach out and clutch the counter edge to keep from falling over. She said nothing as she watched him running out of the hardware store holding the shovel against his chest. As he flew out of the store into the shopping mall, she turned and stared at his body speeding across the narrow pavement between stores toward the parking lot. She stood very still for several seconds, leaning against the counter at the front of the store as the noise in the hardware store rose. Finally, after a few minutes, she righted herself and quickly and quietly walked to the telephone in the back. Lifting the receiver, she dialed the operator. Finally the flat voice announced itself. The woman swallowed her thick saliva, her dry mouth feeling like sandpaper. "Give me the police," she said firmly.

"Is this an emergency?" the operator inquired.

"It is," the thin woman replied calmly.

As the police car sped up the thruway, Mac pulled off the road to a pay phone. "I'm going to call home," he said to Mike. After a few rings, the

phone was lifted and a familiar female voice answered. "MacGinnis's home."

"Flora, Mac here. Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Maureen is up. Some young cop here this morning and let himself in and got her out of bed." Flora Gravis gradually gave him the details.

Mac frowned. "I been wondering how he got in."

"Came knockin' on my door. Woke me up. Nice young feller. Real serious. And not real friendly. But he was good to Maureen. He a new guy on the squad?"

Mac smiled. "He's my boss."

There was a brief silence. "Your boss?" She sounded amazed.

"Yeah. Ain't that something?" He laughed.

"Jesus. And I thought he was a rookie. Just starting," she commented reflectively.

Mac grunted. "He's new. But he's good."

Mac could hear Maureen calling in the background, her urgent, strident voice fracturing the calm conversation. Flora Gravis hollered back across half the length of the house. "It's Mac. He's callin' to see how you're doin'." A muffled but crackling reply came back, too muffled for Mac to decipher.

"What's she saving?" he asked.

Flora chuckled dryly. "You sure you wanna know?"

Mac sighed. "Yeah. Nothing from her mouth is gonna surprise me anymore."

The neighbor answered slowly. "She says for you to stop screwin' around and haul your ass home. Too much sex for an old man like yourself'll ruin your heart."

Mac chuckled. "Tell her that I'm doing fine. These young girls can't keep their hands off me."

"I can't tell her that," Flora said seriously.

Mac continued laughing. "That's okay. I'll tell her myself when I get home."

"When's that?" There was a slight impatience in the voice.

Mac frowned. "Soon, I hope. We gotta get the kid first," he said quietly and hung up the phone.

Arvis ran across the almost deserted shopping center parking lot clutching the shovel against his chest. His mind spun wildly. She knew me. She recognized me. I know she did. I had to run away from her. He hurried across the cement top of the wide empty area and finally entered the woods immediately beyond. He continued running through the thickening foliage until he stopped suddenly. He looked around himself and felt a heightening panic. Which way do I go? he thought. In his terrified confusion he had forgotten the route that he had followed getting in and out of the woods. He slowly began walking, checking the landscape to try and rediscover the original pathway. He gingerly walked through several areas, finding them strange and unfamiliar and had to turn back to return to the edge of the wooded area to attempt another path. I'm lost, he thought, panicked. That boy's body is lying somewhere in there for me to cover up and now I can't find it. That woman knows who I am. I have to hide that boy so she won't know about him. He has to disappear. Go away so Arvis can have another chance.

He moved farther into the dappled green forest area and called out very softly, "Ricky?" But there was no answer. The shovel pressed tightly against his pounding chest he carefully made his way deeper into the overgrown tangled plant life, kicking broken branches away from his feet, tearing thick vines away from his aching ankles. After a long searching period he called out again, "Ricky?" Again only silence greeted his question. He trembled and kept pushing deeper into the woods. Finally he hollered at the top of his voice, "Ricky?" He stopped and listened carefully.

From behind him and far to the right he heard a small frightened sound like a voice whose words could not be discerned. He turned in the direction of the muffled voice and thrashed through the underbrush. After about fifteen minutes he called loudly again, "Ricky?"

Clearly, to his right and only a short distance away, he could hear the same weak, terrified voice call back. "Here. Over here." He followed the voice until he walked between several large trees and broke into the clearing.

Ricky sat leaning up against the tree trunk opposite him, his body not having moved from the position in which Arvis recalled he had last seen it before his flight.

Ricky kept his own eyes focused on the dead boy as his angry voice lashed out at the older man standing on the rim of the clearing. "Where

were you?" he demanded, his tone harsh and unyielding.

Arvis bent his head. "I got lost."

"You're always lost, Arvis." Ricky raised his eyes and stared at the tall man.

Arvis blinked several times as he absorbed Ricky's comment. Finally he moved his head in agreement. "I know."

"You got the shovel?" Ricky asked firmly.

Arvis held out the shovel from his chest, extending it the full length of his arms. "See," he said.

Ricky stared at the new shovel for a brief second, then pointed at the body lying immobile on the forest floor. "Bury him. Do it quick. I can't look at him any longer."

Arvis winced. "I'm gonna do it. Take it easy."

Ricky did not move. His muscles ached from being held in the constant taut crouching position. His back was wet from the moisture of the tree trunk, and his pants had pulled down from his waist in the back so the cool dampness gathered on the thin strip of naked skin exposed on his back. But he made no move to change his body's rigid shape.

"Start digging now," Ricky almost screamed.

Arvis moved to the center of the clearing and dug the shovel into the earth at the dead boy's feet. He scooped up several mounds of moist earth and flung them in the opposite direction from where Ricky was pressed up against the tree. He whined, "Don't holler at Arvis. Please. I didn't mean to do it."

"Dig," Ricky commanded.

Arvis flushed. He chopped at the earth angrily and slowly began digging a grave to receive the body of the young Italian boy. Tony was about to be buried among his own stolen belongings in his own private graveyard.

"Don't throw the earth too far. You'll need it to cover him," Ricky said harshly.

Arvis nodded and smiled feebly at the hunched figure of the young boy across the clearing. "Right," he replied as he continued removing earth from the expanding hole and laying it carefully to the side of the grave he was digging. Arvis felt the sweat trickling down his back. His back muscles tightened with each stroke. His mind drifted back to the prison yards where he had dug gardens and worked with construction gangs. The aching back,

the foot against the rim of the shovel, the earth lifting and dropping, the sweat running in thin streams down his back, the gradually increasing thirst, the sounds of other men cursing and laughing by his side, all came back to him as his body toiled to deepen the hole. He was acutely aware of the young boy's eyes piercing his back as he bent over the deepening gap in the earth. The staring eyes cut into him like a knife, increasing the pain in his back. He straightened for a moment and turned to look at Ricky Stern, whose face was directed at him. Arvis flinched as he read the feelings strikingly etched across the young drawn, tired face.

"Please don't hate Arvis, Ricky. I didn't mean to do it."

Ricky tightened his mouth, his jaw muscles protruding out from his cheeks like ugly tumors in front of his ears. "Dig, Arvis. Don't worry about me right now," he said bitterly.

Arvis shook his head. "But I want you to forgive me."

Ricky closed his eyes and tightened his fists. "Arvis, if you had any sense, you'd know that was impossible. I'll never forgive you and I'll never never forget you and I'll never forgive you." Ricky challenged the older man with a blinding look of hatred and defiance.

Arvis cringed visibly, raised the shovel in anger over his head instinctively, and watched as the young boy did not move a muscle, his eyes traveling upward to stare impassively at the menacing instrument.

"Do it, Arvis," Ricky said softly.

There was a long moment's silence. Arvis stared at Ricky and gradually lowered his arms, the shovel hanging loosely. He bit his lip and shook his head wildly, his lambda medal swinging crazily and his disheveled moist hair springing with each movement. "No," he said softly.

Ricky narrowed his eyes. "Then dig and get that dead body out of my sight."

Arvis turned his paining back to the accusing eyes and he finished scooping earth from the deep hole he had created.

Mike's voice punctured the silence in the car as they neared Philadelphia. "Doesn't it seem funny that the kid's still with him?"

"Yeah." Mac nodded. "If he's alive." He sat silently for several minutes. "It sure seems like he could of tried harder to get away."

Mike rubbed his hands together. "Maybe he's scared."

“You’re damn tootin’ he’s scared. But he had a cop right at his side on the parkway,” Mac grumbled.

“Well, whatever’s going on, it’s not getting us anywhere. And the kid’s a sitting duck,” Mike said quietly.

“You said you thought we’d find the kid alive,” Mac reminded the younger man.

Mike sat and studied his hands. “I’m praying we do.”

“You don’t pray. I bet you ain’t been inside a church for years.” Mac chided.

Mike nodded slowly. “You’re right. I haven’t.” He paused. “We better call Weeks.”

