

VOODOO

by

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Voodoo is a trilogy of novels written by Kevin Esser between the years 1997 and 2001.

All three books are dedicated to the men and the boys who continue to find each other year after year in a search for love and hope and freedom.

Volume One:

Pepper's Book

CHAPTER ONE

She was always a threat, always the Enemy, yet she brought us together. In a way, she was the catalyst for everything. I'm talking about our neighbor, a little silver-haired woman who lived in the house across the street. Her last name was Dillon. I didn't know her first name. She was a widow who pampered her cats like children and grew prize-winning roses in her perfect backyard garden. It seemed to us that she was always around, always home—if not in the yard, then on her front porch, on the creaky wooden swing, perched there like some silver-crested mother bird on the lookout for intruders.

More than anything, she was on the lookout for me and Pepper. She regarded the boy with a suspicious glare on his very first visit to my house, watching us from that wooden swing across the street. A middle-aged bachelor like myself was already an object of her grim curiosity; this young stranger at my side was a new piece of damning evidence for her consideration. I deliberately met her gaze as I led the boy from my car to my house across the tiny patch of front lawn. I wanted her to notice my defiance, my nonchalance. After all, I had nothing to hide or fear. She acknowledged me with a cool nod as she stroked one of her cats, a fat red tabby curled on her lap.

"The porch police are on duty," I muttered to Pepper, causing him to smile. "Be on your best behavior."

"Like how?"

"Just act. . . normal," I said, smiling back at him. How could I explain to him what I meant? I hardly knew him. He was the son of Holly Robinson, my friend and co-worker from the post office who had just gone into the hospital for surgery on her back. Nothing serious, just a disk that needed trimming. Trouble was, she had no family in Sandburg: no parents, no brothers or sisters, no kindly old aunts. The boy's estranged father lived almost two hundred miles away in Chicago. It was up to me to play Good Samaritan and give the boy a place to stay

while his mother was away. “Just a week,” she’d assured me, “then I’ll be back home, Jake, I promise.”

I had met Pepper several times in the past, but I knew very little about him: that he was twelve years old, that his real name was Khalid, that he played alto saxophone in the junior high school band. Not much else. In most ways, we were strangers when I brought him to my house on Whitman Street that first day. How could I joke about acting “normal” and expect him to understand? He had no experience (not yet) of people watching him with cold suspicion; no experience of people eager to hate him and hurt him for loving in unauthorized ways.

“Well, here we are,” I said as I ushered him inside. “Your home sweet home for the next week.” I took his arm for a moment to bring him farther into the kitchen. “It’s not much to look at, I know.”

The boy shrugged, taking a glance around at the old round-shouldered Westinghouse refrigerator, the even older General Electric stove, the little dinette table where I kept the microwave, the double sink so stained from decades of hard water that the ancient enamel seemed painted with rust, the red-and-yellow linoleum floor original from 1953. The kitchen was like the rest of the house: except for a microwave here and a VCR there, nothing had been replaced or redone or refurbished in roughly forty years. But I didn’t mind; the place was cheap and felt like a comfortable and undemanding old friend.

“A few things you should know about,” I said to the boy. “Like the shower, for instance. Sometimes the spigot jams and you can’t get the shower to work, so you need to use the tub for your bath. And also it takes the toilet a long time to refill, so you can only flush it once every thirty or forty minutes. Which is OK for me, when I’m alone, but for the two of us, you know.”

“I’ll try to remember.”

“And the La-Z-Boy chair here in the living room is broken,” I continued, leading him through the house, “so you can’t open it, you

can't recline it, see? And sit down gently if you use it, because the springs are fragile."

Pepper nodded OK, but he was distracted by the piles of boxes and books and records throughout the room. "You have tons of stuff," he said, turning in a slow circle to see it all. "Do you keep stuff for other people?"

"No, this mess is all mine. But that's a funny question."

"What question?"

"About me storing things for other people."

Pepper eyed me with a strange little smile. "That was a funny question?"

"I thought so. Look here," I said, pointing him toward the couch. It was old, like everything else, greenish brown, or brownish green (the color of vomit, it always seemed to me), with a twenty-year-old wine stain on one of its cushions. "This opens into a bed if you pull it out."

"It's called a hide-a-bed," the boy nodded. "We have one at home."

"You can sleep here if you want."

"That sounds OK."

"Or you can share my bed," I proposed, watching his eyes, his face.

"No, I'll use the couch. Out here."

"Well, you know, either way. It's your decision."

"This is good out here, don't worry." He tossed his red Nike gym bag onto the couch as if to stake his claim and end the discussion.

That first night seemed long and awkward for both of us. We didn't talk much after the initial tour of the house. We were alike, I soon discovered, in our reticence. I also discovered that Pepper was addicted to junk food, very picky about what he would or would not eat—no mushrooms in any form, no "smelly cheese" like cheddar or Swiss, no fresh fruit or vegetables, no fish—nothing but pizza (without mushrooms, of course), burgers, canned spaghetti, chicken, french fries, chips, tacos, any kind of candy or ice cream or sweetened breakfast cereal. Also no milk, just sodas and Kool-Aid and sugary juices.

Normal, I suppose, for a twelve-year-old boy, and no real hardship for me: I subsisted on fast food more often than not, too tired after a day of delivering mail to spend time cooking for myself.

What did we eat for dinner that first night? Burgers from McDonald's, I recall, purchased on our way home after visiting Pepper's mother in the hospital. She was nervous about her surgery the next day, but happy that her son was safe with a good friend. "I hope he's behaving himself," she said to me, then to the boy: "You're not being a pest, are you?"

"What kind of pest?"

"He's fine," I interrupted. "Good as gold."

"Sure, when he's not home he's a little saint," his mother smiled. "You can't imagine, Jake, how this kid can chatter sometimes. Like a parrot! He never stops, never stops."

"Just like his mother."

"Oh, very funny, Mister Brahms."

"Do I really talk a lot?" the boy wanted to know, seeming to enjoy our attention. He was standing at the side of his mother's bed, his hand on the metal railing. "When do I talk so much?"

She gave his arm a firm but affectionate swat. "Stop being silly! You behave yourself for Jake."

It was burgers and fries at McDonald's after that, plus a shake for Pepper that was colored orange for Halloween (coming in three weeks). Not much changed in our routine as the week went along. I warned Pepper, at the very start, that I had no video games, no computer, no pool table—nothing to keep him amused. But he didn't seem to mind. Every afternoon, on my way home from work, I picked him up in front of his school and drove him to the hospital for a quick visit with his mother. From there, it was a trip to Pizza Hut or Taco Bell or KFC for a bagful of dinner, then back to the house. We always ate on the couch, in front of the television, eliminating any need for conversation.

Often, after dinner, he sat across the room where the light was better, maybe doing his homework, maybe reading comic books or sketching pictures. I was able to watch him discreetly during those quiet moments. He was a delicate mingling of his white mother and his black father, with hair like ringlets of brown cotton and skin of smoothest cocoa; big dark eyes alive with frisky intelligence; a wide full-lipped mouth always curled upward at the corners in the slightest hint of a sly, playful smile. His father had been a basketball player and Pepper was built the same way, long and thin, with gangly arms and legs and spidery fingers. He would be tall when he finished growing, very tall, but not a basketball player, he told me on one of our nights together. He wanted to be an artist, or some kind of musician, not “a dumb jock.” He said it emphatically, with almost angry conviction, then averted his eyes as if embarrassed.

Always alert and curious, he spent a good deal of time rummaging through my piles of books and records, intrigued especially by the old vinyl disks from the Sixties and Seventies—some opera and symphonic, but mostly rock albums by the Beatles, the Stones, Jimi Hendrix—all the classics. Pepper seemed fascinated by every aspect of them: the sheer age of them, for starters, positively antique to his twelve-year-old sensibility; the pleasure of handling them and putting them on the turntable and operating the tone arm; the audio feast of hisses and pops produced by the worn vinyl. Most of all he loved the artwork on the album jackets, remarkably large and elaborate to someone familiar only with the shrunken format of CDs and cassettes.

Those albums became his favorite pastime by the end of our week together. While listening to them on the stereo, he would sit with his pad of paper and his pencils and pastels and do his best to reproduce the artwork on the jackets. He especially liked the psychedelic ones, the real hard-core hippie stuff: *Magical Mystery Tour*, I remember; also some Jefferson Airplane; anything by the Grateful Dead, of course, with all

those skulls and skeletons and wonderfully ghoulish details. So that I might see his handiwork, he started sitting next to me on the couch instead of by himself across the room. I liked having him beside me, close enough for me to reach out and touch the back of his neck, the back of his head, just an occasional friendly touch, feeling the soft curliness of his hair with my cautious fingertips.

Should I have told him, right then, that I was gay? Should I have discussed it with him? His mother already knew, of course. Whether or not she had told her son, I didn't know. So many things go unspoken and remain unclear—through laziness, through embarrassment, through fear. Part of me, in this case, wanted to tell the boy; another part decided to remain silent, to wait, to be safe. He was with me for only the week and then he'd be gone. No sense in risking confusion, or even hostility, during his brief visit.

True to her prediction, the boy's mother was out of the hospital after six days, hobbled by her surgery but doing well, steadily regaining her strength. It was time for Pepper to leave. His departure was an uncanny replay of his arrival, with the old woman once again acting as spectator from across the street. Pepper waited until he was in the car before muttering his annoyance. "That lady is like a spy or something. She's a real pain."

"It seems like she's been watching me for years," I agreed. "It's how she gets her kicks, I guess."

"Who is she?"

"Just a neighbor lady. Nobody special. Her name is Dillon."

"Dill pickle," the boy improvised, smiling at his own joke.

"You got that right."

Pepper looked at me with that impishly self-satisfied grin of his. He had the red Nike gym bag on his lap, hugged against his chest. "You think she's a sour dill?"

"You're a real comedian, man."

He looked away with that same satisfied little grin.

I said goodbye to him with a quick hug after driving him home. He accepted the hug silently, his arms limp at his sides. In our week together, he had never returned a hug or shown any trace of affection. Our parting was no different.

His mother was in a pink terrycloth robe to greet us. "Well, Jake, you can finally have your privacy back," she said. "I bet you're relieved."

"It'll seem sort of lonely," I said. "We had a nice week together."

Holly looked at her son, who was standing between us with the gym bag still in his hand. "So you and Jake got along good?"

Pepper nodded and then opened his bag and pulled out one of his drawings to show her. "He has millions of cool albums. See? I did reproductions."

"Beautiful!"

"He's a real Picasso," I said, giving the boy's shoulder a little squeeze. He lowered his eyes and smiled.

When I returned to my own house, the old woman was outside sweeping the steps of her front porch. She tried to be discreet, but I could see her glancing in my direction as I crossed the yard. She was looking for the boy, of course. It nagged her that a man and a boy should spend time together, alone and unsupervised, right there in her own neighborhood. It was something creepy and inappropriate, reeking of dark conspiracy, probably even molestation. I did my best, that day, to ignore her.

The house seemed strangely quiet without Pepper. Or perhaps not quiet. Just empty. That young body of his was missing from beside me when I sat on the couch later that evening in front of the television. One of his drawings was on my lap. "You keep this one," he had told me. "It's a souvenir for when I'm gone." It was his Magical Mystery Tour

reproduction, complete with a rainbow and walrus-men and multicolored stars. I held it and looked at it, detail by detail, again and again, until I was tired enough to close my eyes and sleep, eager for the refuge of dreams.

CHAPTER TWO

My white Volvo was kicking up a giant fantail of dust on the road to Doc's house. No rain for nearly five weeks had left the countryside parched, with gravel roads like ribbons of chalk through field after harvested field of sere yellowy-brown stubble. I kept the windows closed against the dust. A Neil Young song was on the radio ("... tin soldiers and Nixon coming/ we're finally on our own. . ."). I had the volume up, way up, to compete with the monotonous noise of tires on gravel, like the furious crunching of endless millions of peanut shells.

Doc Wilson had been an English professor at Sandburg College when I was there as a student in the early Seventies. No one, at that time, had been aware of his sexuality; he was just Professor Wilson to me and his other students; nothing provocative or controversial about him. It wasn't until a few years after my graduation, while I was working as a pizza deliveryman, that his many stories for gay magazines had brought me back to him as a fan, then as a friend. His phone number had been in the book, so it wasn't difficult to find him or contact him. Strange at first, befriending a former professor, someone with so much more age, experience, sophistication. I felt clumsy and dull in his presence, just a foolish young pup hungry for his master's approval.

He lived, back then, in an apartment near the college. I stopped there four or five times to see him, timidly exploring and testing my relationship with this older man, this famous gay writer, but never quite brave enough for more than brief visits, an occasional lunch or dinner, nothing remotely intimate. That finally changed one night when loneliness and boredom left me drowning in a sea of bourbon. I was drinking for courage, although I didn't realize it at first—courage to do something more with Doc Wilson than exchange small talk over a plate of lo mein at the Canton Café. It took about ten shots of Jack Daniel's, maybe twelve, to work the magic. Every ounce burned away a bit more

of my caution. I was feeling horny and reckless and invincible. Why had I waited so long? There was nothing to fear, no reason to tiptoe around Doc any longer, no reason to be shy or inhibited. Just do it, do it, do it: anything, everything, wild shit, nasty shit. The booze made it all so obvious, so fucking obvious.

I ended up at his door after a bleary drive across town in my ten-year-old Ford Galaxy. There was nothing subtle in my drunken, rambunctious entrance. I continued drinking once I got there, and chain-smoking Marlboros, doing a nonstop booze-rap that seemed absolutely brilliant, sparkling with inspirations and revelations and epiphanies. Doc said very little, certainly nothing that I remembered afterwards.

What I wanted, of course, was sex—and eventually, after an hour or so of boozy rambling, sex is what I got. It wasn't difficult: I was only twenty-four; I was lean and strong; I must have looked sufficiently inviting to my old professor on that long-ago summer night. I remember him saying, in fact, that I was “his type. . . a smooth chicken.” I was naked and on his bed and he was feeling me, about to give me a blowjob. I insisted on sucking him first, thinking it somehow magnanimous that I should pleasure this lonely old man, that I should do him this generous favor. Was he lonely? Not really. Was he old? Just in his forties. But I was young and drunk and reality was a cockeyed blur.

I slobbered on him for several minutes with no result, staring at his grayish bush of pubic hair and realizing, even through the bourbon, how much I disliked the smell and taste and feel of this middle-aged dick in my mouth. This ain't for me, I kept thinking. Nothing sexy or exciting about a hairy old guy with a hairy old dick. But I kept working on him until. . . what? I don't remember how it happened—only that Doc must have tired after a while of my sluggish and uninspired slurping, because I was somehow on my back and staring at his head while he went about sucking me off. It seemed never-ending, my dick like a link of numb

sausage in his mouth, my body and brain so deadened by the alcohol that no amount of fellatio, no matter how dedicated or skillful, could bring me to orgasm.

We started laughing about it after the first thirty or forty minutes. Doc kept pausing, then starting again, then pausing, then starting. “This is hopeless,” was my mumbled refrain, over and over for at least an hour. I must have excused myself eventually and stumbled to the bathroom, where I decided to jerk off for a while, using the toilet as a seat, figuring that I might prime the pump for Doc by coaxing myself to the brink of orgasm. But then I went too far and ejaculated right there in the bathroom. It was over, suddenly and pointlessly, with no other person even in the room. I could have stayed home, as it turned out, and masturbated in my usual solitude.

I vaguely recall Doc laughing when I reported back to him in the bedroom about my mishap. What I recall after that is waking in my own bed late the next morning, sick with nausea and headache, but even sicker with black vapors of shame and regret. I was convinced that my tenuous relationship with Doc Wilson was finished forever, killed by my own display of crude stupidity. How could I ever see Doc again after my humiliating performance? Impossible, impossible. Back to my solitary routine of delivering pizzas, looking at porno, ogling neighbor boys and jerking off.

Then, sometime that afternoon, the phone rang. It was Doc. I could hear from the tone of his voice that he was smiling. “Well, Jacob, have you recovered from your nocturnal bacchanal?”

“I’m still alive, sort of.”

“Ah, the resilience of youth,” he chuckled. “Quite a miraculous thing.”

It was the failure of our sexual encounter, we later decided, that inspired our friendship. The wariness and tension between us had gone;

the fiasco allowed us to admit, finally, that there was no erotic chemistry between us and never would be. It was a strange sort of relief. “I must tell you, Jacob, that I was confused from the outset of your visit,” Doc told me in a conversation later that same week. “There you sat on my sofa with a bottle of whiskey. . .”

“Bourbon, actually.”

“. . . with a bottle of bourbon, pardon me, expounding with surprising eloquence, given your condition, on the glory of boys. Young boys. Teenaged boys. So why is this connoisseur of youthful flesh interested in me, I wondered. Why has he come hunting such a grizzled old buck?”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Oh, you were far too entertaining for that! I didn’t want to interrupt you and spoil your momentum. And besides, my side of the deal was pleasant enough.”

“I’m gorgeous, right?”

“Well,” Doc said, “I wouldn’t kick you out of bed, and I didn’t. Funny thing is, though, that I happen to share your taste in boys. Any older and I would have kicked you out of bed.”

It was our mutual love of boys, more than anything, that made us fast allies in a hostile world. Back then, of course, the hetero establishment made no distinction between lovers of men and lovers of boys; all homosexuals were members of the same shadowy underground, uniformly despised as unpersons by the mainstream culture. In fact, within the queer subculture itself, the love of boys was at least as common as any other tropism, and probably the most popular subject of the available erotica: photo books and magazines and 8-mm films by the hundreds, all available legally through mail-order houses or at any urban sex shop. But the Gay Rights movement altered that reality by turning sexuality into a political issue, then engaging in historical revisionism to suit its new image. Lovers of boys were sacrificed to the new god of mainstream acceptance, demonized by both the hetero

establishment and by this eager group of homo parvenus and sycophants. Opportunistic boy-lovers were happy to play along and cloak themselves in this heady new respectability; others with greater dignity and courage remained true to themselves and their passions.

Doc was one of those stubborn heretics. By the end of the Eighties, when the country was shivering with child abuse hysteria, it was nearly impossible to find a market for his books and stories. Gay magazines and publishing houses, in submissive accord with the master culture, had become politically correct. The love of boys, with its age-old tradition of poetics and erotica, had been transformed into the ultimate perversion. This fundamental aspect of male sexuality was now repressed and persecuted by Gay and Straight alike with self-righteous fanaticism. "Every culture needs a demon," Doc pointed out. "Once upon a time we had anarchists, then communists, now child molesters. We've moved the enemy from the realm of politics to the realm of sex, from the street to the bedroom. Do you understand what that means? Americans have invited the police into their own homes! They've surrendered their own privacy in a swoon of sexual hysteria. It's a stunning capitulation!"

As the whole of Western culture sickened on its own fear and hatred, Doc abandoned his apartment, his job at the college, all of his social ties. He bought a place in the country, just a few miles outside of Sandburg but comfortably isolated. Money was no problem; he had plenty. Loneliness never fazed him; he enjoyed his privacy and his solitude. To keep busy, he tended his own garden; went fishing in nearby streams and ponds; did some hunting with an old twelve-gauge shotgun; chopped his own firewood; watched videos of oddball foreign films that he ordered through a company in Chicago; read bottomless stacks of books and periodicals; wrote occasional stories for little magazines in Amsterdam or New York; even found a few moments every night to maintain his own journal of ideas, theories, poetic fragments.

He had several boyfriends during those years, high school and college kids who drifted randomly into his orbit. He shared his stories of them with me; I shared my stories, whenever possible, with him. The stories, from both of us, became more and more infrequent as the years went by, as the Eighties became the Nineties, as boys became increasingly aloof and homophobic beneath their baggy layers of clownishly oversized clothing. “America has draped its boys like Muslim women,” Doc once observed, “against all admiring eyes. It’s another surrender to the darkness, Jacob, another surrender to the darkness.”

When I came to see him that day in October, listening to Neil Young on my car radio, we had both of us been as chaste as Trappists for a discouraging number of years. Doc was outside stacking firewood when I arrived. His house was a small green box on a forested hill deep in the Illinois farmscape of pastures and fields. It had been built by an eccentric, reclusive knifemaker named Jesse Gray back in the Seventies, then abandoned in 1987 when the knifemaker died of liver disease. Doc had bought it for a pittance. “I could see you coming,” he told me now, pointing to my dust trail with his axe. “How goeth the world beyond?”

“It sucketh royally.”

“Haven’t heard from you in a while, my friend.”

“If you had a phone,” I said, “that wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Evil technology,” Doc dismissed. “The devil’s own handiwork. Here, grab some of this wood and come inside.”

I followed him through the door. He was shorter than my own six feet by a few inches, but heavier by several pounds, like a stocky, broad-shouldered lumberjack in his blue jeans and flannel shirt. His beard, which had been dark and neatly trimmed when I first met him at Sandburg College, was now bushy and totally gray, the beard of poets and hermits and saints. “So what’s up, Doc?” I now asked. It had been my stock opening for many years, shamelessly stolen from Warner

Brothers but the quickest way to launch Doc into his latest entertaining tirade.

“I’ve been thinking about Peter Pan and the film industry,” he said, busily adding to the pile of wood beside his pot-bellied stove. “Have you ever read the original work?”

“Just the old Disney book.”

“Hah! Exactly my point! Disney has appropriated the story for its own nefarious purposes. We’re talking here about the Disneyfication of world culture, from the Grimm Brothers to Aladdin to Victor Hugo, all reduced to the same sanitized, sterilized, homogenized crap. And all transformed into parables of perfect heterosexist conformity, needless to say.”

“So what about Peter Pan?”

“But do you understand what I’m saying about this Disney cancer?”

“I think I get the point, yeah.”

Doc brushed the dirt and bits of bark from his hands and wandered to his favorite chair across the room. The whole house was a simple one-story square of interior space divided into three sections: bedroom, bathroom, and the main living area, with stove and sink and refrigerator in one corner as a tiny kitchen. The east and south walls were constructed almost entirely of glass; all the huge windows and sliding doors made being inside the house feel like residing within a giant terrarium. “It’s been going on for over sixty years,” Doc continued. “A totally WASP confiscation of world folklore. Now they’ve made some concessions to the new multiculturalism, strictly as a savvy commercial maneuver, a nod to fiscal necessity. But everything they touch is still reduced to the same toothless, spiritless, pasteurized heterosexist tripe. Do they have the right to produce such soul-deadening garbage? Of course! But where’s the counter-balance? Where’s the authentic bio-pic of Hans Christian Andersen and his young boyfriends? Where’s the

authentic version of Pinnochio with all of its homoerotic subtext faithfully rendered?”

“And where’s the authentic version of Peter Pan, right?”

“Now you’ve got the idea,” Doc said. He paused to light a Camel (unfiltered). He preferred English Ovals or Balkan Sobranies when he could get them, but that required a visit to a certain tobacco shop in downtown Sandburg, which wasn’t always convenient. I often brought him several packs as a courtesy, but not on this particular day. My week with Pepper had distracted me from my usual routine.

“Do you recall, Jacob, how Spielberg mangled the story a few years ago? Just a sweet little kiddie adventure! How nice! How Disney!”

“Lousy movie, no question about it.”

“More than just lousy. Dangerous. Fraudulent. He took the work of an undoubted boy-lover like James Barrie and turned it into a trite heterosexual psycho-drama. Would you care for a cigarette, by the way?”

“No, I’ve given them up for a while.”

“Admirable self-discipline,” Doc said between smoke rings. “Anyway, it’s time for Hollywood to give us the definitive Pan tale. Imagine what it might be like! A gorgeous Pan, fourteenish, think in terms of your favorite teen hunk from Tinsel Town. . .”

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking.”

“Now imagine this young shaggy-haired hero of ours, this enchanted Huck Finn, garbed in nothing but tattered loincloth and moccasins—and often in nothing at all, brazenly nude. Needless to say, we could digress here into an equally splendid treatment of Tarzan and Boy, or Lord of the Flies.”

“Stay with Peter Pan for now.”

“Right,” Doc said, lighting another Camel. “Back to our hero in peekaboo loincloth and moccasins. The young chieftain of Never-Never Land, that fabled isle of Lost Boys. How do you suppose these boys would amuse themselves with no social taboos, many of them robustly adolescent? Well?”

“Seems obvious to me, Doc.”

“Imagine the luxuriant, tropical sensuality of naked boys playing together, bathing together, sleeping together. Imagine the lush Technicolor beauty of it on the big screen. We’ll keep this film rated R, let’s say, actually within the realm of current legal standards. That still leaves us with a wealth of homoerotic possibilities. Sun-browned skin, wild tangles of hair, slender asses and pubescent genitalia—unaroused, of course. Imagine dozens of these boys strolling arm in arm on the beach, lounging in the sand, dancing like warriors ’neath the swollen tropic moon. There, on the screen at your local multiplex would be our teenaged Pan presiding over this savage Eden, the film lovingly photographed and scored, fierce battles with Hook and his pirates, a sultry scene of Peter and his favorite friend played by another of your popular teen dreams from Hollywood.”

“I’m seeing it now,” I said. “Definitely worth the price of admission.”

Doc was nodding, his pale blue eyes fixed somewhere in the treetops outside the windows. “Yes, fine, a sultry scene of romance between Peter Pan and his friend in their bamboo tree house. Nothing more graphic than your average Hollywood potboiler, standard R-rated sex—but between two boys! Multicolored macaws watching over them, torches flickering on bronzed skin, long wet kisses, quickening breath, close-ups of lips, of hands on nipples, of bellies and backsides glistening with sweat. That, my good friend, would be the truth of it! Can you grasp the utter impossibility of showing that particular truth at this particular point in history? The fear of it? The hatred of it? The shrill denial of it?”

“It’s unthinkable. Could never happen.”

“You might have expected some such film from Europe or Brazil perhaps, someplace that could better recognize and appreciate the dark and pagan aspects of the story. Perhaps Holland or Denmark ten years ago. It might actually have been possible, as remarkable as that seems to

us now. Peter Pan with nudity and romance! Even sex! Yes, it could have happened in a saner world. It could have happened.”

We sat silently for the next several moments, as if to let our imaginations cool. “I don’t begrudge heterosexuals their art and literature,” Doc finally said, “or their music, or their film—I would just appreciate the same courtesy from them. What I do begrudge is having my history and culture and identity stolen and rewritten and transformed into celebrations of heterosexuality. It’s fraud, Jacob, pure and simple.”

He gave the arm of his chair a conclusive slap and then went to the kitchen to pour himself a mug of coffee. “So where have you been lately?” he yelled over his shoulder. “Anything wrong?”

“No, nothing wrong.”

“Something good, then?”

“I’ve been taking care of a boy named Pepper. His mother was in the hospital. He stayed with me for a week.”

“And who, pray tell, is this boy named Pepper?”

“Well,” I said, “his real name is Khalid Robinson. I don’t know how he got his nickname. He’s twelve years old.”

“You must be joking.”

“No, it’s all true. His mother is a friend of mine. From the post office. She went into the hospital for back surgery and I got Pepper for the whole week.”

Doc brought the mug of coffee back to his chair. “And is he as cute as his nickname?”

“Oh, sure, he’s very cute. Half black, half white, beautiful skin and hair, impossibly long eyelashes, slim as a whippet. Very bright, very clever. Totally adorable.”

“You sound smitten, my friend. How far has this friendship progressed?”

“It’s hardly even a friendship,” I said. It was now my turn for a trip to the kitchen. I took a bottle of beer from the supply that I always kept in Doc’s refrigerator. He himself never touched it, unable to tolerate

alcohol since suffering liver damage from a long-ago bout of hepatitis. I guzzled half the bottle before returning to my spot on the couch. “No touchy, no feely,” I finally continued. “Sometimes he sat next to me and let me stroke the back of his head. He has the most wonderful hair. Very cottony and curly and soft.”

“Yes, I know the type,” Doc said, indolently blowing rings of smoke. “A feast for the fingers.”

“But he never hugs. Or kisses. He seems uncomfortable with any type of affection. He’s the same way with his mother, so it’s not just a problem he has with other males.”

“Some boys simply don’t know how to express or receive affection, Jacob. He has no father in the home, I assume?”

“That’s right.”

“And I’m guessing that he has a sort of skittish and self-conscious personality to begin with.”

“Very much so.”

“I’ve known boys like that,” Doc nodded. “They seem awkward inside their own bodies, afraid of physical display or physical acting out. To love them can be a frustrating ordeal.”

“Do they ever change?”

“Well, we are as nature made us, for better or worse. Remember, though, that we’re dealing here with façades and mannerisms, with outward display, not with his interior reality. Chances are, he enjoys it very much when you pet his hair or put an arm around him. But there’s no evidence of it.”

“Well, in any event,” I said, “he’s no longer staying with me. I probably won’t be seeing him again. At least not without his mother.”

“That might be just as well, Jacob. These are dangerous times. Boys have been thoroughly and successfully brainwashed to hate their own bodies and to hate us for loving them. Dangerous, depressing times.”

I finished my bottle of beer, then had another while watching one of Doc’s new videos, something from Sweden or Denmark about a boy

making slingshots out of condoms. The television was a small second-hand Zenith with a feeble picture tube that gave every image, whether color or black-and-white, the look of a sepia-tinted daguerreotype.

That evening, on my way home, clouds started rolling in from the west like dark smoke billowing from the twilit horizon. By the time I parked in the driveway, rain was beginning to patter gently against the windshield of my car. It continued to pour harder and harder as darkness fell.

The long autumn drought had ended.

CHAPTER THREE

It was the finish of a wet and gloomy week, the last Saturday in October, when I got a phone call from Holly Robinson. She was healing well, and wanted to thank me again for taking care of Pepper. “He really liked you,” she confided. “He talks about you all the time.”

“Are you serious?”

“You sound surprised.”

“Yeah, I am, definitely,” I said into the phone. “Well. Hey. That’s great. He’s a wonderful kid.”

“He’d like to stay with you again.”

“Really?”

“It would be good for him, I think,” she said. “Being with a man, you know, like a role model. It would be good.”

I agreed, vaguely, not sure how to respond. “He can come over any time. No problem. I mean, really, I’m flattered.” There was one question that needed asking. “You’re not forgetting that I’m gay, are you?”

She laughed on the other end of the line. “No, Jake, I’m not forgetting!”

“It didn’t matter so much before, when it was just for one week, no big deal, but in the future. . .”

“Relax,” she said, “I understand.”

“I won’t pretend that I’m straight, or put on an act for him.”

“It’s OK, Jake, he already knows.”

I was twisting the cord of the phone nervously around and around my fingers. “Since when?”

“It came up this past week. We talked about it. He doesn’t seem to care. You know how kids are these days. They know about everything so young, it seems.”

“He doesn’t care?”

“It doesn’t seem to bother him,” she said, and I could imagine her shrugging and smiling. “Anyway, I always know that I can trust you.”

“Thanks.”

“I know you would never do anything wrong.”

“No, nothing wrong,” I said softly, thinking that this woman, my friend, was sweet but naïve; that her definition of “wrong” was not mine, not mine at all; and that the future was suddenly tangled and risky for all of us. What I finally said, in all honesty, was, “I would never do anything to hurt Pepper, I promise.”

It was decided, by the end of our conversation, that the boy should come to visit on the following Friday, which happened to be Halloween. “Keep him as long as you want,” Holly joked. She always enjoyed playing the role of stressed-out, long-suffering mother, even though Pepper was her only child and never caused her any significant trouble. She had been the same way even before Pepper was born, forever complaining about unfair supervisors at work, about too many bills, about her problems with various boyfriends—especially with Quinn Robinson, the man who eventually became Pepper’s father and Holly’s husband. The marriage had lasted for less than two years, when Quinn suddenly hit the road to pursue a career in the Continental Basketball Association, leaving Holly in Sandburg with little Khalid.

It was Quinn’s desertion that turned my casual workplace acquaintance with Holly into an actual friendship. She needed help moving into a new apartment, and I ended up volunteering my assistance for that entire weekend. She served me strawberry shortcake with whipped cream when we’d finished. It seemed that I had never tasted anything more delicious. For several years I had been living alone in drab simplicity, more interested in cigarettes and beer than food, seldom indulging in anything more exotic than an occasional box of Twinkies or cupcakes. Holly’s shortcake and whipped cream was like an ambrosial taste of childhood, like being pampered once again by a mother who had been dead since I was a teenager.

We had dinner together many times over the next several months, always at Holly's apartment with Khalid asleep in his crib. She enjoyed cooking extravagant meals for the two of us, and I was happy to be her guest. But where was our friendship heading? It had become obvious that Holly was hoping for romance, looking for a man to replace the unfaithful Quinn and become Khalid's stepfather. I must have seemed a likely choice. Only trouble was, she had no idea that I was gay.

She found out one night when four bottles of Asti Spumante inspired me to an emotional confession, another of my boozy monologues that lasted until nearly dawn. Even then, of course, I admitted only to being generically gay, providing no illicit details of my taste for young boys. Not even an excess of alcohol could relax my caution regarding that topic. The straight world had learned to tolerate run-of-the-mill homosexuals; but there was no toleration, to put it mildly, for child-molesting bogeymen.

My friendship with Holly survived that drunken night with no serious injury. We continued to see each other at the post office, starting every day with coffee and cigarettes and drowsy gossip; we continued to rely on each other for special favors, for rides to work, for help with moving into new houses and apartments; nothing changed in the fondness that each of us felt for the other. But Holly's romantic energy, for obvious reasons, turned in new directions; we seldom saw each other outside of work for purely social or convivial purposes; she kept busy over the next decade dating a string of prospective husbands, always hoping for the one who might demonstrate enough decency and reliability to become Khalid's new father. None of them ever did.

During that same decade, Khalid grew up and became Pepper. To me, he was just Holly's kid, someone I saw maybe a dozen times each year whenever I made a quick stop at the Robinson house. Only once did I spend more than a few minutes with him. He was sick with the

measles, seven years old. Holly had taken the day off from work to care for him. When I stopped by their house that afternoon to deliver her paycheck, she seized the opportunity of a free babysitter to do an hour of urgent shopping. I watched Pepper while she was gone.

He was a sad little guy—spotty from the measles, puffy-eyed and weak from fever, nearly hidden beneath a pile of blankets on a cot in the living room. At his croaky request, I sat on the floor beside his cot and fed him cherry Popsicles until his lips and tongue were bright red from the icy juice. “Your mom will freak when she sees your mouth,” I teased him. “She’ll think you have a terrible new disease.”

“She will really?”

“Oh, yeah, she’ll be totally freaked out.”

“I’ll eat another one,” he said with a game little smile. “She’ll be real fooled.”

I fetched one more Popsicle and sat beside him while he ate it, smoothing the sweaty hair from his forehead. He dozed off once or twice with the thing actually in his mouth, like an infant with a pacifier. I kept my hand on his head while he drifted in and out of sleep.

It was another five years before we found ourselves alone again, brought together by his mother’s surgery. Now, just two weeks later, we were ready for another rendezvous, this time through Pepper’s own initiative. I picked him up early that Friday evening in my Volvo. He smiled when he saw me and allowed me to hug him as before, unresponsive. I asked him about his plans for the night. “Do you still go trick-or-treating for Halloween?”

“No, I’m too old for that,” he said. “It would be stupid.” He opened the red Nike gym bag that he had with him and pulled out three videos, all horror films. “We can watch these. If you think it’s OK.”

“Of course, that’s fine. Sounds like a perfect Halloween activity.”

“Yeah,” he grinned, looking pleased, proud of himself, “that’s what I figured, too.”

He had one other surprise which he revealed later, when we were together inside the house. “This is for the porch police,” he said, pulling a little jelly jar of dirt from his gym bag. “You know, that lady across the street.”

“Dirt?”

“It’s graveyard dirt. From the cemetery near my house.”

“And you’re going to give it to her?”

Pepper shook his head and laughed with a flash of big white teeth. “No, no, no! It goes under her porch. For bad luck. Like a curse.”

“But why?”

“To make her stop watching us. It’s like a curse,” he added once more, a little vague in his logic.

His use of the word “us” made me want to tremble. “We’ll have to wait until after dark,” I told him. “Make a midnight raid.”

“A midnight raid,” he echoed softly, still smiling with mischievous eyes. “That’ll be totally excellent.”

Why had he bothered to obtain the dirt? I tried to imagine him sneaking around Holy Cross Cemetery with the little jelly jar hidden in his sweatshirt. It meant, clearly, that he had been thinking about me, about us, ever since his previous visit—and more, thinking about us as a team, as allies against a common enemy. He understood, in some basic way, that our friendship was an invitation to danger, a rude threat to the grown-up world around us.

There were several hours to fill before that midnight raid of ours. For dinner we ordered a large pizza from Luigi’s, where I had worked as a deliveryman after graduating from college. Pepper, of course, insisted on no mushrooms, but agreed reluctantly to black olives and onions. “They’re OK on pizza,” he said. “It’s harder to taste them.”

“What about mushrooms? They’re even harder to taste.”

“But they’re evil!”

“Mushrooms are evil?”

“Yes,” Pepper insisted, fighting unsuccessfully against a smile. “Mushrooms are very evil!” He turned his head away and started laughing on the last word—an already familiar gesture, something I’d seen many times, Pepper’s sheepish amusement at one of his own little jokes.

We ate our pizza while watching reruns of *The Simpsons* and handing out candy to the occasional trick-or-treaters who came to the door. Later, when all the pizza and all the trick-or-treaters were gone, we opened the hide-a-bed and stretched out side by side to watch Pepper’s videos. “These are the goriest ones I could find,” he guaranteed cheerfully. “Especially *Slaughter House*. It’s really gross!” He was wearing a baggy Chicago Bulls T-shirt and red sweatpants. His shoes were off. His white socks were dirty around the toes. He hugged his knees to his chest and stared at the screen as the first movie began.

It was dark in the room, the only light coming from the bluish glow of the television. Each time there was an especially bloody killing in the film, Pepper glanced at me with a devilish grin to check my reaction. And each time, he inched himself a little closer and a little closer until I could feel the warmth of his shoulder against my own. It happened so slowly, so gradually, that it might have been inadvertent, nothing but the boy shifting his weight to make himself more comfortable.

The first movie finally ended, after ninety minutes of mayhem, in a climactic flurry of knives and cleavers and guts. (Why, I wondered, are the victims in slasher films always teenagers? Was it just coincidental that the trend had started at the same time as the hysteria over molestation and abuse? Would America rather see its young people dead than sexually active, sexually unclean?) I used the remote to stop the tape and rewind it. “Well, that was a truly gruesome spectacle.”

“It was awesome,” the boy countered, that familiar grin of his struggling to surface. “Don’t you think it was the greatest ever?”

“Oh, sure, the greatest.”

With nothing to watch or hold his attention, Pepper seemed to sag tiredly against my side, as if needing a brief rest before the next surge of adrenaline. I worked my arm free from between us and put it around his shoulders, letting him lean his full weight against me. “Hey,” I said, “don’t fall asleep.”

“No way,” Pepper answered quickly, sounding alert. “I’m OK.”

“We have a midnight raid to make, don’t forget.”

“How could I forget? No way,” he said again. “The graveyard dirt is a good idea, right?”

“Totally brilliant.”

“We have to spit on it and pee on it to make the curse work best.”

“OK,” I laughed, “whatever you say.” I could smell the pizza, spicy and oniony, on his breath, close to my face. “You’re the voodoo master.”

He rested his hand on my leg, just lightly on the thigh, very lightly, like a timid little bird ready to fly. “It’ll work best if we spit on it and pee on it,” he insisted, laughing along with me, watching my face carefully in the near darkness. “Will you do it with me?”

“Sure, we’ll do it together,” I said. “Anything to defeat our evil nemesis, right?”

“The evil dill pickle.”

“Oh, right. The sour dill. I almost forgot.”

“You almost forgot my awesome joke?”

“Sorry,” I said, then surprised myself by kissing him suddenly on the forehead, letting my lips linger, my nose pressed against the dark musk of his hair. He said nothing—just stayed there against me with his hand on my leg. Not bad, I thought: He knows I’m gay; I just kissed him; and he’s still snuggled contentedly beneath my arm. I could feel that tight churn of excitement, of anticipation, in my stomach, a feeling unknown for several years, the creeping realization that a boy was becoming a boyfriend, and might easily become a lover.

There were two more videos for us to watch. We took occasional breaks throughout to use the bathroom and to fetch drinks (root beer for the boy, Coors beer for myself). By midnight, we were finished with Pepper's film festival and ready for our guerilla raid across the street. "Time for action," I announced. "Let's go, put on your shoes."

The night was moonless and drizzly and cold. Pepper wore his red zippered sweatshirt with the hood up, like some pixie on an errand of nocturnal mischief. We crossed the deserted street and hid ourselves in the darkness beside Old Lady Dillon's porch. Pepper took the jar of dirt from the pouch of his sweatshirt. I put my hand on his shoulder. "OK, boss, now what?"

"We have to do the ritual," he whispered, unscrewing the lid of the jar.

"You know, your mother would kill me if she saw us out here."

"She would kill you?"

"Absolutely."

"Why would she kill you?"

"Because it's rainy, and it's the middle of the night, and we're trespassing."

"Could we go to jail?" the boy asked. His voice was almost giggly with pleasure. "Is this illegal?"

"Enough talk," I said. "Let's do this dirty deed."

Pepper reached through the wooden lattice enclosing the bottom of the porch and dumped out his jarful of graveyard dirt. "We put a curse on the evil dill pickle," he intoned quietly, "with this dirt of dead people. So she will stop spying on us. So terrible things will happen to her if she doesn't mind her own business. Amen."

"Good job."

"Now we have to do the rest."

"OK," I said, "show me."

Pepper, already on his knees, leaned forward and put his face to the lattice and spat through it. I did the same, then waited for the boy to continue. “Now the last part,” he whispered. “But we don’t have to. If it’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid.”

“OK, well, then I guess. . .” He scooted forward on his knees and pressed himself against the lattice while pulling down the front of his sweatpants. I moved forward beside him. The knees of my pants were soaked and cold against the wet grass. I unzipped and found a hole in the lattice to aim through, then gratefully emptied my beer-swollen bladder. Only then, after hearing me, did Pepper himself manage to begin—first a trickle, then a noisy splash against the dirt beneath the porch. “Wow,” I said, and nudged him with my elbow, “too much root beer.”

Pepper glanced at me and smiled. I could see the ivory flash of his teeth beside me in the darkness. “This makes the curse final,” he said.

“Good to the last drop. Drain it and shake it and let’s go.”

Pepper followed my instructions with a little shake of his hips, then hopped to his feet and followed me back across the street, into the house. I took his hand and shook it, patting his shoulder at the same time. “Mission accomplished, partner. Now what happens? With the curse, I mean.”

“If she keeps watching us, she’ll get sick or drop dead or something bad,” the boy explained. There was a wet spot of urine, about the size of a nickel, on the front of his red sweatpants. “It might take a few weeks, I’m not sure.”

“Is this your first voodoo curse?”

“No, I put a curse on Richard Van Fleet last year.”

“Your mother’s old boyfriend?”

“Yeah,” Pepper said, “he was a jerk. I hated him. I put a curse on him and pretty soon him and Mom broke up.”

The boy took off his sweatshirt and his shoes and crawled onto the hide-a-bed. I sat next to him on the bumpy mattress. “Why did you hate Richard Van Fleet so much?”

“He was a jerk.”

“I know, you already said that, but. . . why was he so bad?”

“I can’t remember why,” Pepper said with his nose wrinkled and his eyes fixed on the ceiling, hands behind his head.

“Well, anyway,” I said, “it’s good to know that the curse works.”

Pepper didn’t answer. He had rolled onto his side, facing me with his eyes shut. A long Halloween day had finally worn him out. I put my hand on his head and watched him as he slept, like a pleasant flashback to watching him as a measly seven-year-old. The TV was still on from before, flickering its cool bluish light from across the room while cheesy two-bit celebrities chattered about their psychic network. I was feeling tired myself, accustomed by my job at the post office to early mornings and early bedtimes. But I couldn’t force myself to leave; I couldn’t force myself off the hide-a-bed and away from the boy. Just a few more minutes, I kept thinking—just a few more minutes of petting that curly-cotton hair of his, of watching that pale blue flicker of light on his cheek, that glisten of moisture on his parted lips. A scrap of poetry occurred to me, something written by Doc many years earlier: “This is where heaven started/ in the dreamy riddle of a boy’s face. This is how angels were born/ in the timid prayer of a boy’s sigh/ in the pagan alchemy of skin and hair and sweat/ in the sacred sin of softly parted lips.”

It was after two o’clock when I finally gave up my vigil and covered the boy with his blanket, driven to my own bed by fatigue and frustration and a saving remnant of self-control. I dreamt, that abbreviated night, of Halloween masks, countless thousands of them shrieking as if magically and horribly come to life.

Pepper, in predictable twelve-year-old fashion, was already awake and watching television when I shuffled from the bedroom next morning. The hide-a-bed had been folded back into a couch, and the boy

was seated on one end of it with a bowl of Fruit Loops in his left hand, a spoon in his right. "I thought you were left-handed," I said from across the room.

"I am."

"But you eat with your right hand?"

Pepper looked down at his own hand in order to appraise the situation for himself. "Mostly I just write and draw with my left hand," he decided. "Other stuff I do with my right."

"Yeah," I remembered as he said it, "you pee with your right hand, too."

He smiled in the act of spooning cereal into his mouth, resulting in a messy dribble of milk down his chin. "I use my right hand?"

"Last night you did."

He wiped his chin with the back of his wrist. "Was last night fun?"

It was strange, this interrogative manner he had of speaking, always using questions to probe and maneuver and tease his way through a conversation. "It was fabulous," I said. "The best Halloween I've had in many years."

"It was the best one?"

"For me it was. What about you? Did you have a good time?"

The boy nodded energetically with his mouth full of cereal.

"So your visit has been a success so far?"