After a short delay, Weeks’s voice came over the speaker in the police car.

“What took you so long to call?” Both policemen detected the mild impatience and recrimination in the sergeant’s voice.

Mike made a face, looking at Mac. “We’ve been getting our asses up to Philly. We’re almost there.”

There was a pause. Then Weeks said, “I have something.”

The air in the police car became electric with the man’s charged, calm statement. Mac turned quickly and almost grabbed the car phone out of Mike’s hand but allowed his thick fingers to tighten and fall in his lap.

Mike reflexively leaned forward over the car phone. “What?” he asked quickly.

Weeks replied without a shred of emotion. “We just received a call from a woman in Merion. Suburb of Philly. Works in a hardware store. She claims she saw somebody that looks like Moore. But without the beard and mustache. The guy just ran out of the hardware store.” He paused.

Mike felt his breath coming in rapid spurts. “Anything else?”

“Yes.” Weeks spoke very slowly. “The man stole a shovel.”

Weeks stopped. The impact of the words seeped gradually into the two policemen sitting expectantly in the car. The engine droned on unnoticed.

“Oh, shit,” Mac whispered from his side of the car.

Mike sat frozen in his seat, grasping the phone in tight fingers with knuckles which had suddenly whitened from the tautness of his fist around the instrument.

Mac reached over and pulled the phone firmly from the tight grasp of the younger man. He put it to his mouth. “Mac here. Give us directions.”

Weeks carefully described the area the call had come from and the direction in which the man had run.

“What’s out there, Weeks?” Mac rasped.

For a second the policemen thought the box had gone dead. Finally Weeks spoke after taking a deep breath. “Woods.”

“That ain’t good,” Mac said to no one.

Mike continued staring ahead and listening to the onesided conversation.

“You’re right. It doesn’t sound good,” Weeks said calmly.

“Should we see the woman first?” Mac asked for supervision.

Weeks thought a minute. “No. Go directly to the woods. Try to find him.” He caught himself. “I mean them.”

“Give me those directions again,” Mac said as he reached over and nudged Mike into a more alert, attentive state. Mike turned his face toward Mac, and the older man could read an inexplicable rage in the clear blue eyes of the young policeman.

After Weeks had finished, Mac signed off. “Call you.”

The two policemen sat silently for a few minutes. Then Mac turned toward the unmoving figure of the younger man. “Do you want me to drive?”

Mike turned and stared at him for a brief second, his tired face assuming the lines of determination, his body shifting from paralysis into action. “No. I can drive. Just tell me the way.”

As Mac began repeating Weeks’s directions, Mike shifted gears and pulled the police car into the sparse early-afternoon Sunday traffic, heading north to the woods where Ricky Stern watched the bent figure of Arvis Moore digging frantically at the soft spring earth.

TWENTY

Arvis stood knee-deep in the shallow grave. He leaned his sore body over the edge of the dirt pit and laid his head briefly against the damp earth above. His hair clung to his wet forehead and neck in grimy wiry ringlets. His aching arms hung limply by his side and he took several deep breaths. The shovel lay at the bottom of the hole. Slowly he lifted his head and looked across the clearing at Ricky, who continued to crouch, his knees clasped tightly by his arms, his back pushed solidly against the bark of the massive tree.

“I’m done,” Arvis said simply.

Ricky stared at him, saying nothing.

Arvis waited for the boy to respond and give him directions, but Ricky merely looked blankly at the older man’s head and torso sticking out from the newly dug grave. Arvis coughed, the dirt having smudged his face and gotten into his nose and mouth. The taste of earth sickened him slightly. But he swallowed and tried to eradicate the thick acrid feeling in his mouth. The bitter earthen taste would not leave. He spit several times, but his saliva was sparse from the tension in his body. He tried wiping his tongue on the sleeve of his flannel shirt, but the film of dust added to the dirty dry taste in his mouth.

“What’ll I do now?” he asked quietly, peering over at the huddled figure of the young boy.

He heard only stillness interrupted briefly by the occasional flutter of birds’ wings and rustling leaves. His eyes did not leave the empty ashen face of his young companion. Minutes drifted by as he stood in the earthen pit. Finally he saw Ricky’s arm rise very slowly and point to the immobile figure of the dead boy just above the upper rim of the hole in the ground. Arvis’s eyes traveled to the cold, still figure. He turned back to stare at Ricky, whose face remained vacant. Arvis nodded and wearily lifted the shovel out of the pit, tossing it a distance away to the side opposite the staring young boy on the other side of the forest area. He pulled himself slowly up out of the grave and stood arching his sore back, rubbing the tense, tight muscles.

Quietly he walked around the rim of the pit and stood over the body of the young Italian boy. Arvis bent down, grunting with the sudden surge of back pain, and lifted and cradled the dead boy in his arms. He felt his knees shaking almost uncontrollably as the boy dangled in his grasp. Soon his whole frame was vibrating to the point that he almost dropped the body. He turned to stare at Ricky. But the boy had averted his face and was staring out at the woods, avoiding the sight of Tony lying limply in Arvis's arms. The dead boy's head fell off of Arvis's left forearm and hung down toward the earth, his dark hair loosely drifting in the stirrings of the morning breeze. Arvis stood clasping the heavy body against his chest, trembling violently, choking on the dust in his tightening, frightened throat. "Ricky," he croaked.

The young boy turned to gaze at Arvis, his eyes skating down the man's arms to look intently at the dangling head and unseeing open eyes of the dead boy lying in his grip. "What?" he whispered.

Arvis staggered slightly. "Will you help me bury him?"

Ricky opened his mouth in stunned silence. He saw Tony's eyes staring at him. All I see are dead bodies now, Ricky thought. I had never even thought about death or dying before this weekend, and now my life is surrounded by the bodies of the dead, hanging in mid-air, staring at me, accusing me, urging me to come forward, inviting me, asking me for futile help. How easy it is to die, Ricky thought. How fast. How simple. A car wreck. A cord around the neck. A shovel falling on your head. I've never looked at it before, and now it keeps peering at me all the time. I travel with Arvis and death now. One of Tony's eyes rolled uncontrollably back into his head, so that Ricky was staring into a totally white eyeball. He suddenly felt sick to his stomach and started to cry out in uncontrollable rage. The noises he made had no meaning, only frantic, wild, loud sounds of agony and defeat.

"What's the matter?" Arvis asked quickly, trying desperately to balance the dead body in his arms as his body accelerated his nervous twitching.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Ricky screamed.

Arvis stood holding the body for several seconds after Ricky had quieted down. Then he asked again, "You gonna help me bury him?"

Ricky shook his head vigorously. "No. No. Stop asking me. No."

Shrugging, Arvis turned toward the hole he had just dug and, lowering his arms, let the limp body of the dead boy fall into the pit out of Ricky's sight. Ricky watched and gave a single piercing scream. He then fell silent as Arvis retrieved the shovel and slowly and methodically began covering Tony with the earth lying to the side of the grave. Ricky watched with numbing horror as the earth gradually returned into place and the boy disappeared.

Finally the hole was filled and Arvis patted the surface firmly with the shovel. After laying the shovel over the earth as a gruesome marker, Arvis stood tall and peered down at the ground. "It's over," he said simply.

No, it's not, Ricky thought. It will never be over. You will forget, Arvis. Like you forget yesterday and tomorrow. But I will feel everything and see everything and taste everything and remember everything that has happened to me. Tony's eyes will stare at me forever. Pleading with me, blaming me.

Arvis moved toward Ricky and started to lower himself next to the boy on the ground.

"Don't sit near me," Ricky said quickly.

Arvis stopped in the middle of bending down. "Why not?" he asked, surprised.

"I don't want to be near you," Ricky said, his voice choked.

Arvis remained hunched over and reached out and touched the boy's face with his filthy hands. "Last night you told me I could touch you."

Ricky turned away. "I know. And I'm sorry."

"You didn't mean it?" Arvis asked, childlike.

Shaking his head, Ricky said dully, "Not that. I think I did mean it. That's what I'm sorry about."

Arvis took both his hands and cupped Ricky's chalky white face. The dirt from the earth was embedded in his cracked fingernails and the smudged dust wiped off onto Ricky's perspiring face.

"You're Arvis's friend, kid. That ain't nothin' to be sorry about," the older man said softly.

Ricky reached up and gently took Arvis's hands away from his face. "Go away, Arvis."

Arvis sat on his haunches silently for a few minutes, then rose and walked to the other side of the clearing and lowered his tall body down into

a cross-legged position. His eyes did not leave Ricky's face. "You think I'm a bad person?" he asked the boy softly.

Ricky stared at the flushed, perspiring face of the older man. He could not help but feel a quick wave of pity and concern for the childlike man. Arvis sat leaning forward, his clean-shaven face grimed with dirt, his eyes clouded and unfocused, his body intermittently rocked by evanescent trembling. You can't help it, Arvis, Ricky thought. And you have infected me. I hate you for that. And pity you for everything else. As for Tony, I don't feel anything. I only wish it had been me instead.

Arvis cleared his throat as he saw his young friend looking away. "Do you think I'm bad?" he asked again.

Ricky shook his head and answered softly. "No, Arvis. Not bad. Just different. You're too different."

Arvis frowned. "Why am I too different?" he asked, confused.

Ricky did not answer. He sighed and stared at his hands.

"What should I do?" Arvis suddenly asked the boy.

Looking up in the older man's bewildered face, Ricky tried hard to find the words to reply, but they were difficult to put together into a thought that he could express easily.

"If I'm too different, then what am I gonna do?" Arvis persisted.

Finally Ricky had assembled his sentence. "Find a way to die, Arvis. You'll be happier."

The older man bent his head and stared at the ground. Suddenly he began to nod his head slowly and twist his hands in his lap. Finally he looked up. Ricky could see by the moisture around his eyes that he had been crying.

"What do you mean, Ricky?" Arvis whispered.

Ricky stared at the tear-streaked cheeks and the twitching grimy face and waited a few seconds before answering. When he spoke, his young voice was crisp and hard. "Kill yourself."

The air was still with an oppressive emptiness. Arvis watched the young boy's determined features. Ricky's mouth opened very slightly to catch the cool air around his soft, flushed, hairless face. His eyes did not leave Arvis's head as it bent downward.

"Did you hear me, Arvis?" Ricky asked.

The crouching man slowly nodded his head, his face lowering toward the damp earth, his mouth moving silently.

Ricky leaned forward so that his shoulders almost touched his knees, which were drawn up tautly against his body. He urged the man toward him with his insistent voice. "Repeat it after me, Arvis. Do you hear?"

"Yes," Arvis mumbled hoarsely.

"Say it," Ricky demanded.

Arvis looked up, his eyes wild with pain and fear. "What do you want me to say, kid?"

Ricky said very slowly, "I have to kill myself."

Arvis took a deep breath and shook his head slowly from side to side, shaking the thought from his mind. He coughed a deep rasping sound and remained silent.

"Arvis," Ricky commanded.

The tall man rose off his haunches and stood erect in front of the huddled figure of the boy. Slowly his mouth opened and a rasping cry echoed throughout the forest clearing. "I gotta kill myself." Arvis stood very still, his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his overalls. His eyes stared ahead of him, seeing nothing.

Ricky whispered, "Say it again."

"I gotta kill myself" was the reply, this time clear, low-pitched, and desperately sad and final.

Arvis turned to gaze into the unblinking eyes of the young boy beneath him. He saw no hate, no pity, no anger staring back at him. He saw the empty blue eyes of exhaustion and relief.

"Did I say it right?" he asked tentatively.

Ricky nodded. He waited and then sighed deeply before speaking softly. "And don't you feel a lot better now?"

"Yeah," Arvis said in a distant voice. He lowered himself back down onto the soft wet ground next to the young boy, taking care not to touch the tightly coiled smaller body with his own.

"Thanks, kid," Arvis said very quietly, beginning to hum his eerie melody.

The two sat contemplating the newly turned earth in front of them as the birds continued to fly through the branches over their heads, fluting the air with carefree abandoned noises.

Mike pulled the police car into an empty spot on the shopping center parking lot at the farthest point just opposite the wooded area. He turned the

key and the engine suddenly quieted. He turned to Mac, who sat staring at the green forest area.

“We’re here,” Mike said simply.

Mac frowned and took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

Mike passed his right hand across his face, rubbing his tired eyes with the back of his hand.

Mac leaned over and pulled his gun out of his holster. “Check your gun. Be sure it’s loaded,” he ordered the younger policeman.

Mike removed his gun, opened it, checked the bullets, snapped it shut, and turned toward his older friend. “It’s ready.”

“Mine too,” Mac croaked softly.

Without saying anything else to each other, both men opened their doors and slipped out of the police car. They stood for a minute surveying the wooded expanse lying in front of them.

“Together or separate?” Mike asked.

“Together,” Mac said definitively.

Mike nodded in agreement.

“You want me to lead?” Mac asked, not looking at the younger man.

Mike shook his head. “I’ll lead this time.”

“No throwin’ up, you hear?” Mac teased.

There was no answer. He turned to glance at Mike. The young policeman was not smiling.

They walked to the edge of the wooded area and began slowly making their way through the trees, vines, plants, and underbrush. They tried walking as softly as possible, but the sounds of their feet crunching moist green stems and plants or butting against fallen branches echoed throughout the dimly lit green jungle. Slowly each man scanned the area for signs of footprints or crushed underbrush, but nothing was evident. They were traveling through virgin territory which had not been walked through in the recent past. After about fifteen minutes they stopped and looked at each other.

“Doesn’t look like anybody’s been here,” Mike remarked.

Mac scanned the area. “Yeah. Let’s move to the right.”

They edged toward the right and moved several hundred feet to the side inspecting the ground as meticulously as possible. Suddenly Mac stopped and pointed to something. Mike walked over to his side and stared down. A small bush had been trampled by a heavy foot. The green foliage

was bent away from the men and leaned toward the earth's surface rather than toward the intermittent sunlight. Several small green shoots were broken off and lay at the base of the bent bush.

"Somebody's been here lately," Mike said evenly.

"Yeah," Mac whispered.

They moved forward. As they carefully wended their way through the bushes, more footprints and mangled, trodden underbrush could be seen. The trail was becoming fairly obvious. They stealthily moved very slowly foot by foot toward the center of the woods, knowing that they were about to meet the man for whom they had been searching.

Mac reached down and pulled his gun out of the holster and cocked it. "Your gun," he whispered.

Mike stopped and took his gun out and got it ready, allowing it to rest easily in his right hand.

"He's in here," Mac whispered.

Mike nodded and said nothing.

"Should we call out to him and let him give himself up?"

Mac asked.

Mike stopped for a second. "Let's get a little closer," he said softly.

Mac thought for a moment and then started walking forward silently. He felt his heart skip an occasional beat as he pressed closer to his prey. His face felt flushed and his mouth became dry. An old excitement overtook the elderly man as he moved his heavy body through the woods. He felt very fatigued but alive. Once again he was a policeman and he was closing in. The thought sent the blood pounding against his temples.

"I've tried to do it before," Arvis said sadly.

"What?" Ricky asked. Arvis's voice had interrupted a momentary reverie where Ricky had been throwing the baseball with all of his strength toward home plate. He wanted to remain in his fantasy world, and he resented Arvis for dragging him back into the grim reality of the moment.

"Tried killin' myself," Arvis said slowly.

"Yeah?" Ricky remarked casually.

Arvis did not seem to notice. He continued talking. "Yeah. Twice. Last time in jail. I tried stringin' myself up. But the sheets tore and I fell down. They put me in solitary for that. Then in the hospital I slept with one of the doc's assistants and he gave me a mess of pills and I swallowed 'em all. But

they pumped my stomach. And I was okay. I've tried. But I never can get it right." Arvis's voice was solemn and pensive. "Somehow I'm always messin' things up in my life. My life is one big fuck-up." He sighed and ran his right hand through a tall, scraggly clump of grass at his side.

Ricky did not respond but laid his head back against the tree trunk and closed his eyes. His voice finally split the silence with the clean cutting edge of a knife. "You'll do it right this time. This time you won't fuck up."

Arvis stared at the boy for a few seconds and opened his mouth to answer. Suddenly a voice shot through the clearing from a short distance away, startling the tall man so that he jumped immediately to his feet. Ricky unclasped his knees and clutched at the ground.

"Moore, we're here. Come on out and give yourself up." Mac's harsh, grating voice surrounded the clearing.

Arvis stood terrified, his arms flailing wildly, without purpose, his head turning in every direction. He ran from one edge of the clearing to the opposite side. Finally he stood shaking in front of Ricky. Looking down at him, he asked in a panicky voice, "What am I gonna do?"

Ricky pointed behind him. "Run in that direction," he ordered in a clear, direct tone.

Arvis nodded and started running away from Ricky and the clearing, crashing through the forest plant life like a frightened bull.

Mac called again, his thick voice booming through the wooded area. There was no immediate response. The two policemen stood listening. Suddenly they heard a rustling of leaves and the sound of hurried movement through the woods ahead of them. They moved quickly, with guns drawn, and carefully worked their way toward the sound. As they passed several trees and closely overgrown bushes, the two men came upon the clearing.

Instantly they saw the boy huddled against the tree trunk. His eyes were staring at them and his face was contorted into a terrified grimace.