Again he responded with an energetic nod, smiling with his mouth closed and chewing. I left him there to finish his cereal while I used the bathroom and got myself a glass of juice in the kitchen. Later that day we drove across town to return Pepper's videos and rent a few new ones. I dropped him, while I did the rest of my shopping, at an arcade on Main Street where he could spend time with his friends. It was for my benefit, as well: I wanted a brief respite from the burden of entertaining him. He didn't seem to get bored as easily as most boys his age, but a little time playing video games with other kids could serve as a pleasant break for both of us, I figured.

The clouds had broken by the time we returned home, giving way to the buttery soft sunlight of mid-autumn. Like a skulking leftover from Halloween, the old woman was across the street in her front yard, nudging at the dead leaves on the ground with a fan-shaped bamboo rake. As I climbed from my car, something on the bottom step of her porch caught my eye: a glint of glass. “Jesus Christ,” I mumbled. “We forgot the jar.”

Pepper slammed the door on his side of the car and quickly lifted his head to peer across the street. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“The jar,” I mumbled again. “What did you do with it last night?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Was it in your sweatshirt this morning?”

“No.”

The woman, by this time, was watching us as she ever so slowly dragged the rake through the scattering of leaves in her yard. For the first time since moving into the house across from her, I felt a distinct flutter of nervousness. The previous five years had been ones of innocent chastity—empty and unsatisfying, certainly, but also safe, allowing me an almost arrogant indifference to the woman and her suspicions. (The other neighbors had always seemed too busy with their own lives to concern themselves with mine.) Now, although nothing yet had happened, there was a ripple of something uneasy and dangerous in my life, a changing balance of forces, a feeling of vulnerability—all embodied in this twelve-year-old boy standing next to me on the sidewalk.

I took one more glance at the woman’s front porch, then followed Pepper into the house. “That’s your jar over there,” I told him, pulling aside a curtain at one of the living room windows. “See it? Right there on the bottom step.”

“How did it get on the step?”

“She must have found it when she was raking.”

“I guess I left it on the ground.”

“Well,” I shrugged, “no big deal. She doesn’t know who it belongs to. It’s just an old jar.”

“Can she find my fingerprints?”

I looked at Pepper’s face to see whether or not he was joking. There was no trace of humor in his eyes. “It’s just an old jar,” I assured him again. “There’s nothing to worry about. Anyway, she’s now an official victim of your curse.”

The boy looked harder out the window, as if the woman might drop dead in front of us. “She’s an official victim now?”

“She was watching us when we came home, right?”

“Yeah, she was,” the boy said, starting to smile. “Does that make her an official victim?”

He was standing in front of me at the window. I put my arms around him and hugged him from behind, letting my chin rest against the curly top of his head. “It should activate the curse, no question about it. She’s in big trouble now, man.” I rubbed my chin across his scalp, slowly back and forth, side to side, then pressed my lips into his hair and kissed him, a fragrance like musty wool filling my nose. Pepper continued to gaze out the window while I kissed the top of his head, the side of his head, his ear, his cheek. My hands were inside his unzipped sweatshirt, feeling the front of his Bulls T-shirt and the thin, hard chest underneath. Keeping his head still, careful not to interrupt this business of being kissed, the boy turned his eyes sidelong in my direction. “Is it OK if I do some drawings while I’m here?”

I lifted my head away, the spell broken. “Of course,” I said, my arms still around him, my hands still feeling up and down the front of his T-shirt. “In fact, let me show you something.” I guided him from behind, a hand on each of his shoulders, into my bedroom, which was off the narrow hallway that separated the living room from the kitchen. I pointed to the mirror above my dresser, where his Magical Mystery Tour drawing was taped to the glass. “See, that’s the picture you made last time.”

Pepper brightened when he saw it. “You keep it here in your bedroom?”

“You bet. Right where I can see it.”

“Why do you like it so much?”

“Because it’s an excellent piece of work, for one thing. Also because it reminds me of you whenever I look at it.”

The boy was smiling at the mirror, at the reflection of himself being hugged from behind against my chest. “It’s not very good,” he said. “I can draw a better one if I spend more time.” He gently disengaged himself from my arms in order to explore my bedroom. Before I could stop him, he crossed to the dresser and opened the drawer where I kept my favorite books and magazines about boys, including several items by Doc. I allowed him a look, a very brief look, before stepping forward and shutting the drawer. “That’s just some personal stuff,” I said. “Nothing important.” Should I have allowed him a longer perusal? Was I missing a chance to promote something subversive and sexual between us? Or was I prudently keeping the situation from going too far, too fast? It seemed to me, from what I knew about Pepper—his inexperience, his cautious demeanor, his mother being a friend who “trusted” me to behave with impeccable discretion and propriety—it seemed to me, for now, that closing the drawer was my best and safest option.

In fact, it appeared that Pepper had already seen enough. His glimpse of my collection had embarrassed him, I could tell; he turned away quickly when I shut the drawer and started fiddling with the items on my desk across the room, being careful not to look in my direction. I needed to dispel this sudden awkwardness. “It’s OK, Pepper, the stuff you saw. It’s not a secret. It’s OK.”

“I didn’t see much.”

“It’s no secret that I’m gay, right?”

“I guess not,” the boy shrugged. He picked up a stapler, put it down, picked up a box of cheap ballpoint pens and examined it slowly. “These are good pens, I bet.”

“Oh, they’re the very best,” I said. “Incredibly expensive. Worth their weight in gold.”

Pepper finally shifted his eyes in my direction. There was a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. He put down the box of pens and picked up my camera. “Is this expensive, too?”

“That, actually, is very cheap,” I answered truthfully. “An old Polaroid worth about twenty bucks. When it was new.”

Without warning, the boy aimed the camera in my direction and clicked the shutter. I was about to say, “Sorry, there’s no film in it,” when a print came sliding out the front. When and why the camera had been loaded, I had no idea, and no memory of using it in the last two or three years. (Maybe to take pictures of Sandburg for an old boyfriend named Calvin who now lived, with his wife and two-year-old daughter, in Denver. I might have sent him a “Hi, how are you?” letter with photos of my new house and new car, that sort of thing.) Pepper held the print to watch it develop, to watch the image of me emerge in his hand. “Is this a good picture? Do you like it?”

I stepped beside him to take a look. The photo showed me staring directly into the camera, a middle-aged man with close-cropped red hair going gray and a pair of aviator sunglasses still on from when I’d been outside. “The composition is just fine,” I said, “but the subject leaves something to be desired.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I don’t like looking at myself in photographs.” I took the camera from Pepper and backed away several steps. “How about one of you?”

The boy instantly ducked his head and held up both hands to block my view. “No,” he protested, his voice a comical wail of panic. “It’s evil and terrible to take my picture!”

“Come on, don’t be silly.”

“Nobody is allowed to take my picture!”

I was laughing, trying to keep the camera steady. “Why are you being such a goof?”

Pepper, with something between a laugh and a yowl, rushed past me out of the bedroom. I followed him and waited until he reached the kitchen and turned unawares to face me, then I snapped his picture. He threw back his head and wailed, stomped his feet, made exaggerated cartoon sobbing noises (“Boo-hoo waaah! Boo-hoo waaah!”), all the while grinning at his own display of make-believe despair. “You’re a bit on the crazy side,” I said to him. “It’s just a little picture, you know.”

He calmed down after that performance and returned to the living room, where he started working on an improved and more elaborate version of his Magical Mystery Tour picture. Both of the Polaroid photos were on the lamp table beside him. “You can take those home,” I told him while he was working. “Either keep them, or give them to your mother, or whatever.”

“Don’t you want the picture of me?”

“Sure, but I figured. . .”

“You should keep it,” Pepper insisted. He pointed in the direction of my bedroom. “You can put it on your mirror.”

“That’s an excellent idea. What about the picture of me?”

“I can keep that one,” the boy agreed with a shrug, as if doing me a favor. He immediately took a break from his project to open his gym bag and stash the photo inside, putting it at the very bottom for safekeeping. Without further comment, he picked up one of his pastel chalks and went back to work.

Dinner that evening was Mexican—not the fake fast-food variety but authentic tacos from Casa Sierra, with fillings of pork and chicken and lengua. Pepper ended up eating two of the chicken tacos, but refused even to touch the pork or the tongue. “Taco Bell is way better than these,” he decided.

“You need to broaden your horizons.”

“Taco Bell is the best.”

“You’re addicted to lousy fast food,” I told him. “I happen to share your addiction in many ways, so I can’t judge you too harshly. Anyway, I think sometimes you just like to be contrary.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, Master Robinson, that you like to take the opposite position on. . . everything. For instance, I think that Singapore Station is just about the worst show on TV.”

“Singapore Station is awesome!”

“You’ve never even seen it, I bet.”

“It’s the awesomest show on TV,” Pepper insisted, keeping his head down over his food to hide his playful smile.

“There is no show called Singapore Station,” I informed him. “I just made it up.”

“You tricked me?”

“I sure did.”

The boy once again pretended to dissolve in a fit of exaggerated sobbing, his face contorted and his head thrown back while he boo-hooed and waaah-ed. I grabbed the back of his neck and shook him gently. “You’re a real character, man.”

“I’m sad,” the boy half laughed. “Cry-cry, waaah, boo!”

“A real character,” I chuckled once more. “Now finish your taco, wise guy.”

After dinner, Pepper went back to work on his drawing, stopped again for a few hours to watch videos (Jurassic Park and The Lion King), then applied the finishing touches with pen and pastel. “Here’s my masterpiece,” he finally announced. “Is it better than the first one?”

“Quite a bit better, yes.”

Pepper handed me the sheet of heavy art paper. “The walrus-men are the hardest part to do. That’s why it took me a long time.”

“Well, I think it was worth the wait.”

“Are you going to hang it up?”

“Of course. I’ll do it right now.”

The boy followed me into the bedroom and watched as I took down his original picture and taped the new one in its place. “Do you want the old one back? Or should I keep it?”

“You can keep it,” Pepper said. He took it from my hand, opened the top drawer of my dresser and laid the picture inside, placing it carefully on top of a copy of Blue Jeans magazine. “You can keep it in here with your other stuff.”

I was too surprised, at that moment, to respond. Pepper closed the drawer and faced me with a slow, diffident turn, as if afraid to discover my reaction. I stepped forward and put both arms around him. His arms, as always, stayed at his sides. “It’s a good place for it,” I finally said. “I’m glad you thought of it.”

“It’s a good place?”

“I think it’s perfect.”

Even though he couldn’t force himself to return the hug, he seemed content and comfortable in my arms, his face pressed against my chest. He was willing to stay there, it seemed, until I decided to release him. We could hear the music for Saturday Night Live from the TV down the hall; a dog barking from somewhere outside; the honking of a car horn from down the street. We were alone in my bedroom, alone in the house, safe from the ears and eyes of all parents and neighbors and meddlesome adults. I squeezed him more tightly in my arms. “You should probably take a bath, Pepper.”

“I like showers better.”

“That’s fine. If you can get the handle to work.”

“Baths take too long,” the boy mumbled. I could feel the soft kitten-purr vibration of his voice against my chest. “Either one is fine,” I said. “Bath or shower. It’s up to you.”

“I don’t need either one, really.”

“You haven’t washed since you got here.”

“I’m not dirty,” he protested. “I’m still clean enough for now.”

I realized, suddenly, why the boy was stalling. “While you’re in the bathroom, listen, I’ll stay in the living room and fix your bed,” I told him, offering a guarantee of privacy. “Just like last time when you were here. Right?”

He lifted his head from my chest and nodded. I leaned forward and kissed the warm satin of his cheek, then let him go. His stubborn modesty came as no surprise, of course. During his previous visit, while his mother was in the hospital, he had managed all bathtimes and bedtimes without ever allowing a single glimpse of his bare body, or even his underwear. He did all dressing and undressing in the bathroom with the door carefully shut and locked, and always slept in either his everyday sweatpants or a pair of baggy lemon-yellow shorts with a black Nike swoosh on the left leg.

I could hear him now in the bathroom while I pulled out the couch and adjusted the sheets, the blanket, the pillow. He had succeeded in starting the shower with its calcified, temperamental spigot; even so, the spray sounded diffuse and weak, like some oafish animal piddling into the tub. When he came out, not many minutes later, he was wearing his Bulls T-shirt and his yellow shorts and was carrying his sweatpants and socks in a bundle against his chest. “The shower worked OK,” he said. “You have to jiggle the handle real hard, is all.”

“Was the water warm enough?”

“It should be hotter, I think.”

“The water heater isn’t working very well.”

Pepper dropped his socks and sweatpants next to the hide-a-bed and stood for a moment staring at the television. The yellow shorts made a vivid contrast to the smooth brownness of his legs, which were thin beneath the baggy fabric, knobby-kneed and long in the calf. I was in the La-Z-Boy across the room, watching him. The Polaroid camera was on the table beside me. I picked it up while Pepper was still standing transfixed, then aimed it furtively and snapped his picture. He jerked his head in my direction, not sure at first what had happened. I snapped

another picture of him as he stared perplexed into the lens. “Say cheese,” I said to tease him. “You look positively gorgeous.”

He put up his hands and started laughing. “No, no, no! It’s going to destroy me!”

I put the camera back on the table and held the two photos as they developed. “Oh, very nice,” I said. “Here he is, ladies and gentlemen, the fabulous new supermodel Khalid Robinson! What a hunk! What a stud!”

Pepper feigned an attack of mortified panic and scrambled into bed, beneath the covers. “Make it go away! It’s deadly and evil!”

“It’s OK, sweetie, the big bad camera won’t hurt you, I promise.” The two photos, fully developed, showed Pepper from the knees up, posed with one hand on his hip like a statue of Pan—remarkably like a pubescent Pan, I suddenly realized, with his dark skin and his hair like curly fleece and his ears that were actually pointy at the tops like the ears of a little goatboy. I’ll have to show these to Doc, I found myself thinking. As soon as possible, show them to Doc.

When I looked up from the photos, I discovered Pepper peeking at me from beneath his bed covers, just his fingers and the top of his face exposed, like a Word War II drawing of Kilroy. I got to my feet and stepped toward him with the photos. “Want to see how handsome you are?”

“Ugly, ugly, ugly.”

“You can’t possibly believe that,” I said, taking a seat on the edge of the mattress. “You see, two more photos for my Pepper collection. Nice ones, hah?”

“Are you going to keep a Pepper collection?”

“Well, I’m trying. But you’re making it very difficult.”

The boy pulled down the covers from his face, far enough to reveal the big-toothed gleam of his smile. “Is there more film in your camera?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“It’s OK if you take some pictures,” Pepper decided. “Just a few.”

“No more hysterical fits?”

“I guess not.”

“That’s awfully generous of you,” I said, my hand on his head, petting him. “So. It’s back home tomorrow. The weekend went fast.”

“It’s over already?”

“I’m afraid so. You’ll come back, I hope.”

Pepper stared up at me while I stroked his hair. “Next weekend?”

“I have to work the next few Saturdays,” I told him. “I deliver mail, remember. Today was a rare Saturday off for me.”

“What about Saturday night?”

I shrugged, thinking it over. Yes, the boy liked me; yes, he wanted to spend time with me; but his presence could eventually become an agonizing frustration, a temptation impossible to resist. Was I ready for that? I had been through it before, always with a safe and happy conclusion—but did I have the strength and the nerve for it one more time? “Maybe next Saturday night would be OK,” I finally told him. “We’ll decide later in the week. Is that all right?”

The boy nodded an enthusiastic yes. Within minutes his eyes had closed and he was sleeping soundly beneath the covers. I used what proved to be the final Polaroid print to photograph him while he slept. The flash made him stir ever so slightly, but didn’t wake him. The photo was a close-up of his face, those eyelashes like delicate combs of black silk against the top of each cheek. I put that photo, along with the two of Pepper in his shorts, next to my wallet and keys. Next day, as soon as I could manage, I would take the pictures to Doc, to let him see this boy who was growing so precious in my heart.

CHAPTER FOUR

“So this is your Khalid?”

“Better known as Pepper.”

“He’s a lovely lad,” Doc said, shuffling through the three photos for a second time. “Makes one think of pixies and imps and other denizens of the primeval wood.”

“Exactly! Look at those ears!”

“Delightfully pointy.”

“Pan the goatboy, captured on film.”

“Quite a coincidence,” Doc nodded, “given our recent discussion of Peter the Pan. It’s a shame about those baggy shorts. Dreadful. The scourge of American boyhood, slowly infecting the entire planet.”

“Baggy clothes are depressing, I agree.”

Doc put aside the photos and lit a Camel with a wooden match flicked against the horny nail of his thumb. Once again I had neglected to bring him any of his favorite cigarettes from the shop in Sandburg. I apologized for my absentminded behavior. “Next time I’ll remember, Doc, I promise.”

“You have good reason for being preoccupied. Boys have a way of commanding one’s attention. Or so I seem to recall.”

“You could have a boyfriend of your own. If you bothered to try.”

“I suppose so.”

“You still get occasional fan letters from star-struck gay teenagers, don’t you?”

“Along with my social security and pension checks, yes,” Doc conceded. “One of the great mysteries of the cosmos.”

He had been roasting a hunk of venison when I arrived, and now returned to the kitchen to check its progress and do a little basting. “Too bad you didn’t bring some red wine,” he said over his shoulder. “It would make a dandy sauce.”

“If you had a phone.”

“I know, I know, life would be perfect with a phone.”

“What if you get sick or fall down or. . .”

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

The aroma of the venison lured me into the kitchen. I grabbed a bottle of beer from the refrigerator and leaned against the wall. “What do you think about Pepper, Doc? Should I make him a Saturday night habit?”

“Has he warmed up since his first visit? Any cuddling or kissing?”

“No change in that department,” I said. “He’s a sweet boy, but totally passive. There’s none of the seductive interplay you get with so many kids.”

Doc closed the oven and straightened to face me. “I’m not sure what to tell you, Jacob. Do you want a friend or a lover?”

“Honestly, I’d be satisfied with a simple friendship, if that’s how it ends up.”

“Satisfied,” Doc said, pausing for dramatic effect, “but not satisfied.”

I swigged from my bottle of beer. “Well, sir, we’re all sexual creatures, aren’t we? Sex feels good. It’s fun. Birds do it, bees do it, even boys with men do it.”

“You lost the rhyme.”

“Having him around for sleepovers could become such an agony of self-denial.”

Doc led me back to the living room. “That roast will be ready in another twenty minutes or so.” He stood at one of the big windows that looked south through a tangled growth of oaks and elms and box elders to the grassy pastureland beyond. “Just remember to go slowly and carefully, Jacob. Take whatever the boy gives you, and be grateful. Enjoy his friendship. Don’t be greedy.”

“I do realize all that.”

“Of course you do,” Doc said. “You’ve been playing this game for many years.”

“Still, it’s always a helpful reminder. But. Oh Christ, I don’t know if I have the energy for all this shit.”

We continued our discussion into dinner, always returning to the same point of pathetic indecision. “You know,” Doc finally said, “if Khalid were a member of the Sawiyaho tribe in Papua New Guinea, he’d be just the right age for his initiation into manhood.”

“Involving what, exactly?”

“Involving fellatio, to be perfectly exact. Each boy, at the onset of puberty, is paired with a sponsor or mentor for a variety of training exercises and rituals. . . Hold on, I need another helping of this venison.”

“You keep talking,” I said, taking his plate. “I’ll get some more for both of us.” We were eating, as always, in the living room, with our plates on our laps. “More potatoes and carrots, too?”

“Sure, a little of everything. Now, where was I?”

“Each boy has a sponsor for his initiation. . .”

“Right,” Doc said. “Usually an uncle, or some other adult male from his own kinship group. The climax of this initiation, in more ways than one, is a ceremony of mass fellatio, with all the boys performing as a group on their sponsors.”

I handed the plate of food to him. “The boys give blowjobs to the men?”

“As a group, yes. The idea is for each boy to ingest the semen of his sponsor, thereby ingesting part of the man’s spirit. All of which, needless to say, would be grounds for arrest and prosecution in any Westernized society.”

“Papuan pedophile ring busted,” I announced in an extra-extra-read-all-about-it voice. “An entire tribe of perverts and child molesters discovered in the jungles of New Guinea! Satanic devil-worship suspected! This is wonderful venison, by the way.”

“It’s quite good,” Doc agreed. “I’ve always loved the wild taste of venison.”

Both of us went silent for a moment as we enjoyed our food and sat listening to the Gipsy Kings, my choice for dinnertime music. The tape was playing on a Sony boom box that I had given to Doc for his sixty-fifth birthday. His television and VCR had also come through me, although secondhand. He referred to all the items as “an effort to corrupt me with technology”—but he never refused any of them. Maybe, I thought, I should buy him a cell phone for his next birthday.

I swallowed a last morsel of venison and set my plate aside. “Or,” I said, picking up our discussion where we’d left off, “if Pepper had been alive in Sparta or even Athens at the time of their glory, he’d be just the proper age to take an adult lover.”

“You know,” Doc nodded, setting his own empty plate on the table beside him, “it’s interesting that modern culture reveres the legacy of ancient Greece, yet turns an expedient blind eye to the pederastic part of that legacy. Not just homosexual, mind you, but pederastic: the love of men and boys.”

“Considered the finest and purest form of love.”

“Celebrated in poetry and song and graffiti, yes, absolutely. In Sparta, of course, the relationships were mandatory, part of every boy’s upbringing. But even in Athens and Thebes and so on, even there a boy of Khalid’s age without an adult lover would have been something of an embarrassment to his family. The parents would have been a bit shamefaced. They would have wondered, what’s wrong with our son?”

“As the boy’s adult acquaintance, I would have been expected to court him,” I agreed. “If not. . .”

“If not, the parents would have been insulted. Don’t you find our son attractive? Don’t you find him worthy of your attention? Is he not bright enough? Is he not handsome enough?”

“All conveniently forgotten by modern historians.”

“Not exactly forgotten,” Doc said. He was blowing smoke rings from an afterdinner Camel. “On a PBS documentary just recently, there was a mention of Greek love, an acknowledgment that sex between men and adolescent boys had been not only accepted but encouraged. And in

Sparta, as I said, actually mandatory. And yet. . . the modern mind seems able to hear that fact and still not register the truth or significance of it, as if it were just some bit of a fairy tale, or some fanciful yarn of space-alien sexuality, nothing at all to do with the reality of human nature.”

“What did Orwell call it? Double-think?”

The Gipsy Kings tape ended, paused, then began again on the first side. Doc fished in the pocket of his flannel shirt for another cigarette. “Double-think is precisely what it is: the ability to know and not to know both at the same time. Damn! This pack is empty.”

He crossed the room to a cluttered bookcase where he kept, among other things, his cartons of cigarettes. I was about to pick up my plate and take it to the kitchen when a large and spindly brown spider ran across it, vanishing in a skitter of legs off the opposite end of the sofa. My yelp of surprise caused Doc to turn and smile. “Must have been a bug of some sort,” he guessed.

“One of those god-awful spiders,” I said, rubbing at the gooseflesh on my arms. The spiders at Doc’s were not like the tiny, innocuous ones I might have found in some cobwebby corner of my own house; Doc’s spiders were the big ugly kind that lurked in woodpiles and seemed altogether larger and wilder than anything ever seen in town. It was because of them, in fact, that I never stayed overnight at Doc’s house, even when I’d had too many beers to drive home soberly; no way was I going to sleep on that sofa after the lights went out, not with all those creepy-crawlies just waiting to invade and infest the darkness.

Doc, on the other hand, seemed not at all disturbed by the spiders and beetles and other bugs that shared his home. If anything, he enjoyed them as a sort of scare tactic against his more squeamish visitors, as one way of maintaining a psychological edge within his private domain. Strange to recall, as I often did, how different Doc had seemed in the early years of our friendship, back in his little apartment near the college. Nothing about him then had appeared tough or rustic; no one could have more perfectly fit the stereotype of soft and sedentary

professor. His way of dressing, of grooming, of speaking—all indicated someone who had never held a shotgun or chopped a single stick of firewood.

But the reality was just the opposite: Doc had been born on a farm not far from Sandburg, just outside the small town of Bishop Hill. It was 1929, year of the Crash. FDR and his New Deal still three years away. Young Charlie Wilson grew up during the bleakness of that Depression, and the World War that followed, a farmboy with a strong back and calluses on his hands. He had just turned sixteen when the war ended. “Can you imagine,” he once told me, “that I was disappointed about not getting a chance to volunteer? I dreamed about going overseas to fight the Germans or the Japanese, returning home a hero, the whole adolescent fantasy. Imagine me with visions of Audie Murphy dancing in my head!”

Deprived of martial glory, Charlie finished high school, graduated from Western Illinois University, then took and abandoned a variety of teaching jobs around the Midwest. Eventually he went back to school and earned himself a doctorate from the University of Iowa, where he stayed on as an associate professor of English for the next five years. “It was amazingly easy back then to adopt a boy as a lover,” Doc often recalled. “College freshmen were a delight in the early Sixties, extremely naïve about all things sexual, which granted them a wonderful freedom entirely unknown today. Think about it: Sex was never discussed in public. Homosexuality was little more than a rumor, totally nonexistent in the pop media. In other words, sex and sexuality were totally private matters. No debate, no discussion, nothing but one’s own personal journey of discovery and exploration. A boy could try anything in private, anything at all, because it could never and would never become a public issue, and because there was no media propaganda to convince him that private pleasure was cause for public shame. That

came later, when sex and politics and entertainment all became entangled in the venomous, unholy mess we have today.”

In 1966, when America found itself thrashing in the mire of Vietnam and all political hell was starting to break loose, Doc resigned from the University of Iowa and headed to North Africa, following the trail of André Gide and William Burroughs, two of his favorite writers. He spent nearly three years abroad—drifting from one country to another, from one city to another—until finally settling in Tangier in a tiny house at the end of an alley behind the Al-Djenina hotel. He lived for several months in that sleepy paradise, waking every morning to the scent of lemons and sea air and a teenager named Azik who worked as his houseboy. “My first and only experience with true love, Jacob. I convinced myself that the feeling was mutual. But who knows? Who knows?”

The death of his father brought him back to America in 1968. Caring for his sick and aged mother kept him here. He took a job at Sandburg College and returned to the business of being an American, once again a stranger in the strange land of McDonald’s and baseball and color TV. He started writing about the gay experience and the love of boys. I first encountered him in a freshman English class three years later. Somewhere during that forty-year journey of his from Sandburg and back again he had invented himself as the Doc who looked and sounded like some city-bred intellectual dandy. It would take many years for me to discover the truth of him beneath that façade.

“I’ve never understood your hysterical arachnophobia,” he said to me now from the bookcase. “Spiders are such timid little creatures.”

“Have you ever thought about going back to Morocco, Doc?”

“Thought about it? Of course.”

“But?”

“But life kept interfering. I got old and tired. And, besides, the Third World paradises like Morocco ain’t what they used to be. Culturally, the

whole world has become an American colony. Morocco, the Philippines, Thailand—they're all taking orders from Washington now, cracking down on so-called sex tourists as a way of demonstrating how modern and enlightened they are."

"The whole planet is an American suburb."

"More or less," Doc said. He had moved to the kitchen to refill his coffee mug, pouring with one hand and holding a cigarette with the other. "Anyway, Jacob, how did we segue from spiders to Morocco? Am I missing the connection?"

"Your life flashed before my eyes."

"How dull for you, poor thing."

I finally picked up my empty dinner plate and took it to the kitchen. "Your life never impressed me as dull. Especially not your experiences in other countries."

There was a strangely pensive look on Doc's face as he peered at me from across the tiny kitchen area. "It feels like a lost chapter of my life," he said quietly. "Those many years, everything about them, all the journals, all the photos, everything gone."

I knew that he was remembering a day in 1986 when much of his past had gone up in smoke, quite literally. The police, granted new powers by the Child Protection Act of 1984, had found his name on an old mailing list for materials now illegal, and had used it as probable cause for raiding his apartment. A five-man squad of state cops and postal inspectors and FBI had spent nearly an hour bullying him and ransacking his possessions, but had found nothing to warrant his arrest. Even so, Doc ended up paying a harsh price for his freedom; he had guessed that the cops would eventually target him, and had prepared for their visit with a major trash fire just beyond the city limits. His journals, his photographs, his modest collection of erotica—he had burned nearly everything.

Afterwards, when I'd heard the full story, I questioned his strategy. "Why didn't you just put everything into storage? Why destroy so much precious material?"

Doc had replied that it was easy to appraise the situation with the cool logic of hindsight, but not so easy to behave coolly or logically in the grip of panic. Even suicide had occurred to him as an option. "It's difficult sometimes to keep struggling against the darkness, against the horror of it all. There are times, Jacob, when burning a few journals and pictures seems like a quite moderate course of action."

Now, watching his face and remembering those words from 1986, I was sorry that I had resurrected such an unpleasant topic. "Well," I said, "it's all ancient history. Let's just. . ."

"You know," Doc interrupted, "I made an effort some years ago to reproduce my journals from that era. Not verbatim, of course. Not even close."

"You never mentioned this before."

"It seemed like a private matter. And I'm not sure that the finished product is anything worth seeing. It's an impressionistic hodgepodge, bits and pieces of memory, of sights and sounds, little episodes."

"I'd love to see it," I said. "Would you mind?"

"I'm not sure."

"Hey, that's not fair! You can't just tease me with something and then. . ."

"I'll dig it out tonight and take a look at it," Doc said, leading me back to the other room. The evening darkness outside had turned the big windows into mirrors, my reflection following Doc's across the reflected living room. "If I don't find it too embarrassing, I'll hand it over next time you show up."

"Which might or might not be next weekend," I said. "It depends on the Pepper situation, I guess."

Doc lowered himself into his chair with a quiet grunt. “Damned arthritis in my knees,” he mumbled. “So. Have you come to a decision regarding Khalid?”

“We both know that I’ll let him come back, don’t we?”

“I suppose it’s written in the stars,” Doc agreed. He had the three Polaroids back in his hand, that pensive expression once again on his face. “It’s very odd. Must have been our mention of Morocco. Do you recall a boy named Azik?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

Doc held up one of the photos of Pepper. “This boy could be Azik’s brother. The resemblance is uncanny. I wonder that I didn’t notice it earlier.”

“Pepper does have an Arabic look about him.”

“And his real name is Khalid, which is a wonderfully appropriate touch. Feels like an omen.”

“Regarding what?”

“The journals,” Doc said. “Time to take them out and dust them off, perhaps.” He smiled at the photos in his hand, as if the boy might smile back.

CHAPTER FIVE

The whole world had gone white with frost by Wednesday dawn—the grass, the trees, the cars parked along Whitman Street—like the ghosts of grass and trees and cars silently frozen. Before I could drive to work, I had to rummage through the trunk of my Volvo to find an ice scraper, then had to spend another few minutes cleaning all the windows. At the post office, the fleet of Jeeps and trucks sat waiting for the sun to warm them, frosted there in the parking lot like a Siberian traffic jam.

The postal building itself was a gray neoclassical relic of granite and concrete, a massive structure befitting a town that had once boasted the second-largest railroad yards in the country, a town that had served as a transportation hub between Chicago and points west. Inside, the building was just as antique and imposing, with arches and columns and stone floors that made the workspace feel more like a museum than an office. Away in the back, near the loading docks, were rows of lockers where the letter carriers kept their bags and spare uniforms. Next to the lockers was a lounge area, a spartan arrangement of metal tables and plastic chairs and vending machines.

Each morning workers began their day in this lounge with coffee and donuts and a glance through the early-edition newspapers. The headline in the local paper that particular Wednesday was about a prominent businessman who had been busted on sex charges the day before. I sat at one of the tables with my Styrofoam cup of coffee and my chocolate donut, listening to the other workers and their predictable responses. An older carrier who went by the sobriquet of Uncle Eddie was especially vocal in his disgust. “They oughta hang the bastard up by his nuts,” he announced, a flash of fluorescent light catching his glasses when he turned his head.

“Or just cut ’em off,” proposed a twenty-something clerk named Ramirez. “That would take care of the problem, I guaran-fuckin-tee it.”

“Only way to stop them types,” Uncle Eddie and everyone else agreed, nodding grimly. “It’s sickening, is what it is.”

The story was this: Kurt Randall, owner and operator of the largest pet shop in Sandburg, had been arrested Tuesday morning on a variety of charges including possession of child pornography and criminal sexual assault. The police surmised that he had been molesting local boys for over twenty years, meeting them through his activities as Boy Scout leader and camp counselor and soccer coach. The principal victim now bringing allegations against him was a twenty-five-year-old auto mechanic who had been assaulted in Kurt Randall’s home for seven years, beginning when the boy was thirteen. Other young men, the newspaper said, were now stepping forward to help in the investigation, all of them emotionally damaged by their years of abuse at the hands of Kurt Randall.

OK, I thought, what’s wrong with this picture? Is there no one else in this building (or this town, or this country) who can recognize the language of hysteria and deception? Is there no one else who can read a story like this and question the definition of terms such as “victim” and “assault” and “abuse”? Here’s a boy, for example, who returned again and again to Kurt Randall’s house over a period of seven years, not stopping until he was twenty, old enough to be working as a mechanic and living in his own apartment—and yet, no one challenges the concept of his being a victim of sexual assault. Must it not be obvious to anyone and everyone that this boy, and all the others like him, kept returning to Kurt Randall’s house because they were enjoying themselves, because they were having fun, because being there made them happy?

Oh sure, the argument goes, but they were lured into the situation by games, by money, by all manner of treats and goodies. And in exchange for these treats, these bribes, they were expected to participate in sexual activity (the assumption being, of course, that normal boys

would never participate voluntarily in such behavior). But where, one must ask, was the downside for these boys? In exchange for games, for money, for new clothing, for whatever they might desire—in exchange for all this, they were rewarded with sexual pleasure. At any point, needless to say, these boys were free to end the arrangement, free to refuse whatever the man might offer, free to walk out and never come back. And yet, given this freedom and this control, the boys stayed; given a lifetime of warnings and public service announcements and classroom indoctrination, these boys returned anyway, again and again, year after year after year. So how were they victims? How were they being assaulted? And where was the abuse?

But again the argument comes back: These boys were victims because the adult, by definition, is always in control; because fear of reprisal kept them from ending the arrangement; because they suffer today from very real emotional and psychological problems. Well yes, I would say, they suffer problems today because their culture has convinced them that they were abused, that they were damaged, that their manhood was endangered; anyone with less than remarkable insight and self-esteem might easily succumb to this delusion of victimhood. And yes, in cases of legitimate coercion and abuse there can be fear, intimidation, an unfair advantage of power; but abuse can occur in any type of relationship, regardless of age or gender. How can anyone imagine that all relationships between men and boys are based on this abuse? Should we likewise condemn all relationships between men and women because of heterosexual rape and domestic violence? Don't laugh. Some radical feminists have done just that.

Consider one final time, I would say, the twenty-five-year-old auto mechanic in the case against Kurt Randall, this person who spent seven years of his life, his entire adolescence, returning to a place that obviously made him happy, to a man who obviously gave him pleasure. If his society, his culture, had not filled him with shame and guilt and remorse for his behavior as a teenager, he could have lived the rest of his days with nothing but good memories and fond nostalgia. But now he's

a victim, now he takes a creepy sort of pride in being damaged for life, permanently traumatized.

Of course, I said none of this. Uncle Eddie went on and on about cutting off testicles and stringing up the queer bastard, and I said nothing at all. I was a spy, a saboteur, silent among my enemies. Any other strategy would have been a lunatic dash toward self-destruction. As always, I sipped my coffee and remained silent.

By the time I sorted my mail and loaded the full trays into my Jeep, the sun was just beginning to thaw the overnight frost. Color had returned to the world. Using a small towel that I always kept in the Jeep, I wiped the now-slushy frost from all the windows, the headlights and taillights, the license plates. I checked the tires at the same time, then glanced at the asphalt underneath the vehicle for any trace of fluid leaks, completing my mandatory safety check before starting out.

It was the first week of November and the mail was light, a welcome breather before the impending onslaught of the holiday season. My route, the same one I'd been delivering for nearly five years, was in an old residential district just west of the college. Mostly single-family houses, also a few multi-story apartment buildings, including the one where Doc had lived until his move out of town—it was an easy route, the streets flat, the addresses well marked and the boxes well maintained, no crazy dogs or hostile patrons. I was a fortunate carrier and I knew it; most days, my job was nothing more than a pleasant, leisurely stroll in the fresh air. Every day at noon, weather permitting, I parked my Jeep in the gravel lot at the entrance to West Park, an ideal spot for my usual brown-bag lunch. On days that were either too hot or too cold, I drove a few blocks farther north to one of the fast-food joints along Henderson Street—McDonald's next to Burger King next to Pizza Hut—a boulevard of endless plastic and neon. I tried not to think about the fat and salt and cholesterol attacking my arteries.

Tompkins Street, Doc's old address, was the first swing on my route after lunch. One particular house on that street always received an extra measure of my attention. It was the house where the Fox family lived, the nicest one on the block, a two-story brick with a beautiful old willow in the front yard. There were two boys in the family. Chad, the older one, was just beginning his senior year at the University of Illinois, a three-hour drive south from Sandburg. Doc had watched him grow up, often referring to him as "that exquisite blond from across the street." Nothing had ever happened between them. They had never even spoken, as far as I knew. Doc had simply admired him from a distance, like some naturalist in his lookout observing an especially lovely specimen of bird or gazelle or feral cat.

Now Chad was gone, a young man off at university, but his nine-year-old brother was still at home. Ryan was his name, and he was just as exquisite and just as blond as his older brother. Over the previous five years I had spoken to him several times—on Saturdays and school holidays and during his summer vacations—but never more than "Hi, how's it going" or "That's a nice skateboard" or something equally banal as I passed him in the front yard. I knew almost nothing about him except his name and age, plus a calculated guess that his birthday was in February: Every year at the end of that month he received a batch of cards in the mail, too late for Valentine's Day and much too early for Easter. A birthday seemed obvious, putting him three months shy of his tenth.

One thing else that I knew about him, something that he shared with his brother, was a passion for sports, especially swimming and track. I had seen his name (and his brother's) several times in the sports section of the local newspaper, listed as participants in various swimming tournaments and track meets. Once, during the summer just past, there had even been a picture of Ryan swimming in one of his tournaments, doing the breaststroke alongside another boy in the pool,

just their heads and shoulders and arms visible above the churning water. He had won that event, and two others, in his age division.

I wasn't expecting to see Ryan on that first Wednesday in November, it being an ordinary school day. Quite a surprise, then, when he opened the front door to meet me. "You're home from school," I said, a bit stupidly.

"I'm sick."

"Your throat sounds sore."

Ryan nodded impatiently, opening the door wider and sticking out his hand. "You got my Sports Illustrated?"

"Not today," I said. "Just a few bills."

He grumbled a soft "darn" under his breath and snatched the bills from my hand. "It better be here tomorrow," he said.

"Hey, don't abuse the poor mailman."

"Well god, I been waiting all day!"

"Everybody's copy is late," I told him. "It'll probably be here tomorrow." The two of us had never stood and conversed face to face as we were doing that afternoon. It gave me a chance, for the first time, to really examine him up close: His face was round and ivory-pink with a splash of freckles across the nose; his four front teeth on top were still gappy, not quite finished growing together; his eyes were the kind of blue that looked almost artificial, like the electric blue of neon-lit glass. Making his round face and head look even rounder was his perfect mushroom cap of yellow hair, a more radical variation on the bowl haircut he'd been sporting his entire brief life. He grumbled one more complaint about having to wait all day, then backed away from the door and shut it in my face. I was not favorably impressed by young Ryan Fox as I headed up Tompkins Street to continue my route.

After work, I decided to call Pepper about our possible weekend plans. I held the phone in my hand for at least a minute before dialing the number. Again I had that feeling of mingled anxiety and excitement,

that sensation of treacherous but exhilarating free-fall, my life spinning loose from its comfortable orbit. It was now several years since my boyfriend Calvin and his buddies had grown up and faded from my life, leaving me aimless and strung-out but also safe, surprisingly content with my monotonous but risk-free routine. Now I could feel the old dangers creeping back; I was inviting them into my life with each visit from Pepper, with each phone call, with each word and smile and touch that passed between us. Even my fleeting encounter with Ryan earlier in the day seemed vaguely portentous, as if boys were suddenly being thrust at me by some unseen agent of mischief.

I let the phone ring seven times, and was about to hang up, when Holly finally answered. She had been running the dishwasher and hadn't heard the phone at first. "And of course Pepper didn't move his lazy butt," she added. "That kid, I swear, you have no idea."

We talked briefly about her returning to work the following week, and then I brought our conversation back to Pepper. "What's he up to?"

"Playing with his Nintendo, same as always."

"Does he still want to come over here on Saturday?"

"Oh please," Holly said with one of her tired laughs. "All I've heard this week is going to see Jake, going to see Jake."

"Seriously?"

"He's been waiting for you to call since Monday."

"I told him it wouldn't be until later in the week."

"Well, he's never really known a man who keeps his promises, so I guess he's sort of antsy, you know."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right."

"Wow, speak of the devil," she said. "Here he is right behind me, little sneak! I'll let you talk to him."

There was a pause as she passed the phone to her son. The boy mumbled a tentative "hello" at his end of the line. I could picture him clutching the phone nervously with both hands. "Pepper," I said, "what's up?"

“Nothing.”

“Were you playing video games?”

“For a little while I was.”

“So. What about Saturday night?”

“What about it how?”

I had to laugh at his silly echo of my question, so typical of his cat-and-mouse way of conversing. “I mean, do you still want to stay over Saturday night?”

“I guess so,” Pepper said, as if he didn’t much care either way. From behind him I could hear Holly’s voice saying, “Oh please, stop playing like some little shrinking violet.” Pepper told her to be quiet with an embarrassed half-laugh. I could easily imagine him fighting against a smile. “Should I come over Saturday?” he finally asked me, circling back to my own question.

“If you’d like to, then. . . yeah, sure.”

“Will you be too tired?”

“For you? Never.”

“Can you pick me up?”

Yes, I told him, I could pick him up. There was a pause, and then he said, “OK. Is that all?” His awkward lack of etiquette didn’t surprise me; the phone forced him into the type of direct back-and-forth dialogue that he always avoided in person; he wasn’t good at it, which led to a jittery case of rudeness. I released him mercifully with a quick goodbye.

Five o’clock, and it was already nearly dark, the cold November night descending. I stayed on the couch in the living room, staring at the local news on TV. There in front of me was Kurt Randall himself, being escorted in handcuffs into the Boyce County courthouse by two uniformed cops. He might have been a crazed mass murderer for all the security assigned to him. Again there was the same grim rhetoric about “abuse” and “criminal assault” and “the permanently scarred victims of this sexual predator.” The reporters all assumed their best professional demeanors of grave outrage and cool distaste. This is insanity, I thought.

This is a culture gone mad, lashing out at demons of its own creation, terrified by the chaotic reality of human nature. How, I wondered, did I end up here? Of all the cultures in all the world throughout all of history, how did I end up here?

The sun dawned Thursday on another kingdom of silence and frost. My routine was the same as the day before, with lunch at noon in the parking lot of West Park: two bologna sandwiches and a little bag of corn chips and an apple, the gentle autumn sun warming my Jeep while I sat inside, eating. After lunch it was back to Tompkins Street, back to the Fox house at number 609.

Ryan must have been “waiting all day” again because he was there at the door when I crossed the porch. “Yes,” I said before he could even ask, “I have your Sports Illustrated.”

“It’s about time,” the boy replied in his usual petulant tone, grabbing the bundle of mail from me with both hands. He was still wearing his pajamas—a short-sleeved top and knee-length bottoms with Warner Brothers cartoon characters all over both, Bugs Bunny featured largest on the chest, munching a carrot. “So, Ryan,” I said, “are you feeling any better?”

He put one hand to his throat. “I might need my tonsils out. Because they keep swelling and stuff.”

“Don’t worry, that’s no big deal.”

“I’m not worried,” he scoffed with a slow roll of his eyes. “Do you think I’m a baby or something?”

“No, sir,” I laughed. “Forgive me, sir.”

Ryan didn’t seem to be listening. “I need to get them out and get all better by December ’cause that’s when the season starts.”

“Which season?”

“The swimming season,” Ryan informed me with another impatient roll of his eyes. “Don’t you know it’s from December to March?”

“What about during the summer?”

“That’s invitational stuff. For the YMCA team.”

“And winter?”

“That’s for the school team! Don’t you know anything about swimming?”

“Well, not very much,” I admitted, laughing again. There was something humorous in being chided so relentlessly by a nine-year-old. “I’ve seen things about you and Chad in the newspaper. Like last summer, when your picture was in there.”

“You saw my picture?”

“It was you doing the breaststroke,” I nodded. “You were the winner, of course.”

For the first time, Ryan actually smiled. A breeze spooked through the open doorway and ruffled his yellow mushroom-cap of hair. “I won three events that day,” he said. “Did you know that?”

“Yes, actually I did.”

“You’re lying.”

“No, it’s all true. I happen to be a big fan of the Fox brothers.”

“You’re just lying, I bet.”

“Careful, you’ll insult me,” I said. Ryan didn’t get the chance to respond. His mother appeared suddenly behind him and ordered him to shut the door. “I cannot believe you’re standing there in your pajamas,” she scolded, “with that cold air blowing on you!”

“It’s my fault, Mrs. Fox,” I said. “We were talking about Ryan’s swimming.”

The woman looked past her son and acknowledged me with the tiniest of polite smiles. I was just the mailman, an everyday part of the neighborhood scenery, of no particular importance or concern. “Now, young man,” she ordered the boy, “before you catch pneumonia!”

“Jeez, don’t have a major fit,” Ryan muttered, then shut the door without looking back. It never occurred to him, obviously, to say goodbye.

I didn't see him the next day, but he was back at the door on Saturday, still wearing his cartoon pajamas. As if no time had passed since our previous encounter, he immediately asked if I had ever seen one of his swimming meets.