Mike turned quickly to the older policeman. "That's him," he said recognizing the blond-haired boy at once.

Mac grunted. "Yeah. He's alive."

Mike walked across the clearing and touched the frightened boy's shoulder. "You all right, Ricky?" Mike said gently.

Ricky nodded his head mutely. Tears began streaming down his face. He started shaking, his body convulsing in the release of repressed fear. The

two policemen watched him for a second, then saw him raise his arm and point at the shovel lying over a patch of newly turned earth. His hand trembled but he did not lower it. He continued pointing.

“What’s that, kid?” Mac asked gruffly.

The boy stared at the older policeman. His mouth opened and he tried to speak. He stammered a few unintelligible words.

“Take your time. What’s in there?” Mac urged.

Finally Ricky blurted out, “A body. A dead body. A boy.”

Mike turned to look at Mac. “Oh, God. He did kill a kid.”

Ricky was nodding furiously. Mac moved over to the mound of earth and lifted the shovel.

“You sure, kid?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” Ricky said weakly.

“What’s the kid’s name?” Mac asked.

Ricky blinked. “Tony,” he whispered.

“He’s buried in there?” Mike asked.

Ricky nodded.

“Where’s Arvis?” Mike asked quickly.

Ricky pointed behind him.

“He ran further into the woods?” Mike questioned.

Ricky nodded.

The sound of running had ceased coming from the forest behind the boy. There was a silence in the wooded area. Mac walked over to the boy and bent down to lift him up. Ricky rose slowly, his weak legs barely able to support his body.

Mike walked to the edge of the clearing. He turned and looked at the older policeman supporting the slumping boy’s body. “Mac, I’m going after him. You stay here and watch the boy. He may run back this way.” Mike spoke in a clear, calm voice that was direct and definite.

“You sure you want to go alone?” Mac frowned.

Mike nodded. “Yes. Stay here. Unless you hear something.”

“All right. But be careful, Mike.” Mac urged as the boy began to slip out of his grasp and sink toward the ground.

Mike stared at the boy for a second and then walked slowly into the woods beyond the clearing.

Arvis had run carefully at first, dodging tree trunks and bushes, kicking aside logs as his feet sped along the damp earth. After several hundred feet he bumped up against a tree trunk and was momentarily dazed, but he shook himself and turned around and continued hurrying between bushes and trees deeper into the woods.

The foliage became thicker and more difficult to separate as his body pushed and bulled its way through the overgrown greenery. He was becoming winded and his chest was beginning to hurt him with every breath. Sweat rolled into his eyes, the salt momentarily stinging and blinding him, but he continued running and knifing his tall form through the forest. Suddenly his foot caught on a thick clump of tough vines and he tripped heavily, falling to the ground, his right leg caught in the vines. The pain in his right ankle shot quickly up his leg but it soon numbed. However, when he tried to rise, he found he could not bear weight on the foot. The ankle buckled and fresh shards of pain shot up his leg and then through his whole body. He tried dragging himself along the ground, but he could not pull his heavy muscular frame through the thick vines and bushes. The pain in his right ankle was beginning to intensify, and he bit his lip as he tried to locate a thick clump of green covering behind which he could hide. He slowly inched himself along the forest floor until he settled his broken form behind a tall, copiously overgrown bush. He lay there, bathing in the sweat and the pain, waiting.

He breathed deeply but quietly. He tried moving the painful leg, but it dragged across the earth, making loud crunching noises, so he had to leave his foot somewhat exposed, protruding from behind the bush.

Arvis sat very quietly listening to the rustling movement of the approaching person coming closer to where he was hiding. He tried one more time to pull in his foot, but he only succeeded in bringing his knee closer to the base of the thorny green bush.

Suddenly he saw the form of a man walking toward him through the leaves and branches. Arvis remained as rigidly silent as possible. The uniformed man searched the area to the left of where he was hiding and, finding nothing, turned in his direction.

He heard the man's voice calling, but at first could not make out the words. He leaned forward slightly; and as the policeman walked slowly in his direction, he understood what the man was shouting.

"Arvis. Where are you?" Mike called in a low, friendly voice.

Arvis gasped. He parted the branches and stared at the man almost in front of him. He heard the words again.

“Arvis, I won’t hurt you. Where are you?”

Mike finally caught sight of the leg sticking out from the bush and saw the two eyes staring at him from between the green branches. He walked over to the seated man with his gun resting easily in his right hand. Mike stared down at Arvis and smiled.

“Hi, Arvis. Do you know who I am?” he said gently.

Arvis nodded and finally whispered hoarsely, “Yeah. You’re a cop.”

Mike felt his head begin to pound as he swallowed through his tight throat and croaked, “That’s right. I’m a cop.”

“Hey, cop, I’m in a lot of trouble, ain’t I?” Arvis asked softly.

“Yeah. A lot of trouble.” Mike stared down at the twisted, unkempt figure with a sense of mounting rage.

“You think I’ll have to go back to jail?” Arvis whined.

Mike winced. The fierce anger that he felt rising in his throat tasted so bitter that he was finding it difficult to speak. “Yeah. Maybe worse,” he finally managed between clenched teeth.

Arvis looked up at him, rubbing his painful leg, and frowned quizzically, “Why’re you so upset?”

“Because I hate you, Arvis,” Mike rasped.

Arvis whimpered softly.

“I hate you, you bastard,” Mike hissed softly at the fallen man.

“Why do you hate me?” Arvis pleaded.

“Because of what you did to that little kid. And all the other kids before him.” Mike spoke with his firm, compact frame rocking back and forth like a swaying tree trunk about to collapse over the prone figure.

“But why should that make you so mad? It don’t mean nothin’ to you,” Arvis said softly.

Mike glared at the crumpled figure. It means everything to me, you fucking idiot, he thought. What you do is what people think I do. I’ve got to live with the shit you do. Mike’s face was contorted with disgust. He suddenly felt the urge to retch. His free hand flew quickly over his mouth.

Arvis lay silent for a moment, his face averted from the searing anger in the policeman’s eyes. Finally he turned his head back and looked into Mike’s face.

“Cop, would you do me a favor?” he asked softly.

Mike stared at the upturned face of the man. He took a step backward. The young policeman's face burned with an anger directed at the pleading man lying sprawled in front of him. The years of hiding, the furtive attempts at closeting his own secret, the crude jokes about homosexuals tearing at him in locker rooms and police stations, the screaming newspaper headlines of child molesters and homosexual murderers that shamed him and pushed him further into frightened isolation became diffused into a volcano of unchanneled fury. Mike tightened every muscle to quiet the trembling caused by his onrushing desire for revenge.

His voice cracked, "What do you want me to do, Arvis?"

Arvis sighed, "Kill me. Please kill me. cop."

Mike frowned. Arvis was putting into words the thoughts that were racing through his own mind. The idea terrified him.

"What?" Mike asked, shocked at the sudden union of their ideas.

"If you hate me so much, please kill me. Please." Arvis reached out and took Mike's left hand in his own. Mike pulled his hand away brusquely.

"Don't touch me," Mike barked.

Arvis turned away for a second. Finally he looked again at the policeman.

"You don't have to touch me to kill me. Please."

Mike crouched silently in front of Arvis for several seconds, watching the tense, agonized face of the hunted man who suddenly had become his personal prey, his victim, his enemy.

Arvis whispered, "The kid is right. I gotta die. So you kill me. Now."

Mike was very still.

"Will you?" Arvis begged.

Finally Mike answered, his voice a low, rumbling, hostile whisper. "Yes, Arvis, I will. I really want to."

Arvis nodded as if he finally understood.

Mike stared into Arvis's eyes. The fallen man began to smile at him, his separated teeth standing out of his dirty face. Mike lifted his right hand and pointed the revolver at Arvis's head. He felt his hand tremble and he challenged himself to steady it. Slowly the wavering pistol settled down and came to rest several feet away from Arvis's forehead. Arvis continued smiling as Mike pulled the trigger.

Mac heard the shot from the clearing. He bolted from his spot and then remembered the young boy. He turned toward Ricky and shouted quickly as he dashed into the woods. "Don't move, kid. You hear me. Stay right here. Don't move."

Ricky nodded and sank down to his knees as the heavy policeman ran out of the clearing toward the shot.

Mac saw Mike standing with the pistol lowered, staring in front of him. A leg protruded from the bush that separated him from his younger companion. He hurried toward Mike. As he reached his side, he saw the slumped body of the tall man in overalls lying on its side in the tall grass. Mike stood looking at the dead body, his eyes unblinking, his face an expressionless mask. The gun slid out of his right hand and fell to the ground at his feet, landing between himself and the prostrate form of Arvis Moore.