"You mean in person?"

"Duh! Of course in person."

"No," I said, "just pictures in the paper, I'm afraid."

"See, I knew you were lying about being a big fan!"

"Now just wait a minute. . ."

"I can't stay here and get pneumonia," he informed me as he shut the door. I stood there staring straight ahead, unable to believe that he had vanished again so abruptly. Then I started laughing. What else could I do? The kid was a prize-winning brat, a comical little bundle of vanity and insults. A few weeks earlier I would have found myself obsessed with Ryan, weaving fantasies about what might eventually develop between us if only. . . if only. But now I had Pepper foremost on my mind. In just a few hours I would be picking him up and bringing him to my house for another sleepover—a sleepover requested by the boy himself as a way of being with me, being near me. How could I think of anything else?

CHAPTER SIX

Along with his familiar Nike gym bag, Pepper also had a brown leather case with him when I picked him up. It was his alto saxophone, which he played in the school band. Would it be OK, he wondered sweetly, to practice at my house? I was delighted, of course. “You’re just chock-full of different talents,” I told him. “Artist, musician, probably an athlete—if you wanted to be.”

“I’m not very good yet.”

“How long have you been playing?”

Pepper raised his eyes for a quick calculation, as if the numbers were somewhere above his head. “About two months, I guess.”

“Just this school year?”

“That’s why I’m not very good.”

“But do you like it?”

“I think pretty much I do,” he shrugged. We were just pulling into my driveway. Pepper twisted nearly backward to look across the street. “Where’s the Dill Pickle?”

No sooner had he mentioned the old woman than she appeared around the corner of her house, the big bamboo rake in her hands. She was on her way to the garage, not enough daylight left for her to keep working in the yard. “There she is,” I said, “as charming as ever.”

“She sure rakes a lot,” Pepper said, a grin creeping across his face. “She must like to rake.”

“She only does a tiny bit whenever the weather is nice. Anyway, it’s a good way for her to keep track of everybody else on the street.”

“Did she know I was coming?”

“She does seem to have some sort of spooky sixth sense.”

Pepper opened the door on his side of the car. “Is she like a witch?”

“In many ways,” I said. “Any minute now she might take off on that rake.”

Pepper let out a type of giggly laugh that I'd never heard from him before. "Maybe my curse won't work," he said, "because she's a witch." He started grappling with his gym bag and his saxophone case, backing clumsily from the car with his butt holding the door. I took the gym bag from him to lighten his load. With both of us outside in plain view, the woman paused on her way to the garage and took a good look, making no effort to disguise her curiosity. It seemed possible to me, much too possible, that she was thinking of Kurt Randall as she watched me and Pepper cross the yard and enter the house. "I'm keeping the faith," I said to the boy. "About your curse, I mean."

"Keeping the faith?"

"In other words, I'm hoping and praying that it works."

"You want her to drop dead?"

"I'd settle for a minor stroke," I said, putting Pepper's bag on the couch. "Just a little something to scramble her circuits, maybe cause some permanent disorientation." I waited as the boy carefully placed his saxophone case on the floor beside the couch, and as he pulled off his red sweatshirt, then I took him in my arms for a long-delayed hug. "Welcome back, Pepper. I'm glad you're here again."

He mumbled "OK" against my chest, awkward as always with any exchange of affection, his arms motionless at his sides. "So," I asked him, "what should we do tonight?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Should we go to a movie? Or to the mall? Anything on TV you want to watch?"

"Maybe we could go see Rocket Man," the boy proposed. "And then have tacos."

"What kind of tacos?"

"Like last week. If that's OK."

"So you did like those tacos from Casa Sierra," I said, my hands around his neck as if to strangle him. "You're such a little liar."

"Did I fool you?"

"Such a cute little liar," I added with a kiss to his forehead.

Later, as we were leaving for the movie, a police car came cruising past the house. The profile of it, with that big rack of lights on top, was ominous even in the darkness. It was moving slowly, the cop inside obviously watching for trouble. The notion that he might have been watching for me shriveled my guts with a jolt of fear. Had the old woman called the cops? Would she actually have gone that far? But then the cruiser kept going, the dark and sinister mass of it fading into the night as slowly as it had appeared, like some huge vampiric beast prowling through the moonlight.

A bit of fear stayed with me like a hangover as the night went on. At the theater, a multiplex with eight screens, I found myself glancing around for people I might know, for anyone who might recognize me and wonder about the young boy at my side. Twenty years earlier, even ten, I could have walked boldly in public surrounded by a gang of boyfriends with not a trace of self-conscious anxiety. A man and a boy together, back then, had not conjured automatic scenarios of molestation, of things unseemly and inappropriate. I had strolled often through downtown Sandburg, or through the crowded shopping mall, with my arm around Calvin or Bobby or one of my other friends, actually proud of our affection for one another, and always with a feeling of confidence. Now that confidence was gone, and there were no more safe havens. Love and sex had become media commodities, packaged and sold like cigarettes or beer, and only to authorized, state-sanctioned customers. Pepper and I didn't fit that correct demographic profile; we were like an alien blip on society's radar, easy to identify and easy to destroy.

At least, that was how I felt on that particular night. When we encountered two of Pepper's friends from school, I was happy to back away and let the kids play with the video games in the lobby arcade, wondering all the while if my date with the boy had been a mistake. Maybe my paranoia had ruined any possibility of pleasure between us. Maybe the guardians of sexual conformity had won after all, making any

attempt to defy their rules and their authority just too dangerous, an exercise in rebellious lunacy. Maybe this night with Pepper, I decided, should be our last.

The boy himself, of course, seemed cheerfully unaware of all these subliminal agonies. He played the video games with his friends; he bought himself popcorn and licorice sticks and a jumbo Coke at the refreshment stand; he enjoyed the movie. Afterwards he reminded me to stop at Casa Sierra for a carry-out bag of tacos, preferring to take them home for dinner in front of the television. "We can watch the Showtime channel," he suggested. "They have the awesomest movies."

"Anything special tonight?"

"Did you ever see Hook?"

I looked at him beside me in the car. His profile was softly washed by street lights and oncoming headlights, his chin lifted slightly and his Adam's apple silhouetted like a chunk of half-swallowed something in his throat. "Was it Hook you just asked about? The Peter Pan movie?"

"It's funny," Pepper nodded. "Do you want to see it?"

"Oh, I've seen it."

"Is it awesome?"

"Not exactly awesome," I said, marveling at this bit of synchronicity. "Why d'you like it so much?"

The bag of tacos rustled on Pepper's lap as he shifted his weight. "Don't you think Robin Williams is funny?"

"Is that all? Just Robin Williams?"

"I like the food fights and stuff. And when they have sword fights."

"My favorite character was Ruffio," I said, referring to the wildest and most combative of the Lost Boys in the film. "It was disappointing when he got killed. Sort of a surprise. I liked him best of all."

"Was it sad when Ruffio got killed?"

"A little sad. Didn't you think so?"

"I think it was a little sad," Pepper agreed, as if echoing my words made it safe for him to admit his own feelings.

“And,” I said, “I liked his red underwear. Remember?”

“Ruffio had red underwear?”

“When Peter Pan cut his belt and made his pants fall down.”

“He had red longjohns,” Pepper said, and I could tell without looking that he was smiling. “Were those his underwear?”

“What else could they have been?” “I didn’t think longjohns were underwear.”

We were on the street in front of my house. No police cars. Nothing out of the ordinary. “Underwear to you is. . . what exactly?”

“Just regular stuff.”

“Like Jockey underpants? Boxers and briefs? That sort of thing?”

“Yeah, like that.”

“Well,” I said, “we absolutely must watch Hook and take another look at Ruffio’s undergarments.”

As it turned out, the movie had already started by the time we got inside and settled onto the couch with our tacos and drinks. When it came to the scene of Ruffio losing his pants, I hit the “record” button to catch the moment on tape. We waited through the rest of the story, then returned quickly to the videotaped highlight, which I played in slow motion. “OK,” I said to Pepper, “here we see Ruffio’s pants coming down, and rather nice black leather pants they are. And here we see his red longjohns.”

“Why does he wear underwear like that?”

“It must have been a popular fashion in Never-Never Land,” I said, sipping from a bottle of Coors. “And otherwise he would have been naked when his pants came down.” I glanced at Pepper next to me on the couch. He was smiling at the silliness of our conversation. I backed up the tape once more and then ran it forward again in slow motion as the camera panned up Ruffio’s legs. I paused it on his crotch. “I’ll tell you another thing,” I said. “He’s not wearing anything else under his longjohns.”

“How do you know that?”

“Two reasons. First of all, there’s no outline of any shorts or briefs underneath. See? The longjohns are skintight, and there’s no outline, nothing but skin.” I glanced again at Pepper. He was staring at the screen, carefully following my description. “Am I right?”

“What’s the other reason?”

I advanced the image one frame at a time, then paused it again. “The other reason is right there. You can see. . . everything,” I stumbled, not sure at the last moment about my choice of words. “Do you see what I mean?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You can see his. . . his genitals,” I said, putting a comical emphasis on the word that made Pepper look at me and laugh. “Everything is right there in front, plain as day, can’t miss it.”

Pepper looked back toward the screen. He was slouched way down on his side of the couch, clutching his jumbo container of Coke (which he’d brought home from the theater) in both hands against his chest, clutching it like an infant with an oversized baby bottle. He had the white plastic straw loosely in his mouth, just chewing on it now that the soda was gone. “So that’s how you can tell there’s nothing else underneath?”

“Well, just look at him! There’s obviously nothing else between him and his longjohns, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” the boy said, chewing and chewing on the straw. “OK,” he added after a brief silence, “let’s watch something else now.”

I obliged him by stopping the tape. At almost the same moment, he sat up suddenly and reached for the brown leather case on the floor. “Oh man, I almost forgot about my saxophone!”

“Don’t panic, there’s still plenty of time for a midnight concert,” I told him.

“I’m not very good,” he warned again. “I only know a few things so far.”

I took the empty Coke container from his hand so that he could assemble the saxophone. He inserted the reed after moistening it thoroughly between his lips, then started blatting his way up and down the scales to warm up. He was right about his own lack of skill; and yet, as he finished the scales and started playing When The Saints Go Marching In with his body swaying to the rhythm, I could see and hear his feel for the music. "I think you're terrific," I told him honestly when he'd finished. "Better than I was expecting, to tell you the truth."

"I can play one more song."

"Hey, that's great, go ahead."

The boy straightened his posture to ready himself, took a moment to adjust his lips on the mouthpiece, then began a halting but plucky version of Louie Louie with his right foot keeping the beat. He went through the simple tune maybe a dozen times, like someone lost in a maze, finally just ending with a single loud squawk. I responded with "bravos" and applause. Pepper lowered the saxophone and looked timidly in my direction. "It doesn't really have an ending," he explained.

"I noticed that myself."

"It just ends whenever you feel like stopping."

"It was great, Pepper. Do you know anything else?"

"Not that I can really play."

"How about one more performance of the Saints song?"

"You want to hear it again?"

"Yes. I love listening to you play."

So, trying to suppress a proud grin, the boy carefully placed the shiny black mouthpiece between his lips and swayed through When The Saints Go Marching In one more time. I gave him another ovation and awarded him a kiss on the cheek. He put the disassembled instrument back into its leather case and then stood up, yawning. It was after midnight by then and both of us were starting to feel tired. Still seated on the couch with the boy standing beside me in that irresistible position, I reached out with my right hand and patted his behind. He just stood

there, yawning with both hands in front of his mouth. He was wearing red-and-black jungle-striped athletic pants made of lightweight cotton. I left my hand where it was on the seat of those pants, patting and patting in a sort of nonchalant way, like someone might pat casually or idly against the cushion of a chair. Just keeping my hand there while he stood and yawned and gazed at the TV. I could feel a pair of briefs under the blousy fabric, and I could feel the very leanest and hardest of muscle under those briefs. Not the tiniest bit of cushiony fat anywhere on his body, just thin and gristly muscle everywhere, including the rear end beneath my right hand. Not sure what else to do or say, I scrambled back to our earlier topic. "I bet I can tell what kind of underpants you're wearing."

Pepper looked down at me over his left shoulder, sleepy and unsmiling. "Why can you do that?" It seemed odd to me that he had used "why" instead of "how" in his question. "I'm good at guessing," I answered vaguely. "They're definitely not longjohns like Ruffio's." I rubbed my fingers against the jungle-striped seat of his pants, confirming what I already knew. "You, sir, are wearing briefs. Am I right?" Pepper nodded in silent confirmation. I kept going. "I need one more clue for guessing the brand," I told him, already lifting the back of his red T-shirt and his white undershirt, then folding down the top of his pants just far enough to see the waistband of his underwear. One blue pinstripe. One orange. "So," I concluded, "you're wearing Fruit of the Loom briefs. Correct?" He responded with another nod, still watching over his shoulder. As if merely to confirm my own guess, I took the final liberty of folding down the waistband of his underpants to see the label inside. "Yep, exactly like I said. Fruit of the Loom. Size 14." With the waistband down, I could just see the shadowy dimple where his tailbone met the crack of his butt. He didn't move, and neither did I, as if we were doctor and patient involved in some delicate examination. It was a moment that seemed frozen, teetering between fear and fulfillment, robbing me of breath. Pepper finally snapped the spell by turning

slightly to one side, dislodging my hands. “I’m going to the bathroom,” he said, a tone that seemed more question than statement.

“Go ahead,” I told him, sending him off with a final swat to the backside. “I’ll fix your bed.” He was halfway to the bathroom when he wheeled and came rushing back to the gym bag for his shorts. Then he was gone again, leaving me to pull out the couch and think about having his pants and his briefs in my hands, so close to having them down, all the way down. But really, not so close at all, because Pepper’s body was his to give and not mine to take, and he had shown no inclination to give it, not even with my hands on his butt. Or had he actually wanted me to assume control and do more? I was already familiar enough with Pepper to know the vitality of him, the warmth of his spirit, the delight he took in our friendship. To me, he seemed the same as any other boy in his openness to pleasure; he would be no different, I was convinced, in the eager enjoyment of his own body, in the gleeful hunger for new sensation, for sexual excitement, for hands exploring him and thrilling him.

But then I stopped and realized what I was doing, realized that I was pondering the future for me and Pepper—for the two of us together—just hours after deciding that we should probably not see each other again, that it was too dangerous. I needed to decide, somehow, which reality to pursue. How to decide, I didn’t know. Day by day, even hour by hour, I would need to evaluate our friendship, evaluate the risks, balance the one against the other and somehow make a decision. One thing I knew for sure: I didn’t want to become the next Kurt Randall on the evening news.

As I finished preparing his bed, I heard Pepper open the bathroom door and emerge with a creaking of floorboards into the hallway. I turned to see him, but there was no one behind me. No Pepper. I wandered to the hallway, thinking that the boy had detoured to the kitchen for a drink or a snack, when I discovered him unexpectedly in

my bedroom, in front of the dresser. "So here you are," I said, taking a step toward him. "Are you looking at your pictures?"

The boy turned, nodding. "You keep them in here?"

"Of course. So I can see you all the time," I said. We were talking about the Polaroids from his previous visit. They were stuck into the wooden frame of the mirror. "I told you that I'd put them here, remember?"

He nodded again as I stepped beside him and put my arm around his shoulders. "One thing you need to learn about me, Pepper, is that I keep my promises. You can trust me. I won't lie to you or break my word."

"OK," he said, talking to the reflection of me in the glass. He was wearing his lemon-yellow Nike shorts. His pants and socks were hugged against his chest in a sloppy bundle, one jungle-striped leg hanging loose like the pelt of some mutant red-and-black zebra. I touched his hair, which was still perfectly dry. "You didn't bother to wash tonight?"

"I took a shower this morning," Pepper said. We were making our way back to the living room. He pointed a thumb toward the bathroom as we passed. "Do I have to take another one now?"

"No, no, it's all right. I think you're clean enough. You don't stink, do you?" I bent down and stuck my nose into his armpit and started sniffing him, making him flinch with ticklish laughter. He broke away and threw his clothes at me, one smelly white sock hitting my face. I caught it before it dropped to the floor. "Not exactly fresh as a daisy," I said, dangling the sock between thumb and forefinger. Pepper scurried beneath the covers of his bed. "Do you have more film for your camera?" he asked.

"No, unfortunately."

"Why not?"

"It completely slipped my mind," I confessed. "I'm getting old and forgetful, you know." I laid his clothes on the floor next to his shoes, then sat myself on the other side of the bed with both legs stretched out on the mattress. "No pictures tonight, I'm afraid." He responded with a

quick “boo-hoo waaah!” as if disappointed. I gave his shoulder a poke. “Why boo-hoo? I thought you hated the camera.”

“No more pictures for your Pepper collection,” he said with a tremble of mock sadness in his voice.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get plenty of film for next time.”

This promise brought on another, even louder chorus of “boo-hoo waaah! cry-cry! boo-hoo!” from the boy beneath his covers. He met my eyes midway through his pretend fit of sobbing and started laughing instead, unable to stop himself. “You’re the silliest critter I’ve ever known,” I told him truthfully. I scooted a bit lower and rolled toward him to rest my hand on his arms, which were folded across his chest like the arms of some serene little dearly-departed. He closed his eyes as if to complete the resemblance. I studied his face while we lay there together, trying to memorize every detail of it: the flawless café-au-lait smoothness of the skin; the pointy arch of each eyebrow giving him an expression of elfin mischief even in repose; the moist prominence of his big, sulky bottom lip; the small but deep dimple in his chin like the imprint of a pinkie finger in brown dough. I tried to capture all of it in my mind’s eye, to keep that face with me forever.

I thought he had fallen asleep when he drowsily opened his eyes and turned his head in my direction. “Are you going to sleep here?”

“Is there enough room for two people?”

“Probably,” the boy said. “Do you think there’s enough?” “Feels comfortable to me. Have you ever shared a bed with another person before?”

Pepper had rolled himself slightly toward me while we were talking, the two of us nearly face to face now on the bumpy old mattress. “I don’t think so,” he answered. “Maybe with my mother when I was little. But I can’t remember for sure.”

“Well, to be honest, I wouldn’t mind snoozing here for a while.” I moved my hand up his arm and slipped it behind his neck, easing my fingers into the curliness of his hair. “Is this all right? Are you cozy?”

I could feel his head nodding OK. “Should I go to sleep now?” he asked. “Are you going to sleep?”

“It’s up to you,” I murmured back across the few inches between us. “Do whatever you want.”

That was how our night ended. Pepper closed his eyes while I held his head and watched him. I could have groped him beneath the covers after he’d fallen asleep; I could have undressed him down to the bare skin, no doubt, and done whatever; he would have allowed it, I’m sure, in his dreamy, befuddled stupor. But I did nothing of the sort. I had told Doc that a friendship between me and Pepper would be enough, that I would be satisfied with his affection, with the warmth of his company. And it was true. I was satisfied, for the moment, for now, to hold him, to watch him, to adore him. I was satisfied. It was enough.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Pepper and I decided, when I took him home Sunday afternoon, that he should come for weekend visits whenever the two of us were free—or until he became bored with the arrangement. Holly, although pleased with our friendship, warned me against her son's pushiness. "He'll take advantage of you, Jake, if you let him."

"You're always exaggerating," I told her.

"You don't know him the way I do."

"Well, that's true, but. . ."

"I don't want him becoming a pest," she said, eyeing the twelve-year-old suspect beside her. We were standing, all three of us, in their living room, Pepper still holding his gym bag in one hand and his saxophone case in the other. "Don't let him interfere with your regular plans every weekend."

"He won't be interfering with. . ."

"Anyway," Holly continued, "we won't be here next weekend. Remember, Pepper? We're going to Joliet for your Grammy's birthday."

"That's fine," I shrugged. "Maybe the weekend after that, right? We'll wait and see what happens."

Just a few minutes later, I was on my way to Doc's house. Two cartons of English Ovals and a case of Coors were on the passenger seat beside me. "You see," I announced first thing upon arriving, "I finally remembered your cigarettes. Plus some beer to replenish my supply."

Doc was watching his old Zenith television when I came in (the front door, as ever, was unlocked). He looked at me and muttered something about a breadstick. I circled behind him to leave my beer in the kitchen, then came back with his cigarettes. "What did you say, Doc? I didn't hear you."

"That Pillsbury Doughboy creature," he said, pointing to the TV. "I said that someone should sodomize him with a breadstick."

“With plenty of sesame seeds,” I added. “Here, take your cigarettes.”

Doc held up the one he was smoking. “As fate would have it, Jacob, I just bought some this week. But thank you. They won’t go to waste, needless to say. Just put them on the table.”

“So you drove into town?”

“I was feeling very energetic this week,” Doc nodded. “Going through my overseas material must have started the emotional juices flowing.”

“Did you finish?”

“Finish? Not exactly. The material seems to break down into three sections. Portugal, Spain, Morocco. I’ve only managed to resuscitate Portugal so far.”

“You’ve never mentioned being in Portugal or Spain,” I said. “I thought you lived in North Africa.”

“Mostly, yes. In Morocco. But Spain and Portugal were just a short trip away on the ferry. I traveled back and forth.”

“And now you have the Portugal material ready? Can I see it?”

“I suppose so, but. . . I’m not sure how interesting, or even coherent, you’ll find it. Do you understand? It’s just a collage of memories and impressions, never meant for public consumption.”

“I’ve already heard this disclaimer,” I said. Doc finally agreed to part with the first batch of material, passing it to me in a manila envelope like a spy handing over stolen documents. I put the envelope with my jacket and cap for inspection later, at home.

That completed, Doc inquired eagerly about my current situation with Pepper, which we discussed as afternoon dimmed and hushed into evening. We finished the day with a dinner of catfish and rice and acorn squash while watching a video of old Menudo highlights. Doc provided an animated commentary on the relative merits of various Menudo members throughout the years, smiling the entire time at the inanity of the topic. “No one could compare to Rawy Torres in his prime,” he

concluded with his mouth full of catfish. “The finest specimen of Menudo-ism, in my humble opinion.”

“You’re in an awfully good mood,” I laughed.

“I’ll tell you how good,” Doc said. “I finally answered one of those fan letters this past week.”

“Now you’re talkin! Whose letter?”

“Believe it or not, he’s a young man from this area. Stonerville, to be exact.”

“That’s only a few miles away.”

“Which is why I finally decided to get in touch with him. The whole affair is an amazing coincidence, really.” Doc paused to set aside his empty plate and to wipe his mouth and bearded chin with a pocket handkerchief. “He’s been writing to my old publisher in New York, an address he got from a book of short stories I did twenty years ago. Three letters in total.”

“And your publisher forwarded them from New York?”

“That’s right.”

“So this fan of yours doesn’t even know that you live here in Sandburg, just minutes away?”

“Well, he knows now,” Doc said. “But there hasn’t been time for him to respond yet.”

I set my plate on top of Doc’s and cleaned my mouth with a swig of beer. “OK, so what about his name and age and other goodies? Do I get the details or not?”

“His name is Frankie Patallero and he’s sixteen years old, I believe.”

“Aha,” I grinned, “an actual honest-to-god boy! This is exciting stuff!”

“He mentioned being sixteen in his first letter, but that was written last summer, so I’m not sure about. . .”

“Regardless, he’s a high school kid hot to meet you. My oh my. I’m all a-twitter with anticipation!”

“Don’t get too excited yet,” Doc said. He pushed himself stiffly to his feet and ambled to the pot-bellied stove across the room. “Honestly, I can’t imagine anything developing between me and this Patallero lad. I’m nothing but an ugly old goat, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“Not so old, and definitely not ugly.”

“You’re blinded by fondness and loyalty, I’m afraid.”

“Both of us are suffering from the same problem, that’s all.”

Doc was poking at the fire in the stove. “And what would that be?”

“Fear, of course. No self-confidence. Too many years in our lonely ruts, cut off from the company of boys.”

“Stage fright, in other words.”

“That’s exactly what it is,” I said. “Like a performer coming out of retirement. Don’t you think so?”

“Of course. How could a reasonably intelligent person not be afraid in today’s police state? But understanding the cause doesn’t necessarily mitigate the effect. I repeat, Jacob, don’t get too excited.”

I convinced Doc, after he had finished poking at the fire, to show me Frankie’s three letters. They were rather ordinary fan letters, all addressed to Mr. Charles Wilson and handwritten in blue ballpoint pen, filled with admiration for Doc’s stories and poems, with words of respect and gratitude, with timid hopes that Doc might possibly see fit to respond at some point in the future. “Bu if you don’t,” the youngster wrote, “I will understand, because I am sure you are a very busy man.”

His second and third letters expressed increasing concern that Doc might not be receiving his correspondence, along with repeated expressions of nearly reverent praise for Doc’s work, including: “I would probably be dead if it wasn’t for your stories. They are definitely the best stories in the world. Most of them are like my own life and make me feel like you’re writing about me.”

It was in his first letter that Frankie wrote in greatest detail about himself, revealing his age and other vital statistics (five foot seven, 120

pounds, brown eyes, hair that he described as “sort of dark blond”) and concluding with a charmingly awkward description of his own sexuality:

I guess you must know that I’m gay, and yes I am. I have known since I was a little kid that I’m gay, because I was always looking at other boys and thinking about them. I had one friend who was like a real boyfriend when I was in eighth grade, and then last year I did stuff with an older guy from my neighborhood. He’s gone now but that’s how I got your book and wrote to you. Of course I think being gay is JUST FINE, especially now since I’m older and I understand it much better. THANKS MOSTLY TO YOUR STORIES!!! I like younger boys too, the same as you, but I also like men, so I guess I just like all kinds of guys. That probably makes me a SEX FIEND (ha, ha!). I hope you don’t think all of this is stupid.

“This kid sounds like a total doll,” I told Doc after reading all three letters. “Shame on you for keeping him dangling (pardon the expression) for so long.”

“Stage fright, you know.”

“What did you say to him in your letter?”

“That’s a bit personal, don’t you think?”

“Did you invite him here for a visit?”

Doc blew smoke at me from his chair. “It was mostly just an announcement of my whereabouts. Plus a thank-you for his bountiful compliments.”

“That’s all?”

“It seemed like a good idea to start slowly and cautiously. After all, I’m not sure how safe or confidential his mail might be. I wouldn’t want his mother or father opening a letter of sexual proposition from a strange man.”

“You have a point there, Doctor.”

“I shouldn’t have to explain the need for caution to you, Jacob, of all people. Especially given your situation with Khalid. Now how about a game of chess? Do you have time?”

I glanced at my watch. “Enough time for you to beat me. Same as always.”

It took less than an hour for Doc to capture my queen, and then I was back in my car, on my way home. A weather forecast on the radio was predicting rain and cold for the coming week, not good news for a mailman. But my thoughts about the weather were abruptly swept aside when I turned the corner onto Whitman Street. There were red and blue and amber lights flashing in front of my house, strobing like a psychedelic nightmare up and down the entire block. Immediately I pulled to the curb and tried to regain control of my breathing, and of the frantic thumping of my heart. This is it, I thought. This is the fatal moment; the midnight Gestapo raid; the end of my freedom, of my life, of everything.

Then I looked more carefully. The fist squeezing my heart relaxed its grip as I recognized the size and shape of an ambulance in front of my house. Or, more accurately, in front of the Dillon house. Also one police car and a small fire department vehicle. Slowly, I moved away from the curb and drove the remaining distance to my house, where a cop mistook me for a rubbernecker and waved for me to keep going. I rolled down my window and explained that I lived just across the street, that I merely wanted to enter my driveway. The cop backed away to let me move forward and make my turn.

After parking, I wandered out to the sidewalk where a small group of neighbors had already gathered. They began that eager clamor of all witnesses to a crime or an accident or any other type of disaster, whether large or small, each of them competing morbidly to be the herald of bad news. I listened and listened as the red and blue and amber lights swirled around us, the whole block illuminated like some hellish carnival

midway. What I discovered was fairly simple: Mrs. Dillon, whose first name turned out to be Helen, had collapsed in her upstairs bedroom earlier in the evening. Had it been a stroke? A heart attack? Or had she simply fallen and injured herself? Perhaps broken her hip? No one knew for sure. Someone did know, however, that she had managed to reach her bedside phone and call 911. Police and fire personnel had been needed to break through the locked doors downstairs, which had been heavily secured and burglar-proofed. Now, as we stood and watched, the old woman was wheeled down the front walk on a stretcher and placed into the ambulance. One member of our group, a young man named Ricardo, approached the cop in the street and started fishing for information, but ended up getting nothing beyond an assurance that the woman was still alive. No other details. We waited there until all three emergency vehicles had departed into the night, then returned home to our own mundane affairs.

I still felt shaky when I got inside. I left the envelope of Doc's material in the living room, on the couch, then took a long and lazy bath to relax. The bathroom still had its original 1950s décor, black tiles halfway up the walls and then forty-year-old poodle wallpaper to the ceiling in colors of black and silver and green and pink. There were gentlemen poodles in top hats and lady poodles in sunbonnets; poodles shopping and poodles picking flowers; young poodle sweethearts and old poodle married couples out on promenade, strolling paw in paw. Something about that little poodle universe was strangely soothing, especially when enjoyed from the womb-like security of a warm bath.

I wondered, while I stared at the wallpaper, if there would be enough room for both me and Pepper in the old tub—should such an opportunity someday arise. Or would it be more fun to take a shower with him? I could vividly imagine either scenario: the warm and intimate languor of the bath, or the soapy and playful vigor of the shower. Touching him all over. Slippery and naked. Would he have pubic hair

yet? Probably not. He had just turned twelve in early October and still had the look, to my eyes, of a smooth little pre-adolescent.

So much fantasizing had left me uncomfortably aroused. For the first time in years I masturbated while still in the bath, desperate for relief from thinking about the boy, imagining the boy, craving the boy. Meanwhile, the poodles went about their never-ending business of strolling and shopping and picking flowers.

Back in the living room, I settled in front of the TV with a cold beer and a bowl of buttered popcorn. Doc's Portugal material was beside me on the couch. With my grease-free hand I opened the little brass clasp on the manila envelope and shook the manuscript halfway out. I was surprised by the meager number of pages, only about a dozen in total, all of them double-spaced on Doc's ancient Hermes typewriter, a decrepit manual with a broken "e" that hovered above the other letters like page after page of follow-the-bouncing-vowel. I took a peek at the first line, then decided to stop, too tired for anything more mentally strenuous than gazing stupidly at the ten o'clock news. Another report about Kurt Randall was in progress, with a professionally earnest female reporter presenting safety tips for protecting our children against "the sexual predators lurking among us." Fear, it seemed, was everywhere, like a plague spreading.

It was at that very moment, while I was clearing my throat to dislodge a kernel of popcorn, that the realization finally hit me: Pepper's curse on the old woman had actually worked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Monday was rainy and cold, just as forecast on the radio. Trying to keep the mail covered and dry was the day's only adventure. Ryan failed to make an appearance when I stopped at the Fox house, even though I lingered a moment longer than necessary on the front porch. Was he in the hospital to have his tonsils removed? Or was he back in school? I could only wonder.

After work I did a quick stop-and-shop at Wal-Mart for a new pack of Polaroid film, just to have it handy for Pepper's next visit. I had heard from his mother (who was back working at the post office) that the boy was pouting over his upcoming trip to Joliet for his grandmother's birthday, upset that he couldn't spend the weekend with me. I had promised her, over our morning coffee and donuts, that I would call Pepper and discuss the situation with him, which I did as soon as I arrived home. He answered the phone himself, after only one ring, as if he'd been waiting to grab it. I reassured him that he could visit me in two weeks, that the time would pass quickly, that he would have fun in Joliet with all of his cousins. Then I told him about the old woman. "It's sort of scary," I concluded, "but maybe your curse really did its job."

He seemed more intrigued by the news than surprised. "It took a while to work," he said. "Is she dead?" "I don't think so. But she's definitely not in good shape."

"Will she come back?" "I have no idea." "Probably she won't," Pepper decided. "Is her house empty now?" Yes, I told him, it was empty. No one would be spying on us, at least for a while. Then, before saying goodbye, I mentioned that I had just bought a new pack of film for my camera. I could hear the smile come into Pepper's voice as he said, "But pictures are evil!"

"I thought you changed your mind about that," I said. "Remember?"

“Oh yeah,” the boy laughed softly. “I forgot.”

“We need more pictures for my Pepper collection,” I reminded him, then stopped myself abruptly, realizing the indiscretion of such a conversation over the phone. I ended by wishing him a fun time in Joliet, and by saying that I would miss him, and then I hung up.

After a dinner of leftover tacos from Casa Sierra, I settled myself comfortably on the couch with Doc’s manuscript. Again the question occurred to me: Shouldn’t there really be more than these few pages? Did Doc forget to include the rest? Wondering, I began to read:

Lisbon, in the year of turmoil 1968, is a gray eternity of drizzle, a labyrinth of stones the color of bruises. Strong coffee in tiny cups and greasy steak sandwiches called bifanas are what I eat everyday at the Bar Bristol off the Rue Santo Antão—nowhere near my hotel, the Residencial Mansarde, but there are boys here, shoeshine boys—a quiet corner of the town closed to auto traffic, meaning not so much choking black exhaust and lunatic clamor. Not many tourists now in late September. Makes me more conspicuous as a foreign prowler in this ancient Lusitanian metropolis by the sea.

One boy in particular: His name is Jorge, pronounced “Zhorzha” in Portuguese, that language of slushy sibilants like drunken Spanish. He ambles to my table at the Sol Dourado (next door to the Bar Bristol), lugging his shoeshine box in front of him with both hands. It bangs against his knees with each lazy step as he surveys the customers, his head bobbing slowly to some inner rhythm. I sit at my table in a splash of streetlight with a plate of grilled swordfish and a salad of lettuce and green tomatoes and raw, sweet onions—watching him, waiting for him, we’ve done this before, he knows me as the American who gives him money for no reason. He wears a navy-blue soccer jersey with two white stripes on each short sleeve, black jeans (are they denim?) with the zipper partially down showing a flash of lime-green something underneath, sneakers with no socks. His dirty ankles are clearly visible

because both pant legs are rolled up to the knees. I asked him days ago how old he is, and he said, “Catorze.” Fourteen.

Fourteen years old.

Which may or may not be true. He looks even younger with his round ragamuffin face always smudged with dirt or shoe polish and his plump slightly babyfat behind. He comes and goes like a tomcat that moves in and out of the shadows, always with a mysterious Mona Lisa grin. He counts his money as a frequent pastime on one of the stone window ledges across the way (a bank, appropriately). He demands twenty escudos (“veent-escoosh!”) for a shine, refusing to haggle. I let him do my shoes every evening either here or at the Bar Bristol, with my hand on his shoulder as he hunkers and does his job. He lets me touch him. I can feel the flex of muscles beneath his navy-blue soccer jersey. I give him cigarettes. I buy him bifanas and Cokes, which he eats and drinks at my table, sitting beside me using his shoeshine box as a seat.

He had brown hair long and stringy when I first saw him, now it's shaved close to the scalp like a reformatory haircut. Jorge says he likes it because it's cool and then gives his own scalp a quick rub with one hand to illustrate. We talk haltingly as my rudimentary Portuguese permits. An old lottery-seller shuffles up the street braying like a donkey through his megaphone, and I say, “Como um burro.” The boy laughs with his head ducking rhythmically and I laugh along with him. When he finishes laughing and stares at me, I touch his shoulder and ask, “What? O quê? What is it?” Nothing, nothing, he answers, and I stroke the back of his head, feeling his crewcut hair bristly beneath my hand.

He goes. He comes again. It's a long walk to see him every day, twice a day, maybe a dozen blocks from my pensão on the Avenida de Liberdade where I live on the fifth floor, no elevator, 125 steps up to my room, I know because I counted them one day to distract from the monotonous ascent. I live there because the Residencial Mansarde is cheap and clean and has plenty of hot water in the bath down the hall,

but also and mostly because it has no lobby or reception area (the desk is down the hall from the fifth-floor entrance, in the opposite direction from my room), making it possible for visitors to arrive and depart unseen. It's eerily quiet and unsupervised here—no other guests in the halls or in the bath—no management at the desk whenever I wander that way for a peek—no sound of voices or TV or music from a radio—always a faint odor of boiled cabbage, or of something vaguely sulfurous, but no sound, no other people, like a ghost hotel conjured in some daydreamy swoon.

Jorge wears his pants rolled up because of a big scabby abrasion on his left shin, and because the friction of pant leg against abrasion is too painful. When he comes back to my room for the first time, it's for me to treat his injury with amateur remedies of Johnson & Johnson first-aid cream and three Band-Aids stuck side by side by side to cover the whole gooey mess. His fly is always partially open, I realize now seeing it so close, because the zipper is broken, torn loose from the fabric halfway up. I give him a small bottle of Coke which has been cooling in the sink, in cold water, something to drink while he looks at the pictures in a Superman comic book that I brought with me from the airport in New York. His shoeshine box is still at the Bar Bristol, against the wall by the door where the proprietor will watch it until the boy returns. Jorge sips his Coca-Cola and smiles at the pictures and smokes one of my cigarettes, the light from the fifth-floor window dim on his back—evening light, the window facing west over an El Greco hillside of purple-gray stones and orange roof tiles.

Fifteen minutes later and he's on his way out, down the hallway with its dark green carpet speckled black as if crawling with ants. He stops to use the toilet in the banho, rancid cabbagey smell of sewer gas strongest here as I stand in the doorway and watch him, watch him, watch him. No one else in the hallway. No one at the desk. No sound but the boy splashing into the toilet. Letting me watch while he watches

himself, while he smiles just as he smiled at the pictures in the comic book.

To Lisbon and to Jorge I've returned after weeks away—many lazy weeks in the south on the beaches of the Algarve, wasting each day beneath the sun of late summer. Sagres, where a teenager from Mozambique wonders if he might have my Converse sneakers as we stand on a windy cliff above the Atlantic. Burgos, where local boys play soccer and run races in the sand for a furtive audience of expatriate Brits and Germans—nimble boys, brown as pagans, nearly naked in next-to-nothing briefs, shameless itty-bitty scraps of elastic unimaginable on any American youngster, some held together by the flimsiest of little strings tied at each hip. I sit on a blanket and roast like a capon, staring.

To Lagos, a fishing village where I sleep on the beach and wake to the music of playful young voices, to the sight of boys like seal pups diving from jetties and piers into the sun-speckled harbor. They seem to perform for my benefit with sly glances and frenetic stunts. Some wear swimming trunks of saggy nylon—some wear underpants soaked and transparent—some wear nothing at all as they leap and spin and splash. A blond lad helping to load his father's fishing skiff wades in the shallow surf. His white T-shirt has no sleeves and his ragged shorts are the same pale blue as the morning sky. He turns to face the beach and pulls up the right leg of his shorts to bare himself while he drains his own water into the seawater lapping at his sun-browned knees.

Here, in Lagos, on a veranda overlooking the harbor, I eat tiny clams in garlicky butter with hunks of chewy bread and a bottle of vinho verde. Here, in sleepy Lagos, I befriend a lonely fisherboy who borrows my pocketknife to cut his tangled line. We sit on the concrete breakwater without speaking as gulls swoop and squawk overhead. The breeze brings us smells of saltwater and sand and stale fish, of foam and seaweed and clammy mudflats. We say nothing until we say goodbye.

At night, I share the beach with two backpacking hippies and their girlfriends beneath a silver-dollar moon. Our conversation is long and various and fueled by wine and marijuana—discussions of Vietnam and politics and assassinations—rambling rhetoric of defiant idealism against a backdrop of surf and starlight. What, they ask, is a cat my age doing out here by himself? Am I for or against the war? I'm against it, I tell them, and I'm here as a seeker and a lover of Ephebus, as a devotee of the Greek Ideal, as a worshipper of youth and beauty. That's cool, they say in dopey affirmation—it's all about peace and love, man—everybody has a right to do their own thing, you know—it's groovy to be into any kind of love trip, man, just so everybody is cool about it, you know, having a good time and digging the positive energy.

We talk on and on, the five of us, through the soft August night. The tragedy of King and Kennedy, both killed earlier in the year, Bobby just two months ago, a bloody mess—whoever speaks the truth shall die, I quote, and the hippie kids in their headbands and beads say yeah, man, that's exactly the freakin way of it, the truth is what the establishment can't handle, man, the freakin truth. Like in Chicago, one of the girls says. She reminds me of a gypsy with her long dress and her arms jangling with bracelets to the elbows. Like in Chicago, she says, just two days ago, did I hear about it? Did I hear, she wants to know, they all want to know, about Abbie and Jerry in Chicago and what happened when the pigs went crazy? When the whole world finally got to see the fascist pigs in action? Yes, I tell them, I heard about it. They're excited now, reveling vicariously in this faraway triumph—such a gas, man, such a trip—doesn't matter who gets elected in November, whether it's Tricky Dick or the Hump, doesn't matter, man, because politicians are all a total drag and it's time for a new Aquarian age of love and peace and good vibes, nothing but good vibes—like the Beatles said, man, all you need is love.

Yes, we all agree, the answer resides in the bright sphere of love and beauty, in the sweet rapture of loving and being loved, in the primal embrace of nature and its aboriginal pleasures. Maybe the world is

changing, really changing in deep and profound ways—a revolution of the human spirit with a final abolition of bigotry and intolerance—yeah, that’s it, total liberation from establishment hang-ups and inhibitions—go naked if you want, smoke pot, drop acid, live in the forest, join a commune—indulge in free love, no restrictions, no rules, doesn’t matter if you dig chicks or guys, age is just a number—if it feels good, man, just do it!

I can still hear their ecstatic proclamations long after they’ve departed for points east, on their way to Spain. Something like hope tickles at the back of my mind. A revolution of the human spirit. Free love. If it feels good. . . yes, something like hope murmurs its elusive song, teases with its distant vision of happiness. Follows me back to Lisbon, to the city of shoeshine boys and chill Atlantic drizzle where I find the long-distance telephones in the Praça do Pedro IV—where I call friends and family in the United States for the first time in many aimless months—where I wonder about returning, just perhaps, to that land of gray conformity across the sea.

Now is when I find the Residencial Mansarde and haunt its dreary hallways like some skittish phantom. Now is when I return to the Bar Bristol and renew my acquaintance with Jorge—familiar to me from an earlier trip through Lisbon when his hair hung long and scraggly to his collar. I hardly recognize him at first, but it’s definitely him grinning and nodding and ambling from table to table with his box clunk-clunk-clunking against his knees. He doesn’t recognize me, no reason he should, so I follow him to his resting place in front of the bank, to the stone ledge where he sits and counts his money. He asks if I want a shine. No, no, I say, not tonight, maybe tomorrow, and I pat the side of his head and hand him twenty escudos. We meet again the next day, and the day after that, summer becoming autumn during our time together—somehow I can’t end this flirtatious dance between the two of us—something about this teenager with the dirty ankles and the dirty face

keeps me here, waiting here, one week, two weeks, the sky turning grayer, the rain colder.

It's nearly the end of September when he comes to my room and drinks a Coke while I put first-aid cream and Band-Aids on his left shin. I discover, through our scraps of conversation, that he lives across the square from the Bar Bristol in a little apartment above the Galo Vermelho, a tiny churrasqueira eatery where the owner cooks chicken on a charcoal grill on the sidewalk. I can see Jorge's window at night while I drink wine and smoke English Ovals—his window like a sorcerer's glass high and dimly golden above the crowd of midnight imbibers—distant and inscrutable, it makes the boy's world seem farther away, not closer—his world, his home, never mine, never possibly mine.

A fat man playing Cielito Lindo on an accordion strolls past my table. It's noon of some other day, all days indistinguishable beneath Lisbon's damp and sooty sky—Jorge beside me on his box, swallowing a last mouthful of chocolate gelado. He rolls up his left pant leg and points to the lone Band-Aid on his shin, the other two fallen off. Do I have more? Yes, I tell him, and we begin the trek back to my hotel. Two young men from Asia (maybe India or Pakistan) are walking hand-in-hand along the Avenida de Liberdade. Jorge nudges my arm and smirks. I'm expected to smirk back at the sight of these sissy tourists, a joke for us to share, but I only shrug and keep moving. A quick stop at a kiosk for cigarettes. Jorge takes one when I open the pack and then cups his hand over my hand holding my Zippo to catch a light.

No one at the hotel. Even the ground-floor lobby of the building is empty, always empty and dark and pungent with mildew—part of one inside wall demolished, chunks of wood and plaster vomited onto the floor near the entrance. The boy follows me up the 125 stairs, his footsteps like echoes of my own steps in the tomb-dead silence. He sits on the edge of my bed which creaks beneath his sudden weight. When I

kneel to treat his leg, he reaches into the pocket of my shirt where I keep my paper money and counts out five hundred escudos for himself, impatient with me and my ambivalence, impatient for what seems inevitable between us.

He takes off his tattered sneakers. Takes off his own pants, the black ones with the broken zipper. Takes off the green shorts (some type of snug lime-green soccer shorts) that he wears underneath. He leaves on his navy-blue jersey with the two white stripes on each short sleeve and leans back so that he's resting on his elbows, watching me, grinning his mysterious grin—faraway sounds of the city drifting to us through the open window, a little balcony beyond, a pigeon on the railing—it ruffles its feathers in the rain, its eye is on us, it seems to stare at me, at the boy, at the bed that creaks and creaks in noisy complaint and then, at last, goes silent.

Jorge stays on the bed for long indolent minutes afterwards in blue soccer jersey and nothing else, drinking Coca-Cola and smoking another of my cigarettes. I steal a swig from his bottle of warm soda to clean my mouth, then take gentle hold of his bare leg to do the job interrupted earlier, disinfecting and bandaging his shin. When he finally sits upright and dresses and starts to leave, we mumble a brief goodbye and shake hands. He takes three more cigarettes with him on his way out the door.

It's late in the evening, nearly dark, when I venture outside for something to eat, something to drink, stopping at the first café I see just two blocks from my hotel. One of the young hippies who seem to be everywhere is at the table next to mine, both of us beneath the sidewalk awning to avoid the cold, endless drizzle. He wants to discuss the riots in Chicago—tells me later about seeing a concert in San Francisco with Janice Joplin and some band called Quicksilver Messenger Service—asks me where I'm going next, after Lisbon. I'm not sure, I tell him.

It seems noisy here and crowded, very different from the quiet neighborhood around the Bar Bristol off the Rue Santo Antão. The boy orders another carafe of green wine. He's on his way back to America in two days. Maybe I should also return home, he suggests, because of all the wild shit happening there, man, really far-out shit, time to go home, join the revolution, make a difference. Yes, I say to him, perhaps soon. But first I might go south, back to Lagos or beyond, back to someplace warm. I'm tired of all this rain, I tell the boy, smiling at him. I might go south, far enough to find the sun.

Doc's manuscript was on my lap. Maybe five minutes had passed since I'd finished reading it. The television was on and I was thankful for it, anything to fill the silence of the house which suddenly felt so empty, so forlorn. It seemed that I should call Doc, just to hear his voice, but of course he had no phone. Instead, I picked up the manuscript once more and stared at it. Something was wrong. A nice little story, yes, but definitely no memoir. The chronology was out of whack, Doc's description of Lisbon not quite appropriate to 1968, to the fascist Portugal of Salazar's regime. He seemed to be combining elements from various of his trips over many years, also from other stories he'd written, even from movies he'd seen. Why such a mishmash? In some hard-to-explain way, it just didn't feel like Doc and his usual work. There was something a little troubling about it, a little strange.

CHAPTER NINE

That November week seemed to creep forward from day to uneventful day, with a bit of rain followed by a bit of sun, with cold and frost followed by the sweet warmth of Indian summer. When Saturday evening came and brought no visit from Pepper, I found myself feeling strangely restless, with nothing to anchor my energy. Being without a boy in the house no longer seemed like an ordinary ho-hum deprivation; Pepper's absence was like the silence after music, suddenly apparent as a stark and unsettling emptiness.

More and more, that boyless silence was becoming intolerable. I seemed to be drifting helplessly away from my old complacency, closer and closer to a place of daily temptation and daily risk. Earlier that same Saturday I had encountered one of those agents of temptation who seemed to be sneaking from various directions into my life. At the Fox house, Ryan had been outside raking the last of autumn's fallen leaves, collecting them in plastic trash bags that he left piled by the curb for the garbageman. He was wearing an orange sweatshirt and an orange stocking cap, both of them embossed with the name of BUTLER MIDDLE SCHOOL in bold white letters and with the school's snarling tiger mascot. He was also wearing a Walkman, so didn't hear me or see me until I stepped beside him in the front yard. He removed his headphones with a scowl of impatience and leaned against his big bamboo rake. I said, "So you're all better now."

"Yeah, like obviously," he answered, his freckly nose scrunched as he looked up at me, squinting against the sun. There were two teeny-tiny moles on his left cheek like twin pinpoints of chocolate. "Are you surprised or something?"

"I thought you were going to have your tonsils taken out."

"They got better, so the doctor said I could wait," the boy explained. "Why d'you have that stupid towel?"

"This towel? On my shoulder strap?"

"What's it for? It looks stupid."

“It’s an old mailman’s trick,” I said. “You wrap a towel around the strap to cushion it against your shoulder. These bags are heavy, in case you didn’t realize.”

Ryan let his rake drop to the ground and held out both hands. “Here,” he demanded suddenly, “let me carry it.”

I laughed but decided to go along with him and give him the bag, slipping the towel-wrapped leather strap over his head and onto his shoulder. The bag was loaded with just an average amount of mail, but it was enough to make the boy list awkwardly to one side. “It’s not so bad,” he insisted, tugging at the strap to keep it from digging into his neck. “It’s not very heavy at all.”

“Could you carry it around for six hours every day?”

“I could carry it around for ten hours,” Ryan promptly responded, with no trace of a smile. Pepper might have improvised some similar bit of nonsense, but he would have meant it as a joke, as a way of teasing me. Not Ryan: He was as serious as ever in his little cocoon of smugness and vanity. A puff of breeze sent dry leaves skittering over and around his shoes, a pair of fancy Air Jordans that appeared to be practically new out of the box. The boy started across the yard with my bag, the weight of it against his hip making him walk with an exaggerated limp (like Jorge with his shoeshine box, I thought, smiling). “You see,” he called back to me, “I can carry it easy!”

“Yeah, terrific, you can inherit my route in ten years.”

“That’s real funny.”

“You don’t want to be a mailman, huh?”

Ryan came hobbling back from his brief trip across the yard. “That’s real funny,” he said again. “Don’t you know that I want to be a pilot?”

“I hadn’t heard that news, no, sorry.”

“I’m going to be a pilot and fly fighters in the Navy. Didn’t you ever see Top Gun?”

“Yes, I’ve seen Top Gun. So you want to grow up and become Tom Cruise?”

“It’s not a joke.”

“I’m not making fun of you, Ryan.”

“Just wait and see,” he said, slipping the bag off his shoulder and letting it drop to the ground. “I’ll be a pilot, that’s for positive sure.”

“How about picking up my bag there, Top Gun, and giving it back.”

The boy made a face that was a bit exasperated but also a bit sheepish as he stooped for the bag and lifted it by the strap with both hands, then stepped forward and held it out. I took it from him and thanked him with an elaborate bow and flourish. “And now, young sir, I must be on my way.”

Ryan didn’t answer, just turned and put the headphones on again over his orange stocking cap, an awkward fit that took a few moments of careful adjustment. Like all of our encounters, this one ended with no word of goodbye, nothing but Ryan turning his back on me as if I’d already left.

That evening, that same dreary Saturday evening, continued to tick-tock-tick forward in quiet slow motion. I scanned the obituaries in the local newspaper for the second time that day, checking for Helen Dillon’s name. Not there. Not yet. I already knew, from a tiny item in last Monday’s edition, that the old woman had fallen and broken her hip and was convalescing at Silver Cross Hospital, where she was listed in serious condition. I decided, with nothing else to do and with my curiosity nagging at me, to call the hospital. The nurse on duty was happy to cooperate as soon as I identified myself as the woman’s son. She told me that “my mother” was resting peacefully, still hooked up to the IV, that her hip was mending but her pneumonia was a bit worse, divulging everything as if I were already familiar with the details. From her over-solicitous tone, I could only assume that the situation was grave.

I wandered to the window after finishing my call to the hospital. It was already dark, the days becoming shorter and shorter in November’s

gloomy grip. The house across the street was illuminated in front by its yellow porch lights, one on either side of the door in faux Victorian holders. Earlier in the week I had seen a young couple in and out of the house with bags and boxes, both the man and the woman busy-looking and grim and saying very little, obviously putting the house in order for their mother, or perhaps their grandmother. I had done the same at my own parents' house after my father died, days and days spent in lonely packing and cleaning and a weepy reverie of nostalgia. Something else the young couple had taken with them: three cats, including the fat red tabby that had always seemed to be the old woman's favorite. I had forgotten until then that the cats were in the house, stranded without food or water. Hadn't the firemen and policemen and paramedics noticed them on the night of the accident? In the confusion, apparently not.

My restlessness forced me at last from the house, into the night. I drove for more than an hour—aimlessly, it might have appeared, but not exactly. First to the Robinson home, darkened and empty as I had known it would be, a tidy little ranch-style house not far from my own, and just two blocks from the junior high where Pepper attended school. Then to the Fox house farther across town on Tompkins Street, near Sandburg College. Was Ryan home? It seemed likely, with the house brightly lit upstairs and down. I stopped across the street without turning off the engine, able to see every window from where I sat, hopeful, I suppose, that the boy might somehow wander into view. Of course he didn't, and I soon moved on, still farther into the night.

I next drove to the house where I had been born, where I had packed and cleaned after my father's death five years earlier, a boxy two-story clapboard from early in the century. It was actually beyond the city limits, on the road that led east to Stonerville, and then to Peoria. I knew nothing about the family who lived there now except that they were Mexican and had been thrilled about buying and owning their first

home. I stayed across the road for several minutes with the engine idling and the headlights off, parked in a place where I had ridden my yellow Schwinn bike as a kid, where I had played with firecrackers on long-ago summer nights, where I had walked my dog every day after school. But now, on this same road, I was a stranger, and again it was time to move on.

Since I was already halfway there, it made sense to keep going and pay a visit to Doc. It was after nine o'clock when I walked through his door and checked my watch. He was crouched in front of the wood-burning stove and stirring the fire with an iron poker. His reddened cheeks and white beard had me thinking of Old Saint Nick as he looked in my direction and smiled and then rose stiffly from his crouch. "Well, Jacob, this is a surprise."

"Spur of the moment," I said. "Would you believe I just happened to be in the neighborhood?" "I don't have a neighborhood."

"Well, even so."

"Anyway," Doc said, "shouldn't you be at home with Khalid?"

"He's in Joliet. At his grandmother's. Remember?"

"I don't recall, to be honest."

"We talked about it last Sunday."

Doc shrugged and mumbled, "Ah, you know, my damned memory." He picked up his cigarette, already half smoked, from where he'd left it on the edge of the stove. "There's some stew in the refrigerator if you're hungry. Also an apple pie there on the counter, which I baked with my own little hands. It's rather good, I must say."

"Maybe I'll take a piece home with me," I said, giving it an appreciative sniff on my way through the kitchen for a bottle of beer. "I'm in more of a Coors-and-cigarettes mood tonight. Wallowing in nostalgia and self-pity."

"You're smoking again?"

I returned to the living room and helped myself to a pack of English Ovals from the bookcase where Doc kept his cigarettes. "As of this moment, yes. I'll need some matches."

“Is something wrong, Jacob? Bad news?” “No, no, nothing so dramatic,” I said. “Just a general feeling of. . . agitation, I guess you’d call it. Nervousness. Horniness. The whole package.” I had to clean a place for myself on the couch, sweeping aside books and magazines and empty cigarette packs before I could sit down.

“I empathize whole-heartedly.”

“How so?”

“Because,” Doc said, “I’ve been feeling a bit agitated and nervous myself this past week.” He dropped the butt of his cigarette into the blue Maxwell House coffee can that he kept by his chair for use as an ash receptacle. The can was still smoldering from the last butt, and from the butt before that. “This letter, you see.”

“From your teenaged fan in Stonerville?”

“From Frankie Patallero,” Doc nodded. “It came in the mail on Wednesday.”

“He didn’t waste any time, that’s for sure. So?” Doc had the letter, in its envelope, on his lap. “It would be easiest just to show it to you, I suppose.”

“Well, fork it over, Doctor.”

“It feels uncomfortably like a betrayal of confidence, I have to tell you.”

“This is no time for ethical niceties,” I said, leaning forward and grabbing the letter from him. “Unless you’re really, really serious about my not looking at it.”

“Go ahead, go ahead,” Doc said with a quick what-the-hell wave. “There’s no reason for us to start keeping secrets at this point.”

A tape of Puccini arias was providing an extravagantly romantic soundtrack as I pulled the letter from its envelope. The stationery had a tie-dyed look to it with multicolored borders, pulpy paper that was obviously and proudly recycled, like something from a 1968 head shop or a 1988 Grateful Dead concert. I recognized Frankie’s blue ballpoint

ink and his handwriting as I unfolded the page. He began with the still-formal salutation of “Dear Mr. Wilson,” then excitedly continued:

I can’t believe you wrote back! Wow! It’s such a big surprise, and now even more because you live so close in Sandburg, which is so totally SURREAL, I can’t even believe it! I thought it was like some kind of joke maybe, like a practical joke or something, but I guess it’s true, which is AMAZING!!! This is probably the coolest thing in my whole life finding out that you live so close and we’re practically neighbors.

I don’t know what to say because this is so WEIRD! Do you like this paper? I hope so. It’s PSYCHO-delic. I got it at Red Dog Comix, which is in Sandburg, but you probably know where it is. I go to Sandburg all the time of course, it only takes about ten minutes to drive there from Stonerville. I have a car, believe it or not! I got it when I turned sixteen, which was last July if you’re wondering, I’m a Cancer (but I’m not crabby—ha, ha!), anyway the car is a red 1986 Honda Civic from my parents but it runs really good even though it’s old. I’m a junior at Stonerville High, maybe I already told you, and me and my friends go to Sandburg almost every weekend to do stuff. Like movies or to the mall and other things. You can’t believe how BORING it is in Stonerville! Nothing ever happens here, it’s so small, you have to go to Sandburg for anything fun. Sometimes we go to Peoria too, which is not even an hour away, for concerts and other stuff, for example Green Day was there last summer, maybe you’ve heard of them, they are a very good band. Of course as you know I am gay, but there is nowhere around here for gay teenagers to go like I think there is in Chicago or New York, not even in Peoria which is pretty big, so it’s hard to meet other gay people, mostly impossible, all of my friends are straight, we never talk about HOMOSEXUAL stuff except when they make fag jokes which is a lot.

I'm probably writing too much and you are getting totally bored. Your address is Route 6, which you said is way out in the country, and it must be way out because I never really heard of it before. Is it possible maybe that I could visit you sometime? I hope you don't get mad at me for asking. I won't bother you if you say no or even if you don't answer at all.

I'm thinking about you every day and hoping you will write again. It would be like a dream to see you and talk to you in person. Maybe it will happen soon, if you want it to.

Your Best Fan,
Frankie Patallero

I folded the paper and replaced it in its envelope. "I'm overwhelmed, Doc. This kid is priceless. You're a lucky old bastard."

"I'm afraid that 'old' is the key word in this case."

"Don't start that again."

"This whole situation scares me to death," Doc said. He took the letter from me and held it up like a courtroom exhibit. "How do I even start to fulfill this boy's expectations? It seems inevitable that I'll be a disappointment to him whenever we finally meet face to face. Can you imagine? What could I possibly have in common with this sixteen-year-old? I've never even heard of Green Day."

"It's a decent band, sort of nouveau punk. The lead singer is cute, his name is. . ."

"I think you're missing the point, Jacob."

"No, actually I do understand. But I think you're wrong. About him being disappointed, I mean."

"We'll find out soon enough, in any case."

I was lighting a cigarette, my first one in several weeks. Even a cautious drag made me cough as the smoke bit into my lungs. "So," I finally managed to say, "you've already written back to him?"

“Just today. With an invitation and directions to my house. Now I can only fret and wait. Look at me, I’m behaving like a fool.”

“I’ve never seen you so jumpy.”

Doc just shook his head slowly in silent self-loathing, disgusted by his own lack of composure. I spent a few more moments reassuring him before I suddenly remembered his Portugal story, which I immediately began to praise. He shrugged away my compliments. “Really, Jacob, it was just a bit of sentimental fluff.”

“You should think about having it published,” I told him, no reason to mention my earlier troubled reaction to the work.

“You’re serious?” “Of course I am! Now what about the Spain and Morocco material?”

Doc again held up the letter. “I’ve had other things on my mind. Be patient. I think I’ll have some pie.”

He left me in the living room where I lit another cigarette and sipped my beer and listened to the Puccini tape. Placido Domingo was singing E Lucevan Le Stelle in his smoky spinto tenor. I took my cigarette and my bottle of Coors and wandered outside to look at the stars while Domingo sang about them inside. The night skies at Doc’s were often spectacular, his house being miles and miles from the nearest glare of city lights, alone in a universe of perfect darkness that seemed to stretch forever in all directions. The starry brilliance always filled me with a strange sadness verging on tears, a feeling of falling or flying away from myself into something deep and cold and utterly merciless.

When Doc stepped beside me without the slightest sound of warning, I nearly dropped my beer. He laughed and said, “Sorry about that. I didn’t realize you were lost in the stars.”

“Yeah. They’re beautiful tonight.”

“I never get tired of looking at them,” Doc said, his voice hushed and respectful. He had a plate of apple pie in his hand and was chewing slowly as he talked. “Odd, isn’t it, both of us suddenly involved with boys again after all these years.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing lately.”

“Cycles of nature, cycles of life. All very mysterious.”

“Any boy would enjoy himself out here,” I said. “Don’t you think so? With the woods and all the ponds and the big shed in back, and the hills, and. . . well, just the wonderful vastness and privacy of it all. Don’t you think?” “It seems to me, Jacob, that young people nowadays are interested only in electronic gadgets and computers and noise.”

“I’m not sure that’s always true.”

“They’d find it dreadfully boring out here, I suspect,” Doc said through another mouthful of pie.

“Maybe as a permanent resident,” I conceded, “but not as a visitor. Pepper, for one, would love to play explorer around here, I’m sure of it. Boys are still boys, regardless of computers and video games and all the rest of it.”

“Bring him out here someday, if you’d like.”

“Thanks,” I said, “that might be fun.” I blew a plume of smoke toward heaven. “Maybe Pepper and Frankie could become friends, help to keep each other entertained.” I let the idea drift unfinished to heaven along with the smoke of my cigarette.

It was one of those nights, as it turned out, when I ended up driving home with an illegal bellyful of booze, careful to go slow and keep to the deserted back roads and side streets where no cops were likely to be lurking. Doc had offered me his couch until morning, of course, but the prospect of sleeping with furry and overgrown spiders had sent me driving back to town. I had forgotten to leave the porch light on for myself, so I decided to rest for a moment on the front steps before fumbling in the darkness with my keys. It was past midnight; music was coming from somewhere down the block, probably from a party still in progress. I sat on the steps and smoked a cigarette and gazed at the two yellow lights on the old woman’s porch across the street.

Maybe it was just the alcohol in my system, but suddenly I found myself feeling sorry for her, sorry that Pepper and I had regarded her with such animosity. Maybe she hadn't deserved our curse—just an old woman who'd been lonely and harmlessly curious, perhaps even jealous of me and the boy, of our youth and good health and our busy comings and goings. Was it possible? Had I demonized her because of my own paranoia? Or was too much beer making me soft and sentimental, blurring my judgment along with my vision? Either way, it made little difference. She was probably gone, and gone for good.

CHAPTER TEN

Over coffee and donuts at the post office, I listened to the details of Holly's weekend in Joliet (about a three-hour drive northeast of Sandburg). Her mother's birthday celebration had been a success, with a houseful of cousins and aunts and uncles gathered from Chicago, Peoria, Moline, Rockford. Pepper had been mopey and untalkative at first, but had cheered up quickly once the festivities began. "He can be so moody," Holly said with a glazed donut poised near her mouth for a bite. "Just like his father, I swear."

"He always seems so cheerful to me."

Holly dismissed my comment with a wave of her donut. "He's been an awful grouch lately, especially last week," she said, looking tired and a little pale, even more than usual, bruised pouches of fatigue or stress or both beneath her eyes. "Has he ever talked to you about it?"

"About what?"

"His trouble at school."

"No," I said, "he never talks about school, except that he gets good grades, and he plays in the band."

"A bunch of older kids are giving him problems after school, I guess, it's hard to know exactly, he hates to discuss it."

"He's never mentioned a word about it," I said again, then glanced at the clock and gulped the last of my coffee. "We'll talk later," I promised. "You have to tell me more about this."

It wasn't until after work, when Holly phoned me at home, that we had a chance to continue our discussion. I could hear their television blaring in the background as she explained more about Pepper's trouble at school, hard to know precisely what was involved, something about older and larger bullies harassing him on his way home. "So it's not really at school," she said, "but after school."

"Either way, it's not good."

“They tried to take his saxophone today.”

“Today? His saxophone?” “It just burns me up,” Holly said. “So, anyway, Pepper wants me to ask you a favor. He’s here right now giving me signals, you know, for me to ask.”

Of course I agreed to the favor: Pepper wanted me to pick him up after school on my way home from work, at least for a couple of weeks. Since our schedules coincided so neatly, with both of us ending our days around three o’clock, it was no inconvenience for me to give him a ride to his house—a very short ride, only two blocks. Holly could have provided the same service, it was true, but Pepper didn’t want his mother as a bodyguard adding embarrassment to an already unpleasant situation. “It’s such a typical boy thing,” Holly said with a familiar drawl of disdain in her voice. “He wants you to do it because you’re a man.”

“The male ego is a fragile piece of work, Holly, as you know.”

“Oh please, don’t make me sick.”

“Anyway,” I told her, “Pepper can relax. The cavalry is on the way. I’ll pick him up tomorrow in front of the school.”

I was there Tuesday afternoon as promised. Pepper was waiting just inside the main entrance, watching for me through the glass panel in one of the big metal doors. I could see him only dimly through the thick glass, like some ghost trapped in the depths of a mirror. A moment later he was shoving open the door with his shoulder and ambling down the steps, seeming very deliberately to take his time, in no hurry whatsoever, glancing around nonchalantly from side to side as if he hadn’t even noticed me. When he reached the sidewalk he finally looked at the car and widened his eyes in phony surprise, then broke into a smile of amusement at his own crafty performance. He lowered his face quickly to hide the smile betraying him, which only made him smile more. He was carrying his saxophone case in one hand with a book bag of shiny blue nylon slung over his opposite shoulder. I reached across to the passenger door and pushed it open for him. He climbed inside with much unwieldy banging of case and bag. I asked him, as soon as he was

settled, about the boys who'd been bullying him. "Where are they? I don't see anybody around."

"I guess they're not here right now."

"Who are they exactly?"

"Just some kids."

"From your school?" "Yeah," Pepper said with a slight shrug, as if it were difficult to explain. "But they're older, because they flunked a grade, they should be in high school, so they're bigger than most everybody else."

"And they pick on you?"

"Sometimes," Pepper said with another shrug. We were still parked in front of the school. I ran the back of my hand gently across his cheek. "So. You want a ride every day?"

"I guess so."

"At least for a while, right? Maybe until the end of this semester?"

Pepper agreed with a quick nod, my hand still against his cheek. "I missed you Saturday night," I told him. "It seemed lonely without you."

"What happened to the Dill Pickle?"

"She's still in the hospital, not doing very well, has pneumonia."

"What happened to her cats?"

"Somebody rescued them last week," I said. "It's nice that you remembered them. More than I can say for myself, to be honest. I forgot about them completely."

It was time to go; loitering in front of the school with a boy in my car didn't seem like a good idea. We pulled away from the curb and drove the two blocks to Pepper's house. Holly was still not home, probably shopping for groceries or buying gas, so we let ourselves in with the key that Pepper kept in a Velcro-sealed inner pocket of his book bag. As soon as we were inside, the boy dumped his bag and saxophone case on the couch and hurried to the fifteen-gallon aquarium in the corner of the living room. It was a fresh-water tank stocked mostly with guppies and mollies and filled with a gaudy hodgepodge of mermaids

and deep-sea divers, treasure chests and King Neptunes, sunken ships and giant snapping clams. The fish came swarming to the surface even before Pepper could start feeding them, a voracious squiggling mob that attacked the food as it began sprinkling at them from above.

I considered leaving Pepper by himself at that point; he often spent an hour or two alone after school while his mother was at the store or the bank. But since it was the first day of our new arrangement, I decided to stay until Holly arrived. While we waited, Pepper finished feeding his fish and made a trip to the bathroom, then agreed to show me his bedroom at the back of the house. In all my years of visiting Holly, at this house and others, I had never once gone into Pepper's room and looked around.

It was mostly as I had imagined, a predictably messy sanctuary crammed with videos and video games, CDs and audio cassettes, stereo speakers, a personal computer, dozens of action figures and war toys, a Gilbert chemistry set and microscope, art supplies, Lego blocks in various stages of construction and demolition, a Star Wars sleeping bag unrolled in the middle of the floor, comic books and shoes and discarded clothing. There were several posters on the walls, including one of a blue-robed wizard and a white unicorn against a stormy and fantastical sky. Pepper said it was his favorite because it was about "magic stuff." I sat on the edge of his bed and bounced lightly to test the mattress. His sheets and pillowcases were covered with cartoon characters from *The Simpsons*. "You must've been a sorcerer in a previous life," I said, pointing to the poster.

"I was a sorcerer?"

"It certainly seems that way. I've seen you in action, remember."

"In action?"

"When you put your curse on the old lady! Where did you learn about that, by the way?"

"In these books," Pepper said, turning quickly and rummaging through the litter on his desk until he found them. There were two, really more like pamphlets than books, one called *The Wizard's Reference*, the

other Sorcery and Enchantment. “And where,” I asked, “did you get these things?”

“Red Dog Comix has millions of books like these,” the boy said. “It’s the awesomest place in the world.”

“It’s an interesting store,” I nodded, familiar with it as a frequent customer over the past twenty years. It had shut down briefly when Red himself was arrested on drug and sex charges in 1992, but was now open and thriving once more under different ownership. I leafed through the two books, page after page of charms and spells and incantations. “Maybe you should put one of these magic spells on the bullies at school.”

“Which one would be good?”

“Well,” I said, “let’s take a look in The Wizard’s Reference and see.” Before the invitation was out of my mouth, Pepper had perched himself eagerly beside me on the bed and was leaning against me so that we could share the book. He held one corner of it, his hand resting on my lap. The room, the whole house, suddenly seemed very quiet as the two of us examined the spells and curses one after another, searching for something simple and potent and appropriate for vanquishing enemies. Some were impossibly complicated, involving turtle doves and menstrual blood, quicksilver and saltpeter and dried snake skin, sulphur and St.-John’s-wort and the yellow root of gandergoose. Those we skipped, and kept looking. Pepper leaned closer to use both hands for holding the book and flipping the pages, which freed my own left hand for feeling his back while we sat there on the bed with its cartoon sheets. He was wearing a black T-shirt with GIBSON USA across the front in white letters that formed a guitar. There were not one but two undershirts beneath, a concession to the cold winds of November. I counted the undershirts with my fingers when I slipped my hand beneath them to get at the clean skin of his back. Pepper didn’t flinch, didn’t say anything, didn’t react in any visible way as he studied the spells and turned the pages. His back was arched, hunched forward, the vertebrae like a ridge of bumpy stones. I moved my hand down to the waistband of

his sweatpants and worked my fingers inside, and then inside the elastic of his underpants and across a few inches so that I was holding his bare hip. He looked at me and said, “This is a good one!”

I had been staring at the book without seeing what was in front of me. Pepper was pointing at spell number seventy-three:

To weaken and defeat an opponent, and for dispelling his energy, take a candle to the cemetery at night, and on the stroke of midnight light it and then bury it, being careful not to let the flame be extinguished before the candle is nearly covered with earth. Recite over it your enemy’s name with a curse upon him. Unless he can find the candle and destroy it, he will pine away and die.

“More graveyard dirt,” I said. “That’s not bad. It seems workable.”

“When can we do it?”

“Some Saturday night maybe.”

Pepper shifted his weight from right hip to left to right again, just a brief squirm of excitement caused by talk of curses and graveyards; but it was enough of a squirm to nudge my hand lower on his hip, so low that he ended up actually sitting on my splayed fingers. He didn’t appear to notice, or else pretended convincingly not to notice, even when I started to massage the bony left cheek of his butt. The only thing on his mind was making a trip to the cemetery. “Which Saturday night? This one?”

“We’ll have to ask your mother about sleeping over.”

“She’ll say yes.”

As if abracadabra-ed by our discussion, Holly herself now came banging through the back door into the kitchen. Hearing her, I pulled my hand from beneath the boy and hastily out of his pants—maybe too hastily, and too obviously, an unfortunate signal to Pepper of panic, of guilt, of sneakiness and wrongdoing. “No more talk about curses and magic for now,” I mumbled. “Your mother might not approve.”

“We won’t tell her,” Pepper agreed, already crossing the room to return the books to his desk. Together we went to the kitchen to greet Holly, who was busily unpacking several plastic shopping bags and transferring the items to cupboards and drawers and refrigerator shelves. All three of us agreed, after a quick parley, that I should stay and have dinner, a reminder of earlier times and many other meals at Holly’s table. “But this time Pepper’s not in his crib or his high chair,” I said.

“Why was I in my crib or my high chair?”

“Because you were just a baby.”

“And,” Holly said, “you were a little pain in the neck and always hid food in your diapers.”

Pepper let out one of his rare giggly laughs and hid his face in his hands. I laughed along with him as Holly told us stories of finding food in his diapers at changing time, including, among other things, a slice of bread and a chicken leg. “Is that a chicken leg,” I joked, “or are you just happy to see me?”

Holly looked at me and laughed, probably the loudest laugh I had heard from her in several months. The joking and storytelling continued into dinnertime. There were pork chops and mashed potatoes and gravy, and there were canned peas that sent Pepper into one of his hysterical “evil food” rave-outs. It seemed comfortable being at the table with Holly and the boy, easy to imagine the three of us as papa and mama and young son. If I had been agreeable to Holly’s marriage plans ten or eleven years earlier, the fantasy might have become a reality, with Pepper as my stepson in a relationship of impossible complexities.

“We should do this more often,” Holly suggested. Pepper nodded in eager and immediate agreement. He had spent the entire meal bouncing in his chair and grinning, his happiness making him hyper. “Yeah,” I said, “I’m always up for a free meal.”

Holly made a ha-ha-very-funny face. “How about spending a Saturday evening over here once in a while? Or a Sunday?”

“Sure, why not.”

“There’s no sense in you having to entertain Pepper all the time,” she continued, picking at her food the way she always did. She was a big woman, as tall and sturdy as most men, with a lifelong fear of unattractive weight gain that forced her to pick and nibble at whatever she was eating—and contributed, I always assumed, to Pepper’s own finicky way with food. She looked at me now from across the kitchen table. “You can come here sometime, you know.”

“What’s wrong, Holly, do you get lonely here without us?”

She gave me another of her ha-ha-that’s-very-funny looks (reminding me, in a strangely oblique way, of Ryan Fox). But, really, I wasn’t joking. She hadn’t dated anyone in over a year, and spent her weekends, as far as I could determine, sitting in front of the television and reading the latest novel by Stephen King or Anne Rice. Her recent back surgery had made her more sedentary than ever. She could manage her clerical job at the post office; also her shopping and banking and housework; but any additional nightlife or socializing seemed more than she was willing or able to handle. “We could play Monopoly,” she proposed. “It’s one of Pepper’s favorites.”

“It’s OK,” the boy said with a lukewarm nod. “But Warlock is way better.”

“I’m talking about real games, not video games. What’s the one you got for your birthday? You know, the one from Uncle Rick, with the castles and monsters?”

“Oh yeah, that one is pretty cool,” Pepper admitted, his eyes darting from his mother to me then back again to his mother. “Does Jake know how to play Hero Quest?”

Holly pointed at me and said, “He’s sitting right there, dear, go ahead and ask him.”

Pepper dutifully looked at me, as if I hadn’t already heard, and asked, “Do you know how to play Hero Quest?”

“No, but you can teach me.”

The boy began an immediate explanation of the rules, but Holly quickly interrupted. “Wait until we’re ready to play, silly. It’s too confusing otherwise.”

“Can we play after dinner?” Pepper asked.

Both he and his mother looked at me for a decision. I glanced at my watch and shrugged. “Sure, for an hour or two.”

We left the dirty dishes in the sink and set up the game on a card table in the living room. It consisted of a board and dice and little plastic pieces like Monopoly or any of a hundred other games. One player needed to fill the role of Goblin Master, the villain who controlled all of the traps and bombs and monsters standing between the heroes and their destination. It was Pepper who happily assumed this role of master fiend and manipulator, while Holly and I shared the four hero roles of barbarian, wizard, dwarf, and warrior, each of us throwing the dice for two of the plastic characters, moving them on alternate turns. Not since Pepper was a toddler had I spent so much time with him and his mother. With Holly alone, yes. With Pepper, yes. But not together like this, gathered first around a dinner table and now around a game table, an unfamiliar dynamic suddenly at play among the three of us, a feeling of knowing one another intimately yet becoming reacquainted in fresh ways, observing one another from new angles.

Holly sat on a wooden chair for the sake of her tender back; I sat across from her on the couch, which is where Pepper also chose to sit, the two of us side by side, shoulder to shoulder. If alone with the boy, I would have put my arm around him and enjoyed the feel of him against me, no self-consciousness interfering. But with Holly in the room, every gesture and word and touch required a careful bit of reckoning; my interaction with Pepper became a sort of performance with his mother as our audience. I needed to pretend just a little emotional distance between myself and the boy, the casual disregard that most adults exhibit toward children. An occasional pat on the back, an occasional tousle of his

hair—that was all I could allow myself as we sat together on the couch, playing our game of Hero Quest.

Almost two hours passed before Holly's wizard finally managed to capture the Goblin Master's treasure. A few minutes earlier, as the game was nearing its end, Pepper had surprised me by suddenly slumping against me with his head against my shoulder and his hand holding my knee. He was tired, he explained. "Oh sure, just because you're losing," his mother smiled. "You're such a sneak!"

"No! I'm tired, really tired," Pepper insisted in a sleepy baby-talk voice, snuggling more closely against me, bolder than he'd ever been at my own house. He, too, was performing for his mother, showing off our friendship for her to see. Her presence, which inhibited my own behavior, actually had the opposite effect on the boy: He seemed to feel safe and confident here with his mother in the room, free to be openly affectionate in ways he couldn't when we were alone.

His snuggling continued as the game ended. My arm was around him by then, a natural response, unavoidable really with him pressed so tightly against my side. Holly told him not to be a pest, her usual reprimand. Pepper again replied in his baby-talk voice that he was tired, then embellished his performance by throwing his arm across my chest and burying his face against my shoulder—but too late to hide his pixie grin. "Poor little thing is so exhausted," I said.

"Oh please," was Holly's only reply. Then both of us were laughing as Pepper shut his eyes and pretended to snore, an exaggerated cartoon snore that soon dissolved into helpless whimpers of his own laughter, his face still hidden coyly against my shoulder. "You have a very bizarre son," I said to Holly. She shook her head and chuckled, "I don't even know that strange child! He's yours if you want him."

"This little creature is all mine?"

"Please, take him with you."

I wrapped both arms around Pepper and squeezed him in a greedy embrace. "OK, kid, you heard the lady."

“Do you own me now?”

“Yes! You belong to me forever and ever,” I said. “Come on, time to go!” I grabbed him as if to lift him, as if to carry him home. Pepper pretended to panic and struggle, pleading with his mother, “Don’t give me away, don’t give me away!” She went along with the charade and agreed, after a moment of theatrical reluctance, to keep him. I agreed, with genuine reluctance, to let him stay.

We said goodbye just a moment later, all of us pleased with the evening we’d spent together and looking forward to others in the future. Pepper would have had me back the next day, and every day thereafter, but I was careful not to overdo a good thing. Once a week, I figured, was enough. Before leaving, I asked Holly about Pepper spending another Saturday night at my house. It was up to me, she said, as long as I didn’t let him abuse my generosity. I promised not to let him abuse me in any way whatsoever. Holly responded with, “I’m serious, Jake. Don’t keep having him over just to be nice.”

“I have him over because I want him over, Holly. He’s a great kid. We have a good time together.”

“Then by all means,” she said, “take him, please take him.”

So each afternoon that week, Pepper asked if our plans for Saturday night were still OK, as if I might have taken his mother’s advice and changed my mind. Come Friday, I was expecting the same question from him. What I wasn’t expecting, as he climbed into the car, were his new glasses. I laughed from the sudden surprise of seeing them, then caught myself. “Sorry,” I said, “but I wasn’t prepared for your new look.”

“I just got them last night.”

“I’m so surprised.”

“I need them mostly to see the blackboard at school and stuff like that,” the boy explained, his knee bouncing nervously. I took his chin in my hand and turned his face toward me to see the glasses more clearly.

They were aviator glasses with copper frames (nearly identical to my own sunglasses, I noticed), a bit too large for his delicate child's face and heavy on his nose, giving him the look of an owlish little scholar, somehow vulnerable and very sweet. "You know," I told him, "they're sort of cute. I like them."

"I'm nearsighted," Pepper said, resuming his earlier explanation. "I don't really need them to read or draw, just for faraway things. But the eye doctor said I should wear them all the time."

"Does that bother you?" "Not a lot, I guess."

"Good. Because I think you look very handsome."

The boy smiled and turned his head away. "Is Saturday night still OK?" he asked.

Yes, I reassured him for the third day in a row, our plans were still unchanged, nothing to worry about. As I was talking to him, I glanced through the windshield and saw three boys on the sidewalk in front of the school. They were bigger than most of the other kids around them, conspicuous by their size and by their slightly sinister bearing. I pointed them out to Pepper. "Are those the bullies? Those three over there?"

Pepper hesitated in a way difficult to interpret, then nodded and said yeah, that was them, or looked like them, he wasn't sure, they were too far away. I reminded him that he needed to know their names in order to work the spell against them. "I know their names," he replied quickly. "We can do the spell with no problem."

Next day, after work and a fast shower, I drove to the Robinson house and picked up Pepper and headed directly to Holy Cross Cemetery, only a few blocks away. It was much too early for our excursion, of course, but we needed a chance to scout the terrain before nightfall. Just enough twilight remained for us to choose a suitable site for later: away from the street, secluded, plenty of trees. It was not by accident that I found the spot; as a kid, almost thirty years earlier, I had used this same cemetery as a hideout, as a place to ditch school during gym class. Where Pepper now attended junior high had been Sandburg

High School in the Sixties, my unhappy prison for four years, each day an adolescent torment. The usual tale, I suppose, of alienation and angst, of a teenaged loner struggling to cope with acne and awkwardness and turbulent hormones.

The actual cause of my truancy was equally banal: a cross-eyed psychopath named Dale Olsen who chose me as his personal punching bag when I was a freshman. Gym class, naturally, was the arena for his relentless bullying. I fought back once with my fists, but the outburst of violence seemed only to excite him more, to fuel his hostility. One day, when I'd finally had enough, I kept walking right past the gym and out the door, and I didn't stop until I came to the little cemetery nearby, one of those old village graveyards long-since filled to capacity and crumbling from neglect, overgrown with sunflowers and hawthorn and messy lilacs. I spent the next hour under a large maple out of sight from the road, reading something by Dickens, maybe *Oliver Twist*, returning to school just as the bell rang and students came crowding into the hallways. Every day I repeated the same subterfuge, and every day I expected to be caught—but I never was, as if some charm of invisibility were protecting me from enemy eyes.

I told this story to Pepper as we stood in the dying light near the big maple tree. He wondered whether or not I had failed gym class as a result of my skipping it every day. “No,” I answered, laughing now as I remembered, “I had one final trick up my sleeve.”

“You had a trick?”

“I used an illness from earlier in the year, I think it was pleurisy, to get a retroactive doctor's excuse for the whole semester. Somehow nobody ever figured out what I was doing.”

“Why didn't the school call your mom and dad?”

“It's a mystery,” I said. “My mother was dying of cancer right about then, so maybe I got lost in the confusion. I'll never know.”

“You were lucky.”

“And now I’m back here again. Because of more bullies. Strange, isn’t it? My friend Doc could write a good story about the freaky coincidence of it.”

“Who’s Doc?”

“He’s my best friend,” I said, then put my arm around Pepper’s shoulders. “Or, I should say, my best adult friend. You’re the winner of the junior division.”

We walked back to the car. On our way home I told Pepper a few things about Doc, including a description of his house and the surrounding countryside. “He said we should visit him sometime.”

“Would it be fun?”

“Of course,” I said. “It’s a great place. There’s fishing, hiking, exploring. Great hills for sledding when it snows. Like a regular Never-Never Land.”

“When can we go there?”

“It sounds pretty good, right?”

“Yeah, pretty good, I guess.”

“Well, we won’t be going there tonight, obviously, but. . . soon, I hope.”

Pepper hadn’t brought his saxophone with him for this visit. His thoughts seemed preoccupied with our upcoming midnight expedition to the cemetery. He had both of his magic books in his Nike bag and brought them out as soon as we got inside. On our way in from the car, he had taken a long look at the empty house across the street, as if examining and contemplating his own handiwork. “Is the Dill Pickle still in the hospital?”

“Oh yeah. No improvement.”

“It’s strange with no porch police,” the boy remarked.

“It does seem nice for a change.”

“Did the porch police make you nervous?”

“Yes,” I laughed, “the porch police always made me nervous. I don’t like people spying on me.”

“Are there porch police at Doc’s house?”

“No, like I said. Doc lives way out in the country, in the middle of nowhere. He likes his privacy even more than I do.”

“Is he married?”

“No, he’s not married, he’s gay like me,” I said in one hasty breath. When Pepper didn’t respond, I added, “His place is like a clubhouse. No girls allowed.”

“Is that a rule?”

“Not really a rule, but. . . it’s a boys-only kind of place, very exclusive membership, very private.”

“Like on *The Simpsons*.”

“How’s that?”

“Bart Simpson has a clubhouse with no girls allowed.”

“Yeah,” I said, “sort of like that.”

We were in the house by then and Pepper was taking the magic books from his bag. Pizza, with extra pepperoni, was his choice for dinner. While we waited for the deliveryman, he sat on the floor with his art supplies and copied some of the more interesting charms and talismans that he found in his books. I settled myself on the couch with a beer and a cigarette to watch him. He glanced up at me from the floor when I lit the cigarette. “You don’t smoke,” he said, clearly surprised.

“I stop and I start.”

“It’s bad for you.”

“Especially these,” I said, holding up the unfiltered Camel fuming between my fingers. I had bought a carton of them earlier in the week. “I’m setting a terrible example for you, I know. Does the smoke bother you?”

“Not very much.”

“I’ll just have one every now and then,” I promised. “The room won’t get too smoky that way.”

Pepper nodded OK but warned, “It can give you cancer.” He was seated near my feet in a spot where he could watch TV while he drew. Something about his being on the floor seemed endearing, the relaxed

informality of it, a touching indication that he felt comfortable and very much at home. He stayed on the floor to eat his pizza when it arrived, and afterwards to continue drawing. The carpet was dirty, unvacuumed for several weeks, covered with bits of grass and leaves, pieces of gravel from the driveway, even crumbs of food.

But Pepper obviously didn't mind. He had shifted from a sitting position to lying on his belly, facing directly away from me with his weight on his elbows. His legs were spread so that his feet were on either side of mine. Both of us had our shoes off. By stretching my leg forward, not quite straight out, I was able to rest my foot on his bottom—my right foot on his right cheek. He looked at me over his shoulder with his glasses down near the tip of his nose, then asked, as if it had something to do with my foot on his butt, "Did you grow up in this house?"

"No. Not here. I was born on the east side of town, on the road to Stonerville."

"Why don't you live there now?"

"The house was too big for one person," I said, my toes massaging him through his sweatpants, the red ones he wore so often. "And this house is much more convenient, closer to the post office, closer to stores, closer to everything."

"Is this a good house?" "It's a nice little place, I think."

"But it needs a better shower," Pepper observed. "That would make it better."

I slipped my foot down between his legs and wiggled my toes. "Speaking of showers. Do you need one tonight?"

"I don't think so."

"Are you nice and clean, Master Robinson?"

"I'm nice and clean," the boy said with a smile in his voice. He brought his legs together so that they were gripping my foot. I expected him to respond with laughter as I felt with my toes between his thighs, but he didn't. "I'm not ticklish," he said as if reading my mind.

"Not at all? Nowhere?"

“I’m not ticklish at all,” he insisted, his head down over his paper as he continued drawing.

“You must be ticklish here,” I said, “or here.” I was using his boast as an excuse to poke and rub everywhere with my foot, getting my big toe right up into him, into the crotch and crack of him. He clamped my foot tighter with his thighs and tensed his hips, but otherwise did not react. It was a game for him, nothing more than that, just a game to maintain his composure against my onslaught of poking and tickling. I finally declared him the winner and relaxed my foot, which allowed him to relax his own legs and hips. “No more of that,” I said, once again playing footsie with his behind, but gently, lightly. “This way is better, I think.” Pepper nodded, and kept drawing.

The movie *Hook* was on television one more time when we left the house and drove to the cemetery. The spell called for burying a candle but provided no details of type or size. I improvised (cleverly, it seemed to me) with birthday candles and a small hand-held spade for digging the hole. No unwieldy, conspicuous shovel necessary. We parked the car outside the cemetery and hurried through the front gate, which stayed open all day and all night, no need for security at such a rundown old graveyard. There was enough moonlight to make for easy maneuvering through the tombstones and for easy working once we reached the big maple tree. I dug the hole while Pepper stood holding the three little candles, one for each bully. “OK,” I finally said, “that should be deep enough, I think.”

“Do we need three holes?”

“Shouldn’t be necessary,” I decided, both of us speaking in urgent whispers. “Come on, let’s put them in and light them.”

The boy crouched beside me and stuck the candles upright into the soil at the bottom of the hole, as if planting them in a birthday cake. I waited until my watch said exactly midnight, then lit the candles with matches from Casa Sierra. “OK,” I told Pepper, “I’ll bury them while you recite the names and the curses.”

Slowly I began to refill the hole, careful not to extinguish the candles as I scooped the dirt around them. Pepper, still crouched beside me, mumbled a curse upon one bully, then another, then another, none of the names meaning anything to me and quickly forgotten once I'd heard them. As before, at the old woman's house, Pepper ended his string of curses with a solemn "amen." I completed my part of the ritual with two final scoops of dirt that extinguished the candles and filled the hole. "Are we forgetting anything?"

"I don't think so," Pepper said. He got to his feet and hitched up the waist of his pants. "The book didn't say any more."

"It seems like we should dance naked or do something properly pagan."

"What's pagan?"

"Worshipping nature, being in touch with natural forces, with the earth and the sky, the sun and the moon."

"Like Indians?"

"That's right," I said, standing beside the boy, both of us staring at the filled-in hole like mourners at a graveside. "Or like Peter Pan. He was definitely a pagan. Dancing naked in the moonlight with the other Lost Boys."

"They didn't do that in the movie."

"I'm talking about the real Peter Pan. Not that fake kiddie stuff."

Pepper looked at me from inside the pointy hood of his sweatshirt. "It's too cold for that."

"You might be right. It's easier to be a pagan in warm weather."

"Maybe we can do like last time," the boy decided. "It's how you add power to any curse."