"Mike," Mac rasped loudly.

Mike turned and stared at him as if he were a stranger.

"What happened?" Mac demanded.

Mike did not answer. He simply stared quietly at the older policeman.

Mac's eyes went from the dead man's body to the dazed face of his young friend. Finally he answered himself. "He put up a fight. You had to do it"

Mike said nothing.

Then Mac placed his hand on Mike's shoulder. "I understand," he said softly. "I know how you feel."

Mike stared and finally nodded, very slowly at first, then more violently. He began to cry, his sobs racking his body and tearing into the silence surrounding the two policemen and the dead body of Arvis Moore. Mac slipped his gun into the holster quickly and reached out his arms and pulled the young man toward him. He said nothing but held the young man very close, his right arm going up to gently hold and occasionally stroke the back of the sobbing head. Mac's eyes were focused on the body lying in front of him, the eyes half closed, the face grimy but soft and innocent in death, the lips opened in an easy smile.

TWENTY-ONE

The Stern car sped away from the two unmoving figures in the station-house parking lot. Slowly the two policemen turned and, without looking at each other, walked wearily toward the front steps. They remained a distance from each other, careful not to brush against each other, the older man breathing deeply and noisily, the younger man staring dazedly down at the cement driveway. Weeks stood at the top of the front steps watching each movement with curious interest. His face was a mask of passive calm, but his restless eyes darted intently from Mac's florid face to the sloping shoulders and bent head of Mike Androtti. As they climbed the steps. Weeks pulled open the heavy wooden door. No words were exchanged. The two policemen walked into the station house. They waited until Weeks followed them inside and then walked quietly behind him up the long stairway to his office. Without glancing back in their direction, Weeks slipped into his office and eased himself into his leather chair, then began drumming his fingers on the desk.

The three men sat very quietly for a long time. Finally the voice of Garry Weeks ripped through the tense silence. "How did he get shot, Mike?"

Mike's head jerked upward, his eyes skidding into the piercing gaze of the man behind the desk.

Mac cracked his knuckles and frowned. Finally it was Mac's coarse voice that scraped against the silence in the room. "The guy put up a fight" The older policeman shot a hard look at Mike.

Weeks turned and stared at Mac. "I asked Mike," he said simply.

Mike swallowed and searched Weeks's face for a sign. But the sergeant's features were unchanging, impassive, thoroughly controlled. It was very hard for Mike to find his voice. It seemed so far away. Lost deep within him. Reluctant to rise and erupt from his mouth. He sat, his mouth opening slowly, nothing coming from his lips.

"How did he get shot, Mike?" Weeks asked again.

Finally Mike spoke. He shocked himself at the firm and steady tone in his voice. He heard himself as if he were standing on the opposite side of

the room listening to someone else. "He went after me," the younger policeman said loudly.

"With what?" Weeks asked calmly.

"The shovel," Mac blurted out.

Weeks turned to stare at Mac with a flicker of impatience.

"I'm talking to Michael." His words were ice cold and final.

Mike sighed. "He picked up the shovel and was going after me with it." He was terrified because he distinctly remembered the shovel being on top of the other boy's grave when he had first found the Stern boy and surveyed the scene. The damn thing should still be there.

Weeks stared at his fingers. "So you shot him?"

"Yes," Mike said quietly.

Weeks waited a long minute. "In self-defense?"

Mike's head was beginning to throb. "Yes," he whispered.

The room became still. Mike could see that Weeks was lost in thought. Mac turned to look at Mike's ashen face. He was making a face at the younger policeman, but Mike kept his gaze riveted on the blank expression of the sergeant seated behind the desk absorbed in his own musing.

Weeks took a deep breath and creased his face with a mild frown. "It'll work," he said simply.

Mike sat confused. "Sir?"

Weeks looked at him steadily for several seconds, then replied, "I said it'll work. Your story will stick."

Mike twisted his hands visibly in his lap. He had led the boy out of the woods ahead of Mac. The last thing he remembered was the shovel lying in the center of the clearing. His heart raced. Mac had joined them at the car several minutes later and they had called the station house and then driven the boy here. Nothing had been changed. Nobody else had been there. The crime lab would have all of the photographs. The shovel was lying on top of the grave and Arvis was several hundred feet away deeper into the woods. He couldn't have threatened me with the shovel, Sergeant, Mike wanted to holler into the quiet room. It won't stick. I killed him. In cold blood. You'll find out sooner or later.

"You sure?" Mike heard Mac's rasping voice asking Weeks. "You sure there won't be an inquiry?"

Weeks frowned. "I just got a call from the crime lab boys. They found the shovel next to Moore's body. With that and the dead kid, Mike's story

will stick.”

Mike stared incredulously at the sergeant. Where did they find the shovel? His mind dug frantically into his memory. He was certain he had seen it on the grave just as he was leaving the clearing. Suddenly he felt Mac’s eyes boring into him. He lifted his gaze and stared at the older man. Mac was grinning and his nose twitched slightly. When Mike’s eyes caught the older man’s look, Mac abruptly winked at him.

Mike felt his knees weaken. Mac had moved the shovel after Mike had taken the boy out of the woods. That was why he had stayed behind. Mike stared at the smiling face of the tired old man and bit his lip. He was going to be granted this personal act of murder. That old man sitting near him had risked his reputation to save Mike from having to explain Arvis's death. The young policeman tried to collect his thoughts. But the random flashes of the past hours kept interrupting the usual orderliness of Mike’s reactions. All he could focus upon was Mac lifting the shovel off the grave and running through the green forest area to drop the dirt-covered instrument by Arvis’s dead body lying sprawled behind the thorny bush.

“Write it up, Mike. We’ll need the full details.” Weeks was drawing his cursory investigation into Arvis’s death to a close.

Mike nodded dumbly. Mac rose quickly and walked over to the younger policeman. “Get up, kid. We got a lot of paper work to do.” He grabbed Mike’s arm. Mike got up under the pressure of the man’s hands and walked blindly out of Weeks’s office.

Mac led Mike down the hallway outside of the sergeant’s office and into the first men’s room they passed. He scanned the empty lavatory and pushed Mike up against the cold tile wall. Mac’s face was stern and hard. “Pull yourself together,”

he commanded.

Mike stared at him almost without seeing.

The older man reached up and took his thick hands and squeezed the young policeman’s face tightly between them. “Did you hear me? I said snap out of it. It’s over. Done with. You gotta forget it.” The older man’s voice was strong and sure, though the tones were low and hoarsely whispered in the emptiness of the white-tiled room.

Mike nodded. Mac’s hands left the younger man’s face. Finally Mike spoke. “Why did you do it?”

Mac stared at him impatiently. "Don't ask dumb questions," he growled.

Mike rested his right hand on the older man's shoulder to steady himself. "But I killed him, Mac," he said softly. "In cold blood."

Mac frowned. "You did him a favor."

Mike winced. "Did I?"

The older policeman turned and spit into the sink. "Don't talk like a shithead. Now let's drop the whole fuckin' thing. He's dead. And he's better off."

Mike stared at the older man standing in front of him. Everything seemed so clear-cut with Mac. So final and complete. Why wasn't it so easy for him?

"I shouldn't get away with it, Mac," the younger man said softly.

Mac lowered his eyelids so that his pupils stared at Mike through very narrow slits in his face. "But you're gonna get away with it. You hear me? Now stop upchuckin' your guts like a kid lost in the woods. We got work to do."

The older man suddenly reached out his right hand and soundly slapped the younger policeman across the face. Mike's head reeled back sharply from the blow, striking the cool tiles with mild force before his head snapped back into place. The young man felt the stinging sensation of the older man's hand on his cheek and his face flushed with the heat of the blood rushing upward toward his head.

"Now you ready to move on?" Mac shouted.

Mike swallowed and finally smiled a feeble grin. "Yes."

"Good. Then let's haul ass and write up that self-defense shit so even we believe it." Mac pushed the younger policeman toward the men's-room door and kicked it open, shoving Mike ahead of him with a jolting thrust of his big hand. Mike almost fell out of the lavatory and stumbled. Mac grabbed his arm and pulled him upright. He straightened the young policeman up and pushed him away gently.

"Now stand up by yourself. And follow me like a man," Mac ordered.

Mike silently and obediently walked in the shadow of the older policeman down the station-house hallway.

The two policemen slowly and hesitantly filled out the long forms laid out on the wide conference table in front of them. When Mike had finished, he kept his eyes focused on the paper; and without prefacing his remarks,

he began to read his version of those last minutes aloud to the man seated across from him. Mac listened carefully, attempting to catch a flaw, an error which might unravel the carefully knit story.