"Spitting and peeing?"

"That's what Sorcery and Enchantment says. I think."

"Honestly, I have to pee anyway."

"Yeah, me too."

And so, in the graveyard darkness, we stood side by side and sealed the curse with our spit, and then with our urine, which hit the freshly turned soil with a continuous wet smack. Pepper, same as before, needed to hear my stream before he could coax his own shy bladder to drain. I glanced down at him standing to my left and could see the glisten of his pee in the moonlight, and the steam coming from it in the cold air, but could not see what was held hidden by his right hand. “Just like last time,” I said, causing him to glance in my direction. “You hold it with your right hand, not your left.” He reacted with a quiet sniff of laughter and returned his gaze to himself, his hooded head lowered, like a little monk praying. I finished before him but didn’t move or zip up. “Just like me,” I added. “With my right hand, I mean, even though I’m left-handed.”

“You’re left-handed?”

“For most things. Bu for this, see, I use my right.”

The boy accepted my invitation to take a look, to observe for himself what I was holding, and how I was holding it. He trickled to a finish while he was looking at me, actually staring at me. It was then, as he shook and squeezed out a last few stubborn drops, probably getting some on his pants and his shoes, that I glimpsed him, not sure really if I was seeing his thumb or a thumb-sized penis, his thumb nail or a circumcised tip. His view of me must have been equally dim and ill-defined. When he tucked himself back into his pants and took a step backward, I also zipped up and prepared to leave.

Back home, Pepper guzzled a glass of water at the kitchen sink and hurried yawning to his bed, which I had already pulled out and prepared. He took off his shoes and socks only, not even bothering to change into his yellow shorts—too tired, he explained in a sleepy mumble as he crawled beneath the covers. Outside, the temperature had been dropping all night; even inside we could feel the chill. “Drafty old house,” I said, fiddling with the thermostat across the room. “Are you cold, Pepper?”

The boy was removing his copper-rimmed glasses. He put them on the table beside the couch and said, "It's freezing in here. Can you see my breath?"

"It's not that cold," I laughed. "Anyway, I just turned up the heat."

Pepper exhaled forcefully a couple of times with his mouth wide open in an attempt to create a puff of steam. I laughed at him again and grabbed the Polaroid camera from the top of the television. Earlier in the night, while the boy was on the floor with his magic books and his drawings, I had taken several pictures of him; he had offered no resistance beyond a half-hearted "boo-hoo waaah!" and a fidgety, self-conscious grin. Now I took another of him as he gazed droopy-eyed at the TV with the covers just beneath his chin. "You can't even see me," he said in his drowsy mumble.

"I can see your cute little face," I told him, snapping one more picture as he smiled at the compliment.

"When will your Pepper collection be finished?"

"Oh, it'll never be finished," I said. "Not as long as we're friends."

"How long will we be friends?"

"Forever, I hope."

"Yeah, me too," Pepper said, glancing in my direction and then quickly away.

"Forever and ever and ever," I said cheerily to cover a sudden surge of weepy sentimentality. When the photos were finished developing, I put them and the camera back on top of the television, then sat on the edge of the mattress to take off my shoes and socks, my shirt, finally my pants. Until our last weekend together, the boy and I had never slept in the same bed; even that last time had been impromptu, unexpected, with me lying beside him above the covers and fully clothed, more like keeping him company than anything else. This time was different, a tacit understanding that we would be sleeping together as true bunkmates. It would have felt odd—to both of us, I'm convinced—had I disappeared now into my bedroom and left Pepper by himself for the rest of the night.

I looked at him over my shoulder as I removed my pants. “Hope you don’t mind. But I always sleep in my underwear.”

“Don’t you get cold?”

“Not once I’m beneath the covers. Especially if there’s somebody to snuggle with.”

I had on my usual brand of underwear: Hanes boxers, this particular pair with broad stripes of red and white. I stood up and did a slow fashion-model turn. “Fancy, hah? I used to wear briefs, like yours, when I was a kid, then I switched to boxers when I got older.”

“Why?”

“They’re more comfortable,” I said, plucking the loose fabric at the crotch to demonstrate. I made a fast circuit of the house in order to turn out the lights, then burrowed beneath the covers with Pepper. The television, its sound turned low, was still on, providing quiet MTV music and a dim nightlight. The boy seemed uncertain at first how to behave with another person next to him, a vague nervousness that I could sense in the restless movement of his hands and feet.

I tried to put him at ease by taking charge and playing Big Protective Grown-up, moving against him in a frank and relaxed way. “See, it’s nice and warm like this,” I said. “Go ahead and get comfortable.” Pepper shifted a couple of tentative times before settling himself backward against me, the two of us spooned snugly together. My left arm was draped across him, my hand on his chest. I could feel his rabbit heart as he turned his head and eyed me sideways. “Do you think our spell will really work?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“We did everything just right, I think.”

“No doubt about that,” I said, both of us murmuring like spies. “It’s strange, but I thought this magic stuff was just a game at first, just goofing around. And now I’m not so sure.”

“It’s mostly real, I think.”

“After what happened to the old woman,” I said, “you might be right.” As we murmured back and forth, I slipped my hand beneath Pepper’s usual layers of T-shirts and felt the bare skin of his chest and his stomach. “But we don’t want those kids to die, do we?”

“What kids?”

“The three bullies.”

“Will they die?”

“The spell says they will. If they can’t find the candles and destroy them.”

Pepper gave me another sidelong glance. “Would that be like murder?”

“More or less,” I said, my lips brushing his hair as I talked and breathed close against him. “We don’t want that to happen.”

“Maybe I have an idea.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“What if. . . what if we just wait a while and then dig up the candles? Would that work?”

My hand found his navel, making him flinch against me. “A very ingenious idea, Pepper. You’ll make them suffer for a while, but not fatally. Such a brilliant guy you are.” My fingers told me that he had an “outie” belly button, a fleshy little nipple on his stomach that I started fondling with gentle pinches. He squirmed slightly while trying to hold in a laugh. “Hey, I thought you weren’t ticklish,” I said to tease him. “This feels like a ticklish boy to me.”

“I’m not. . . ticklish,” Pepper laughed, more and more giggly. There was no way I could stop. No way I could resist tickling him wherever I could reach: around his belly and up under his arms, then down again, farther than before and more boldly across the front of his pants, between his legs. He curled himself in defense and giggled louder. Again I couldn’t resist trying more, just a little more, squeezing at his crotch to find what he had there, causing him to curl tighter—but not tight enough to keep me from finally sneaking my hand beneath the waistband itself where I managed to get at his bare butt. He thrashed,

almost screaming, when I tickled him there, then sat up as if electrocuted when I tried to reach in front. I pulled my hand away and said, “OK, that’s enough horseplay for tonight. Are you all right?”

“I’m all right,” the boy said in a sort of exhausted echo, still sitting up beside me. I touched his shoulder and urged him back down. It took a moment, but gradually he relaxed and returned his head to the pillow. I stroked his hair to soothe him. “Sorry about that,” I said. “Really, I shouldn’t have gotten you so worked up. It’s my fault.”

Again the boy said that he was all right. I put my arm around him and held him as his breathing calmed and slowed to normal. An old song by Prince was coming softly from the television, as sweet and soporific as any lullaby. “Just go to sleep now,” I whispered close to the boy’s ear. The smell of his hair and clothing was like the smell of his bedroom, a distinctive blend of dirty sheets and greasy fast-food wrappers. “Go to sleep, little Pepper, go to sleep.” I crooned and crooned to the boy lying there beside me, warm beneath the covers, wondering if he could feel my erection pressed against him.

I woke for the first time around five o’clock, confused briefly by being in the living room and by the sound of the television at such an early hour. Pepper and I were still spooned together, but our positions had been reversed, with the boy now behind me. His right knee was bent up, wedged uncomfortably against my rear end.

When I woke for the second time, it was after eight o’clock and Pepper was already awake beside me. His glasses were on and he was gazing vacantly at MTV, the channel still unchanged from the night before. I mumbled a groggy “good morning” to the boy and kissed him on the cheek, then shuffled to the bathroom. He was waiting when I came out, in a hurry to use the toilet.

I knew by now what he liked for breakfast: any sweetened cereal, or gooey pastry, or pancakes with lots of syrup. No fresh fruit. Especially no eggs, which he considered an evil food. On this particular

morning, along with his bowl of Cocoa Puffs, he had two English muffins, heavily buttered, and as much bacon as I was willing to fry—an ideal breakfast to his taste, crammed with sugar and salt and grease. Afterwards I brought in the fat Sunday newspaper from the front porch and settled in the dilapidated La-Z-Boy to read it.

As always, I went straight to the obituaries to check for the old woman's name, just a glance before turning to the other news. But this time I stopped and caught my breath—because her name was actually there. I muttered “oh my god” and looked closer at the page, not quite believing what I'd just seen. “Oh my god, Pepper, look at this!”

The boy was on his bed, which was still pulled out. He was staring at the television and munching one last strip of bacon, taking tiny nibbles of it with his front teeth to make it last. He jumped up and rushed to my side. I pointed to the name on the page. “You see. That's her. Helen Dillon, seventy-eight years old, died last night at Silver Cross Hospital.”

“The Dill Pickle?”

“Yeah,” I said, “the old woman from across the street. She's dead.”

“Did we kill her?”

“No, of course not. It's just a coincidence, that's all.”

Pepper was studying the obituary on my lap, as if for cryptic clues. “But I thought the curses were real,” he said, chewing the final morsel of bacon. “Remember, last night you thought they were real.”

“That was before somebody actually died,” I muttered.

“Do we feel guilty?”

“No, Pepper, we definitely do not feel guilty.”

The boy reached, I thought, for the obituaries, but instead grabbed the garishly colored comics. “Who's going to live in her house?”

“I have no idea.”

“More porch police?” I turned to the sports section and said, “Let's hope not. It might stay empty for a while. If we're lucky.” I managed to read a few lines from a story about the Bulls, then set the paper on my

lap and gazed toward the window, toward the woman's house beyond. "I can't believe she's really dead. It's a relief in a way, but. . . she was just an old lady, not a monster."

"Wasn't she a witch?"

"That was just a joke," I said to the boy. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor beside my chair, focused with furrowed brow on a cartoon of Charlie Brown and Snoopy. I nudged his curly, downturned head. "You understand that, don't you, Pepper? She was just a lonely old lady."

"But she was the porch police, too."

"OK, she was definitely a busybody, that's true," I said. "It's just. . . it's bad karma to feel good about somebody dying."

"What's bad karma?" "Like bad luck."

"Her cats probably miss her," the boy decided. "She was like their mom."

I nodded but couldn't answer. The noise of the television suddenly seemed yammery and annoying. I put aside the newspaper and went to the kitchen, by myself, to smoke a cigarette, my first of the day. The table was still covered with dirty dishes and silverware, an opened tub of margarine, a bag of English muffins also opened, a box of Cocoa Puffs, a carton of orange juice, glasses, cups, crumpled paper napkins. I refilled my cup of coffee that was still sitting amidst the clutter and took it to the back door and stood there looking outside, a cold draft leaking through the cracks.

Pepper left a few hours later (his mother picked him up on her way to the mall). I had a late lunch of leftover pizza and then made a half-hearted attempt to clean the house. I had finished with the kitchen and was just starting to vacuum the living room when someone came pounding at the front door. Fear, immediately, of enemies at the gate. I turned off the Hoover and looked cautiously out the window. Even before I saw Doc himself on the porch, I could see his blue Ford pickup

in the driveway. “This is a rare honor,” I said as I let him in. “What’s the occasion?”

“I’m in town for supplies,” he said, politely wiping his feet. “I need certain items such as soda pop and chips. Among other things.”

“For what?”

“For the Patallero lad.”

“Frankie? You’ve seen him?”

Doc took a seat on the couch. “Is that coffee I smell?”

“Sure. I’ll get you some. But what about Frankie?”

“Get me the coffee,” Doc said, “and I’ll tell you the latest news.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Doc sipped his coffee from a Star Trek mug. "I thought perhaps I'd get the chance to meet Khalid," he said. "Did he spend the night?"

"He left around noon," I nodded, sitting at the opposite end of the couch. Pepper's magic books were between us on the middle cushion. "These are his, in fact. He decided to keep them here."

"So the two of you dabble in the dark arts? How sinister!"

"You have no idea," I said. "We just killed the woman who lived across the street. With a curse. On Halloween."

"You don't say."

"It's true. She died last night at Silver Cross. Cause and effect, very simple."

"I hope you're joking," Doc said between sips of Folgers. He was glancing through one of the books, flipping the pages one-handed. "There are no mystic forces controlling our lives, Jacob."

"Says who?"

"It's not like you to be so superstitious."

"I've never killed anyone before now," I said, finally smiling. "Anyway, you still haven't told me about Frankie. What's the story?"

"The story, basically, is that he got my letter of invitation and showed up at my door yesterday afternoon."

"And?"

"And," Doc said, "we spent a rather enjoyable day together. He's a very likeable young man."

"So. How does he look?"

"Just as he described himself in his first letter, really. Fine-boned, long hair, brown eyes. He favors tie-dyed shirts and combat boots. Like a hippie boy from thirty years ago."

"That would explain his psychedelic stationery," I remarked. "He's a retro hippie. Probably a Grateful Dead fan."

“In fact, he is. I’m impressed by your powers of deduction. He loves the Grateful Dead, and the Beatles, and Jimi Hendrix, et cetera, et cetera. He’s very. . . passionate.”

“In what way?”

“He always seems,” Doc paused again to find the right word, “very enthusiastic about. . . about everything. Loaded with energy.”

“That was obvious in his letters.”

“Exuberant might be a good word for him. Very exuberant.”

I had to laugh at Doc and his frazzled expression. He finished his coffee and peered into the mug as if baffled by its emptiness. I took it from him and went to the kitchen for a refill. When I came back, Doc had crossed the living room and was perusing the new photos of Pepper that were stacked on the television. “Such a contented little boy,” he said. “Very cute.”

I looked over his shoulder at the photo in his hand, a shot of Pepper belly-down on the floor, drawing. “Here,” I said, “take your coffee. Now tell me more about Frankie.”

“Are you changing the subject, Jacob? Something wrong with Khalid?”

“No, no, nothing wrong. Same old story. I make a cautious advance and he retreats. But we like each other very much. We’re good friends.”

“Fair enough.”

“Now. What about Frankie?”

We were back on the couch, which I always thought of now as Pepper’s bed. The window behind us was rattling in a cold November gust. “There’s not a great deal more to tell,” Doc finally said. “We talked and talked. I showed him around the homestead. We spent hours going through videos and books, old manuscripts, everything you can imagine. He seemed thrilled by even the littlest things.” “Well, sure. You’re his hero.”

“He’s like an overly excited puppy. You can’t imagine. And, no, we have not had sex.”

“Did I ask such a rude question?”

“Our visit was exceedingly proper, you might say. Our contact was limited to hugging. When he arrived and when he left.”

I was drinking a Coors while I listened. “Hugging? His idea or yours?”

“His,” Doc smiled, “definitely his. He’s a real hugger, that boy. Not at all bashful about it. He grabbed me in his arms as soon as I opened the door.”

“The complete opposite of Pepper, in other words. You lucky dog!”

Doc responded with a slow nod and a shrug, clearly ambivalent. “He’s coming back again today. Later this afternoon. That’s one of the reasons I’m here.”

“What are you saying? Are you hiding from him?”

“No! I wouldn’t do that. I just need a bit of moral support, that’s all.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re. . .”

“Just a bit of moral support,” Doc repeated. “I’d like for you to meet him. Do you understand? Just to relieve a bit of the pressure. Until I get to know him a little better.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“I’m happy you think so.”

“There is more pressure with an older boy,” I agreed.

“Of course there is! Little boys are happy to lose themselves in play, in their own imaginations. They’re children, after all, still children, with no expectations or agendas or cynical attitudes. Older teenagers, in most ways, are already adults.”

“But much cuter and sexier.”

“Yes, no question about it,” Doc said, gulping the rest of his coffee. “I’m not saying that Frankie isn’t cute or desirable. He is. Very much so. But. . . but I can’t give him a bowl of ice cream and some toys and leave him to his own amusement. He expects more from me. He has adult expectations of me, you could say.”

I finished my beer and played a few notes with the empty bottle by blowing across the top. “Sixteen-year-old boys can be very playful,” I said between my idle tootling. “They generally love sports and video games and comic books. It’s a great age for hobbies, for collecting, that sort of thing. Honestly, you should relax, stop worrying so much.”

“It’s been too long, I think,” Doc said in a distracted mumble. “I’ve forgotten how to. . . how to behave with young people.” He pushed himself up and went to the kitchen for more coffee, but found the pot empty. I was right behind him, ready with an apology. He put his Star Trek mug in the sink and said, “Never mind, never mind. We should be going, anyway. Are you ready?”

“You go ahead, I’ll follow you.”

“Good, good,” Doc said in that same distracted mumble, on his way out.

A flurry of snow was falling by the time I arrived at his house. Doc was rebuilding the fire in the pot-bellied stove, his face ruddied by the heat. “You know,” I told him as I came in, “I’m a little uncomfortable with this. I feel like I’m interfering.”

“Nonsense! I invited you here.”

“But Frankie didn’t invite me. He might not be so glad to see me.”

“Nonsense,” Doc scoffed again. “I told him all about you. He’s very eager to meet ‘Kenneth’ in person.”

Doc was referring to my fictionalized alter ego, a character based on me that he had used in several stories through the years. Being a fan of those stories, Frankie was understandably curious about meeting me, the real-life Kenneth. “Just so long as I’m not in the way,” I hedged one more time.

Doc straightened up, wincing at the pain in his knees, grumbling about his damned arthritis. He looked past me through the window in the front door and said, “Well, it’s too late for second-guessing. Frankie is coming up the road. You see, that’s his red Honda.”

I stepped to the door for a better view of Frankie's car as it slowed to a stop behind my white Volvo, which was parked behind Doc's blue pickup, all three vehicles lined up patriotically in the gravelly cul-de-sac that served as Doc's driveway. The boy seemed slightly puzzled by the sight of my car, touching it with his fingertips as he walked past, like a psychic feeling for impressions. Snow had powdered the ground by now. Frankie's black combat boots left prints as he approached the front door. He had his hands in the pockets of his jacket—actually not a jacket but a ski vest of ribbed, insulated silver-and-orange nylon. His jeans were ripped, it seemed deliberately, at the knees.

I opened the door for him as soon as he stepped onto the wooden porch and began stomping the dirty slush from his boots. He looked at me with a smile, a very squinty and very dimply smile, as if responding to the punchline of some wickedly funny joke. He kept stomping his boots even as he moved toward me. "Are you Kenneth?"

"Sort of," I said, extending my hand to greet him. "My real name is Jacob. But everybody calls me Jake."

"Well hey, bro, I'm Frankie," the boy said. "It's cool to meet you." He took my hand and then, at the same time, surprised me with a hug, using his free arm. I hugged him back, also one-armed, patting the shoulder of his lumpy ski vest. Just as Doc had described him: a real hugger, that boy. "I come here most Sundays to see Doc," I explained. "I've heard all about you, Frankie."

"Dude, I hope it was all good!"

"Extremely good, I can honestly say. Come inside," I told him, my hand still on his shoulder. "It's cold out there."

"No doubt, it's totally cold," the boy said, still smiling so squinty-eyed and dimpled, so goddamned cute, that I wanted to pinch his cheek and kiss him. He moved past me into the house. His hair was long and straight, nearly to his shoulders, parted in the middle where it was darkest blond, lighter where it had grown out. He went straight to Doc and grabbed him in a full hug. They were almost the same height, Doc

possibly an inch or so taller—and, of course, a good seventy or eighty pounds heavier. “It’s nice to see you again, my boy,” Doc said to him as they separated, and as Frankie unzipped and removed his insulated vest. “How’s the road from Stonerville?”

“It’s cool, it’s cool, no problem,” the boy said, nodding and smiling, nodding and smiling. He was wearing a dark flannel shirt unbuttoned and untucked beneath the ski vest, and a tie-dyed T-shirt (all greens and reds and purples) beneath that. Doc started toward the kitchen with sideways steps, beckoning with his finger for Frankie to follow. “I went shopping,” he said, “as I promised yesterday.”

The boy jogged past him and opened the refrigerator. “Oh man, Doc, you’re too cool! Cherry Coke, my favorite!” He grabbed one of the cans and popped the top for a quick swig. “This is so great!”

“Also chips. And nuts. And Twinkies,” Doc recited, displaying each item in turn. “And some little pizzas in the freezer, the kind you wanted.”

Frankie opened the freezer door and nodded a vigorous confirmation. “Dude, the little snack pizzas! Totally!”

“As for dinner tonight, it’s already in the oven.”

“It smells really, really good. What is it?”

“Venison,” Doc said, “with roasted potatoes and vegetables.”

Before I had arrived, and before rebuilding the fire, Doc had apparently started everything cooking. “You’ve been very busy today,” I told him, “full of surprises.” I looked at Frankie. “Have you ever had venison?”

“No, never, I don’t think so.”

“You’re in for a treat, then. Doc’s venison is the best, the very best. He’s a superb cook.”

“Please, Jacob, no more flattery. We’ll let Frankie judge for himself, if you don’t mind.”

I sidled past the two of them to get myself a beer from the refrigerator. “Feel free to have one of these now and then,” I said to the boy. “If you ever feel like being naughty and rebellious, that is.”

“Oh man, my parents would slaughter me if they smelled beer on my breath!”

“You live with both parents?”

“Both of them, yeah, which is sometimes a pain in the ass, believe me.” “Any brothers or sisters?”

“A little brother and a little sister,” Frankie nodded, sipping at his can of Cherry Coke. “It’s such a nightmare, our house, you wouldn’t believe it.”

All of us had wandered back to the living room with our drinks and a can of mixed nuts, mostly pecans and cashews—something to nibble before dinner. Doc was in his usual chair in the center of the room, Frankie and myself on the couch along the wall to his left. I produced a manila envelope full of old photos that I had gathered just before coming to Doc’s. “I thought Frankie might enjoy seeing some pictures from the old days,” I said, scooting next to him. “This one here, for example, is Doc in his office at Sandburg College, when he was still a professor.”

“Jacob, Jacob, you sadistic fiend!”

“Dude, no, it’s cool! I love this stuff,” Frankie said. He took the photos one after another as I pulled them from the envelope and described them—photos of Doc at the college when his hair and beard had still been dark brown and carefully trimmed; of Doc and myself at his apartment on Tompkins Street; of Doc with his arm around a succession of boyfriends from the Seventies and Eighties. “I love this stuff,” Frankie gushed again. He was seated at the end of the couch closest to Doc. “These pictures are excellent.”

“He was quite the handsome devil,” I said as I pulled out the last photo. It was another of Doc in his old office at Sandburg College, smiling from behind his messy desk and resembling, I’d always thought, a middle-aged Ernest Hemingway.

“Yeah, he was, no doubt,” Frankie said with rapidly bobbing nods of his head. “Like a real stud, you know, like sharp.”

“As opposed to now,” Doc added, letting the thought finish itself.

“Dude, no, I think you still look cool. Like some total mountain man or something.”

“That’s exactly right,” I said, pleased to see that Doc was grinning at the description. Such a little thing, so simple, but Frankie’s sincere compliment had somehow eased Doc’s tension, it was easy to see. He was more talkative as he finished preparing dinner and as he served us plates of venison and carrots and potatoes all swimming in glisteny brown juice. Frankie tore into the food with his typical passion, wolfing oversized bites, each mouthful causing him to smile and nod with pleasure. It was while he was eating that I noticed the braces on his teeth, the clear plastic kind that escape detection on first glance. I mentioned them to Frankie and told him, after a swallow of beer to clear my throat, how lucky he was. “You should have seen the metal monstrosities that kids like me had to wear,” I said. “It was a real freak show.”

“I’ve seen them.”

“Count your blessings, buddy.”

“Yeah, these aren’t so bad,” the boy agreed. “They come off pretty soon, like next summer.”

Doc leaned forward to get a better look. “Your teeth look fine to me.”

“They were totally gappy on top, really major, before I got the braces.”

Gappy like Ryan’s, I found myself thinking, smiling at the conjured image of that other boy’s pretty, bratty face. “Do they get in the way when you’re kissing?”

“Oh man, such a wicked question! I can’t answer that,” Frankie laughed, visibly blushing.

“OK, we’ll just have to use our imaginations,” I teased him. “Right, Doc?”

“Behave yourself, Jacob.”

I shrugged and then asked Frankie what he thought of the venison. “It’s so good,” he said, “it really is. Like ordinarily, most of the time, I don’t even eat meat, you know. Like steaks and stuff, I don’t even eat them. But this venison is different, like more natural or something, I like it a lot.”

Doc nodded approvingly. “It tastes more natural, as you say, because it is more natural, without all the chemicals and preservatives routinely injected into supermarket meat.”

“That’s why it’s so cool out here, bro, because everything is, like, in total harmony with nature. It’s like in Woodstock, you know, in the movie, when they were talking about peace and love and all that.” The boy never stopped moving as he talked, some part of him always in animated motion—his head doing that excited, rhythmic bob; his hands gesturing for emphasis; his legs bouncing and bouncing as if eager to catapult him from the couch and run him around the room. “So you’re a fan of the Woodstock Generation,” I said, something between an observation and a question.

“It would’ve been more fun back then,” Frankie told me. “The music was better and everybody was, like, devoted to the revolution because of the war and all that.”

“I happen to agree with you.”

“Were you a hippie?” “I was a definite long-haired freak. In fact,” I said, “I looked very much the way you do right now. Except that my hair was red, not blond.”

“I wish my hair was really blond, you know, like Macaulay Culkin when he was young.”

“It tends to darken as you get older. Unless you’re a full-blooded Scandinavian or whatever. Even Macaulay Culkin doesn’t have hair like Macaulay Culkin anymore.”

“I tried dying it a few weeks ago,” the boy confessed. His plate, now empty, was on his lap, and he was taking swigs of Cherry Coke as

we chatted. “It looked kind of trippy for a while, but now it’s growing out weird.”

“I noticed the two-tone effect.”

“I didn’t have the nerve to ask,” Doc remarked softly, like someone thinking aloud. “So, my boy, how about some more food?”

“Thanks, thanks, but no, I’m full,” Frankie said, patting his scrawny belly. Doc and I told him, in unison, that he ate like a bird, the two of us sounding like identical old nags as we refilled our own plates. The boy laughed at us and said that we sounded like his mom, always badgering him to eat more, complaining that he was too thin. “But I will have dessert,” he announced, in the kitchen with us now, bouncy as ever. “There’s always room for Twinkies!” He grabbed the whole box, then another can of Cherry Coke from the refrigerator, and hurried back to the couch. “He’s just like Pepper,” I said to Doc. “A true sugar fiend.”

Frankie heard me, as I’d intended. “Who’s Pepper?” he wanted to know, ripping at the cellophane of a Twinkie pack.

“He’s a friend of mine, a boy, his real name is Khalid Robinson.”

How much more, I wondered, should I say? This was strange, this was something new, dealing with a gay teenager like Frankie. This was not just your average omnisexual teenager playing hooky, so to speak, from the hetero world, around for the affection and the pleasure but still and always just a secret sharer, a temporary refugee from alien territory. No, this kid was something different: a genuine sixteen-year-old faggot, and proud of it. There was no reason to be cautious around him, I realized; no reason to worry about him returning to the enemy camp with sensitive or confidential information, with loose talk, with gossip. And yet. He was still a stranger in nearly every way, still an outsider, a visitor who might or might not become a close friend, too soon to tell, too soon to trust. And yet, and yet. Caution seemed to dissolve in the presence of this high-spirited boy with the squinty, dimply grin. I added, finally, “He’s twelve years old, very cute, sort of shy.”

“Why is he called Pepper?”

“Same thing I wanted to know,” Doc said. He was looking through the videotapes piled beside the television. His plate of food was waiting for him on the arm of his chair. I was back on the couch with Frankie, eating more venison while he devoured Twinkie after Twinkie. “All I can tell you,” I said, “is that his grandmother started calling him Pepper when he was two or three years old. Just a term of affection for a feisty little boy, I imagine. You’d like him, Frankie, I’m sure.”

“Does he come out here?”

“Not yet, no, we haven’t had a chance.”

“He has been invited,” Doc said, putting a tape into the VCR.

“We were talking about it just yesterday, in fact. He seems eager for a visit.”

“Good, good, bring him out here any time, Jacob.”

“Dude, this is too cool! I mean, being here, it’s just like one of Doc’s stories or something!”

“Life imitating art imitating life,” Doc mumbled as he found his remote and hit the “play” button. His well-worn copy of *You Are Not Alone* came to life on the screen. It was our earlier discussion of blond hair, he said, as well as my mention of Scandinavia, which had reminded him of that particular film. Frankie shook his head no when we asked him—once again in vaudeville unison—if he had ever seen it. “I’ve never even heard of it,” he said, a smear of white Twinkie filling on his bottom lip. “Is it like famous or something?”

I kept silent this time in deference to Doc, who was busily consuming his second plateful of venison and potatoes and carrots. He took a moment to swallow before offering a reply. “It’s a brave little film, nothing else quite like it, about two boys in love, openly and candidly in love, as close as cinema has ever come to an authentic boy-love romance.”

Frankie responded, as he listened to Doc and as he watched Bo’s first scene on the beach, with a soft and slightly awestruck, “Duuude!”

“It could never be made today,” Doc added. “The mere act of showing it or watching it would now be illegal in some countries. Canada, for instance.”

The boy nodded, but his eyes were riveted to the screen. At Kim’s first appearance, he pointed and said, “There, you see, he has truly excellent hair!”

“It looks just like yours,” I told him, although it was difficult to see on Doc’s defective television.

“Better than my hair,” he insisted, “seriously.”

It was intriguing, watching this soft-core boy-meets-boy romance with a real teenager, peeking at his reaction when Kim jerked off in his bedroom, when Bo and Kim took their shower together, when Bo interrupted two other boys making out in the bathroom—and, of course, when Bo and Kim exchanged their climactic kiss. “Duuude,” was Frankie’s general response, the word uttered as a soft croon of amazement, of marvel, of delight. He had never seen anything like this movie, he gleefully confessed at the end, then asked Doc, a bit bashfully, if we might see the shower scene one more time. I decided, at that point, to retire discreetly before I became a nuisance, an obstacle. Both Doc and Frankie protested. “It’s early,” the boy said. “Don’t go so soon.”

“Stay, Jacob, by all means.”

“I’m a mailman, remember? Early to bed, early to rise, blah blah blah.”

Doc was rewinding the tape to find the shower scene. He paused when it became obvious that I was really leaving. “Jacob, Jacob, we haven’t even discussed plans for Thursday.”

“Oh my god,” I said, “Thanksgiving! I forgot about it entirely.”

It had become traditional for me to spend my holidays with Doc. I had no family, after all, and neither did he; being together at Easter or Christmas or Thanksgiving had always seemed a sensible way of spending an otherwise dreary and depressing day. “Same plans as

always for me,” I said. “I’ll be here around noon. Unless you’re doing something different this year.”

“Nothing different. I’ll be having the mandatory turkey and trimmings. Everyone is invited,” Doc said, glancing at Frankie.

“I’ll be stuck at my grandparents’ house,” the boy grumbled. “Such a bummer.”

“Same as Pepper,” I said. “He gets carted off to his grandmother’s house in Joliet for practically every holiday.”

“Such a bummer!”

“Yeah, life is a bitch,” I said, and headed for the door. Frankie jumped from the couch to intercept me, the manila envelope full of photos in his hand. “Don’t forget your stuff!”

I thanked him and patted his shoulder, which was all the encouragement he needed for another hug—so affectionate, this boy, that he made me laugh. “You’re a great kid, Frankie. It’s a pleasure having you around.”

“Well hey, bro, you’re really cool,” he said as we stepped apart. “I’m totally glad I got to meet you.”

“Stop by my house and say hello whenever you’re in town.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” I said, “have Doc give you my address and phone number.”

That was the end of my first meeting with Frankie Patallero.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Instead of a boring old turkey, Doc ended up roasting a dozen quails for Thanksgiving dinner. I spent the day drinking beer and watching football while Doc kept busy cooking at the stove and, later, tinkering with material for his Spain and Morocco stories. We agreed, both of us, that Frankie had lived up to every expectation, a delightful boy filled with warmth and humor and infectious spirit. But, I wanted to know, what had happened after my departure Sunday night? Had Frankie watched the shower scene from *You Are Not Alone* one more time? Yes, Doc finally revealed, they had watched the shower scene again, and yes, Frankie had become excited, and yes, the boy had looked at Doc for approval and then had opened his own pants, those raggedy blue jeans ripped at the knees, and had begun jerking himself off. Doc, with paper napkins from the kitchen, had helped him finish. “Lucky bastard,” I said.

I could imagine a similar scene with Pepper—someday, somehow, maybe. We had seen each other, Pepper and I, when I picked him up after school Monday and Tuesday, before the start of Thanksgiving break. He had seemed quiet to me, a little glum, but nothing I said could coax an explanation from him. Was he having trouble with the bullies? He wouldn’t say. Was he upset about leaving town for the holiday? He wouldn’t say. Or was he disturbed in some way by our previous weekend together, by my tickling and groping which had gone too far? That particular question, I never asked.

Whatever the reason for his mood, I saw nothing more of Pepper that holiday weekend, which left me to wonder and worry. That same holiday also brought another encounter with Ryan, who was home from school when I came delivering mail on Friday, the day after Thanksgiving. He was outside on the front porch with a small army of

action figures, everything from Power Rangers to Transformers to plastic Civil War soldiers. The snow from earlier in the week had melted and the weather was clear and mild for an afternoon in late November; even so, it seemed peculiar that the boy should be outside to play, dressed against the cold in his orange sweatshirt and stocking cap, his cheeks rouged by the chill breeze. Seeing me, he started talking immediately about whatever was on his mind, never bothering with any type of greeting—as if, always, I were late for an appointment and he needed to make up for lost time. “Hey,” he said, “my first swimming tournament is in two weeks.”

“That’s great,” I replied. “Good luck.”

“Are you coming?”

I shrugged, taken by surprise. “Why? Are you inviting me?”

“You should come and watch me,” was the boy’s answer. He was fiddling with a red-and-black Transformer while he talked. “I’ll probably win.”

I imagined him nearly naked in his Speedo briefs, and then I shrugged again and smiled. “Do I need a ticket or something?”

“No, don’t be stupid! Just show up and watch me! Here,” he said, yanking a sheet of yellow paper from the pouch of his sweatshirt, “this is the schedule for the whole season.”

I took it from him and glanced at the list of dates and times and locations. Ryan, still fidgeting and fidgeting with the toy, told me to keep the list, to take it home. “That’s very nice of you,” I said.

“I bet you won’t even show up.”

“Of course I’ll show up. With one little condition.”

The boy sprang to his feet and faced me, eye to eye, from the second step, like someone responding to a challenge. “What kind of condition?”

“Nothing big,” I said. “Just call me Jake, you know, like a regular friend, instead of hey-you-mailman.”

“Why?”

“Because it would make me happy, that’s why!”

Ryan regarded me with that quizzical, scrunched-nose look of his. "I thought your name was Sam," he told me. "That's what Old Man Kauffmann calls you."

I laughed, then explained to him that the old man next door called me Sam, short for Uncle Sam, because he thought of me as a government worker. "But my real name is Jake Brahms. So let's make this a proper introduction," I said, extending my hand. "Shake, pardner."

Ryan made a this-is-stupid face, which didn't surprise me, but he took my hand anyway, and took it with some enthusiasm, a good strong grip for a nine-year-old. I had never touched him before. Holding his chilled hand, and keeping it held for just a moment or two longer than necessary, made the flesh-and-blood reality of him suddenly vivid, suddenly intense. "OK," I told him, "now we're buddies."

"Oh wow, buddies," Ryan repeated, sarcasm in every word. Somehow, though, it seemed unconvincing, just a nervous young boy's pretense against appearing too soft, too vulnerable. He was staring at me hard with those neon-blue eyes of his, both of us the same height because of his perch on the second step. "You probably don't even live in Sandburg," he finally said. "Where do you live? In Gilson or Stonerville or someplace stupid like that?"

I laughed again, always something amusing about being so mercilessly belittled by this kid, this child. "No," I said, "I live right here in Sandburg. On Whitman Street. Number 747. Like the airplane."

"The jumbo jet."

"That's right. It's not very far from here. Just an easy bike ride, really."

"I know where Whitman Street is," Ryan said. "It's over by the junior high."

"Exactly."

"I'll be going there in two years."

Again I let my imagination play with the idea of him in skimpy Speedos, but this time as a junior-high swimmer of twelve or thirteen

years old, perfect from his blond head to his bare pink toes. I needed to touch him at that moment, and I did, quickly on the shoulder and then just as quickly on the cheek. He didn't flinch or pull away, as I'd expected he might. A slight flare of the nostrils was his only reaction. I'd seen it before, that flaring of his nostrils, an exaggerated intake of breath that made his nose widen and his mouth turn down at the corners, like someone confronted with an unusual odor. What did it mean? I had no idea, and no time to find out. "Gotta go," I said, turning away. "It's holiday time. Lots of mail to deliver."

"OK, whatever," the boy mumbled. He sat down on the concrete porch to continue playing with his army of toys. Or so I assumed. But when I reached the house next door and glanced back to see him, he had already gathered the toys and disappeared. It occurred to me, with a tingle of revelation, that the boy had been waiting for me, playing outside on the porch solely in order to see me and invite me to his swimming tournament. Maybe not, of course. Just wishful thinking on my part. Impossible to know for sure.

Two days later, December hit with an arctic blast of wind and snow. My life, outside of work, seemed to go as cold as the weather for the next couple of weeks. Of Ryan and Frankie I saw not a trace, nothing sinister about their disappearance, just a consequence of school for them and work for me and blizzardy weather for all of us. The same bad weather also prevented me from visiting Doc; whether he and Frankie managed to see each other, I didn't know, but it seemed unlikely. Pepper, of course, remained a part of my daily routine regardless of ice or snow. I continued to pick him up after school and drop him at his home, stopping twice during those first weeks in December to have dinner with him and his mother and to play a game of Hero Quest. His sulkiness came and went as the days passed, and I eventually decided not to take it personally, and not to worry about it.

Something else I decided: Pepper's story about being bullied after school had been exaggerated—not exactly a lie, but almost certainly

embellished for reasons only he could know or explain. This became obvious after I'd been picking him up for a while, noticing most days that the three big boys—the alleged bullies—were nowhere in sight, clearly not a threat. I was willing to believe that they had harassed Pepper at some point, but not to the brink of desperation that Holly and I had first assumed. Whenever pressed for details about the situation, Pepper himself always became vague and absentminded, like a bruised little victim unable to discuss his trauma. Several weeks of this routine had finally convinced me that Pepper was, for the most part, pretending.

But why? What was his reason for making such a big deal out of such an apparently minor problem? Did he want attention, just simple attention, from both his mother and me? Possibly—but I was reminded of Ryan out on the front porch with his toys for reasons just as mysterious as Pepper's. There was only one piece in common between the two puzzles—and that was me. Only me. Both boys, it seemed, had concocted ploys for spending time with me, for getting closer to me—ploys which would have been condemned, if used by an adult, as manipulative and seductive, possibly even criminal. Or was I being hopelessly narcissistic? Perhaps I was misreading both situations, inventing motives and strategies where none existed. Then again, maybe I really did have two boys plotting for my attention, for my affection, for a kind of friendship unclear even to themselves. Vague longings. Unfamiliar feelings, desires. The age-old story of boys and men together, always a goatish whiff of sex in the air.

Despite so much prepubescent intrigue, I was left alone at my house throughout that first half of December. I used my abundance of free time to give the place a thorough cleaning, and also to fix the troublesome toilet that always took thirty or forty minutes to refill between flushes. One of the components in the tank, I discovered, had been destroyed by age and rust. The job of replacing it, which should have taken no more than an hour, dragged on for days in a nightmare of leaky joints and broken valves and blisters on nearly every one of my

fingers. Even my knees ended up bruised, thoroughly black and blue from the marathon hours of kneeling on the hard tiles in front of the toilet. In the end, with the component finally replaced and the toilet working properly, I stood in the bathroom and eyed the defective shower spigot like a battered fighter appraising his next opponent. No, I decided. It was too much. Pepper's wish for "a better shower" would have to wait for some other day.

Midway through December, with Christmas less than two weeks away, the weather grew warmer and the drifts of snow, some of them three or four feet high, began slowly to melt. On one of those pleasantly sunny days (a Wednesday, to be exact, when I was home from work), a moving van pulled up across the street and two burly workers commenced the job of emptying Helen Dillon's house. I watched them from my living room window, getting a chance to see every piece of furniture that the old woman had owned, something crude and undignified about the whole process, a postmortem violation of her privacy. Tables and chairs, beds and chests, a spinet piano, a heavy old console television, lamps of every shape and size, a big hi-fi stereo cabinet obviously from the Fifties or early Sixties—a public parade of her possessions for the voyeuristic delight of each and every neighbor. It took surprisingly little time, emptying her house. The two men worked with the silent efficiency of burglars; within two hours they were finished and the mammoth truck was gone. Later that same day, a "For Sale" sign appeared in the front yard. Next day, the house was already being shown to prospective buyers. No trace of Helen Dillon—the notorious Dill Pickle—remained.

Each day when I picked him up after school, I told Pepper the latest information about the Dillon house. He responded with his usual questions, wondering most often about "porch police" and the prospect of our privacy, as if we had something genuinely covert to hide from nosey neighbors. One time, our conversation bounced from the old

woman to magic spells to the curse that we'd put on the three bullies, prompting a sudden revelation from Pepper. "I dug up the candles," he announced, beside me in the car. "The ones in the cemetery." He had done it just the day before, his first chance after the long bout of snowy weather.

"All by yourself," I said, surprised. "So? Did the spell work? What happened?"

"It worked, I guess."

"No more trouble with bullies?"

Pepper shrugged, vague as ever about the subject. I tried again. "Come on," I said, "tell me what happened. Did they get sick or break a leg or something like that?"

With another shrug, as if he had lost interest in the whole topic, the boy said, "One of them got expelled because he brought a knife to school."

"He got kicked out?"

Pepper looked at me and nodded. He couldn't help smiling. "If they catch you with drugs or knives or guns, they kick you out first time."

"Zero tolerance."

"Yeah, that's what they call it."

"So what about the other two?"

"They don't hang around after school anymore," Pepper said. "I think they're in trouble, too."

"Amazing."

"What's amazing?"

"Well, I mean, it's almost like your spell really worked. Again. I'd say that's definitely amazing."

"But I dug up the candles," Pepper hastened to remind me, "so they wouldn't, you know, die."

"Very considerate of you."

The boy was watching me, still with that slightly smug grin flickering at the corners of his mouth. "Why are you always so surprised?"

“It’s hard to believe in magic.”

“I don’t think it’s hard.” “Anyway,” I said, “what happens now? I guess you won’t need a ride after school anymore.”

“Really?”

“Well,” I laughed, “you don’t need a bodyguard now that the bullies are gone.”

“So you want to stop?”

We were in front of his house by this time, and he had his hand on the car door, ready to get out. “We can finish this semester, like I promised at the beginning,” I said. “It’s only one more week.”

“OK.”

“And maybe I can still pick you up now and then.”

“For Hero Quest and stuff like that,” Pepper quickly agreed.

“Of course, of course, none of that will change. And you can still come over any weekend, just like before. It’s been a while since you came for a visit,” I added.

“What about tomorrow?”

“Sure,” I said, “that would be great. In fact, I have the whole weekend off for a change. Saturday and Sunday both. So, if you’d like.”

“I can come over tonight and stay till Sunday?”

“Exactly.”

“Yessss,” Pepper exclaimed in a rare outburst of excitement. He was already scrambling from the car to get inside the house and find his mother, to win her permission for our weekend together. I turned off the Volvo’s engine and followed him in. Holly had just returned home from work. She was quick to say yes when Pepper found her in the kitchen—probably relieved to get the boy “out of her hair,” as she often said, for a day or two. We all agreed, standing there in the kitchen, that I should stay for dinner (a casserole from the freezer, made of turkey left over from Thanksgiving), then afterwards take Pepper with me back home. The boy packed as if leaving town, stuffing his Nike bag with art supplies, a few favorite comic books, packs of Big Red gum, a large box of Milk Duds, some extra T-shirts and socks and underwear. He also

brought his saxophone—"just in case," he said, making a pun. We were in the car together, already on Whitman Street. "Get it?"

"Just in case," I nodded, "as in saxophone case. Very clever. Do you know any new songs?"

"Have you heard me play Eleanor Rigby before? It's a Beatles song."

"I'm familiar with it," I chuckled as we pulled into my driveway. "But no, I have not heard you play it before. I'm looking forward to it." Across the street, there was light and activity in the Dillon house. The Realtor, apparently, was working overtime, showing the house to another prospective buyer, whose Chevrolet minivan, with Missouri license plates, was parked in front. It was Pepper who identified the plates by sneaking across the street for a closer look; even in the dim streetlight, he had detected a strange color and design which had piqued his curiosity. "Maybe they're from the Ozarks," he said after sneaking back, when we were safely inside the house. "The Ozarks are in Missouri, I think."

"Mostly in Missouri and Arkansas, yeah."

Pepper was at the window, peeking outside from behind the curtain. "We can see them when they come out."

"I'm not sure it's worth the wait. They're just here to look at the house, after all. Come on," I said from behind him, "at least take off your coat."

Now that wintry weather had arrived in full force, the boy had started wearing an actual coat, hip-length, zippered and insulated but without a hood. Usually he wore no hat unless subzero temperatures demanded one. He had a red Bulls stocking cap for those special occasions. Otherwise, like today, he relied on his thick and fleecy hair to keep his head warm. I helped him out of his coat while he stood at the window and kept watch. Without turning, he went ahead and took off the pullover sweatshirt that he was wearing underneath, which left him in a pair of jeans and his black T-shirt with GIBSON USA shaped like a

white guitar on the chest. I took his coat and sweatshirt to the couch, just to lay them there temporarily, when my eye caught something yellow nearly hidden between the cushions, a piece of yellow paper. It was Ryan's swimming schedule, which I had set aside and forgotten two weeks earlier. I grabbed it with a feeling close to panic, afraid that I had broken my promise to the boy and missed his tournament. Pepper turned his head to see what I had found. I strolled back to the window while reading the schedule. "It's a list of swimming meets," I explained, holding it up for Pepper to see. "A boy on my mail route gave it to me."

"For what?" "He wants me to come and watch him. So that he can show off, basically. He likes to brag and show off, this kid, believe me."

"When is it?" "His first tournament is tomorrow afternoon," I said, "at one o'clock."

It occurred to me, as I was talking, that Pepper's visit had come at just the right time, that his presence at the tournament could be an advantage. By myself, I might appear conspicuous and out of place; with a boy at my side, I would blend in more convincingly as one of the parents, a father in the bleachers with his son to root for one of his other kids, all very upright and proper. "It's at the high school," I said to Pepper's back. "Are you interested in coming along?"

"Tomorrow afternoon?"

"That's right."

"Are you going for sure?"

"Yeah, I promised that I would. If you don't want to come, I can drop you off at your house, then pick you. . ."

"No, it's OK," Pepper cut in, "I'll go with you."

"Good! It might be fun."

"Is it fun to watch swimming?" "We'll find out tomorrow," I said. How else could I answer? How could I tell Pepper that I wanted to go in order to watch young boys, especially Ryan, without their clothes? Sure, he knew I was gay. But what did "gay" mean to Pepper, to a virginal twelve-year-old? It was a vague and inadequate label, in any event. To

him, and to everyone else who knew me as gay, I suppose it meant that I liked other men, other adult men, an “orientation” and a “lifestyle” now considered safely alternative, almost quaint, like being a vegetarian or a Quaker. Loving boys (and ogling them at swimming tournaments) had nothing to do with that acceptable new gay lifestyle. Homosexuality, like everything else, had been sanitized for public consumption, just another commodity, nothing but hype and pretense and fraud.

My random musings were interrupted when Pepper spotted someone through the window. “It’s the Missouri people,” he said, pointing. I turned off the room’s overhead light to give us a better view through the darkness, and to hide us at the window while we spied. I stood behind the boy with my arms around him, peering over the top of his head and letting the familiar wooly musk of his hair fill my nose. We watched as the female real-estate agent locked the house and walked to her car and waved a final goodbye to the group of prospective buyers. Difficult to see them clearly, but there were five figures in all, two larger and three smaller, probably a mother and a father and three kids. Girls? Boys? Pepper couldn’t tell for sure, and neither could I. “Anyway,” I pointed out one more time, “they’re just here to look at the house, nothing else. So it doesn’t matter if. . .”

“I think they’ll buy it,” Pepper interjected quietly.

“Oh yeah?”

“Because they came a long way, I think they’ll probably buy it.” “It might be sort of small for five people.”

Pepper shrugged and said, “It’s probably big enough.” He waited until the Chevrolet minivan had driven away, then touched both of my hands with both of his and gently freed himself from my embrace. I turned on the light and squinted against the sudden glare. Pepper was already on his way to the kitchen for something to drink.

The night passed uneventfully. We watched movies on TV; we played a few games of checkers; we ate hot-fudge sundaes. Pepper took

out his saxophone around ten o'clock and treated me to another concert, with Eleanor Rigby as the featured selection. "And I can do part of Penny Lane too, but not very good," he told me. "That's another Beatles song."

"Why so many?"

"The band director is a Beatles fan," Pepper explained, "so we're learning a Beatles medley."

"I've got an idea," I said, then hurried to my boxes full of records and dug out a collected-hits Beatles album that included both of the songs in Pepper's repertoire. "You can play along with the record," I proposed, an idea that made the boy smile in agreement. By midnight, while I sat and read his comic books (mostly issues of Batman and Spawn), he had played each song several times, delighted by the karaoke effect of accompanying professional musicians. He was finally forced to stop because, as he said, "My lips are exhausted."

He retired to the bathroom after that to change into his Nike shorts—a white pair this time, but just as baggy around his thin brown legs as the yellow ones. It was then, as he was coming back out, that I told him about my repair job on the toilet. He agreed that it was a major improvement, then recommended again that I should also fix the shower. "You need like a big tub and a real stall with a door and everything."

"You almost never use it anyway," I said to tease him. "So you shouldn't complain."

"I never use it?"

"Hardly ever. Like tonight. Did you take a shower or a bath?" When the boy answered no with a shake of his head, I said, "Well, there you go! I rest my case, your Honor."

"No, no, no, it's not true," Pepper whined in protest, playing along. "I use it all the time!"

"Such a liar you are!"

Pepper started his comical sobbing with his face lifted to the ceiling. Again he whined, "I'm not lying, I'm not lying, I use it every day, all the time!"

I wrapped one arm around his neck to drag him into the living room. “You have a twenty-four hour reprieve, chum! But you’re taking a bath tomorrow night or else!”

“Or else what?”

“Or else,” I said, “I’ll give you a bath myself!”

“No, you can’t do that!”

“Sure I can.”

Pepper poked me in the stomach with his elbow and twisted away from my grip. He was smiling when he said, “I’ll do it tomorrow, for sure I will, just wait and see!”

“OK,” I agreed after a moment of fake deliberation, “we’ll see what happens tomorrow.”

We slept together, as always now, on the lumpy pull-out couch, an arrangement that had come to feel as natural and routine as sharing a meal or sitting side by side to watch television. I started the Beatles album at the first song and let it play through uninterrupted as we lay in the darkness and listened. Pepper was asleep against me by the time Strawberry Fields concluded the first side. I put my hand beneath his GIBSON USA T-shirt and felt his heartbeat while he slept.

Next afternoon, shortly before one o’clock, Pepper and I arrived at Sandburg High School and made our way to the gymnasium and swimming pool, the two areas separated by a huge wall of cinderblocks and glass. Today, an extra section of bleachers had been set up against that wall to accommodate the crowd of spectators in the humid, chlorine-smelling natatorium. There were more people in attendance than I had expected—at least a hundred adults and kids in a gaudy array of rival school colors—orange and white over here, scarlet and gold over there, purple across the way. Pepper and I sat on the bottom row of bleachers directly behind the starting blocks, where young swimmers were taking turns practicing their “ready, set, go” dives into the pool. Others were already in the water, doing slow laps or splashing lazily to

stretch and loosen their muscles. Most others were milling around the edges of the pool in T-shirts and baggy shorts, keeping themselves covered until their time to compete. Their voices sounded diffuse and echoey in the vast enclosure of concrete and water and turquoise tile.

One of those milling, poolside competitors was Ryan Fox himself. He was with two boys his own age, teammates no doubt, all of them draped in the same oversized T-shirts and shorts while they stood with arms crossed and appraised the competition. He hadn't seen me on the bleachers some thirty or forty feet away—to his left as he was currently positioned—and he didn't appear to be looking for me, either. I pointed him out to Pepper, who seemed restless, probably bored. “We should be seeing some action here pretty soon,” I said. “Be patient.”

“When does that kid swim?”

“He'll be in several different races. But I don't know when. Maybe I should find out,” I decided, then got up and headed toward Ryan. He turned and saw me as I stepped beside him, and he almost smiled. “Well god, so weird, you showed up for real,” he said, sidling away from the other boys as if we needed a bit of privacy.

“Didn't you believe me before?”

Ryan made a dismissive “pfff” sound and put his hands on his hips. “Why aren't you working?”

“I took the day off,” I told him, making it sound, not quite honestly, like my own magnanimous gesture. “I had to come and watch my buddy Ryan kick ass.”

“Your buddy Ryan,” the boy repeated with a quiet chuckle, his large and gappy front teeth bared in a nervous sneer. He glanced at the other two boys standing a few feet away, embarrassed perhaps that they might overhear—or was he hoping that they would? I asked him about the times for his races, but his answer was a vague one. “Our coach keeps track of the times,” he informed me. “Just watch for me, that's all.”

I thought of Pepper and looked at my watch and then told Ryan that I had to leave by—looking at my watch again—two o'clock or thereabouts. "I'm taking care of a friend's kid," I said with a quick sideways nod in Pepper's direction. "I'll stay as long as I can."

"OK, whatever," Ryan said. He was taking a long look at Pepper in the bleachers, appraising him with that same competitive eye he'd been using on his opponents. Just a few minutes later the first group of swimmers was in the water and I was back with Pepper, watching the action. There were boys and girls from eight years old to fourteen competing in this tournament, with the youngest going first in each round of events, as I determined by the third or fourth race. Throughout, I tried to keep my eyes on Ryan, difficult as it was with the distraction of so many other boys. Twice I caught him glancing at me from his position beside the pool, making sure apparently that I was in my proper place and ready to watch him. He waited until just moments before his first event—the hundred-yard freestyle—to remove his shirt and shorts, the grand unveiling, the only chance to see a boy actually undress in public. His body was the same delicate pinkish white as his face, built perfectly for the water (or for running track) with slim but surprisingly well-muscled legs and arms. He and the other Butler Middle School boys were sporting American flag Speedo briefs with red and white stripes across the butt and patriotic white stars on the blue crotch. Ryan ran his thumbs quickly under the elastic at his waist and thighs to adjust the skimpy trunks, then padded barefoot to the starting blocks, an almost dainty stride, slightly up on his toes, as graceful as a little dancer.

He glanced at me, and at Pepper, as he prepared to take his place. "That's Ryan," I said pointlessly, having identified him once already. I must have been agitated by the sight of seven young asses in tight spandex so close in front of me, Ryan's directly in the middle of the line-up, all of them bent forward now in colorful full moons as the starter's whistle sent them hurtling into the pool. Perhaps I was a distraction to Ryan as well, a minor one certainly, but enough to disrupt his concentration and his rhythm, costing him the race. Whatever the

reason, he ended up in third place and slammed the water furiously with his fist as soon as he looked around and realized the outcome. He never even glanced at me when he climbed from the water.

It was another ninety minutes before he swam again, this time in the fifty-yard butterfly. Pepper, while we were waiting, had encountered a couple of his friends and was now shooting hoops with them in the gym. Having him occupied gave me the freedom to relax and enjoy the swimming—or, more accurately, the swimmers, dozens of sleek young boys in nothing but scraps of elastic just barely covering their bulges in front and their cheeks in back. Ryan was as handsome as any of them in his star-spangled Speedos, still obviously prepubescent but definitely a healthy boy, no mystery about that, impossible not to notice the bold lump beneath the blue spandex at his crotch.

In that second race of his, Ryan lived up to his own self-promotion and won easily. He pumped both fists above his head to celebrate while still bouncing and splashing in the pool, then climbed out and continued the celebration with his teammates, all of them whooping and laughing and high-fiving. It was plain to see, even to a casual spectator like myself, that Ryan was the star of his team, the stud, the big shot, expected by one and all to bring home the trophies and the glory. He was the Golden Boy—the kid I'd always hated at school, the object of my envy and my lust in equal measures, superior and unreachable except in my fantasies, always in those fantasies where we were set free to grapple naked and to kiss and to taste each other's cum. My fantasies hadn't changed in the years since, and sometimes, with luck and diligence, they actually came true—with the perfect Golden Boys themselves. Like Ryan Fox.

Pepper, meanwhile, was still busy with his friends. At one point they left the school entirely and went to a video arcade down the street, returning, when they were out of money, for another basketball game in

the gym. With Pepper so happily involved elsewhere, I was able to stay on and on at the pool to watch Ryan, two o'clock becoming three o'clock becoming four, the tournament finally concluding with a 500-yard team relay as afternoon became evening and my stomach began rumbling for food. Ryan ended up competing in four events and winning two. He vanished with his teammates (to the locker room, I assumed) while the older kids were still swimming. I was about to head for the exit when he made his reappearance, dressed in orange-and-white sweats and carrying his gym bag, ready to leave. I strolled over to congratulate him. He wondered why I hadn't left earlier, as planned. I hemmed and hawed a murky response about changing my mind, not being able to tear myself away and so on. "You were great," I concluded. "How could I leave before you were finished? No way!"

"See, I told you I would win! You probably didn't believe me."

"I came to watch you kick ass, remember?"

"Yeah, well. I need to find my ride," the boy said. His perfectly round mop of blond hair was still wet from swimming (and perhaps from showering afterwards), which made it darker than usual and a bit stringy. His ears were reddened from the chlorinated water, and also his eyelids, like someone who'd been crying. I looked around for his mother or his father. "Are your parents here somewhere? I haven't seen them all day."

"Not my parents," he corrected, without bothering to explain their absence. "I'm riding with Davis and Gallagher."

"Teammates?"

"Yeah. Duh!"

"I could give you a ride. If you'd like."

"Why?"

"Because. . . because it's on my way home, no big deal," I said. "It's not like I'm a stranger or something."

Ryan looked at me with that peculiar expression of his, like someone sniffing a funny odor, his nostrils flared and his mouth downturned, then he wheeled and jogged to his friends and told them to

leave without him. Just like that. So quickly, so easily—the boy had chosen to be with me. Together we tracked down Pepper in the gymnasium, where he and five other kids were using a basketball in some type of noisy and disorganized kicking game, like soccer at a lunatic asylum. He had run himself into exhaustion during the long afternoon and was glad, finally, to be leaving. I had never seen him so sweaty, or so brick-red from the heat of his own body. It came as a surprise to him, of course, that Ryan would be leaving with us. He pushed up the copper-rimmed glasses on his sweaty nose to appraise the situation, and the other boy, more clearly. Was he jealous? Probably so. I didn't like that uncomfortable side effect of Ryan's presence, but I hoped that it might be only temporary, that the two of them might actually become friends, or at least friendly.

The three of us decided, as we walked to the car, that we should stop somewhere for dinner before going home. The Steak 'n' Shake on Main Street was where we ended up. It was Ryan's suggestion, but even Pepper agreed that the choice was a good one. We sat in one of the black-and-chrome booths and ordered a high-fat feast of steakburgers and fries, onion rings and chili, sundaes and milkshakes. "This should hold us for a while," I joked.

"There's onions on this," Pepper suddenly announced, horrified.

"You must've gotten mine by mistake," I said, trading burgers with him. "Don't panic."

"Onions are the nastiest," Ryan sympathized, much to my surprise. He and Pepper hadn't spoken to each other until that moment, and his comment had a conciliatory, let's-make-nice feeling about it. Definitely a surprise, coming from him. "They make your breath stink so bad, man, it's gross."

"Oh great," I said, "another fanatical onion-hater. That's all I need."

Pepper, beside me in the booth, smiled for the first time that evening. "Are you outnumbered?"

“It looks that way.”

Ryan was across the table from us on the opposite bench, all alone on that big black bench like a princeling on his throne. “Only dorks eat onions,” he said.

“Now that’s a bit harsh.”

“Well god, it’s true!”

“Onions ruin everything,” Pepper said. “They’re evil.”

“Good,” I said, “that means I get all the onion rings.”

Both boys moved quickly to claim their shares. “They’re OK when they’re cooked,” Ryan explained to me. “Don’t you know that?”

“I’m learning, I’m learning.”

“They’re only evil when they’re raw,” Pepper chimed in, clearly enjoying this new game of pick-on-the-adult. He was still sweaty from his afternoon in the gym, damp ringlets of hair stuck to the skin around his forehead and temples. He and Ryan joked for another minute or two about the horrors of onions, then joked a while longer about other nasty and despised foods, which led to a discussion of movie snacks, which led to a discussion of favorite movies and movie stars—all conducted in goofy and hyper boy-speak with no help or direction from myself. I was free to sit and listen and watch, feasting on the boys as I feasted on the food.

Ryan had already finished his burger and several onion rings when he started on his french fries. It must have been a habit of his, a culinary ritual, saving his french fries for last. He filled the empty spot on his plate, where his burger had been, with a red puddle of ketchup, then proceeded to dip each french fry into the puddle and, one by one by one, devour them. His way of biting and chewing was peculiar, as gracefully dainty as his walk, each fry bitten slowly and carefully between his side teeth like a little treasure, always with his side teeth, like Bugs Bunny eating a carrot. He peered at me, red-eyed, while he delicately chomped and chewed.

After dinner I drove Ryan home to Tompkins Street, jumping out quickly to say hello to his parents and explain our situation. But only his older sister (she must have been sixteen or so) was at the house. His mother and father were already out for the evening with friends, apparently confident that Ryan was also with friends, celebrating with his teammates, no reason to be concerned about him. As we said goodbye, I offered him a hastily concocted invitation that surprised even myself. "Come to my house sometime," I said. "You and Pepper can mess around, watch videos, whatever."

"Oh wow, big thrill."

"I'm serious," I laughed, poking his shoulder until he nearly grinned.

"I know where you live," Ryan said with a flare of his nostrils. It was a difficult-to-decipher comment. He lifted his chin and glared at me as if in defiance. "I know where your house is. On Whitman Street."

"That's right," I said. Hadn't we already had this same conversation? When I left him a moment later and jogged back to the car, I wasn't sure if he'd ended up accepting or rejecting my invitation.

Pepper performed another of his saxophone concerts back at the house, then turned his attention to his drawing, belly-down on the floor with his art supplies and comic books to reproduce pictures from Batman and Spawn. His activities were becoming predictable, routine, the two of us like. . . what? Father and son? Husband and wife? Or just old friends? That, probably, was the best description: old friends intimate with each other's habits and quirks, comfortable together, cozy in our familiarity.

Ten o'clock came and I reminded the boy about his need for a bath. "Especially after getting so sweaty today," I said. "You need a thorough washing."

"Right now?"

"You promised last night."

Pepper gave me an over-the-shoulder look with one of his usual impish half-smiles. “Did I promise?”

I crossed the room and grabbed him beneath the armpits and yanked to lift him. “OK, that’s it, I’m going to wash you myself!”

“No, no, no,” he wailed right on cue, his inevitable response, “I can do it myself!”

I wanted to tease him a little further. “Too late, too late! I warned you last night.”

“I can do it myself,” Pepper again laughed and whined in panicky protest. He let his pen and papers drop to the floor as I hoisted him to his feet and started tugging at his GIBSON USA T-shirt, only playing around, never seriously intending to undress him. He struggled, of course, and pretended to sob, but surprisingly allowed me to remove his T-shirt, and then his white undershirt, while he held and readjusted his glasses with one hand and pushed at me with the other. He was bare to the waist in my arms as we shuffled and sidestepped like clumsy dancers toward the bathroom. “Come on, take everything off,” I said, and as I said it, began fumbling with the cold little copper button on his jeans, and also with the zipper, which is when he finally twisted himself free from my arms. “I can do it!” he almost shouted, a barely controlled yelp that reminded me of the tickling episode from his previous visit. But when I looked at him and he looked back, his face was smiley and excited and not at all upset. It was his own shyness, his own deep-rooted modesty, that had prevented our game of striptease from moving below the waist, nothing to do with anger. “OK,” I said, relieved and maybe even a little encouraged, “get your butt in there and take a bath.”

“A shower,” Pepper corrected.

“A bath, a shower, whichever,” I said, spanking him lightly, pat pat against the seat of his blue jeans to propel him into the bathroom. He was still smiling when he closed the door between us. I stayed there in the hallway with my hand against the wooden door, so easy to grab the knob and turn it and go in. No lock on the door to keep me out. So easy to walk in and see the boy, just a big joke, oops sorry, laugh about it

with him standing there naked in front of me. So easy, and so impossible.

With the first splash of water into the tub, I went to the living room and pulled out the couch, then gathered Pepper's comic books and art supplies and put them back in his gym bag. On the floor beside the bag, wadded and unrecognizable until I picked them up, were the boy's white Nike shorts. In the confusion of our roughhousing he must have forgotten them. I held them up with both hands and smiled, so small they looked, hard to believe anyone's hips could be slim enough to fit them—and yet they were baggy on Pepper, actually too large. I put them to my nose and sniffed for some smell of him, some lingering fragrance from his ass or his crotch, but there was nothing except the generic staleness of unwashed clothing, nothing to teach me the secrets of his body.

Standing there, I could hear the bathtub filling loudly and steadily with water. I left Pepper's shorts on the floor and returned to my place outside the bathroom door, just in time to hear the squeaky handles on the faucets being turned shut, cutting off the flow of water into the tub. I knocked on the door and then did the unthinkable and turned the knob. "Hey," I called in through the crack, "what's going on? Why are you taking a bath instead of a shower?"

"The nozzle won't work."

"Are you sure?"

"It won't work for sure," Pepper called back. I could hear him practically dive into the tub, which was behind the half-open door, out of sight from where I was standing with my hand still on the knob. "Maybe I can make it work," I proposed, shouldering the door open another few inches.

"No, it's OK!"

"Relax, man, it'll only take a minute," I said. "Don't freak out." I pushed the door completely open and stepped into the little room. Pepper unleashed a plaintive chorus of boo-hooing with his eyes closed and his head tossing from side to side, Pan in a panic, his frantic sobbing

betrayed by the merest flicker of a grin. He had his knees hugged to his chest, no way to see between his legs—but still, there he was, there he was—nude in the water as I leaned above him and began fiddling with the faucets and with the lever for the shower, briefly running the water while I jiggled this and banged that, all to no effect. “Well,” I said, “you were right. It’s busted. Not a trickle from the nozzle.”

“I told you, I told you, I told you,” Pepper cried with a shrillness verging on hysteria. It occurred to me that he was embarrassed by his own embarrassment, and was doing his best to compensate with outbursts of slightly crazed silliness. He opened his eyes and yipped when he saw me, as if startled that I hadn’t left, then clamped his eyes shut again and hugged his knees tighter. He was facing to the front, toward the faucets, his toes nearly touching the drain and its old-fashioned rubber plug. As I finished my tinkering and straightened up, I scooped a handful of water against his face. He yipped even louder and shook his head and tried not to laugh, then retaliated with a kick of his right foot that sprayed water against the front of my pants and shirt. “Hey, no fair,” I said, “I’m defenseless here!” The boy opened his eyes to see the effect of his kick, then kicked again, and again, provoking me until I counterattacked with more handfuls of water shoveled against his face. The water blinded him and made him laugh and sob and kick back even harder, a frenzy of thrashing that defeated his modesty without the boy even realizing it, each kick forcing his legs apart and exposing everything between them. I continued splashing at him to keep his eyes filled for just another moment, just one more moment while I peered into the water to see that well-guarded dick of his, no hair around it that I could detect, difficult to get a good look at it or to see anything of the balls beneath, my eager glimpses telling me only that it was circumcised and pale brown and, like the rest of his body, long and thin, impressively long for a twelve-year-old, the same approximate size and shape as his own middle finger, at least three soft inches bobbing there between his skinny legs as he kicked and thrashed. “OK, OK,” I finally said to him, “let’s call a truce. Good god, what a mess!”

He stopped kicking and instinctively hugged his knees once again to his chest, unaware that he had already exposed himself. His hair was soaked, dripping into his eyes, making him blink and blink as if dazed. “Is it all your fault?”

“Yes, it’s all my fault,” I chuckled, happy to take the blame. “Go ahead and wash while I clean up my mess.” I grabbed the four largest towels I could find from the cabinet beside the tub and spread them on the floor to soak up the puddle of bath water. Pepper, his knees still modestly upraised and pressed together, began soaping his arms and his shoulders while I covered the floor. “I’ll wring these out when you’re done,” I said, then unfastened my drenched trousers and took them off. “Sorry, I have to do this, no choice.”

“Are you wet?”

“Slightly moist, yeah. Don’t look,” I warned in a shy-virgin falsetto as I decided, on an impulse, to finish undressing in front of him. Of course, given my exaggerated warning, he did look, first one glance and then a second as I stripped off my boxer shorts and my shirt. “There, now we’re equal,” I said, taking another towel from the cabinet to dry myself. “I’m as wet as you are, I think.”

Pepper stared at my face, carefully and directly at my face while he continued to soap his arms and chest and shoulders. “Is that why we’re equal?”

“Both of us are wet, yeah, and both of us are naked,” I said, special emphasis on the last word and a cartoonish leer making the boy look away with a grin and a phony whimper like some delicate little creature trapped with the Big Bad Wolf. I stood facing him, surrounded by dozens of indifferent poodles as I slowly dried my entire body, glad to let him see me if he cared for a look, proud of a physique made fit and taut by miles of walking every day to deliver the mail. “I think your arms are clean enough,” I remarked after a minute or two of silence. “Don’t forget the rest of your filthy little bod.”

“I’ll do the rest, I’ll do the rest,” Pepper whined in that same hysterical tone, soaping his knees as a tiny concession. I wanted to stay,

to do more, but his body language was thoroughly defensive and off-putting, no trace of invitation in those hunched shoulders or tightly clamped legs. Any further contact between us would have been a bossy intrusion upon an uncooperative and clearly uncomfortable young boy, a betrayal of our friendship, unacceptable. And yet, I needed more, some little token, something. When I announced that I was finished and dry and held out my arms in a “voilà” gesture to prove it, Pepper couldn’t resist another look, a more comprehensive one this time, as if checking me up and down for telltale drops of moisture. It was a torture of self-discipline to keep myself from getting an erection while I stood there with him inspecting me. As soon as shyness again forced his eyes away, I wrapped the towel around my waist and said, “Hey, I just remembered!”

“Remembered what?”

“Hold on, just one second,” I told him, “I need to get something!” I rushed to the living room and grabbed the Polaroid camera and rushed back, nearly slipping on the wet towels spread across the floor. “This’ll be perfect for my Pepper collection,” I said, already aiming and clicking. The boy didn’t seem to realize what was happening until the flash forever captured the image of him in the tub—his hair a mess of soaked curls; his eyes turned blearily in my direction (how well, I wondered, could he see without his glasses?); his wide, full lips parted in an expression of quiet confusion. His reaction, no surprise, was a pitiful yelp and boo-hoo, but without much spirit or energy to it. He went on soaping his bony brown knees, first one and then the other, back and forth, as I stepped next to the tub. “You’re so cute like this,” I teased him in a saccharine coochy-coo voice. “Simply adorable! We need at least one more shot.”

“Do you need it? For sure?”

“Oh, without a doubt,” I said, showing him the first photo, taken from the doorway so that everything below his chest was hidden by the side of the tub. The boy couldn’t help laughing at the image of his drenched-puppy hair and befuddled expression. I put aside the photo and

aimed for another shot, close enough now to see his bare hips and legs below the water, a genuine nudie picture of my favorite twelve-year-old. “So cute,” I gushed again. “These pictures will be great!”

“Do you need more?”

“Well,” I laughed, “maybe one more. If you insist.”

“They’re so ugly,” was Pepper’s way of agreeing. Again I aimed the camera, this time from the head of the tub, as directly in front of the boy as I could manage, hoping for some glimpse between those gangly legs of his. But he never relaxed them and, I swear, never realized how desperately I hoped that he might. In his mind, we were still playing the same goofy game as always, a bit naughtier now because we were playing it without our clothes, difficult for him, but a game that had nothing to do with actual sex, or with the dangly sex hidden between his own legs. I finally settled for his huddled and discreet pose, similar to the previous shot except for a better view of his seated right buttock roundly glistening beneath the water’s soapy surface. “OK,” I said, “that’s all for now.”

“Ugly, evil pictures!”

As a last teasing gambit, I reached into the water below his knees and managed to pinch his seated, slippery butt, another inch to the right and I might have pinched a hidden testicle. “Now get this stuff nice and clean down here, buddy boy.”

“I will, I will!”

“All right, enjoy your bath,” I said, giving up and heading back to the living room with the camera and photos in my dry hand. I left the door of the bathroom open behind me, a signal to Pepper (I hoped) that a new and deeper intimacy had blossomed between us, more of a raunchy guys-in-the-locker-room camaraderie that involved undressing and bathing and seeing each other naked. Bit by bit, such little gestures and signals might encourage the boy to relax his uptight guard and laugh at his own inhibitions, perhaps even to enjoy a boys-club atmosphere of casual nudity, no need for clothing, maybe do a little jerking off (like Frankie) just for the fun of it. Bit by bit, all of it might become reality.

But then those sweet, erotic fantasies were sent fleeing by what I heard and saw on television, a news report about Kurt Randall and the “most sordid case of sexual predation in Sandburg’s history.” He had been arraigned earlier in December, his bond set at two million dollars and his trial scheduled for March, three months away. That, in living color and stereo sound, was the stark reality of men loving boys, all dreams and fantasies transmuted to nightmare because of one careless word, one reckless touch, one moment of thrilling but ill-advised pleasure. Had I already gone too far with Pepper? Done too much? Being naked with him, grabbing his ass, taking pictures of him in the bath—any or all of it could have gotten me arrested if the boy said something indiscreet to the wrong person. In short, I needed to cool my engines and leave the kid alone. He had to be getting tired by now of my constant touching and groping, harassment really, no other word for it. Face the truth, I thought: When I looked at Pepper, I saw a lovely and exciting boy; when he looked at me, he saw an ordinary grown-up man who happened to be his friend, but who meant nothing to him in a sexual way, any more than his music teacher or one of his uncles in Peoria.

I changed into a fresh pair of boxers while I pondered my situation, then settled on the hide-a-bed with a beer and a cigarette to help myself relax. I needed to quit grabbing at the boy and goading him, teasing him, trying to manufacture something randy between us. Back off, I told myself, and let the friendship evolve naturally. Let Pepper decide.

As I thought of him, the boy came rushing into the room with a towel clutched around his waist. “I forgot my shorts,” he explained, which I already knew, of course. He looked deliciously bare and disheveled in nothing but the towel, his hair like a nest of wild ivy, his eyes large and moist and darkly unfocused without their glasses. I wanted to reach for that towel and strip it away, a funny prank, routine locker-room horseplay that would allow me to see every forbidden

morsel of him. But I couldn't, and I didn't, and he rushed back to the bathroom with his shorts in hand and the towel still securely in place.

I was enjoying a second beer and another cigarette when Pepper returned. He was wearing his white shorts and carrying his other clothes in a bundle against his bare chest, everything in one tangled and twisted bunch, including his Fruit of the Loom briefs. For whatever reason, he had decided to do without underwear for the night. I forced myself not to mention it, just continued to sip and puff while he went about his business: fussing with his comic books, running to the kitchen for a can of root beer, studying the new Polaroids of himself, cleaning his glasses with a corner of the sheet on our bed. While he was wiping the lenses, he volunteered an unexpected comment about his bath. "I got nice and clean," he said. "I don't stink anymore."

"You're right," I said, laughing out a cloud of smoke. "Sweet as a rose."

"Will you need a new shower now?"

"I'm afraid so. I'll have to call a plumber, I guess."

"Get a really, really good shower."

"Like what, for example?"

Pepper finished cleaning his glasses and put them on so that they rested on the very tip of his nose, easier to see through them that way as he lounged with his head back, watching a Japanese monster movie on TV. "Like I said last night, you know, with a really big tub and a glass door and. . . and maybe a Jacuzzi."

"A Jacuzzi?"

"Or at least a real fancy nozzle with, like, different settings, like one for massage and one for regular and. . ."

"This all sounds very expensive."

"More than a thousand dollars?" "Definitely."

"More than two thousand?"

"I really don't know."

“Would the poodles like it?” “Oh sure,” I laughed again, “the poodles would love it. Finally, after all these years, something new for them to look at! They would be so happy!”

Pepper laughed with me as we joked about the poodles on the wallpaper, his fingers playing absently with his own bare stomach, especially with his little brown nipple of a belly button. “They would be so happy,” he echoed with another laugh. “Will you do it next week?”

“With all possible speed,” I promised. “Consider it one of your Christmas gifts. A super-duper new shower, something we can both enjoy.” I was still watching Pepper’s hands, fidgety-fidgety all over his own stomach and across the waistband of his shorts, and often underneath, his spidery fingers finding their way again and again beneath the white elastic to flick it snap snap snap against the skin of his belly. “Well. I should finish cleaning the bathroom,” I said, forcing myself away. The boy must not have known what he was doing by snapping that waistband. He must not have remembered that he was wearing no underpants, that I could see down into his shorts nearly to the groin every time he gave the elastic an upward flick. He must not have realized.

When I returned from the bathroom, Pepper was still on his back and still had both hands tucked into his shorts, the fingers all the way in and the thumbs out, crossed on his belly. But his eyes were closed now and he was asleep, breathing deeply. I took off his glasses, which caused him to roll his head and sigh, then I crawled beside him onto the mattress with its usual straining and creaking of decades-old springs. What to do next, I had no idea. Close my eyes and try to sleep? Watch television? Cuddle with the boy while he slept? A long day of watching young swimmers in sexy Speedos and then being naked with Pepper had left me tense and horny—despite my earlier resolution. Fear or desire: Which, in the eternal conflict, is stronger?

The Japanese monster movie was still on TV, Godzilla versus Gamera or some such thing, cheap-looking rubbery creatures stomping clumsily through Tokyo. One of the heroes was a pubescent Nipponese lad in tight-tight shorts, which did nothing to ease my agitation. I looked again at Pepper, at the wrinkly fabric of his shorts, at his hands tucked inside. The springs responded with another creak as I rolled toward him and touched his left thigh. So this, I realized, was the one advantage of baggy shorts: with hardly more than a nudge of my fingertips, almost an accident, the leg of Pepper's shorts slid up to the very top of his thigh, to the crease of the groin, and then up even farther, so gently and easily that the boy never felt himself being uncovered, the baggy white fabric all the way up now with a final delicate nudge, everything hanging bare for me to see. I held the bunched-up fabric with my thumb less than an inch from his penis, then surrendered and let my thumb touch it, the subtlest whisper of a touch, just one time, careful not to disturb the sleeping boy attached.

As monsters battled across the room, I wriggled out of my boxer shorts and began to masturbate. No need to keep a hand on Pepper's shorts; they stayed up, bunched in place, by themselves, leaving me a free hand to pet his perfect coffee-with-cream thigh while I stared at his exposed parts—right there in front of me, easy to caress them or lick them if I had the nerve—letting my hand just momentarily brush the bottom of his balls, no hair on them, no hair anywhere except for seven tiny pubic whiskers around the very base of his penis, exactly seven tiny whiskers which I counted while I continued to jerk off. My hand on his thigh must have had a pleasurable effect, or maybe I was simply imagining that his snaky soft dick was becoming just a bit snakier and firmer as I watched it.

Right then I remembered the camera and rolled, as lightly as possible, off the mattress. Every floorboard seemed to screech as I crossed the room and grabbed the Polaroid from beside the television and then positioned myself near the bed. I stood there with an erection

and trembly hands, afraid every moment that the boy might awaken and discover me snapping first one and then two and then three and four pictures of him with his dick and balls totally, nakedly displayed. But his eyes never opened and his breath never shifted; an entire afternoon of playing in the gym had left him exhausted—dead to the world, as my mother used to say. I set the camera and pictures on the floor and returned to my place next to him, this time with the soggy towel I'd worn earlier spread beside me, between me and the boy, so that I could lie on my side and stare at him and have something to catch the mess when I ejaculated, which took no more than three or four minutes despite my best effort to prolong the experience. I aimed for the towel but shot so forcefully and wildly that one spurt hit like a sneeze of snot against the side of Pepper's leg.

Godzilla roared as I slowly regained my breath and cleaned myself with the towel. I saved Pepper's leg until last, relishing the sight of him messy with sex, even if he hadn't participated. Then, just before I decided to clean him, hopeful that I could do it without waking him, he reacted to the strange substance on his leg by swiping at it in his sleep, then scratching it like an itchy bug bite, smearing it with his fingers. The messy surprise must have been enough to rouse him very slightly, a moment of panic for me when he half opened his eyes and looked down at himself, then wiped his hand on his bunched-up shorts and rolled onto his side, facing me. But his eyes were shut again and he was still asleep, really had never been fully awake, hadn't even noticed that his goodies were uncovered. Rolling onto his side had dislodged the leg of his shorts and undone my handiwork, baggy fabric once again hiding everything between his legs.

I grabbed the photos of him from the floor and became hard again in an instant, ready to masturbate one more time, enjoying a potency like I hadn't experienced in many years. There was a possibility that Pepper might, even now, open his eyes and see me, but that only added to the

thrill—naked beside him, pulling my pecker, studying every detail of those X-rated Polaroids, more and more convinced that the boy had been mildly aroused by my hand on his thigh, not much, hardly noticeable, just a hint of swelling in that slinky little snake of his. A second ejaculation into the towel, then I was finished. Wiped out. Nothing left inside except a sludgy residue of guilt and dread. I put on my boxer shorts and hid the photos of Pepper in my bedroom, in the bottom of the drawer beneath a pile of books and magazines and other pictures where Pepper couldn't find them or see them. The whole night felt wrong, like a broken promise or a nasty bit of treachery, certainly no way to treat a friend. Very wrong—as well as stupid and reckless and the opposite of everything I'd resolved after seeing the story about Kurt Randall on the news.

Fear or desire: Which is stronger? Nearly always, desire.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“It’s hard to know how Pepper feels about anything,” I said to Doc, and to Frankie, the two of them side by side on my couch. “He lives behind a mask, behind his mysterious little smile.”

Several beers had loosened my tongue and I might have been saying too much—not a concern with Doc, but with Frankie, still a kid himself, there was no way to feel entirely secure. We had been talking for most of the afternoon, definitely a surprise for me when they appeared at the front door just as Pepper and I were putting on our coats, getting ready to leave. Suddenly, all four of us were together in the same room. Much hand-shaking and hello-ing, a hug for me from Frankie, a few minutes of small talk, and then I excused myself to drive Pepper home. Doc and Frankie stayed at the house while I was gone, a quick trip back and forth, Pepper accepting my kiss on the cheek when we said goodbye but, as always, returning no affection of his own.

Back at the house, Doc was making coffee in the kitchen and Frankie was rummaging gleefully through my boxes of vintage albums. “Dude, these are too cool,” he said as soon as I walked in. “Like the greatest mother lode of all time!”

“I thought you might like them.”

“Too, too awesome,” he went on marveling. His back was toward me and his narrow shoulders were hunched over his discoveries. He was wearing one of his tie-dyed shirts; his dark blond hair was rubberbanded into a short ponytail that waggled against the neck of his T-shirt as he talked and bounced. “So,” I said, “why exactly are you guys here?”

“Doc let me drive his truck,” the boy vaguely explained. Doc himself appeared from the kitchen just then to elaborate. “Frankie has been aching to drive my pickup since the first moment he saw it. Today seemed a good opportunity. Clear weather, dry roads.”

“I said we should come here,” Frankie told me, standing with an armful of records. He had a softly rounded, weak-chinned face that seemed almost melancholic until he smiled, which he now did, and which always gave him the look of a chipmunk being tickled, all teeth and squinty eyes and deep dimples. “Is it OK if I play these records?”

“Of course,” I said. “And crank up the volume!”

“Dude!”

“You can come here any time and listen to them.”

“Jake, you’re too cool!”

I hadn’t seen Doc since Thanksgiving, or Frankie since the week before that, all of which gave me a perfectly fine excuse for drinking a few beers to celebrate. With Pink Floyd and Jefferson Airplane and Hendrix playing behind us, we sat in my living room and talked about this and talked about that, nothing provocative or memorable until Doc mentioned Pepper, which immediately sparked my energy. “We had a very interesting weekend,” I said. “He was here since Friday night.”

“He’s a good-looking boy,” Doc said. “Photos don’t do him justice.”

“Totally cute,” Frankie agreed. “I dig his hair especially.”

“You’re a real hair connoisseur,” I laughed. “But yeah, you’re right, his hair is the best.”

Doc and Frankie were side by side on the couch while I sat in the old La-Z-Boy to their right, the music forcing us to raise our voices as we talked. Interrupting myself occasionally for another bottle of beer, I told them the story of my weekend with Pepper, beginning with Ryan and the swimming tournament and ending with Pepper’s bath and bedtime, an excess of alcohol encouraging a full and graphic account complete with Polaroid illustrations. “Holy shit,” was Frankie’s appraisal when he saw the photos of Pepper in bed with his dick out. Another betrayal, putting Pepper on display without his permission or, hell, without his even knowing that the photos existed. “But I can’t help it,” I said, sharing these feelings of guilt. “The whole thing is driving me

insane! Horniness followed by remorse followed by frustration followed by fear. Or something like that.”

Doc fished in his pocket for another cigarette. “Does the boy seem to realize any of this?”

“It’s hard to know how Pepper feels about anything,” I said. “He lives behind a mask, behind his mysterious little smile.”

Frankie was watching and listening like a kid on his first day at school, his attention returning again and again to the photos spread across his blue-jeaned lap, the ones of Pepper in bed. “I’m not sure,” I said to him, “but I think he was a little excited in those shots. Can you tell?”

“Whoa, dude, I don’t know,” Frankie said, blushing as scarlet as any boy can blush. He ducked his head and laughed as if being tweaked behind the ears.

“But it looks pretty big, right?”

“Good grief, Jacob,” Doc said, “control yourself. Are you drunk?”

“Drunk with desire, drunk with passion, of course! In fact, I think Pepper has cast one of his spells over me. He’s very good at magic, you know.”

“Definitely inebriated,” Doc chuckled. He glanced at Frankie and added, “Ignore everything he says, my boy.”

“Listen,” I protested, “you have no idea what a talented little sorcerer he is. Those are his books on the table. Right there beside you. I’m serious! The woman across the street is dead because of him and one of his curses, naturally I helped, I’m not denying it, but mostly it was him, you know, his graveyard dirt and. . .”

“Jacob, you’re delusional.”

I started to protest one more time but then gave up and laughed and took another swig of beer. “Probably not a smart idea to talk about any of this, or to show off those pictures,” I said. “My fate is in your hands, Frankie.”

“Dude, get serious!”

“I am serious. They’re illegal, you know, those pictures you’re holding.”

“Sure, I guess, but. . .”

“So you’re an accomplice to a crime of. . . of sexual assault, wicked and horrible sexual assault against a defenseless minor.”

“But, like, I’m a minor too, right?”

“At sixteen? Sure, for most things. Unless you commit a crime, then you’ll be tried and punished as an adult, of course. But my point. . . my point is that you need to be. . . to be prudent, discreet, cautious, very important for all of us.”

“I believe he understands that,” Doc said, on his way to the kitchen for more coffee. I quickly took his place on the couch, nearly falling against Frankie’s shoulder as I sat down. “Sorry about being such an asshole,” I said. “It’s been a confusing weekend.”

“No way you’re being an asshole, bro! That’s stupid.”

“I’m slightly drunk, I guess. Anyway, I should probably put these pictures away. Naughty, nasty, dirty pictures!”

“They don’t bother me, honestly,” Frankie insisted. The plastic braces on his teeth gave him a soft lateral lisp, his tongue just a bit clumsy, just a bit slushy whenever it encountered an “s” or an “sh” in any word. “I think the government and the police are full of shit, a bunch of pigs, and they shouldn’t have anything to do with sex, you know, like, dude, it’s none of their fucking business!”

“Amen and hallelujah! So. You really are an ally? Trustworthy, courageous, and true?”

“I swear! You and Doc are totally the best guys in the world, no way would I do anything to get you in trouble or. . .”

“OK, OK, I’m convinced,” I said, putting my arm around his shoulders to give him a brotherly hug. Frankie, forever eager to hug back, responded with a full face-to-face hug and then a kiss that came as a surprise, I think, to both of us. Nothing wet or passionate, just a sweet kiss on the lips between friends, followed by a short breath for laughter, followed by one more kiss as if to confirm the first. Doc walked in just

then, a perfect soap-opera entrance that felt somehow dramatic and startling and made Frankie and me end our hug and pull apart. Doc responded with a cleverly arched eyebrow. “Well, my goodness, should I be shocked?”

“Yes,” I smiled, “you should be! I’ve stolen your boyfriend and now he’s mine! mine! mine!” Frankie blushed his usual scarlet and fell against the arm of the couch with one hand over his eyes in a helpless swoon of embarrassment. “It’s all right,” I assured him as cheerfully as possible, gathering the photos from his lap while trying not to touch his crotch. “It’s an obvious case of drunken assault. I plead guilty to all charges. Yes, guilty!”

We were laughing, all three of us, when I left the room for another beer, just one more, it was only four o’clock, time enough later to sleep off the boozy fizz in my head. Doc and Frankie, though, had other plans. They needed to leave so that Frankie could get home to Stonerville before suppertime. “My aunt and uncle are here from Texas,” he explained, “and I have to be there for like, you know, a big dinner and shit.”

OK, I said, *c’est la vie* and all that jazz, it’s been fun, sorry if I’ve been slightly obnoxious, come back any time, I mean it, any time at all, listen to more records, maybe we can watch my Woodstock video. Frankie smiled and nodded, and when we hugged goodbye, which was unavoidable (pleasantly so) with him, we added a quick kiss. I had noticed earlier, and I noticed again now, that he smelled of incense, like sandalwood and cherry, strongly fragrant on his clothes and in his hair. “Can’t feel your braces at all,” I told him, answering my own question from a few weeks earlier.

“Oh man.”

“Like kissing a butterfly.”

“Duuude,” the boy grinned, yes, blushing. He flashed a parting peace sign and then both he and Doc were gone, leaving me with Pink Floyd on the stereo and too much beer on the brain. Doc had also left

something else for me to find, rather mysteriously, on the table beside the couch: a manila envelope containing his newest story, this one about Spain. Too drunk to concentrate, I put it aside until later, after I'd managed to revive myself with a dinner of frozen lasagna and four cups of coffee from the pot brewed earlier by Doc. I finished my resuscitation with a bath, wishing it could be a shower instead, determined to bring in a plumber as soon as possible to do the job. Before Christmas, I hoped.