After Mike finished repeating his written words in a low, dull monotone, Mac sat grimacing thoughtfully for several seconds. Finally he nodded his head affirmatively. "That's what happened," he said simply.

Mike stared at him.

Mac returned his look and nodded his head and spoke again. "From now on, as far as anyone's concerned, that's what went on. You hear?" His voice was authoritative and direct.

Mike gulped. "Yes," he answered meekly.

"Good. Let's file these reports and get on home. I have something to tell Maureen. It's time she knows that Jamie is dead. I'm tired of us lying to each other." The old man rose heavily and collected his papers slowly. He stood for a long minute staring at the young man gazing up at him. He looked down at the papers for a second and then back at Mike.

"We're going to be working together a lot from now on. I don't want to hear any more whining about this. You understand?" His hoarse voice tried for authority, but only a weary tenderness filtered through his words.

Mike watched him wordlessly. Mac did not wait for his response but dragged his short, tired body across the room and disappeared into the hall.

Mike knocked on Sergeant Weeks's door.

"Come in," the steady voice called.

Mike entered the room slowly and sat down.

"What can I do for you, Mike?" Weeks asked.

Mike swallowed and then answered quickly. "I'm quitting."

Weeks frowned and asked, "I beg your pardon?"

Mike sighed, hating to have to repeat what he had said but knowing he must. "I'm here to tell you that I'm quitting the force."

Weeks sat silently for a moment. "Do you want a transfer?"

Mike shook his head. "No. I want out," he said desperately.

Folding his smooth, carefully manicured fingers in front of him on the desktop, Weeks kept his eyes riveted to the young policeman's face. "Why?"

Squirming in his seat, Mike grabbed the rim of the hard wooden chair seat. "I just don't want to be a policeman any longer."

Weeks very slowly moved his head from side to side. “No. No, Mike. That’s not good enough.”

Mike began to sweat. “I don’t belong on the force.”

“Why?” Weeks leaned back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head.

“It’s personal,” Mike stammered.

Weeks sat still for a minute. Finally he spoke. “You’re not leaving this office until you tell me why,” he said with finality.

Mike felt a wave of anger. “Why do you have to know?”

Garry Weeks shrugged. “Several reasons. One is you’re one of my best men. I don’t want to lose you. That’s reason enough.”

“Thanks. But I think I should get off the force. It would be better for everybody.” Mike pleaded with Weeks to allow him this explanation.

Weeks refused. “Tell me why,” he demanded.

Mike felt his head spinning. Leave me alone, he wanted to cry out, I’m in enough pain. I don’t need your shock and surprise as my final act of contrition. Mike turned his face away.

“I must know,” Weeks said calmly but firmly.

Finally Mike turned toward the composed man behind the desk and opened his hands as if in supplication. “Garry, I’m gay.” His voice broke slightly as the word erupted from his lips.

Sergeant Weeks stared at him for a second and then sighed. “I know.”

Mike’s mouth fell open in amazement. He looked into the sergeant’s face, but there was no anger, no dismay, no distaste in Weeks’s expression. All Mike could read there was the calm acceptance of an already assimilated fact. He was stunned. Finally he stammered, “You knew?”

Weeks nodded easily. “Yes. For several months.”

“How?” Mike managed.

Weeks drummed his fingers slowly on his desktop. “A woman who lives in your building. She called me and told me. She was obviously very upset with you and wanted to get even. There was a great deal of hate in her voice.” He paused for a minute, watching Mike’s bewildered expression, then continued. “I thanked her and hung up. I didn’t even ask her name.”

Mike said softly, “I know her name.”

Weeks smiled casually. “I’m sure you do.”

Both men sat very still, watching cautiously for the sudden change in attitude or reaction within the other. But neither man reacted to his tentative

approach. Nothing definite, nothing formed had yet occurred between the two since Mike's announcement.

Mike sensed the tension and spoke with a gentle cover of humility in his voice. "That's why I've got to get off the force."

Weeks shrugged. "That's a ridiculous reason."

Finally Mike broke. His voice rose in exasperation. He seemed unaware of the loudness of his announcement. "God damn it, Garry, didn't you hear me? I said I'm a homosexual. And I'm also a cop."

Weeks ignored the young man's loud reprimand. He answered him in a steady, controlled voice. "What you do in your off hours is your own business."

Mike stared at him for several seconds incredulously. "You really mean that?"

"Of course." Weeks smiled wryly. "Now go back to work and forget this foolishness," he ordered quietly.

Mike shook his head as if trying to clear his mind of the inner confusion. "You're not going to let me resign?" he asked in wonderment.

"No," Weeks replied easily.

"You don't know what I've done," Mike whispered desperately.

Weeks set his jaw. "And I don't want to know."

Mike heard Weeks's voice softly come across the desk. "Do you like being a cop, Mike?"

Mike raised his eyes and looked at Weeks. He nodded his head.

"Then get the hell out of here and go back to work." Weeks swung his chair around and stared out of the window, dismissing Mike.

The young policeman wanted to say something, but he could not find the words. He whispered. "Goodbye," to the man's back. There was no answer. Mike walked out of Weeks's office and into the hallway. He leaned up against the wall wondering if he actually had lived through the last forty-eight hours. He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the station-house wall for several minutes, fully expecting to open them and find himself emerging from an unbelievable nightmare.

TWENTY-TWO

Ricky sat bent slightly forward in the chair opposite Weeks's desk in the station house. His blond hair was carefully combed, and he was neatly dressed in casual but carefully coordinated sports shirt and trousers. But somehow he appeared crumpled and weary despite the fact that he had spent half of the last two days sleeping deeply in his room at home. Dark circles rimmed the lower half of his dull eyes like faint half-moon shadows. The corners of his mouth sagged and trembled occasionally, appearing out of his control, as if he were about to cry unexpectedly. He folded his arms across his chest and frequently gripped himself tightly, pulling his body into a crouched, almost fetal position, retreating inside himself. He sensed he was terribly frightened, but the feeling was dulled by the overwhelming numbness which had enveloped him since the moment he had come out of the woods and gotten into the police car.

Weeks questioned Ricky with a quiet intensity. Ricky squirmed occasionally as he tried to muster enough self-control to answer without crying or backing away from the people surrounding him in the room. His mother sat closely by his right side, her face calm. Edward Stern leaned over in a chair slightly in back of his son to the left. Mike Androtti slumped in a hard armless chair in the far corner of the room, while Mac sat staring at his massive spotted hands only inches away from the younger policeman. They all remained still, listening intently, staring fixedly, eyes moving back and forth, as the calm, steady voice of the sergeant was hesitantly followed by the tremulous, careful, halting, whispered voice of the boy sitting in front of him.

"Did he hurt you?" Weeks asked.

Ricky looked down at the floor. There was a momentary silence. Finally he raised his face toward his mother, glanced at her worried face, and then back at the sergeant "Yes," he whispered.

Weeks moistened his lips and swallowed. "How, Ricky?" he coaxed.

The boy moved uncomfortably in the chair. He clutched his sides more tightly and opened his mouth silently almost in an inaudible scream.

"Does he have to talk about that part, Sergeant? Can't we try and let him forget?" Dorothea's strident plea broke the silence.

The sergeant turned to face her, his eyes hooded but compassionate, his face impassive. "I would like to spare him, Mrs. Stern. But we have to know," he said in a soft but very definite voice.

Dorothea reached over and touched the boy's arm.

Ricky turned and stared at his mother. How different she looks, he thought. How strange she seems since I came back. What has changed her? he wondered. Or is it me? he mused. Why did I refuse her invitation to sleep in her room when I awoke crying out last night? Why did that thought make me more frightened than the dream itself? Ricky probed the concerned face of the woman holding lightly on to his arm and smiled weakly, trying to reassure her.

Ricky swung his head back to the sergeant and began describing the episodes in the forest, the rape, the tying of his hands and feet, the forced rides in the cars.

"Did he ever try to kill you?" Weeks eased out as Ricky finished.

Ricky shook his head dumbly. Finally he croaked, "No."

"Why not?" Weeks quickly shot at the boy.

"Sergeant." Dorothea's voice was urgent "Please."

Weeks ignored her. "Why not?" he pressed the boy.

Ricky took a deep breath. His body began shaking visibly. Finally he barely breathed. "Because I did what he wanted."

"Did you ever try to get away?" Weeks was unrelenting in his quiet pressure on the huddled figure in the chair opposite him.

Ricky stared with his eyes opened wide and unblinking at the plain granite face of the sergeant staring at him. He sensed danger in the question, but his mind was so consumed with his determination to tell only the story that he wanted them to hear and that they wanted to hear that he began having great difficulty in processing the correct answer. He stalled for time.