With an almost clear head, I put a Gipsy Kings tape on the stereo and took a quick journey to Spain:

I wonder if the smell is in the room or inside my own head, and then I wonder if the smell is from the dirt of my body or from something within my body, perhaps some enzyme or adrenaline or toxin. Does fear have a smell? Does it produce an odor?

And so I waste the hours in this windowless and cheerless room lost somewhere in the backstreets of Seville, the Tres Naranjas, a small family-run hotel with Papa behind the desk and Mama and children gathered every night in the linoleum-floored lobby to watch reruns of Bonanza and I Love Lucy and The Fugitive on their portable black-and-white television. If I listen hard enough—here, in my room, in my bed—it seems that I can hear the television, the tinny chatter of it from far away, miles away, a universe away. I suppose it's possible, but more likely the sound is in my own head with that frightful smell, hunkered there like twin demons plotting some destruction.

For three days I've been sweating and aching with this fever, in and out of jittery sleep, in and out of dreams about being cooked and eaten, boiled like a brisket until I'm nothing but grease and bones and disembodied screams. I managed on the first day to stumble outside and nibble some nourishment at a cafeteria around the corner, but even that has been impossible since, all strength gone, sickness and a phantom

fear keeping me huddled here on this bed, in this room with no light from sun or stars.

A boy, now, is keeping me alive. He comes to my room because he knew me from before the fever, from my days of wandering the streets of Seville in solitary pursuit of something nameless. He sings, this gypsy boy with frizzy golden hair, and he plays flamenco guitar—that's how we met—that's how I noticed him in the summertime crowds of tourists and peddlers and darting children. Always on the same corner, on the same sidewalk beneath an awning striped candycane red and white—nothing special about the neighborhood or the street, just the boy himself to snare my attention each day as I passed back and forth between my hotel and the surrounding cafés.

This city of Mediterranean blue, of turquoise and flowers—everywhere the pungency of kitchen smoke and diesel fumes—this city has been my refuge from the turmoil of Morocco for most of June and all of July. They tell me here that the summer has been unusually hot—but Seville, to me, comes as a relief after the furnace of Marrakesh.

If I leave my hotel and walk west, across the brown Guadalquivir River, I come to a park named for an otherwise forgotten conquistador whose statue poses greenly beneath the leafy extravagance of shade trees and palms. I spend hours here every evening, alone on one of the wrought-iron benches in the twilight shadows. Alone on the bench, but not in the park. Neighborhood boys gather here to play soccer—the original fútbol—their names familiar to me after so much time spent watching them and listening to their carefree voices, their yelling, their joking. Juan and Pepito and a dozen others. Antonio is the skinny one who seems to be their leader—always smiles when he sees me—kicks the ball in my direction (by mistake but not really) just to include me, playfully, in their game. In my pocket I keep, always, a supply of small candies and bubblegum which I give to the boys and which they clearly and eagerly have come to expect whenever I appear.

It's while I'm in the park, on the wrought-iron bench, that I first notice a raw scratchiness in my throat and an ache behind my eyes, probably nothing serious, just a minor funk caused by poor diet and insufficient sleep, too many weeks of traveling among strangers, living in cheap hotels, no air-conditioning, a debilitating regimen of heat and fleas and nervous solitude. That same evening, on my way back to the Tres Naranjas, a big man with oiled hair and a thin mustache stops me near a fountain on the Plaza de Blasco Garay and asks for fuego to light his cigarette—remarks on the hot weather—wonders if I might enjoy a cold drink at his house, which is, he tells me, just around the corner. I am, suddenly, the hunter being hunted. Instinct tells me to flee. I back away with polite formalities and continue uneasily toward the Tres Naranjas.

A few blocks farther on, feeling vaguely feverish, I stop to rest on a concrete bench near a tiny church (converted in the fifteenth century, easy to see, from a mosque). A young backpacker seems to recognize me as a fellow foreigner and takes his place next to me on the bench. His clothing smells of perspiration and hemp. In America, these young people are called “hippies” and are allied in ragtag throngs against the war in Vietnam. They march, they disrupt campuses, they stoke their revolution with rock music and drugs. This boy next to me smiles when I introduce myself as an American. So groovy, he says, to meet a cat from the States, somebody who can speak English, then instantly apologizes for sounding like some fuckin’ imperialist. A xenophobe, I propose—but the boy only nods with uncertainty and offers me half of his Milky Way candy bar. He, like every other young traveler I encounter, wants to discuss the war, the injustice of the draft, the corrupt dishonesty of LBJ and all the other hawks in Washington. I agree with him, and agree with him some more, but my spirit is not in the discussion. I want nothing to do with America and its filthy politics. The boy’s zealous idealism strikes me as unrealistic and ultimately futile. I don’t appreciate words of hope about free love and Aquarian enlightenment, tantalizing rhetoric from these young hippies I meet day

after day—it can't be true, this bright new world of theirs—every generation, in the end, becomes its own failed promise.

I thank the boy for his offering of Milky Way and continue the last few blocks to my hotel, which is when I pass the young gypsy singer perched on the sidewalk in his usual spot, on the very edge of the pavement with his sneakered feet in the gutter. He plays his battered guitar and sings a flamenco tune about love and loss and loneliness. Beside him is a cardboard shoebox containing some few pesetas in coins and paper. I pause as I often do to listen and to watch and to leave a bit of money in the box. Red neon from a storefront sign behind him glows through his frizzy hair like a rubious halo. He glances at me and, after so many days, recognizes me, even smiles in my direction while still strumming his guitar and singing his sorrowful song.

That vaguely feverish feeling compels me to sit at a table of the café nearby. I order a coffee for myself and, for the boy, a bottle of orange soda which stands sweating on the table while he finishes his song. I catch his eye and point to the bottle. He shoves the money from the cardboard shoebox into the pocket of his brown corduroy pants and then puts the box onto his head and wears it—a cardboard hat—over to my table. He keeps his guitar in his left hand and drinks the orange soda with his right. I invite him to sit, but he only shakes his head as he sips from the bottle and mumbles no, no, thank you, no, thank you, standing next to the table with one hip rolled languidly to the side.

Where, I ask him after a clumsy moment of silence, does he live? He shrugs as if the matter is none of my concern, which is true, but then nods in the direction of my hotel and mentions a street that I recognize. We're neighbors, I tell him, needing to clear my sore throat as I talk, explaining that I stay at the Tres Naranjas. The boy grins with the bottle held to his lips. His knuckles, I notice, are dirty, and also his fingernails. Suddenly and rapidly, almost too rapidly for me to understand, the boy reveals that the Tres Naranjas is owned by his uncle, his Tio Hector Iglesias, and that his own name is Rafael Iglesias—you see, he says, the

same last name! His words produce tiny piping sounds from the glass mouth of the bottle as he talks, breathily, across it.

When, the next day, I stumble outside dizzy with fever and shivering in the noon heat, I get only as far as the cafeteria around the corner. One block farther north is the street where Rafael, the gypsy boy, lives. I always think of him, especially while feverish, as the “gypsy” boy, although I know nothing about him except his name and his kinship to Hector Iglesias, nothing else about his ancestry or heritage, and it’s in my imagination only that he becomes a gypsy scamp. It’s the flamenco guitar, I suppose, as well as the look of him—the exoticism of dark skin and slanty eyes and kinky blond hair—that inspires fantasy.

The illness quickly steals my strength. A yellowish sick light fills my head and buzzes there like an insect voice, small and insidious. It might be—that sound—from the television in the lobby, so difficult to know anything for sure, impossible to focus sight or sound or touch, to distinguish dreaming from waking from dreaming again. Then the smell, the rank smell, also impossible to identify—it reminds me of fear, my own fear, darkness, slow death, the room itself like a cave or a hole in the earth. No light from sun. No light from stars.

The boy is a fragment of dream when he finally appears. No time has passed, I’m convinced, since our fleeting encounter at the café. Everything about him the same: brown corduroy pants and white T-shirt, guitar in his hand, shoebox on his head like a Cubist hat. He appears, he disappears, brings food, brings glasses of orange juice, disappears again. More than a dream, I finally decide, he returns again the next day while I rest, seated, on the edge of my bed.

No guitar today, or shoebox hat, he holds instead a plate of shrimp and rice which I take from him and sniff and cautiously taste, cautiously because nausea threatens each small bite. The boy, Rafael, sits on the floor by the doorway and watches me with an expression of happy curiosity. I ask him about the odor in the room. Can he smell it? Yes, he nods, you’re sick, *estás enfermo*, *muy mal*, in his lispy Castilian accent, that voice like smoke and sherry, like the sly purr of a cat. Not just my

imagination, then, not just inside my own head. After three days, I begin to emerge from the haze of sick confusion. The smell is myself—the stink of my own fever, a whiff of corpse.

I give the boy money to take downstairs to his Tio Hector, money for the room unpaid in several days, also for the food which has been brought to me as an act of kindness. I'm surprised when he comes back moments later, this time with coffee for me and a glass of milk and coffee (mostly milk) for himself. He sits again by the doorway and together we sip our drinks, listening to my little transistor radio which is receiving, improbably, a station from London. A song called Penny Lane makes the boy bob his head and grin.

The following day, when Rafael returns for another visit and brings more food, I ask him how he knew about my illness, how he knew that I needed help. At first he doesn't understand, but then tells me in a rush of Castilian that it's because I didn't come to watch him sing and he decided it was strange because I always come and so maybe I went home to America and that's why he came to the hotel and asked his Tio Hector and then he came to my room himself and found me. It's all very much like a dream, I say to the boy after he finishes his breathless explanation. *Como un sueño*, I repeat, like a dream when you appeared. No, Rafael says, not a dream, then taps himself on the chest as if I need convincing.

It's a plate of rice and grilled pork that the boy has brought me, and I sit in bed eating it while he makes a slow tour of my room, a bold inspection of books, magazines, sunglasses, radio, passport. He picks up one of my Converse sneakers. He unrolls and examines a bullfight poster which I swiped two weeks earlier from a nearby kiosk. He seems especially fascinated by the contents of my shaving kit which are displayed messily on a shelf above the sink in the tiny baño (toilet and bidet, but no tub). A moment of fiddling and clattering and then he turns and holds up my Gillette safety razor. Why, he wants to know, do I need such a thing? He's confused, apparently, because of my full beard. I swallow a chunk of pork and touch the clean-shaven areas on my throat

and on each of my cheeks. For here, I answer, and for here. Rafael runs the bladeless backside of the razor across his own face—across his own cheeks and throat—tells me that he also will be shaving very soon—already, in fact, has a mustache, you see, a mustache. What he has above his lip, to be accurate, is the merest suspicion of adolescent fuzz. You're lucky, I tell him, *estás afortunado*, you don't need to shave that pretty face of yours.

A day later, I'm strong enough to bathe and change into fresh clothing and even, though a bit unsteadily, to venture around the corner to the cafeteria where I eat salad and roasted chicken and a dish of sweet custard. I encounter Hector Iglesias when I return to the Tres Naranjas—pay him for another night of lodgings—thank him for being such a generous landlord during my illness. Your nephew Rafael, I make sure to add, was a marvelous help, *un muchacho muy simpático*, a very nice boy. Just then, the boy himself comes rushing through the door into the lobby. He's carrying his guitar and wearing his shoebox hat. Seeing me brings him to an abrupt and startled halt. The reason for his daily visit, now that I'm back on my feet, has suddenly been eliminated. Both of us seem to realize this truth at the same moment. The boy stays near the doorway while I thank him for all his help and call him “my good angel” and step near enough to shake his hand. There's nothing more I can say. Any invitation to my room would be awkward and inappropriate. His uncle watches from the desk, smiling, amiable, but forever the guardian—even here, in Spain, the same as America—guardians at every gate, watching. Rafael lingers for another minute or two with his eyes fixed on the small black-and-white television across the lobby—so interested, he can't force himself to leave—finally turns and waves a quick *adiós* and hurries back outside with his guitar banging once, just lightly, against the side of the door.

I'm strong enough, by the next day, to pack my bag and leave the Tres Naranjas in favor of another, cheaper hotel several blocks away where my room, on the second floor, has a window that overlooks an alley and the back of a brick firehouse. I take a leisurely walk that same

afternoon and find Rafael in his familiar position on the sidewalk, on the curb, my first chance to hear him sing in several days. I realize, listening to him, that he never sang to me during my illness, when he came to visit me in my room. Even when he brought his guitar, he never played it or sang, just sat on the floor by the doorway and watched me as I slept, or as I nibbled at his gifts of food.

When he finishes his song, I tell him that I've moved to a new hotel, not far away, it's nice, very cheap but nice, nobody at the front desk but an old woman who sleeps all day. Rafael merely nods politely and waits, tuning his guitar while I light a cigarette. It's another hot day, I finally remark, then ask the boy if he would like to visit my room for a cool drink. No, he says, thank you, but no, I need to play for the people. He holds up his guitar as if I might not understand. Perhaps later, I propose, in an hour or two. No, no, the boy replies again, gracias, señor, pero no. Too bad, I say, una lástima, a pity, feeling a moment of disappointment that quickly fades to something like relief. I finish my cigarette while the boy begins a new song. He smiles at me with a lift of his chin, a last simple acknowledgement as I walk away.

I keep walking until I come to the park where the statue of the conquistador stands with upraised sword in swimming splashes of sunlight and shade. The group of boys, even now, is playing a noisy game of soccer which employs the statue, very sensibly, as one of the goals. Antonio, when he sees me, laughs in surprise and does a funny hopping dance over to the wrought-iron bench where I sit and watch. His skinny legs are bare beneath a pair of red gym shorts, his knees smudged black and green from falling on them again and again in dirt and in grass. I tell him, before he can ask, that I've been sick, that I would never leave Seville without saying goodbye. Although happy to see me, he stands fidgety and tongue-tied with a big dopey smile until I remember, as the other boys start to gather, that all of them are waiting for me to produce my usual treat of bubblegum and candy. Sorry, I tell them, but I have nothing with me, then turn out each of my pockets to prove the point.

The other boys rapidly disperse, back to their game of soccer, but Antonio remains standing in front of me and wonders, while lightly bouncing on his toes, whether I might have any sweets at my hotel. Yes, I admit, but it's a long distance from here, east, across the river. Antonio begins to ask me question after question about the hotel, about my room. What street is it on? Does it have an air-conditioner? Do I have a shower? Is there a restaurant downstairs? It's just a small room in a small hotel, I assure him—no air-conditioner, just a fan on the ceiling—a shower, yes, but across the hall—and no restaurant. The other boys start calling for Antonio to return to the game. He appears to be the oldest of the group, taller and lankier than the others, likely in his middle teens (too old, it might seem, to be so interested in candy and bubblegum). His younger teammates are impatient for his return, eager for the advantage of his size and skill—but he ignores them—stays where he is, bouncing on his toes in front of me and asking, for the second time, the details of my accommodations. His dark hair is parted on the side and combed down across his forehead in a swoop that nearly covers his left eye and compels him, while we converse, to lift and tilt his head like a quizzical colt peering from under its shaggy forelock.

Across the park, I notice two backpacking hippies headed in our direction with a type of slouchy lassitude that seems common to all of them. If they see me, no doubt, they will engage me in another rambling discussion of politics and revolution. Today, I have no strength for it, still shaky from the bout of fever and several days spent immobile in bed, my mind and every bit of my energy devoted to a different brand of revolution that begins with this boy in front of me, no act of insurrection more defiant or heroic than standing up, right now, and leaving with him, with this boy named Antonio.

Come on, I finally tell him, vámonos, I can show you my room if you want to see it. OK, he says in English, I'm wanting very much. With a cursory wave to the younger boys, he follows me from the park onto the diesel-fuming avenue which leads to the river. Soon, I realize that the long walk is beyond my strength and I stop to hail one of the taxis

speeding past us toward the bridge. It smells inside of tobacco and, more faintly, of urine. Antonio makes no effort to hide his excitement at our high-speed ride through Seville—rolls his window down and lets the wind buffet his face and whip his hair—grabs my cigarette for a show-offish puff that leaves him coughing and laughing. He tries again and manages to control the smoke, a new skill that delights him and starts him laughing one more time. He bumps against me with his shoulder like a boisterous drunk—says nothing, just keeps puffing happily and blowing out smoke when I put a hand on his grass-stained knee—says nothing, this excited boy, when my hand feels higher, and then higher still, along his bare leg. I can see the stiffening of young erection inside his red shorts.

It's now that I glance through the opened window and see, as we pass his corner, Rafael performing a song for a small group of tourists. His hair is like a shock of sunlight. Somehow, through the noise and chaos of the city, I seem to hear the gypsy music of his voice.

Was that the end of it? I double-checked inside the manila envelope for any pages I might have overlooked. But no—Doc had condensed his time in Spain to one impressionistic tale, just as he'd done with Portugal in his story about Jorge. So much had been lost, so many details up in flames on that day in 1986 when Doc had decided to burn his journals. It was all he could manage, I suspected sadly, to reproduce these episodic bits and pieces—entertaining, yes, but so much less than a full account of his many foreign adventures over the course of several years.

One thing I had decided for sure: Doc had little patience for “hippie” boys and their idealistic notions of peace and love and revolution, not thirty years ago and probably not now. No actual hippies still around, of course, but there were youngsters who continued to emulate them, to dress like them and espouse the same Age of Aquarius rhetoric. Like Frankie Patallero, for example. What, I wondered, did Doc think of such a boy? What, deep down, did he genuinely think?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Christmas came like an avalanche. At work I struggled each day beneath the burden of holiday mail, exhausted by the onslaught of packages and cards. At home I spent my time dealing with a plumbing crew as they renovated my bathroom and replaced the inadequate water heater in the basement—and, because the job needed to be done on evenings and weekends, I ended up paying dearly for overtime. Through it all I managed to find a few spare moments for Christmas shopping, necessary this year more than any time since the days when Calvin and his friends had been a part of my life. Doc and I never bothered with an exchange of gifts, neither had Holly and I in recent years—but now, once again, there were boys in my life, and boys simply could not be ignored at Christmas. I needed gifts for Frankie, for Ryan, for Pepper. Especially for Pepper.

I kept in touch with all of the boys during those two weeks leading up to Christmas. Ryan had another swimming tournament which, unlike the first, stretched over an entire weekend and had him competing in six events (he won three). I managed, despite my cluttered schedule, to attend the second half of the tournament, on Sunday. The boy was surprised to see me when I appeared from the bleachers after the final event, one reason being that the tournament was at a high school in Peoria, almost an hour southeast of Sandburg. He was still poolside and still in his star-spangled Speedos, hugging himself with both arms and shivering slightly. “They should turn up the heat in this joint,” I said as a joke. “You’re all goose-bumpy.”

Ryan ignored the remark and asked, while scanning the bleachers, about Pepper. “Where’s that kid from last time? I don’t see him.”

“He’s with one of his friends,” I said. It was true: Pepper had spent Saturday night with one of his pals from school; and the Saturday before that, at home with a cold and sore throat. He hadn’t been to my house for

a visit since the night of his bath. Even our after-school rides together had ended now that he was on his Christmas vacation. I had the uneasy feeling that our intimacy was cooling as circumstances forced us apart. Still, Christmas itself was coming in a few days and, with it, a chance for us to be together again in a festive atmosphere of gifts and mistletoe.

Ryan said nothing more about Pepper, instead took a few minutes to brag about himself and his three victories in the tournament, providing all the details that I might have missed. His coach interrupted him finally with a summons to the locker room. I asked him, before he could run off, if he wanted a ride home. “We have a van,” he replied, still shivery as he grabbed his shorts and T-shirt and towel. The chlorinated water had once again reddened his delicate ears and eyelids, even the bridge of his nose, like a beachboy with a sunburned face. “OK,” I said, “as long as you have a ride, then I guess. . .”

“Well god, I can’t go with you just like that!”

“It’s OK, no problem.”

“I gotta tell the coach,” Ryan continued, as if I wouldn’t stop badgering him. “I can’t just leave with you!”

“So,” I said, a little confused, “am I giving you a ride or not?”

“Yes, jeez, don’t you listen?”

“Not very well,” I laughed. “OK, in that case, I’ll wait for you out here.”

It took nearly thirty minutes for Ryan and his teammates to reappear, showered and dressed, from the locker room. Roughly half of the kids split from the group to join family members waiting for them in the bleachers. Ryan, of course, had arrived in the van, so needed an explanation for his coach when it came time to leave. I heard myself, as I approached, being identified as Ryan’s uncle, a ploy that made a simple ride home feel suddenly sneaky and complicated. But the coach, fortunately for us, was busy and impatient and hardly looked at me when I shook his hand and escorted his young swimmer to the parking lot.

“Not very tight security,” I said to Ryan. “What if I was a kidnapper or a child molester or something?”

“That’s stupid.”

“I mean, your coach has no way of knowing for sure who I am.”

“That’s stupid,” the boy decided again. “If you were a kidnapper or a pervert or something, why would I go with you? It’s dumb.”

“You’re right,” I said. We were in the car, already leaving the school parking lot. “You’re smart enough to know better.”

For the next hour, as we traveled from Peoria back to Sandburg, I listened to Ryan talk about himself. A little prompting from me, a few questions, was all the help he needed. I learned, from the flow of information, that he was a fan of professional wrestling; that his favorite TV shows were Power Rangers and Beetleborgs; that his parents gave him ten dollars every week for his allowance; that he had “tons of girlfriends” at school; that Air Jordans were the best shoes and only “faggots” wore Reebok or Adidas. Just to test his response, I objected to his use of the word “faggot” and asked him whether he meant actual gay people or just nerds and geeks in general. The question seemed to puzzle him—not something, after all, that a nine-year-old would ordinarily consider. Even more so than Pepper, Ryan probably had only the cloudiest concept of gay sex and sexuality. Mostly, I suppose, it meant something in his mind about being a sissy, a weakling, an all-purpose wimp. “It’s just that Air Jordans are the best,” he eventually responded. “That’s all.”

“Should we stop for something to eat? Are you hungry?”

“It’s Sunday.”

“So?”

“It’s family dinner day! My father would kill me if I missed it!”

“He’s pretty strict, hah?”

“It’s for my own good,” Ryan told me, those chlorine-reddened eyes of his fixed, as always, in my direction.

When we arrived at his house, I made a point of going with him to the door in order to speak to his parents. Always an uncomfortable situation, a precarious show of nonchalance and affability hiding the tension beneath. How to admit friendship for a boy, even affection, while maintaining the necessary façade of grave propriety for his parents? Tricky. Extremely. The meeting was a brief one. Ryan's parents greeted me with obvious surprise. Why was the mailman bringing home their son after a swimming tournament in Peoria? Very strange, it must have appeared to them. I decided, for a change, to tell the simple truth, explaining that Ryan had invited me and that I tried to attend his meets whenever possible and that I was happy to give him a ride home afterwards—honestly, very happy. Ryan's father seemed unimpressed, and not particularly polite or friendly. He was a big man, blond like his sons and daughter, wearing a loosened necktie and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Men of his type always made me uneasy. They were the bosses and the patriarchs and the alpha males of the world, aggressively macho, everybody's gym teacher and Little League coach. We had met each other in the past, of course, during my time as his mailman; I knew, for example, that he was the manager of a Ford dealership and a member of Sandburg's Chamber of Commerce. That familiarity might have been the only reason I was being tolerated now; a stranger almost certainly would have encountered a solid and stony wall of suspicion; but I was the mailman, known to the family for five years, not someone likely to abduct their son. In any case, I retreated as quickly as I could manage, glad to be gone and not eager for another visit.

Back home, on my way through the front door, I noticed a piece of paper hanging from the mail box. I think I knew, even before I took it out and looked at it, that it was a note from Frankie. "I was here," it said in his familiar hand. "I'm sorry you are gone." It was signed by the boy with his name and with X's and O's. Kisses and hugs. None of this came as a surprise. In the two weeks since his visit to my apartment, Frankie

had begun calling me on the phone, just one time the first week, but then more and more often as he gained confidence in our friendship. Sometimes he had a topic for discussion, a song or movie or TV show that he wanted to talk about; other times he called for no apparent reason and we spent five or ten or fifteen minutes inventing chatter about random bits of nothing. Each time, he apologized right off for bothering me. “You really have to quit saying that,” I told him most recently, just the night before. “I’m always happy to hear from you.”

“Dude, seriously?”

“Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t I want to talk to a cute sixteen-year-old?”

“How am I cute?”

“In every way,” I said. “Hair, face, body. Cute, cute, cute.”

“I don’t think so, not really.”

“Oh sure, mister modesty.”

“No, dude, I’m serious!”

“Well, just look in the mirror and see for yourself.”

“Doc never says anything like that.”

A mild complaint? About Doc? “He has his own style,” I said into the phone. “But he shares my opinion, trust me.”

“I’m looking in the mirror.”

“Where are you?”

“In my room.”

“You have your own extension?”

“Dude, it’s cellular!”

“Oh, of course,” I chuckled, “a cell phone. I’m so out of touch. Anyway. What about the mirror?”

“Should I tell you?”

“What? Why? Is this going to be kinky?”

The boy laughed and repeated the word “kinky” as if it filled his mouth with an intriguing new taste. “I’ve got clothes on. Underwear, at least.”

“What kind?” “Nothing special, just regular Jockey briefs. You know, regular white ones.”

Another discussion about underwear with yet another boy. “Pepper wears briefs, too. Fruit of the Loom.”

“It’s what I wear to bed.”

“And? So? How do you look?”

“Skinny.”

“Nice and slender,” I corrected. “Boys always think they’re too skinny. Girls think they’re too fat. Both are usually wrong.”

“This is weird, bro. I mean, like, kinky,” the boy said with another laugh. “My mom and dad would freak.”

“Are you getting excited?”

“Dude, yes! You should see me!”

“I’d like to.”

“Should I take my underwear off?”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

There was a flurry of static as the boy juggled the phone and, presumably, removed the last of his clothing. “OK, I’m done. Feels totally better.”

“How does it look?” “Oh man,” Frankie said, his voice made giggly by nervousness, “that’s a wicked question.”

“Are you still in front of the mirror?”

“Yeah, I’m still here.” He was silent for a moment, both of us silent, then he said, “Come on, Jake, ask me more questions.”

“OK, OK. Tell me, then, are you hard?” “Yes, for sure!”

“Are you playing with it?” “Yes.”

“How big is it?”

“Dude, I don’t know,” the boy nervously laughed. “It’s just, I don’t know, probably just normal.”

“Yeah? Normal?”

“I mean it’s not real gigantic or anything. Oh man, so weird. Here, wait,” he suddenly proposed, “I can measure it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, there’s a ruler right here on my desk. Wait. OK, shit, just a minute. OK, it’s about, like, exactly six and a quarter inches.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Here, listen,” Frankie said. There was a thump thump thump from his end of the connection, something knocking against the phone. “Dude, could you hear that?” “Yeah, loud and clear.” “It was my dick!”

“Sounded hard as a rock.”

“Should I do more?”

“As much as you want,” I encouraged. “Whatever feels good.”

“Too bad you’re not here.”

“I agree.”

“Do you talk like this with Pepper?”

“No, not like this, no way.”

“He’s really cute,” Frankie said. “I liked those pictures of him. You know, the ones in the bathtub, and the ones in bed, where you could see everything.”

“You’re right, absolutely, he’s a real doll.”

“Can he cum yet?”

“I honestly don’t know, Frankie.”

“Do you think he can?” “It’s possible, I suppose. Maybe a few drops.” I waited for some rejoinder from the boy, then called his name into the phone. “Are you there? Frankie?”

“Yeah, oh shit. Dude, sorry, I just. Shit, it’s embarrassing.”

“What happened?”

“You know.”

“Oh, you mean you. . .”

“Yeah, when we were talking about Pepper, bro, I sort of busted a nut.”

“Nothing wrong with that. Hell, I should’ve joined you.”

“Too weird, no shit. Do I sound stoned?”

“Are you?”

“Yeah, I was out before with my buds from school and we were smoking some killer weed. I’m stoned like totally.”

“Well, it’s no wonder you’re so horny,” I said. “Feel better now?”

“Sleepy.”

“Are you still in front of the mirror?”

“Dude, no, I laid down before. On my bed.”

“Did you make a mess?”

There was a pause as the boy, I assumed, looked down and inspected himself. “Damn, bro, you should see all the stuff on my stomach! It’s like a world record.”

“There’s always more where that came from.”

“Not now, that’s for sure,” the boy said in a voice that sounded, for him, remarkably languid, his slushy lisp even more thick-tongued than usual, like someone already half asleep. We said goodbye right after that, with a vague commitment to see each other soon. I hadn’t realized that “soon” meant the very next day. I was still staring at Frankie’s note in my hand. Strange that the swimming tournament should have kept us apart, that being with one boy had prevented a tantalizing rendezvous with another. Could there be too many boys in a man’s life?

Could I have been with Frankie right now, playing between his legs, if not for Ryan? Possibly. But Ryan was worth the cost, a plum that might easily ripen into the most delectable fruit on the tree.

Next day, a mere forty-eight hours before Christmas, three new boys moved into Helen Dillon’s old house, and into my life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Though it was nearly dark by the time I finished work and returned home, I could easily recognize the Chevrolet minivan parked in the driveway across the street. It was the same one that Pepper had furtively inspected because of its unfamiliar Missouri license plates. Eerily, Pepper's prediction had come true, and the family was now in possession of Helen Dillon's house. It wasn't until the following day, when the entire family trooped outside to the van, probably for some last-minute shopping, that I got a look at the three kids already glimpsed in the darkness, that earlier night, by Pepper and myself. They were bundled in coats and hats which hid them from my inquisitive gaze—but all three of them were boys, no question about gender, the oldest probably in his early teens. Beyond that, I could deduce nothing.

I was home, and therefore able to see my new neighbors, thanks to vacation time, ten days off beginning Christmas Eve and running through the first week in January. My holiday plans were simple enough: Christmas Eve at the Robinson house with Holly and Pepper, then the day itself in the deep timber with Doc. I knew from our conversations on the phone that Frankie hoped to visit Doc's sometime during the day—possibly in the evening, the boy speculated, after the mandatory dinner with family and friends. As for managing to see Ryan, I still had not figured out a way. We hadn't been together since his tournament in Peoria, and I wouldn't be delivering his mail again for another two weeks, which meant his gift was still waiting, wrapped in its Santa Claus paper, on the dresser in my bedroom. I had gotten him a Power Ranger action figure that I knew, from talking to him in the car, he wanted but didn't have. For Frankie, I had something a bit more expensive: a game for his Nintendo 64 called *Shadows of the Empire*. It featured various characters from *Star Wars*, which Frankie often mentioned as his favorite movie. There was always the risk, of course,

that my gifts might duplicate those from the two boys' own parents and relatives—but it was a necessary risk and, after all, a harmless one.

There was no such risk with Pepper. I knew beforehand, from Holly, what the boy could expect from aunts, uncles, grandparents, and, needless to say, from Holly herself. This was my chance, for the first time in many years, to spoil a boy at Christmas, showering him with all the toys and gadgets that tickled my own fancy: a Doctor Slime Monster Kit; a walkie-talkie from Radio Shack; art supplies, including a special pen for gold-leafing; an assortment of action figures and cyber-tanks and robo-ships; and, as the grand centerpiece, an Indy 500 auto racing set with multi-level tracks and variable speed controls. I needed two oversized shopping bags to carry everything into Pepper's house when I arrived there on Christmas Eve.

Holly and I had agreed, a few weeks earlier, to an exchange of small gifts between ourselves, something we hadn't done since the first years of our friendship. But she wasn't prepared for my Father Christmas extravagance. She might, even, have been mildly annoyed, although she didn't say anything outright. It hadn't occurred to me, in my gift-buying frenzy, that I might be overdoing it, that I might actually upstage Holly in her own son's eyes. Bad manners on my part, and a source of vague discomfort when it came time, after dinner, to open the presents.

We gathered, the three of us, in the living room, where the tree (a plastic one with artificial pine scent) was already lit and the television was playing a concert of holiday music. Pepper had been moody throughout the entire evening, much as he'd been before Thanksgiving, scowling silently from behind his big glasses despite my efforts to cheer him with teasing and jokes. Holly, for the most part, just ignored him, not at all bothered by his poutiness. "He gets like this," she confided in a private moment, "whenever he has to go out of town."

"Why?"

"Because he's a little pain, that's why."

“No, I’m serious. What’s so bad about going to his grandmother’s house for Christmas Day?” “He’ll be fine once he gets there,” Holly said with a dismissive flip of her hand. “It’s his way of getting attention. You should know that by now.” “It always seems so unlike him.” “Sure, you just see him when he’s in the mood to play and have fun.”

I had to agree, reluctantly, that she was probably right. Later, in the living room to open our presents, the boy brightened considerably, crawling from package to package in the growing mess of ribbons and boxes and wrapping paper. Each new toy made him smile a little more excitedly. Holly responded with polite enthusiasm to my barrage of merchandise, but I could see that she felt overshadowed and just a bit resentful, her own presents suffering in comparison. I pretended not to notice. An apology or some other comment might have made the situation even worse, as if I were condescending to her second-rate effort: poor thing, don’t feel bad, your gifts are OK, sorry mine are so much better!

In fact, Holly’s presents seemed to please the boy just as much as mine. What also pleased him, when the time came, was passing out gifts of his own to me and his mother. For her, he had a cup and a small vase which he’d made himself in art class, at school. For me, he had something from a gift shop at the mall. It was a square plaque, shiny with plasticine and painted with the same scene of wizard and unicorn that hung, as a poster, in his bedroom. “It’s wonderful,” I told him. “How did you find the same picture?”

“I just saw it. By accident. Is it wonderful?”

“Absolutely,” I laughed. “The perfect gift!” Pepper was kneeling in front of me with one hand clutching a Gameboy (from his mother) and the other hand lightly on my knee, a rare physical gesture from him, something about it so attentive and sweet that I had to lean forward and plant a big kiss on his cheek. Holly watched us with a smile—never jealous, to her credit, of any affection shared between me and her son.

We exchanged our own gifts last, Holly and I. Nothing expensive or elaborate: a small music box for her, a sweater for me. After

everything had been opened, Pepper stayed on the floor surrounded by his windfall of Christmas treasures, his poutiness forgotten. I joined him to explore the gadgets and games and gizmos. I told him, while we were together on the floor, about the family from Missouri, my new neighbors. “They moved in yesterday,” I said, “just as you predicted.”

“Are they from the Ozarks?”

“That’s something I don’t know. But I did get a better look at the three kids,” I added. “They’re all boys.”

“Is that good?” “I don’t know. Maybe. Boys can be fun,” I said in a deliberately mischievous tone. Holly had gone to the kitchen, so I felt able to speak more freely, with the kind of teasing and flirting that would have been impossible with her in the same room. “Oh, by the way, I just had the bathroom renovated.”

“Like how?”

“You know, a new shower, et cetera.”

“A new shower? Really? Is it a nice one?”

I set aside the walkie-talkie I’d been inspecting and scooted closer to Pepper, who was on his stomach with his face down over his new Gameboy, concentrating on its miniscule screen. I used one hand to rub his shoulders and the back of his neck. “It’s great. A whole new tub, big enough for two people.”

“For two people?”

“Yeah, it’s an oversized tub, extra large, really too big for my bathroom. But, you know, I wanted something special.”

“Was it expensive?”

“It wasn’t cheap,” I said. “Plus it has a sliding glass door for the shower, which has a super-duper new nozzle with lots of settings.”

“Massage?”

“Gentle and vigorous both! You’ll love it.” “Did you use it already?”

“Just once, this morning. It was a real pleasure,” I said, just as Holly walked back in. She asked what we were talking about so I gave

her an honest answer, my hand still on Pepper's back. "My new shower. It's quite a spectacular piece of technology."

"Such an exciting life you have, Jake," she said, a tray with three mugs of eggnog in her hands. She put it on a side table and passed out the mugs, special Christmas ones decorated with pictures of Santa Claus and flying reindeer. She sniffed the contents of each mug before giving one to Pepper. "This is yours," she decided, handing it to him. "Without rum."

"That's no fair," the boy protested with one of his phony whimpers.

"You're only twelve, goofball."

"Does rum taste good?"

"Take a sip from Jake's," Holly said, "if he'll let you."

I agreed, no problem, and gave my mug to Pepper, who held it with both hands as he sipped from the rummy eggnog inside. It made him wrinkle his nose and shake his head. "It tastes nasty," he said, gladly handing it back. We laughed, all three of us—another of those moments when I could easily imagine us as a real family, together in our home on Christmas Eve. Pepper must have been inspired by the same notion. He looked at his mother and asked, "Would it be funny if you and Jake got married?"

"Oh, it would be hilarious," Holly said. "What about it, Jake? Should we get married?"

"Sure! Are you free next weekend?"

"I have to check my calendar, sweetheart."

"You guys are just kidding," the boy said, licking at his eggnog mustache.

"Sorry," I said, "but I'm not exactly the kind of guy who gets married, Pepper, you know that."

"He knows," Holly confirmed. She was teasing one of their cats (they had two) with a curly strand of red ribbon. "He's being a little twerp."

"Anyway," I said to the boy, "we're practically a family right now. Your mom and I don't need to get married for that."

Holly looked up from her cat-teasing. “Aw, that’s so sweet,” she said with a comically insincere smile. “We love you, too, Jakey. Right, Pepper?”

The boy finished a gulp of his own eggnog, then responded with a nod of happy and sincere agreement, as close as he’d ever come to actually declaring his affection. I wanted to grab him in a smothering embrace and never let go. But I put a discreet lid on my emotions until later, until I was preparing to leave, when I managed to catch the boy under the sprig of mistletoe that hung in the doorway between kitchen and living room. His mother was around the corner at the refrigerator, filling Tupperware containers with food for me to take home. “Whoa,” I said to him, “not so fast!”

“What’s wrong?”

“We’re under the mistletoe.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes! You know the rule,” I said, gripping him by the shoulders. “You owe me a kiss!” With only a token moan of protest, Pepper lifted his face and offered me his left cheek—not quite what I’d been hoping for, but sweet. I kissed that smooth cheek of his and hugged him against me, then kissed him once more. “Have fun in Joliet,” I whispered into his ear. “I love you.”

“OK,” he whispered back.

“I love you very much.”

“OK,” he answered again, cozy in my arms but unable to offer any response beyond that shy whisper and that demure cheek. His shyness, I think, only stoked my desire for him, like an aphrodisiac that left me frazzled and breathless. Did he know that I wanted to taste him, to devour him, to make him shiver with pleasure? As we stood there beneath the mistletoe, did he know? Did he have any idea how much I adored him?

Doc fixed a leg of lamb (which I’d bought) for Christmas dinner. There were no decorations in the house, no wreaths or trees, no other

evidence of the holiday except for two small packages awaiting Frankie's possible arrival: one of them, the Nintendo game from me; the other, a book from Doc, a photohistory of the Grateful Dead that seemed appropriate for the boy. It was Frankie himself who inevitably became the focus of our conversation right from the moment of my "What's up, Doc?" entrance early in the afternoon.

"I thought for an instant that you were the boy," Doc called from the kitchen.

"Not this early," I reminded him. Or did he not even know about Frankie's agenda for the day? Without a phone, it was difficult to keep track. "When did you see him last?"

"Just this past weekend. On Sunday."

"So the two of you are still hitting it off? Having fun?"

"My impression," Doc said, looking over his shoulder as I entered the kitchen, "was that he came here to see you."

"Oh, come on! That's ridiculous."

Doc said nothing as he finished quartering the last in a batch of red potatoes. Then he wiped his hands and turned in my direction. "Frankie assumed you would be here, it being Sunday, after all. He was clearly disappointed."

"I was at a swimming tournament."

"Teenagers have trouble hiding things like disappointment. But it's all right. Really, I'm not the least bit upset."

"But I don't think. . ."

"You need to understand something, Jacob, that I've only recently discovered myself," Doc said. He led me back to the living room and explained, while I sat on the couch and listened, that he was finding Frankie's energy too fatiguing; that he no longer enjoyed the challenge of youthful courtship and intrigue; that he was happiest with his quiet day-to-day routine, alone in his house, undisturbed. "I no longer enjoy the sport of it all, Jacob. That's the simple truth."

"Are you sure about all this? Maybe you're just. . ."

“Just tired, that’s what. I don’t have the spirit for a sixteen-year-old boyfriend. And Frankie can see that. He’s not stupid.”

“I’m surprised, that’s for sure.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Doc said. “I’m a grumpy old goat who likes to be left alone. Nothing against Frankie, mind you. He’s a wonderful lad, just more than I care to handle these days.”

I lit a cigarette to fill the sudden moment of silence between us. “Have you discussed any of this with Frankie?”

“Of course not,” Doc said, lighting a cigarette of his own. “There’s no need. Nature will take its course.”

“Which means what exactly?”

“Which means that the boy is already following his heart in your direction. No help from me is required.”

“You make it sound so. . . so melodramatic,” I said. But I didn’t argue. Maybe Doc was right. Just a few days earlier, Frankie had called me for a session of phone sex. How could I ignore, or explain away, something like that? “I sure didn’t plan on this,” I finally added. “Frankie started coming here to see you, not me!”

“It’s a relief, Jacob, believe me.”

“But, I mean, what did you two guys end up doing together? Sorry for asking, it seems sort of rude, but. . .”

“If you must know,” Doc said, “we never did anything beyond that first night.”

“You mean the shower scene? From *You Are Not Alone*? That night?”

“That’s the one.”

“I’m surprised.”

“He’s only been here,” Doc paused to make a quick calculation, “a total of four times, don’t forget. Maybe five.”

We continued our discussion, in bits and pieces, as Doc finished preparing dinner; and then as we ate our lamb and potatoes and asparagus in front of the television, which was showing a production of

The Nutcracker; and later, as we smoked our postprandial cigarettes with cups of brandy-laced coffee (just a splash of brandy for Doc so as not to irritate his fragile liver). What I tried to understand, by pestering him with questions, was the precise state of Doc's mind, the extent of his passion for privacy, and whether it now included even myself. "Don't be foolish," he told me. "This has nothing to do with you."

"What about Pepper? Does he still have an open invitation?"

"You're being surprisingly dim about this whole situation, Jacob. I haven't suddenly changed, you know. I'm still terribly fond of boys like Frankie, and your Pepper, but. . . but I'm not interested these days in an actual boyfriend, especially not a teenager who demands so much attention."

"So I shouldn't consider this some major psychological crisis?"

Doc let out a quiet laugh as he dropped the butt of his cigarette into the Maxwell House can next to his chair. "Maybe just a minor one," he said. "In any event, I don't regret having Frankie come here. Not at all."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"It's important for him, obviously, to explore his sexuality with sympathetic companions. Like myself. And like you."

"That's certainly true," I said. "But it's sort of strange. Makes me feel a little nervous."

Our day-long discussion finally ended when the boy himself appeared later that evening. He let himself in through the unlocked front door with a quick knock-knock-knock and started taking off his silver-and-orange ski vest while smiling hello. He'd been confined all day with his family and made no attempt to hide his exhilaration at being set free. He gave Doc, still seated, the first of his hugs, then turned and gave me, standing beside him, the second—along with a kiss that shouldn't have surprised me but did—a quick kiss that was over before I even had the chance to pucker. Finally settled in, he found a tin of Christmas cookies in the kitchen and went at them with wolfish enthusiasm, washing them down with his usual Cherry Coke. He was still chewing and swigging

when I sat him onto the couch and gave him the two presents from me and from Doc. He was speechless at first, strange to see him so silent and serious, as if, for just one moment, he might actually start crying. But his smile was swiftly back as he opened the Nintendo game, and then the book. “Dude, I can’t believe it! Look at this stuff! I totally can’t believe it!”

“Do you already have that game?”

“No,” Frankie said, “not yet. I was going to buy it with my Christmas money, you know, like maybe even next week. How did you know I wanted it?”

“You’ve mentioned Star Wars a few times, so I figured it might be appropriate.”

“And this book is so awesome!”

“Glad you like it,” Doc said, munching on a star-shaped cookie as he watched the boy. Frankie flipped through the pages to inspect a few of the pictures, then looked up with that same silent and serious expression as if, once again, he might be close to tears. “I didn’t know we were giving presents,” he said. “I mean, I didn’t get anything for you guys.”

“Don’t be silly,” Doc said.

“I feel like such an asshole,” the boy persisted. He had a habit of pushing his long hair behind his ears, first one side and then the other, again and again as the dark blond strands worked themselves loose. Doc assured him once more that he was being silly, and I hastened to agree. “It’s true, Frankie, we weren’t expecting anything in return. Don’t feel bad.” I was beside him on the couch, so decided to give him a nudge and a poke as a way of joshing him out of his moment of dejection. He responded with a grin that invited even more poking and joshing. “Poor baby,” I said, “him so sad.”

“Jake, dude, you’re crazy.”

“Oh good, I think he feels better,” I said, putting my arm around his shoulders. Such a slender boy—and yet, compared to Pepper, he felt almost large against me. Smiling, he shoved a green Christmas-tree

cookie into his mouth and rested contentedly against my side. I kept my arm around him as he ate more cookies and looked through his new book. Doc glanced at us from his chair, then looked back at the television, which was showing some movie about Santa Claus in a space ship. "Think about it," he suddenly said. "He sees whatever you're doing, wherever you are. He can be everywhere at once. He rewards good behavior and punishes bad. He's ageless and never-changing. He's invisible to ordinary humans. He's imagined in popular iconography as a patriarchal figure with a flowing white beard. He lives 'up there' in a magical realm with magical helpers and messengers. He's the miracle-worker who hears the wishes of his children and makes their dreams come true. Now," Doc concluded, his eyes turning toward me and Frankie, "please identify our mystery guest."

"It's Santa Claus," Frankie assumed.

"Not necessarily," I said. "Don't be fooled by the obvious."

"It could be Santa Claus, of course," Doc said as he lit an English Oval. "But it could also be your Christian God. Very little difference, really. A bearded patriarch who works magic, who rewards virtue, who punishes wickedness. Father Christmas and Our Father in heaven. Much the same."

"That's weird," Frankie said. "I never thought about it before."

"Santa Claus is simply God for children. An introductory lesson. And then God becomes Santa Claus for adults. The name changes, the sense of fun disappears, the North Pole becomes heaven, letters to Santa become prayers to the Big Guy Upstairs. But the underlying concept remains the same."

"Dude, that's bizarre."

"At some age, we expect children to stop believing in Santa Claus. It's a pleasant fantasy, but obviously it's not real! Meanwhile, the belief in God Almighty, simply a different name for the same fantasy, is expected to go on and on for an entire lifetime."

"Not all ideas of a god are quite so childish," I said. "Just to be fair."

“I’ve never denied the possibility of some sort of god force, Jacob. Some sort of primal creative power or energy. In fact,” Doc smiled, “I’ve always been rather fond of paganism. It’s the God of Christianity which I find impossible to take seriously. Jehovah and Allah aren’t much better, of course, just variations on the same desert deity, the same omnipotent patriarch in the clouds.”

I was pleased by Doc’s tirade. It meant, to me, that he was feeling more comfortable with our situation, no longer so tense and so constricted by Frankie’s presence. In his mind, I believe he had already passed responsibility for the boy from himself to me. Frankie, in other words, had become my boyfriend and not his—and all three of us, I think, were aware of it. Again I felt that tingle of nervousness at finding myself in such an unexpected position, suddenly faced with the prospect of actual sex, of actual fucking, with a horny and extremely energetic sixteen-year-old. Possibly quite soon. Possibly that very night. Somehow, I didn’t feel ready.

We spent the next three or four hours watching videos, with a break between Pixote and some film from Turkey for Doc’s homemade eggnog and, at Frankie’s suggestion, a quick stroll outside for a bit of fresh air. It was a relief, even for me, to get away from the stale and smoky confines of the house. “I bet you’ve got lots of good Christmas trees out here,” the boy said to Doc. The three of us were standing in the gravelly cul-de-sac where our vehicles were parked—the Honda and the Volvo and the pickup all silvery with frost and moonlight. “I suppose,” Doc said. “But I prefer to leave them out here, where they belong.”

The night was brilliant with stars, like a million Christmas lights displayed for our private enjoyment. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it,” I said quietly, as if murmuring in church. Frankie responded with a solemn nod and said, “Dude, it’s so awesome. And it’s so cold, you know, like the whole world is frozen.” He had come outside without his ski vest and was hugging himself to keep warm (like Ryan at the swimming pool, I

recalled, smiling). Without a word, I wrapped my arm around him and rubbed his shoulders. He leaned against me. Doc had been right, of course, about the boy following his heart in my direction. Maybe I had known all along, from the first glimpse of his psychedelic stationery, that Frankie and I were the two who belonged together, the old hippie and the new, something compatible and easygoing between us that I had sensed from the beginning.

When we went back inside, Frankie settled himself against me on the couch with no trace of shyness. He could see by now, just as clearly as myself, that Doc harbored no resentment or jealousy about the friendship blossoming between the two of us. It seemed OK, with the lights down and the Turkish film playing, to snuggle like a pair of lovebirds on a date—and I suppose, yes, we were on a date, our first date really, still somehow a surprise to me what was happening, a Christmas gift I hadn't expected.

By the time we said goodbye to Doc, it was after eleven o'clock and too late for Frankie to go anywhere but home. Outside with him, standing by our cars, I wondered what to say, what to do—afraid of being too bold, or not bold enough. "I'll be off for the next week and a half," I finally told him. "You should come over sometime."

"Definitely, bro, I'd love to."

"Maybe you should call first, just in case I'm. . ."

"Dude, I'll definitely call, I promise!"

"You like to talk on the phone, don't you."

"When I'm bored, yeah, I guess I do. Oh, hey, did you get my note Sunday night?"

"Yes, I did, sorry I wasn't home."

"That's OK," Frankie said, each word bringing a puff of steam from his mouth. He was holding, in his right hand, a plastic shopping bag that contained his book and his Nintendo game. "Were you with Pepper?"

“No, not with Pepper,” I said. The frigid air was numbing my lips and my cheeks and making it difficult for me to get my words out distinctly. “I was at Ryan’s swimming tournament. In Peoria.”

“Who’s Ryan?”

“Haven’t I told you about Ryan? He’s a boy who lives on my mail route. Only nine years old, just a kid, but he’s very cute. Beautiful, to be exact.”

“Jake, dude, you’ve sure got lots of boyfriends!”

“Not really. Not anymore,” I said. “Pepper is a boyfriend, I guess. But not Ryan. So far he’s just some kid I happen to know.” When Frankie made no response, I smiled with numb lips and added, “Of course, now there’s you! I mean, after all, your phone call the other night was pretty damn sexy.”

“I was really, really stoned,” the boy laughed with a blast of moonlit steam.

“That’s OK.”

“It was fun, though.”

“I thought so, too. Listening to a boy jerk off. Always very enjoyable.”

“Dude!”

I laughed along with Frankie and joined him in a hug, the nylon of his ski vest rustling against the leather of my jacket as we came together. “But now, my dear, I’m freezing and need to get home.”

“Definitely, bro, me too.”

“See you soon,” I said. Then we were kissing, with mouths open, Frankie’s face lifted to mine because of the difference in our heights. I hadn’t kissed a boy in that way since the days of Calvin and Bobby. Had Frankie kissed anyone, ever, in that way? I doubted it. He seemed to be following my lead, like someone learning an unfamiliar dance, and I could feel him laughing as we kissed, laughing as softly as a whisper at the discovery of this funny and wonderful new sensation. “It would feel even better,” I said when we paused for breath, “if our lips weren’t so frozen.”

“It’s good anyway,” Frankie said, already putting his mouth back against mine for another juicy taste.

Too many boys, I thought again. Too many complications, entanglements, risks. Maybe I needed to start keeping a journal again, as I’d done years ago—a daily journal to help me plan, organize, strategize, to help me regain some control over this increasingly chaotic situation. Too hectic. Too stressful. Part of me empathized with Doc’s desire for solitude and stability. A safe and simple monotony of routine. But another part, a stronger part, liked the feeling of this boy in my arms and the feeling of his tongue in my mouth. The risks and complications, at that moment, seemed trivial and very far away.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I already knew Frankie's favorite snacks and treats, which made it easy for me next day when I went shopping. Miniature pizzas, Twinkies, Cherry Coke—I brought home a good supply of each item and added them to the cornucopia of greasy and sugary junk foods already available, mostly for Pepper's sake, in my cabinets and refrigerator.

Thinking about Pepper only increased my anxiety. He happened to be out of town, away at his grandmother's, but he'd be back soon enough—and then what? How would I manage to juggle visits from him with visits from Frankie? Or might the situation become something nicely freewheeling and playful, maybe even liberating for Pepper, just the perfect way of coaxing him from his bashful shell?

While replaying the different scenarios over and over in my mind, I heard unfamiliar shouting from outside, young and rambunctious voices that didn't belong, as far as I could recognize, to any of the neighboring families. It didn't occur to me, for some reason, that those young voices might be coming from the new boys across the street. But when I looked out the window, there they were—all three of them in their front yard like a band of berserk Eskimos. For the first time, I had an opportunity to give them my full attention, to enjoy a clear daylight view of them while they ran and whooped and rolled in the snow that had been falling throughout the morning. The littlest one, I eventually determined, was called Dally. The oldest was Jimmy. I listened for the name of the middle brother, who looked to be about eleven or twelve, but I never caught it. The window was opened a few inches, despite the cold, to help me hear their voices more easily as I did my spying. They all had (no surprise) the same twangy way of talking, must have been a Missouri accent, maybe from the Ozarks—just as Pepper had guessed. Every other word from them seemed to be a “fuck” or a “shit” or a “damn”

shouted at full volume, profanity enough to shame Helen Dillon's hovering spirit.

The mail arrived while I was at the window. I knew the carrier, a young man named Sanchez, so I went out to the porch to say hello. I asked him about the kids across the street. He pulled a letter from the bunch in his hand and showed me that the family's name was Huckfeldt. "Moved here from Missouri," he said, pointing to the "change of address" label.

"Cassville, Missouri," I recited as I read it. "Where is that? I've never heard of it before."

"Don't know myself, man," Sanchez said with a shrug. I stayed outside after he'd left, spending a few minutes to sweep the snow from my front steps. The Huckfeldt brothers were still chucking snowballs and whooping and, in general, making a gleefully savage uproar. They noticed me on my porch, I think, but there was nothing about me interesting enough to distract them from their noisy horseplay. I soon retreated indoors, just in time to hear the ringing of my phone.

I expected it to be Frankie, and I was right. He wanted to visit, of course, and wondered if I was free. "Sure," I told him, "my schedule is wide open."

"Should I bring anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like music or food or something?"

"No," I said, "just bring your own cute self."

"Dude," Frankie chuckled into the phone. "Will Pepper be there?"

"No, sorry, he's still at his grandmother's house."

"That sucks."

"Maybe next time."

"Yeah, maybe. Anyway. I'll be there as quick as I can."

By the time I finished on the phone with Frankie, the shouting from across the street had stopped. I looked through the window and saw that

only one of the Huckfeldt boys was still outside. Jimmy. The oldest. He was patting at the body of a small snowman that the brothers had built earlier. Jimmy Huckfeldt. I said the name aloud to myself in the otherwise silent house just to hear the full sound of it, to become better acquainted with it. The boy himself was difficult to see beneath his cap and jacket, but he moved with a quickness and an energy that made me smile as I watched him. I guessed again, from the size of him, that he was at least thirteen years old, probably in high school.

What I hadn't noticed at first, while Jimmy Huckfeldt worked busily on his snowman, was that he was giving it a cock. He shaped it carefully with both hands, added a little more snow, shaped and compacted it again, finally appeared satisfied when he'd sculpted an impressive erection of ten or twelve inches. His younger brother (the nameless one) rejoined him at that point and started laughing when he saw Jimmy's handiwork. Together they added a pair of exaggerated balls to the snow phallus, then stood looking at it and laughing and clapping snow from their own gloves as if applauding themselves.

The performance that followed was like some X-rated Christmas special. Jimmy started it by pretending to jerk off the snowman; his brother obviously liked the idea and gave Frosty a few strokes of his own, then moved behind the snowman and did several seconds of energetic humping that made both boys whoop with laughter. Jimmy finished the show by grabbing his brother's arm and forcing him to kneel in front of the snowman, a maneuver that looked rough but was actually playful and which ended with Jimmy pushing his brother's head forward until the younger boy had the snowcock in his mouth. It didn't seem to bother them that neighbors, like me, might be watching. Jimmy was laughing so hard that he stumbled backward and fell onto his butt while his younger brother, a true performer, kept working on Frosty's erection. Like an oversized Popsicle that melted away in his mouth as he sucked. If only Pepper were here to see this, I thought.

Later, after the show, I used my Rand-McNally Atlas to find Cassville, Missouri. It was in the southwestern corner of the state, practically on the border with Arkansas and Oklahoma—and yes, in the Ozarks. I was no longer surprised that Pepper, once again, had been correct. He would be smugly pleased, I was sure, by this latest evidence of his psychic finesse.

Maybe twenty minutes passed before I heard Frankie's car in the driveway. He must have jumped behind the wheel as soon as we'd finished talking on the phone. After a hug and a kiss hello, I took him to the window to show him the snowman across the street, just enough daylight remaining to see it clearly. I described the afternoon's spectacle in graphic detail. "You can still see the stump where Jimmy's brother was sucking on it. Not much left. He ate nearly the whole thing."

"That's unreal," Frankie marveled. "I wish they'd come back out."

"I could use you as my undercover agent," I suddenly decided, slipping my arm around the boy's waist. He had already taken off his ski vest and was standing against me in his traditional uniform of jeans and flannel and tie-dye. His hair was rubberbanded, same as once before, into a short ponytail that waggled against his neck each time he moved or turned his head—like now, when he looked at me with a doubtful grin. "Your undercover agent? What's that mean exactly?"

"It means," I told him, "that you could wander across the street sometime when the Huckfeldt kids are outside and. . . and just get to know them. Be friendly. Discover all of their dirty little secrets."

"Jake, bro, that's very sneaky." "It is? Good!"

"So I'll be, like, a spy?"

"Yeah, that's right," I said. "Maybe you'll all become good buddies and then. . . who knows what might happen." My hand was rubbing the boy's hip and slipping down again and again to feel the denim seat of his pants. Amazing, I kept thinking, amazing that I could say or do anything with this teenager, anything at all, and not worry about the disastrous morning-after consequences. No need to scheme, to maneuver, to choose

every word and every touch with the precision of some grand master agonizing over a game of chess. I could plot with Frankie about the boys across the street, fantasize with him about getting them into bed, talk as dirty as I wanted while putting my hands anywhere and everywhere on his body. It was a bonus, and a nice one, that he was cute enough and small enough to pass for a boy of, say, fourteen—really not much older in appearance, for example, than that Jimmy Huckfeldt kid. He was grinning now while I felt his ass, and gripping the window ledge with both hands as if he might lose his balance. “You always have the most wonderful smell,” I told him, getting closer, nuzzling his neck.

“How do I smell? Tell me.”

“Like incense, sandalwood incense.”

“I burn it in my room at home.”

“And like marijuana.”

“No, dude, can you smell it for real?”

“Oh sure,” I said, “the sweet aroma of reefer. Very nice.” Frankie had turned from the window so that we could talk face to face. He was looking at me with that squinty and dimply smile of his, such a funny smile, his eyebrows (surprisingly dark eyebrows) always arched and raised as if he were actually startled by his own happiness. “Come on,” I told him, “I’ll show you my bedroom.”

The boy nodded quickly, just as nervous as I was, no doubt—probably more. I showed him my special drawer and let him explore the material inside while I left, just briefly, to fetch a beer from the kitchen for myself and a Cherry Coke for him. He smiled again, when I returned and handed him the pop, with that same raised-eyebrows expression of surprised delight. “My favorite,” he said. “How did you know?”

“How could I not know? You always drink it at Doc’s house.”

“You pay attention, bro, it’s very flattering.”

“Pay attention to you? Of course,” I said, seated on the edge of the bed. Frankie was half seated, half reclining next to me, resting on one elbow as he looked through my pictures and magazines—most of them from Denmark or Holland or Germany, obtained in the late Seventies

and early Eighties when such things were still legal. There was music coming from the speakers in the living room, loud enough to cover any of those uneasy silences that I always dreaded. Frankie was nodding his head to the beat as he continued his perusal of my porn collection. I had my eyes on his denim crotch, wondering if I should go ahead and touch it, when he glanced up and asked an unexpected question. "Was Doc mad at us, do you think?"

"You mean last night? No, I don't think he was mad at all. We talked about you before you showed up."

"Really? That's scary," the boy said, not smiling now. It was always a surprise how melancholy his face could become at moments like these, that glisten of sorrowful moisture in his eyes making him look like a heartbroken little boy. I took a swig of beer, then put the can aside and rested my hand on Frankie's leg. "It was nothing bad, my dear, trust me. Doc just isn't as. . . as young as he used to be. That's a stupid thing to say, I know, but. . ."

"I guess he is getting sort of old," the boy cautiously agreed, washing down the comment with a sip of Cherry Coke.

"It's not like he's decrepit from old age or anything, but. . . but Doc likes his privacy, now more than ever, I guess. Honestly, he's very fond of you, there's no question about that, but it's. . . it's OK if we're together like this."

"He doesn't care?"

"He definitely doesn't care," I said. "Don't give it another thought."

Frankie drained his can of pop and then, smiling again, jumped to his feet. "I have to use the bathroom! Sorry!"

"Right across the hall."

"Yeah, I remember from last time."

"Hurry back," I called after him, nervously grabbing for my beer, for another gulp of courage. Was I about to make a costly mistake? Was there still time to back out? No. I couldn't end this courtship dance and turn Frankie away. Not now.

I had nearly finished my beer when the boy finally reappeared in the doorway to the bedroom. He paused there as if he might turn back, but then smiled and stepped toward the bed. “I made myself more comfortable,” he announced, his voice tense and a little too loud. I nodded, wondering what to say—wondering because Frankie had returned from the bathroom wearing nothing but his underpants and his tie-dyed T-shirt, everything else in a bundle which he placed carefully on the only chair in the room (a wooden rocker between the bed and the window). Pepper, it occurred to me, would have thrown his clothes onto the floor, treating my home as his own. But Frankie hadn’t reached that point of emotional comfort—not yet, still self-conscious about his status as visitor, as guest. “Hey, that’s great, that’s a good idea,” I said, quickly finishing the last swig of my Coors. I tossed the can into the wastebasket where it clanked against Frankie’s empty Coke can. “Come sit, sit, sit,” I told him. “I was getting lonely over here.”

“You’ve got all new stuff in your bathroom, Jake.”

“Yeah, that’s right. It was mostly for Pepper’s sake, to be honest.”

“It’s totally nice,” the boy said. He sat with his back against the headboard and his legs stretched out, his feet next to my hip. “Does Pepper like it?”

“He hasn’t seen it yet,” I said. “Are you cold?”

“No, I’m pretty comfortable.”

“Jockey briefs?”

“Dude, yeah, nothing fancy. What about yours?”

I stood, already shoeless, to remove my pants. “Nothing fancy for me, either. Just ordinary boxers. See?” I sat back down, in my underwear, and rested my hand on Frankie’s shin. His legs were thin and without much muscle, pale, only sparsely covered with some fine, brownish hairs, most of them along his calves. He had picked up a photo of a Portuguese boy jerking off, as well as one of the Pepper Polaroids, and was holding them side by side, staring at them. “Dude, just imagine Pepper and this other kid doing it together, even kissing and stuff.” Nerves and excitement were making him rush his words, which was

causing his tongue to trip and lisp slushily over every “s” and “sh” that got in its way. I leaned against one elbow to position myself closer to him, easier to pet and feel the full length of his bare legs while he mixed and matched a few other photos, giving Pepper a variety of imaginary partners. “This one here would be hot, too, because look,” he said, “Pepper is dark and this kid here is awesomely blond.”

“You have very good taste.”

“Oh shit, they’re playing Hotel California on the radio,” Frankie noticed with a sudden upturn of his head, like a dog startled by some unexpected noise. I nodded and mumbled a comment like, “Yeah, it’s a classic,” moving myself into position directly beside him, not especially interested right then in a discussion of music or in anything except getting my hand between Frankie’s legs. “Exactly six and a quarter inches,” I reminded him. “How’s it doing so far? Feel good?”

The boy laughed at the idea of measuring himself. “I was really, really stoned,” he explained again. “Kind of stupid.” He lifted the bottom of his T-shirt to show me the stiffened bulge in his Jockey briefs. “See, it’s doing OK, I guess.”

“It’s not too late to run for the door,” I told him, just a joke, smiling, ha ha. “You can still escape, little boy.”

Frankie repeated the word “escape” with one of his most sweetly dimpled grins. “This is my first underwear party,” he said. “I can’t leave now.”

“Is that what this is? An underwear party?”

“Don’t you remember Doc’s story about Tino and Danny?”

“Vaguely.”

“They had ‘underwear parties’ together. That’s what they called them. Like we’re doing now.”

“The first of many, I hope.”

“Dude, absolutely.”

“It’s a nice way to spend an evening,” I said, then started kissing and tasting the boy’s cherry-flavored mouth while my hand caressed that ramrod bulge in his briefs. He opened his mouth to my tongue and let his

eyes droop half closed, the photos still held one in each hand as if his arms had gone dead, paralyzed. I smiled and gently plucked the photos from his grip. “You might need your hands,” I teased him. “Just shut your eyes and pretend that Pepper is with us.”

“He’s so cute.”

“Right here with us,” I continued, helping Frankie out of his T-shirt, and then out of his underpants. “Right here, nice and naked, just like this, with his dick up big and hard, just like this, just like yours.”

“Jake, dude, you’re gonna make me bust, I swear, you’re gonna make me totally bust!”

I was out of my own clothes and pressed against him bare skin to bare skin, suddenly no more talking as our mouths came together in frantic kissing, wet and greedy kissing that made both of us laugh with a sound like muffled choking while I licked the bumpy plastic of his braces and while I rubbed and rubbed his dick with my hand and with my own stiffened dick, humping against him until he started humping back as frantically and greedily as he was kissing, making little moaning noises under his breath and shoving his boner against mine until I felt the warmth and wetness of him oozing between us. It was easy for me to finish a close second, no problem letting go and spilling my own load, adding to the mess all over our stomachs and thighs. “I should have put a towel down or something,” I said, exhausted. “We did a real job on these poor sheets.”

Frankie agreed with a naughty laugh. “Sorry about that, dude. You had me bustin like a maniac!”

“Likewise, likewise. Man, I was so nervous about doing this! Before we started, I mean.”

“Totally, I know! Me too!”

“It’s been so many years since I’ve had sex with a boy.” I was running my fingertips over Frankie’s body—from knee to hip to nipple and throat and back down, then up again and down again with just the lightest touch of my fingers, no chance until now to look at him and enjoy him—so pale, so slender—his dark and handsome eyebrows

arched as he watched me; his penis still erect and Tabasco red and curved back just slightly against his belly; several small moles sprinkled across his chest, a few on his thighs like tiny specks of cocoa, one on his stomach just above the neat patch of his pubic hair all mucousy and matted with our mingled semen. After a few minutes of my gentle exploration, the boy gave in and took hold of himself and started masturbating one more time. “What a joy to be sixteen and horny and full of cum,” I smiled. “Do you want some help with that thing?”

“Sure, yeah, damn,” Frankie said. His voice was a little shaky—not from nervousness but from the rapid pistoning of his own hand and the clenching of the muscles in his shoulders and neck. Some strands of his dark blond hair had pulled loose from his ponytail and were hanging forward wispily over his ears and cheeks as he stared down at himself. I nudged his hand aside and replaced it with my own. His dick was as slippery as a bar of soap and made wet squelching sounds when I stroked it. I put my free hand behind his head and drew him to me so that my lips could play across his face. “Lovely boy,” I whispered as I nibbled. “Pretty ears. Pretty eyes. Such a sweet little nose. And such a sweet, sweet mouth. A perfect mouth.”

“Jake, bro, I love you,” Frankie whispered, his hands on my shoulders, on my back. “I love you, really, I’m so serious.”

I thanked him with a deep and lingering kiss, then continued nibbling and licking down his body, going slowly, no hurry, it would be several minutes before he could ejaculate again. No hurry. Taking my time. Letting my hand prepare him until my mouth eventually arrived to finish the job. Still licking, still nibbling, tasting the sourness of leftover semen that was partly his and partly mine, cleaning him with my tongue as I took him now fully into my mouth and as he lifted his hips to get himself in deeper, deeper. I expected a long and luxurious session of sucking before he was able to finish, but only three or four minutes later he surprised me with his second shot of cum—not much of it, just a little taste of slime like bitter almonds on the back of my tongue. Any more of it and I wouldn’t have swallowed, the flavor of him already unpleasantly

adult, unpleasantly strong, very different from the fruity sap of early pubescence.

We rested afterwards without speaking, just listening to the music from my stereo and cuddling in each other's arms. Later we took a shower together, both of us quickly erect again but too spent and sore for actual sex. "Did you ever get a boner at school?" the boy asked me as he soaped himself. "In gym class? In the locker room?"

"No, never," I said, "although it was always a fear of mine. One kid named Gary Martinelli got sort of a half-boner one day while we were all toweling off in the locker room, but. . . what about you?"

"Nope, me neither, not so far."

I asked Frankie, since we were comparing stories, to tell me about his previous boyfriends. "You said something in your first letter to Doc about a kid in eighth grade, and about an older guy from last year."

"You saw my letters to Doc?"

"Yeah, I did. Is that OK?"

"Duuude," Frankie smiled at me through the shower spray.

"So? What about your friend in eighth grade and that other guy?"

Frankie gave me a brief account of his junior-high buddy, a boy named Matthew Cameron who had become Frankie's jerk-off partner for a few spring and summer months. "But he liked girls," Frankie informed me sadly. "Then, last year, I started messing around with some guy named Stan who hired me to shovel his snow. He had tons of books. That's how I found out about Doc."

"What kind of stuff did you do?"

"Just normal stuff. Just regular jerking off," the boy said, turning himself beneath the spray to rinse the lather from his back, then from his front, then from his back again. "This is an awesome shower. Pepper would like it a lot, I bet."

I pointed to an outlet near the faucets and said, "It even has a steam generator. For making it like a sauna."

"Trippin!"

"So. Just jerking off? That's all you did with that Stan guy?"

"He gave me a blowjob. Two times. That's all. Then he moved away, like real suddenly, like maybe he got into trouble or something."

I shut off the water after both of us had finished rinsing, easier for us to talk without so much noise. It didn't surprise me that Frankie, at sixteen, had enjoyed some previous experience with sex. In fact, I had expected more. "No other boyfriends?" I asked him, drying his back. "No other lovers?"

"Dude, just you. And Doc, I guess. Why? Is there something wrong?"

"No, no, sorry! I'm being rude, I realize, but. . . you know, with AIDS and everything."

"Oh shit, Jake, no," Frankie said. He turned to look at me with that forlorn expression of his. "I've never done anything that could. . . that could be dangerous like that."

"I believe you. And, to be fair, I should tell you that I'm clean, too. It's been years since I've had sex with anyone, and they were all. . . well, you know, young boys, virginal, healthy."

"That's what I figured," Frankie said. "I was never worried about it. Not with you."

"We probably should've discussed this before we ejaculated all over each other."

"And before I came in your mouth!"

"Yeah, exactly."

"But I couldn't wait," the boy said, grinning again, eyebrows raised. "It's been like torture for so long thinking about it and. . . and wishing it would finally happen."

"I honestly had no idea you felt that way. Until last Sunday, at least."

We finished drying, put our clothes back on, then snacked on miniature pizzas until it was time for Frankie to leave. He had a midnight curfew that neither of us could afford to ignore. When he wished sulkily that he could spend the night, I agreed with him—but, secretly, I wasn't upset to see him go. A full night of more sex and more talk and then still more sex would have been too much of an enjoyable thing. I wanted some time alone to ponder the day's events and to savor the memory of my perfect first evening with Frankie. He would be back soon enough, I had no doubt.

As we were saying goodbye near the front door, both of us wondered about the raucous barking of dogs from outside. Two dogs, big ones, as far as I could tell. We went out to the porch and decided, after a moment of attentive listening, that the canine clamor was coming from across the street, from behind the Huckfeldt house. "Hound dogs," Frankie said, a good guess considering the sound of their baying and bellowing.

"Tonight is the first time we've had this ungodly racket," I said. "Noisy kids and noisy dogs. This family is going to be wildly popular around here."

I stayed on the porch while Frankie said another reluctant goodbye and then climbed into his Honda and drove away. The dogs kept barking for a few more minutes, but gradually they calmed down and allowed the neighborhood to spend the rest of that night in peace and silence. The Huckfeldt boys, although I watched for them, never came back out.

Frankie returned the next day, and the day after that, our sex growing bolder as we spent more time together. I asked him, on Sunday evening, what he was telling his parents about his daily visits to Sandburg. "Or don't they keep track of you that closely?"

"Yeah, bro, they keep track pretty close," Frankie admitted.

"So?"

“Usually, so far, I just tell them that I’m going out with my buds from school.”

“Maybe I should meet them sometime.”

“My parents? Whoa, dude, I don’t know.”

“It might prevent troubles and complications later on,” I said. “We’ll have to think about it.”

“These poodles are hilarious,” Frankie said, changing the subject to the wallpaper in front of him. He was standing at the toilet while I talked to him from the doorway and watched him pee. Privacy, when it came to such things, never seemed to concern him. “Yeah,” I said, “my poodles are always a big hit.”

“They’re so retro, they’re great.”

“If you listen very carefully, Frankie, you can hear them barking.”

“Yeah,” the boy laughed, “you’re right.”

The real barking, of course, was coming from the dogs across the street. At least once or twice each day, they erupted in a frenzy of noise that rattled the entire neighborhood. Usually there was no apparent cause for the eruption. But this time, when Frankie and I returned to the living room and glanced out the window, we discovered the Huckfeldt brothers darting one after another around their house in a hectic game of tag. The dogs were barking, no doubt, because of the boys and their commotion. Frankie was seeing the three brothers for the first time. “They’re wild, just like you said.”

“Are you ready for a little spying?”

“Right now?”

“It seems like a good opportunity.”

“Sure, I guess so,” Frankie said, already getting his ski vest. “What am I trying to find out?”

“Just names and ages and. . . and whatever else you can think of. Cute hat,” I added. “Is it new?” “From my grandma. For Christmas,” the boy nodded. “I thought you didn’t notice.”

“I noticed, but we were too busy kissing for me to say anything when you came in.”

“That’s true.”

“It’s very cute,” I said once more. Frankie had his hair down and loose, no ponytail today, and he was wearing a floppy stocking cap banded red and yellow and green and then again red and yellow and green, which made me think somehow of the Cat in the Hat. The top of it, surmounted by a large and fuzzy yellow ball, was dangling bent-over next to his left ear. Most sixteen-year-old boys would have been mortified by such an extravagant piece of headwear, but Frankie was just the opposite. He thought of it, with his high-spirited sense of humor, as a jest, a joke, something fun to wear because it was colorful and comic and sure to draw attention. “You’re not exactly an inconspicuous spy,” I teased him. “Not in that lovely little hat.”

“Does it matter?”

“No, no, much better this way. You’ll wow them with your style and panache.”

“Holy shit, I must look awesome!”

“Oh, you do,” I said, both of us laughing. “Now get out there and spy your ass off!”

Frankie went outside and wandered to his car, where he cleverly pretended to check under the hood until the Huckfeldt brothers were gathered in their front yard. Jimmy had caught the youngest boy, the one called Dally, and was punishing him with a vigorous spanking while the middle brother looked on and hopped from foot to foot and chanted, “Give him a whuppin, give him a whuppin, give him a whuppin,” in a joyful, sing-song voice. Frankie walked to the curb and stood there watching, like anyone might in the same situation, just curious about the noisy ruckus happening across the street. It didn’t take long for the brothers to realize they were being observed. Jimmy finished his spanking game and looked at Frankie and then, to my surprise, raised his fists in a gesture of “put up your dukes” challenge. He was half scowling

and half smiling when he did it, obviously just fooling around, not seriously looking for a fight. Frankie had his back to me, but I could tell that he was laughing at Jimmy's mock challenge.

The dogs were still barking from behind the house when Frankie made a peace sign, like holding up a flag of truce, and strolled across Whitman Street to meet the brothers. The next several minutes became a pantomime for me to watch from the window. Jimmy and Frankie stood talking face to face while the younger brothers made another run, and then another, around the house. When Frankie gestured in my direction, I flinched and nearly ducked behind the curtain. Jimmy nodded and said something that made Frankie laugh. I was tempted to go outside and join them, to share in their conversation, but decided to let Frankie handle the situation as we'd planned.

Jimmy was digging at the snow with the toe of his right shoe while he talked to Frankie. His brothers, finally tired of their race (or their game of tag, or whatever it was), came over to investigate the stranger in their front yard. Something must have been said about Frankie's hat, because he pulled it off as I watched and handed it to the middle brother, who promptly returned the favor with his own baseball cap. All of the boys were laughing as Frankie's hat was passed from head to head, and as Frankie himself tried on each of the baseball caps offered to him in exchange.

I was straining my eyes to get a good look at the Huckfeldt boys as all this was going on. They were a ragtag bunch in old-looking coats and sneakers and pants. Dally, the baby brother, looked to be just a bit younger and smaller than Ryan Fox. His hair, difficult to tell its color, was buzz-cut close to the scalp, which caused his baseball cap, when he had it on, to sit too loose and too large atop his little cue-ball head. The middle brother, still nameless in my mind, seemed the most hyper of the three, always hopping or windmilling his arms or yelling and singing in his loudest, wildest voice. His hair, an ordinary light brown, was cut carelessly short with messy bangs that he kept brushing and brushing

away from his eyes. Jimmy was the oldest and, naturally, the biggest, maybe an inch shorter than Frankie but much more sturdily built, a junior welterweight with wide shoulders and strong hips and a cocky way of holding himself, like a boxer posturing in the ring. His face, from what I could see at such a distance, was pale and sharp-nosed and framed by a mop of chestnut hair that looked shaggy and untamed by brush or comb. When it came his turn to try on Frankie's hat, he assumed a comical "I'm cool, man, I'm cool" expression and sashayed back and forth so the others could admire him. His final pass was an unexpectedly vampy one, with his hands on his hips and his backside swinging so naughtily that Frankie was compelled to glance in my direction, as if to say, "Are you there? Can you believe what you're seeing?"

In fact, when Frankie returned a few minutes later, Jimmy's coquettish stroll was our first point of discussion. "That was quite a performance," I said. "You were lucky to have a front-row seat."

"He's funny, that kid, really wild."

"What were you guys talking about?"

"Lots of stuff," Frankie said. "I told him that you're my uncle, and that I visit you all the time, and he was like, hey cool, does your uncle have any weed or beer or shit? But I just laughed and didn't say anything, don't worry."

"I trust you."

"Then he was saying what a shitty town Sandburg is, and then him and his brothers said that they liked my hat, and that it looked like a pimp hat."

"A pimp hat?"

"Yeah," Frankie grinned, "that's why Jimmy was walking like that, like so sexy, because he was being a pimp, and then a hooker. It was too funny, Jake, I swear."

I continued my debriefing of Frankie over a supper of leftover KFC chicken and coleslaw and mashed potatoes. What I finally learned, from his impressive cache of information, was this:

The youngest brother's real name was Dallas, but everybody called him Dally, as I'd already determined. He had just turned eight in November, a week before Thanksgiving. According to Frankie, "He just stands and watches and doesn't say much."

The middle brother, anonymous until now, was named Joey, but was also known by the nickname of JoJo. He was eleven years old and, again in Frankie's words, "He talks so much, bro, like constantly, it's hilarious."

Jimmy was fourteen and a freshman in high school, unhappy about being in a new school in a new town. His father was a foreman in a poultry factory that had moved its operations from Missouri to Illinois, leaving him a choice between dealing with unemployment or uprooting his family. Jimmy was pissed off about the whole situation, but mostly (according to Frankie) about being forced to leave his girlfriend back in Cassville. "He kept talking about her, and talking about pussy, and how much he misses it."

"Well, that's boring," I said. "Anything else?"

"He says that he'll come over sometime and see you."

"Are you kidding?"

"Dude, no, I'm totally serious," Frankie said. We had finished our food and were together in the bedroom, where the boy was lighting a stick of sandalwood incense that he'd brought from home. "He says he wants to meet you."

"Why?"

"Because I told him that you're a really cool guy. Oh yeah," Frankie suddenly remembered, "those dogs are hound dogs, just like we figured. You know, for hunting."

"That certainly fits the picture."

“What a funny family,” the boy laughed, his eyes squinted and his brows raised in that peculiar expression of startled delight. (His eyebrows, I decided, were naturally arched and high-set, which is how he could raise them and squint at the same time—not an easy thing to do.) He was taking off his clothes as he looked at me, smiling. “They’re like real hillbillies, so totally, it’s amazing.”

“Ozarkers.”

“Say what?”

“From the Ozarks,” I said. “We’re having another underwear party, I see.”

“Yeah, an underwear party, that’s for sure,” Frankie laughed again. “Is it OK?”

“Such a silly question.”

“I’m really horny right now.”

“Because of the Huckfeldt boys,” I said, helping Frankie off with his socks and then joining him, both of us naked, on the bed. “I like your hair better when it’s down this way. So soft, and long, it’s beautiful.”

“Jimmy’s hair is nice.”

“You like him?”

“He’s sort of hot, yeah. Damn,” Frankie mumbled as I reached under his balls and explored him with a finger. My face was against his, against his hair, the smell of him camouflaged now by the sandalwood smoke from beside the bed. I don’t remember if he rolled over by himself or at my urging, but suddenly he was on his side facing away from me with my hand on his stomach and my dick rubbing against his ass. “I forgot to ask about the snowman,” he said in that same mumbly voice, his face pressed into the pillow, smothered.

“What about the snowman?”

“That kid. The blowjob.”

“Joey?”

“I forgot to ask about it.”

“That’s OK,” I whispered into Frankie’s ear, my weight against his back pushing him onto his stomach. Again he mumbled something about

the Huckfeldt boys, another recollected tidbit from his earlier expedition. I asked him to repeat it. "They all sleep in the same room," he said.

"Maybe naked?"

"I don't know."

My dick was between the cheeks of his ass, working in deeper, some lubricant would have been nice, a jar of Vaseline on the table within easy reach. "Jimmy and Joey in bed together, naked, with hard-ons."

"Damn, dude, damn," Frankie moaned into his pillow. "You're killing me!"

"Sorry, I'll use some Vaseline here, just give me one second and..."

"No, I mean about Jimmy and Joey with hard-ons, damn, you're killing me, I can't stand it."

"Yeah, definitely, a real possibility," I said, and as I talked into his ear, exciting him, I hastily applied the Vaseline and then pressed once more against him and into him, putting a dick up his ass for the first time in his sixteen years. "Maybe Jimmy does this to his little brother, fucking him just like this." Frankie grabbed the pillow more tightly and buried his face, no longer able to respond.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My life was feeling more and more messy and out of control. I hadn't even visited Doc on Sunday, no excuse for that, so I made sure to drive out and see him the next day. He understood that I had been busy with Frankie and insisted, anyway, that he seldom kept track of which day was which. "Artificial distinctions," he said. "Sunday, Monday, Tuesday—all the same."

"Even so, I feel bad about it."

"Nonsense, Jacob."

"I'll come by on New Year's Eve with a bottle of champagne. Or maybe two bottles," I said. "A Marx Brothers marathon is going to be on TV. Channel seven. Always enjoyable."

Doc agreed to the plan, with just a token glass of champagne for himself, and that was how we ended up toasting the New Year a couple of nights later. It was a boyless celebration for both of us, Frankie out with his "buds" and Pepper at home with his mother. I had spoken to each of the boys on the phone earlier in the week, with no definite plans for seeing either of them. Suddenly, what had seemed messy and out of control felt almost like yesterday's news. "It changes so quickly," I said to Doc between gulps of champagne.

"The weather? Your mind? What exactly?"

"Life. With boys. It's hectic and stressful one day and then. . . it just goes cold. Nothing. As if I dreamed the whole thing. I need to start keeping a journal again. A diary. Make some sense of this whole mishmash."

"I suppose you could," Doc said. He had merely sipped his champagne and then set it aside in favor of one of Frankie's Cherry Cokes, several cans of it still stockpiled in the refrigerator. "You need to be careful with all of those boys. Even with Frankie. How is he, by the way?"

“Haven’t seen him in a few days,” I said for what must have been the third time that night. Doc wasn’t old enough to be addled by senility, but he seemed to be repeating his questions more and more often lately, something about the expression on his face also slightly amiss, a type of intense and humorless concentration that I’d never seen before. “But,” I added, “we had a fun weekend together.”

“I’m glad. It’s a good thing for both of you.”

“Real sex. Anal sex. It was amazing, and sort of unexpected, so many years since I’ve done anything like that.”

Doc listened and nodded and warned me again to be careful. “It’s a delightfully ironic thing about Alexander,” he remarked abruptly. “I was just reading about him again.”

“Alexander who?”

“The Great, the Great.”

“Oh sure, Alexander, of course.”

“This finest of all military strategists and tacticians, this paragon of military excellence, this quintessential warrior would today be unfit for service because of his homosexuality.”

“Yeah,” I said, “it’s definitely ironic.” Doc was staring straight ahead, as if talking to the television. “Not only unfit for military service, but probably unfit for civilian life, imprisoned as a sex offender and pedophile. Of course, he himself had been molested by Aristotle and others as a boy, poor thing, just another victim of sexual abuse, such a shame, such a shame.”

“The whole Greek thing, yeah, you’re right.”

“Everywhere you look, nothing but ignorance and bigotry, really impossible to take at times. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Almost impossible to take,” Doc said, so grimly that I felt a moment of true concern, a tingle of fear. But then, still watching the television, he smiled at some wisecrack by Groucho Marx and once again looked like his old self, and stayed that way until I left him at two

o'clock, a spectacular display of winter starlight greeting me as I walked outside to my car.

Next morning, New Year's Day, I slept late and stayed in bed until the champagne had stopped fizzing sourly in my stomach, and in my head. Back on my feet, I used cigarettes and coffee to goose my sluggish morning-after energy. Frankie called on the phone early in the afternoon with a full account of his New Year's Eve celebration, as well as a promise to see me soon. I was still at the phone and about to call Pepper for a quick hello when someone came knocking at the front door. I wondered for a moment, rather foolishly, if it might be Pepper himself come to see me. Then, inevitably, I felt that cold crawl of panic at the thought of police or FBI demanding entrance, flashing badges and credentials, eager to dismantle my life.

But it wasn't the cops, and it wasn't Pepper. In fact, when I opened the door, I found myself face to face with two boys who seemed to be strangers—maybe a couple of kids collecting money for some school team or scout troop—until suddenly I recognized them as Jimmy Huckfeldt and his little brother Dally. Jimmy stepped forward into the doorway, almost into the house itself. "You're that kid's uncle," he said in a bold and twangy Huck Finn voice.

"You mean Frankie?"

"Yeah, man, that's him. Hey," the boy said, stepping even closer, "we're neighbors, y'all know that?"

"Your name is Jimmy," I nodded. "And your brother is Dallas."

"I'm Dally," the little boy corrected softly.

"Nobody calls him Dallas," Jimmy told me. "He's just Dally, man."

"Sorry," I said. "My name is Jake, by the way."

"Yeah," Jimmy said, "I know that. Hey, y'all got a bathroom?"

"Of course."

"My brother needs to pee."

"Don't you have a bathroom at home?"

“You’re closer,” Jimmy said, making no sense. “Come on, man, be friendly.”

“Oh, sure, friendly,” I laughed, ushering the boys inside with a theatrical sweep of my hand. “Be my guests, by all means, come in, come in.”

Both boys were wearing coats (more like jackets, really) that appeared too light for the wintry weather. Jimmy took his brother by the sleeve and pulled him along like a puppy on a leash. Dally was a pale and freckly little guy with an expression that seemed permanently somber. I showed him where the bathroom was and then watched in surprise as Jimmy led him to the toilet and stood there behind him, hands on his shoulders while he peed. I hadn’t intended to watch, but they made no effort to shut the door or keep me away. It didn’t take long for Dally to finish tinkling and then step aside for his brother, who also needed to empty his bladder, he now informed me. “But you can’t look,” Jimmy said, pronouncing it “cain’t look.”

“Oh, really?”

“No way, man, don’t even think about it,” the boy said, then closed the door. I stayed where I was, puzzled. Why were these kids in my bathroom? Jimmy had spoken to me with that same half-smiling, half-scowling expression that I’d seen during his encounter with Frankie, hard to know whether he was being playful or genuinely combative. Dally, with no expression at all, was just as difficult to read. Of course I listened to Jimmy’s healthy splash coming from inside the bathroom, and was still listening at the door when the two boys came out, Jimmy once again tugging his little brother by the sleeve. “Y’all got a kickass tub in there,” he told me.

“Thanks,” I said, “it’s new.”

“It’s so big, man. Why’s it so big?”

“I wanted the biggest and the best. Something special.”

“Where’s your nephew? Ain’t he here?”

My nephew? Who was my nephew? I realized, after a moment of dumb staring, that Jimmy was talking about Frankie. “He’s not actually my nephew,” I admitted, no point in complicating the situation.

“You’re his uncle, that’s what he said, man, I heard him right clear.”

“He was just goofing around,” I said. The boys and I were in the middle of my living room. Dally was staring, with his mouth slightly opened, at a college football game on the television—maybe the Cotton Bowl, maybe the Sugar Bowl. I asked him if he liked football, and he shrugged and then nodded and said, in a whispery little voice, “Sometimes I might watch it, I guess.”

“He don’t like football,” Jimmy told me. “He don’t watch it, never.”

“What about you?”

“Hell, I got better things to do,” the boy said. He was wearing a camouflage baseball cap with a Jack Daniel’s logo on the front, and it was pulled so low over his eyes that he needed to keep lifting his head in order to see from underneath. “Lemme have a cigarette, OK?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on, man, don’t be cheap.”

“You’re only fourteen.”

“Right,” the boy said, eyeing me from beneath the bill of his cap, “I’m just a stupid kid. It sucks, man. You ain’t even friendly.”

“Fine, have a cigarette,” I said. “Have two or three.”

That brought a smile from him, a bold and flashy smile accompanied by a wicked little chuckle, as if he’d won an important victory. It was at that moment, I think, that I finally decided to do something I hadn’t done in several years. I decided, standing there with Jimmy and Dally Huckfeldt, to start keeping that journal I’d been thinking about, to help myself somehow make sense of this sudden swarm of boys in my life. Too much to hold in my mind, too many details to remember—I needed some way of creating order from the chaos. I’d done the same with Calvin and Bobby and the others, using a

journal, a diary, to keep myself safe and sane while, at the same time, preserving the boys forever in print, as good as a photo collection for bringing back memories of them.

My first entry, later that night, was about Jimmy and his cigarettes. I let him take three, but warned him about asking for more in the future. “I won’t be giving you any after this,” I said. “You shouldn’t be ruining your lungs.”

“Same old shit everybody says.”

“Because it’s true.”

“So you oughta quit smokin,” Jimmy said, “if it’s so bad.”

“You’re right. I should. I will.”

The boy was chewing rapidly on a wad of gum during our entire conversation, a real tough guy with that gum and with his camouflage cap pulled down over his eyes. In my journal entry, I called him a punk, so feisty, so pugnacious, the way he carried himself and watched me. Always alert for a challenge or an insult, ready for a fight. But, from now on, maybe I should let the journal speak for itself.

It begins, as all things should, on New Year’s Day.

END