"What did you say, sir?" he asked in a quiet, clear voice which caused his father to stare at his son and fleetingly frown at the unexpectedly respectful tone. Edward Stern leaned forward in his chair.

Weeks smiled casually and repeated the question in equally clear and direct tones: "Did you ever try and get away, Ricky?" Weeks asked.

The boy bit the inside of his lip for a second. Then he lied. "Yes. Several times. But he would catch me and beat me. So I stopped trying. I was afraid."

Weeks nodded. "I understand," he said softly, and Ricky felt the taut muscles in his body ease against the wooden hardness of his chair.

But I didn't try and get away from Arvis, Ricky's brain reminded him. I stayed and went with him. I know that. I will always know that. I had the chances. But I didn't take them. Why?

Ricky began breathing very deeply as his thoughts carried him back across time to the previous week and the times he knew he could have bolted and run, told passers-by in the street, alerted drivers in strange cars in which he was riding to a new and unknown experience with the bearded man, called out to a policeman standing no more than several feet away on the highway. But he hadn't taken any of these opportunities. Why? Why had he stayed? The thought possessed him more than the memories of what had happened to him. He begged himself to let it go, release the self-questioning, the self-doubt. But the nagging realization that he had stayed clung to him like his skin, binding him, surrounding him, smothering him.

"Was that why you only gave the policeman your name when he stopped the woman's car?"

Ricky nodded. He was so caught up in his own mental struggles at that moment that speech was impossible. Weeks accepted the physical gesture and paused for a few seconds in his interrogation.

Edward Stern stared at his son. His eyes raked the boy's short, compact body, neatly dressed, huddled in the chair, shaped in his own image, handsome, lithe, the early years of puberty pushing the boy's body very close to the taut, firm, muscular beauty of early manhood. Edward Stern watched Ricky's movements as if he were contemplating the struggles of a bird with a broken wing attempting to fly. The unexpected furtive movements; the obvious aura of fear and danger surrounding the boy's every gesture; the sudden exhausted loss of tension and the sagging of the young body into the chair—each movement, each gesture, every word from his son gave Edward the sense that the boy had been crippled, damaged, hurt, and was struggling to get away from the palpable danger of being vulnerable and helpless again.

And yet. Edward thought, I feel no pity for my son. I feel no deep concern. All I feel is a new and unexpected sense of sameness, of belonging to this terrified figure crouched in the chair in front of me. For the first moment in our lives, my son and I are alike. Or were we always alike and I didn't see it? Did I give him the weakness, the vulnerability, the impotence

that caused him to be the boy who was raped in the woods by a pervert? Was this my legacy to Ricky? Oh, God, I hope not, Edward thought. But I could easily see myself sitting in that same chair years ago. I know that. And it is Ricky sitting here. I wish I could tear off, rip away any parts of me that are inside of him. I am ashamed of being his father, Edward thought, because he is more like me than I had ever realized. Ricky's father lowered his head and raised his hands and briefly rubbed his eyes. When he brought his hands away, only Edward knew that the back of his fingers were moist.

"Tell me about the other boy," Weeks said matter-of-factly. He picked up the pencil which he had been using to scribble a few notes on the lined pad of yellow paper.

Ricky saw the staring eyes of the Italian boy and was instantly transported back into the forest with Arvis throwing earth over his shoulder and Tony's twisted body waiting to be buried. The young boy squirmed in the chair as he felt the moisture from the mossy bark of the tree trunk again begin to seep into his shirt and cause the tingling on the skin of his back. Ricky shook his head dumbly.

Dorothea folded her hands tightly in her lap and pressed her lips together for a brief moment before speaking. "Don't you think we've had enough for one day, Sergeant?" she asked firmly, staring directly into the piercing, decisive gaze of the police sergeant.

"Not quite, Mrs. Stern," Weeks said blandly. Dorothea knew that he meant what he said.

"My son cannot take much more," she challenged him.

Weeks tilted his head for a second, smiled enigmatically, and commented softly, "I think we ought to leave that up to him. He's a grown boy, Mrs. Stern."

Dorothea stared at Weeks in disbelief. The impact of what he was saying suddenly struck her very hard across the face. "He's a grown man now, Mrs. Stern" was essentially what she had heard. The "now" was the crucial part of the statement. Dorothea turned to stare at her son.

She watched him as if she were seeing him for the first time since he ran crying into her arms at the station house two days before. The blond hair carefully combed off his face, the soft flushed cheeks, the full but whitened lips were unchanged; but the little boy she had held tightly for so many nights no longer seemed to be in the same room with her. He had disappeared. Gone. Who was sitting next to her? He had told her nothing

about what had happened. He had refused to share any of the experiences with her despite her repeated pleadings during the last two days. Ricky had slept, eaten, talked uncomfortably about everything but the days when he was gone from her. She had worried and wondered, but she had waited.

Now she understood. She would never really know. He would probably never tell her. It was locked inside him forever. For a brief second she realized with terror that her son had suddenly become a stranger to her. Withdrawn from her, not unlike his father. What had happened to Ricky during those days when he had lived an experience which she could not uncover, which he would not share? What had he said as his body had been violated? Had he cried out in pain? Had he called out for her? Had he really tried to run away or had he stayed willingly with the man who had raped and beaten him? She tried to convince herself that he had been an unwilling victim. Dorothea's mind repeated over and over again that her son was still the same boy he had been before he was kidnapped, that this has been a terrifying and humiliating experience for him but that he would survive without his life being changed, his response to her being altered. Ricky did everything he could to stay alive, she told herself. But lurking within her thoughts was a disquieting thread of disbelief. Her hands felt cold and her body arched upright in her chair.

"Ricky, tell me about Tony," Weeks continued.

Mac coughed slightly in the corner of the room. Mike started slightly in his chair and turned quickly to stare at the older man. Mac returned his gaze with a cautious look of silence. Weeks glanced at the two policemen quickly, suddenly aware of their presence in the periphery of the small room, and then reverted his gaze back to the worried face of the young boy.

Ricky's voice drifted through the room, monotonously intoning the details of the murder of the other boy.

Edward moved restlessly in his chair, uncomfortable at having to listen to his son discuss the details of Arvis's sexual assault on the unknown youngster. The words sounded incongruous coming from the lips of his twelve-year-old son. The act was so sexually and physically violent, the words and tone so impassive and detached. Get rid of them forever, Edward thought. Spew them out and wash them away, he begged. Clear the air forever of what happened, he silently prayed. But he knew that no one in the room, especially Ricky, would ever completely forget.

"What were you doing when this was happening?" Weeks said softly.

Ricky stared at Weeks. His teeth chattered within his mouth. He had practiced his answer silently for two days and now he was on stage, confronted, required to play out his part. The truth was out of the question. He steeled himself to deliver them.

“I was screaming for him to stop. I was begging him to stop,” Ricky almost shouted.

Dorothea leaned over and threw her left arm across her son’s trembling shoulders. She frowned and spoke sharply to Weeks. “Enough already. Damn it, enough. What in the hell did you think he was doing?”

Weeks sat impassively watching Dorothea embracing the shaking figure of her son.

Edward Stern stood up and walked behind Ricky’s chair. He placed his long thin fingers over his wife’s arm. “This has to be all now. We’ll come back if we must. But I think we can all see that this is finished for today.” Edward’s pleading voice was distressed.

Weeks nodded. “I think you’re right. I don’t want to press him any further.” He paused. “Today.”

Edward looked up sharply. “What does that mean?”

Weeks shrugged. “I may need to question him again.”

“Why, for God’s sake?” Dorothea demanded.

“Because I’m not sure I have all that I need to know,” Weeks said simply.

Dorothea took a deep breath. “You’re treating Ricky like he did something wrong. Like it was his fault. My God, have some mercy on all of us.”

Weeks stared down for a few seconds and then turned toward the young boy in the chair. “Did you do anything wrong, Ricky?” he asked directly.

Ricky gulped and opened his eyes very wide. He shook his head wildly until he could manage a strangled “No.”

He knows what I am, Ricky thought wildly. He can read my mind, see inside my head. But only Arvis knows, he thought quickly. And Arvis is dead. Tony is dead too. So only I know. And I will never tell. Because I did do something very wrong. But only I know. This man staring at me could not know. He’s only trying to make sure. And if I don’t say anything, then no one will ever know. Except me.

“Then you won’t mind coming back to talk to me?” Weeks asked Ricky easily.

Ricky smiled a tentative but calculated smile at the sergeant leaning across the desk toward him. “No. I won’t mind. It’s just bad to remember, that’s all,” he said calmly.

Weeks nodded. He took a deep breath and thought for a long moment. “Actually I think we have all that we need. I’m sorry if I upset you, Ricky. But we try to be complete. Go home and try to forget this. We’re finished.” Weeks stood up suddenly, causing everyone in the room to jerk their heads upward quickly.

Dorothea sat very still for a minute, then brushed back her hair with her free hand. She watched the awkward form of the police sergeant as it swayed slightly behind the massive desk.

“Actually we thank you, Sergeant. And the policemen.” She turned toward Mike and Mac briefly, then returned to Weeks. “We owe you a lot. It’s just been such a strain. On all of us.”

Weeks smiled blankly. “We understand.”

The room remained very still without any movement for several seconds before Weeks turned to stare into the boy’s concerned face. He spoke to Ricky gently. “Thank you, Ricky. You’ve been very helpful. Now I think it’s time for your parents to take you home.”

When Sergeant Weeks uttered the word “home,” Ricky jumped slightly from his chair. He opened his eyes wide and turned to stare at the worn tear-streaked face of his mother, who tried to send a pained but hopeful smile in his direction. The boy did not respond. He swung his head around to gaze up into the vacant, stunned eyes of his father, who returned his look with the cautious mask of one stranger sizing up another. The young boy rotated his face from mother to father several times before finally closing his eyes and covering them with his hands.

He was having great difficulty coming out of the forest. He still felt the wet earth seeping through the material of his pants. The head and shoulders of his strange, compelling, terrifying traveling companion returned, resting on the rim of earth above the open grave. Here in this small brightly lit room surrounded by his parents and the three policemen, he felt detached, removed, separated from the real, the actual, the present. These people seemed to be a fantasy. The reality within his mind was a shovel lying carelessly thrown over the top of a freshly covered grave and dead eyes

staring at him and begging him to act. He drew his legs up and placed his feet on the chair, resting his head down on his knees. It was a position he remembered, he knew, a retreat which felt familiar.

“I think you had better take him home,” Weeks said gently to Dorothea, tilting his head toward the boy crouched in the chair.

She nodded. “Ricky,” she said softly.

Slowly his head rose from his knees and his eyes lifted to stare at her.

EPILOGUE

The slanting morning sun ignited the brilliant colors in the tall stained-glass windows of the rapidly filling temple, the diffused light warming the rich brown mahogany of the pews. Heads bent over black prayer books; voices murmured in unison, echoing through the vast interior. Rabbi Ira London stood in his black robe before the raised front altar. The Saturday morning ritual flowed with the usual rhythmic pace.

Dorothea Stern sat in her seat in the front row of the temple watching her son as he sat beside the altar at his bar mitzvah. Her throat constricted as she thought how young and vulnerable he looked, his feet dangling off the edge of his chair, not quite reaching the floor. His eyes looked downward onto the notes he held in his lap, his lips moving silently as he rehearsed his part in the morning's religious ceremony. All she could see was the top of his blond head. Her eyes shifted to the other side of the platform as the sound of the cantor's chanting filled the wide auditorium.

On the other side of the altar Edward Stern sat upright in his chair facing the congregation, his hands folded in his lap, the prayer book lying unopened in his hand. He could be a model, Dorothea thought, he's so handsome, so elegant in his black pinstripe suit. So composed. So empty. She stared at him for a long period of time.

It's funny that I don't hate you anymore, Edward, she thought. I used to. Very much. But now you just exist. And I'm certain that I merely exist for you. You haven't noticed that I'm not drinking as much as before. I'm trying to stop. And I can go for minutes, hours, without my dry tongue begging for more alcohol. But I'm sure it never came to your attention—because I never come to your attention. I doubt anyone ever has.

She had begun to taste again, feel again, sense the world around her again. The haze had begun to lift from her life. Other men were all around her and suddenly they began to interest her, she saw them and she wanted to know more than Edward. Dorothea Stern felt her body waking up from a sickeningly long sleep.

Dorothea's thoughts were broken by a sound of sniffing next to her. She turned. "Mother, please. This is a bar mitzvah. Not a funeral."

"But what he's been through."

Dorothea leaned over and grasped her mother's arm. "You know the doctors, including the psychiatrist, told us he was fine."

The older woman nodded.

"Is he any different around the house?" Dorothea asked.

The older woman shook her head.

Dorothea set her jaw. "Then stop all this foolish sniveling. And look proud."

She stared across the aisle at Helen Stern clutching her prayer book in her gloved hand, looking fashionable in her tailored beige suit. Edward's mother stared straight ahead. Her eyes did not focus upon her son or grandson at the altar, nor did she look once in the direction of her daughter-in-law. She had refused to sit with Dorothea. In fact, Helen had not spoken to her for the past five weeks, since Dorothea had spit out her angry words at her mother-in-law in the living room of the Stern home while the three of them had waited for news of Ricky. Dorothea felt no remorse. It was enough to have to live with one Stern.

Dorothea turned her head toward the back of the auditorium, and she caught sight of Mike Androtti and Wally MacGinnis entering the temple and uneasily taking the books offered by the elderly man standing at the head of the aisle. The policemen slipped into the last row of seats and sat staring at the splendor of the inside of the temple. Just at that moment, Dorothea saw Garry Weeks walk through the back door. She watched him accept the offered book calmly, search the strange auditorium to get his bearings, and finally edge into a row in the center of the hall. She continued to stare for a very long time at his clean-shaven unattractive face, which was absorbed in the pages of the prayer book.

Soon the cantor stopped and Rabbi London stepped forward to read from the prayer book in his tremulous but forceful voice. The temple filled with the murmuring sounds of voices as the congregation read alternately with the spiritual leader.

When the passage was concluded, Rabbi Ira London turned toward Ricky. The blond boy rose and rather mechanically moved toward the podium. He stood on a stool so he could be on a level with the rabbi, and slowly he began to sing. His clear young voice rose to the tops of the stained-glass windows, circling the ceiling, drifting down over the heads of the congregation. It was a beautiful lilting, lyrical sound. There were no pauses or mistakes. The young boy's eyes slid across the parchment paper

with the rabbi's finger moving as a guide under each thickly scripted word. Ricky remembered all of the cantor's instructions. Slowly piercing the air with his final note, he brought the musical reading of his part of the holy scriptures to a close. Ricky returned to his seat. He did not look out into the auditorium but bent his head again to concentrate on the prayer book.

Ricky's heart was pounding in his chest and he felt strangely fearful and unsettled. He had stared at himself in the bathroom mirror that morning while getting dressed and had studied the face staring back at him. *I don't know you*, he had thought. *I don't know who you are. Or what you are.* He had studied the stranger in the mirror as if he were seeing him for the first time, but he couldn't bring the image into focus. He had always been so sure, so certain of what he wanted and how to get it.

But now. He had felt afraid and uneasy about the young man looking back at him. His thoughts, his feelings, his dreams had changed. Now he was fighting recurrent dreams of Arvis touching his body. Ricky had intentionally made excuses to avoid taking his last two guitar lessons because during the lesson before that he had wanted to touch the bearded teacher whom he admired so much. As the man's hands had covered his to teach him the positioning of his fingers over the taut strings, Ricky had felt his pulse speed and his fingers tremble. He had wanted to take hold of the teacher's hands and encourage them to touch his own body. The incident had embarrassed and terrified him. Ricky knew that something was happening inside of him, something he must try to control.

No one knows, he thought. *I can fight myself and conquer these thoughts. I can smother these dreams. I can gain control of myself again and go back to where I was. I can convince myself that I never went with the man and he never touched my body and I never touched his. I can suppress the memory of wanting to touch him and wanting him to touch me. I can become myself all over again. The only thing I need is time and effort. I can do it. I've done everything else I've ever wanted to do. And no one will ever have to know.*

But the sickening fear that he was telling himself another lie, another unreality, continued to surface. *What if I can't stop these feelings? How can I control my body when it refuses to obey me? Am I another Arvis?* Ricky shivered as he pictured himself dressed in the dirty white overalls and the crumpled flannel shirt, his small thin fingers fondling Arvis's medal. His lips trembled as he tried to keep himself from crying out against the horrible

vision. *Oh, God, help me*, he prayed, his eyes focused on the closed black prayer book in his lap. *Whatever I am, whatever I become, not another Arvis. Not that.*

He heard Ira London calling softly, “Ricky.”

The youth started, realizing he must move back toward the altar. With effort he rose and laid his prayer book on the black leather upholstered seat. He walked slowly toward the rabbi and stood facing him. He heard Rabbi London’s voice and watched as the rabbi slowly raised his hands above Ricky’s head.

“May God bless you and keep you as you stand here on this momentous day.” The rabbi paused for what seemed to Ricky an eternity. “This is the day when you enter manhood. May your path be an easy and happy one.”

About the Author

Ross Berliner is the pseudonym of an eminent physician and teacher at an Eastern university who specializes in adolescent medicine.