



Kevin Esser

Salvation

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SALVATION

A novel

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*For Alex,
my Sandburg Beachboy,
whose love and imagination
co-authored this book.*

CHAPTER ONE

This man, look at him, he spends every morning at a nearby tavern sweeping and mopping the floors, cleaning the bathrooms, stacking the cases of empty beer bottles. He keeps whatever money he finds, lots of scattered change, some dropped and forgotten bills, sometimes even a ten or a twenty, the detritus of clumsy drunks. The tavern is empty when he cleans it, wonderfully empty and silent. In the evening, often until two in the morning, he delivers for Mario's Pizza. He uses his own car and gets paid in cash at the end of each night, a flat fifty bucks plus tips. Weekends are the busiest, so many parties going on, especially at the local college, the man's job becomes a frantic shuttle to the campus with pizzas and submarine sandwiches, with six-packs of Sprite and Coke. The kids call him "pizza guy" or "pizza dude" and have no idea that he once attended their own school, that he even graduated with honors, yes, many years ago.

It's one of those nights, one of those busy Saturday nights at Sandburg College, loud music everywhere, drums and guitars, drums and guitars, same music for the last thirty years, forty years. Drums and guitars. Monkeys banging on a rock. The sound of civilization gone senescent. The sound of culture exhausted. The man is delivering three large pizzas to a dorm called Seymour, third floor—up and up the dirty stairs to the

noisy tempest of yet another party in progress. The pizzas are handed over. Money is shoved into his hand. Some girl amiably and tipsily offers him a beer. The man declines with a shake of his head and is turning to leave, several deliveries awaiting, when another voice snags him and stops him. He looks back and sees a boy grinning at him. “What?” the man asks. “You called me?”

“It is you, damn, I was right!”

“Me?”²\$

“You’re Mike,” the boy says, shouting like someone in the midst of a battle.

“You know me?”

“It’s too funny, man, you don’t remember me at all!”

“Obviously not.”

“You lived next door to us. Well, you know, down the street. On Tompkins.” When the man keeps staring, not replying, the boy adds, “I’m Alex. Now you remember?”

The pounding of the music is painful. Mike, the pizza guy, needs to leave. He gives the kid a “sorry, don’t recall” shrug and rushes to the stairs, down and down, back outside, back to his car. Alex. Of course he remembers. Alex Salazar. Holy fuck. Of course he remembers.

The boy stays upstairs at the party, standing there like, dude, what the hell, I’m sure that was Mike Burroughs! But he doesn’t have time to wonder about it.

People are yelling around him and at him, have some pizza, have some pizza, some song by Nine Inch Nails blasting from four Bose speakers positioned around this dorm suite that serves a dozen bedrooms. Alex takes a slice of cheese-and-mushroom and finds an empty spot on the couch in front of the big-screen TV. You can't hear it, way too much noise, but you can watch the highlights on ESPN—college football, NFL, late-season baseball, a full September package—no sound, just endless images, like sports pornography. He doesn't mingle or say much after that. The party is still going strong at midnight when he leaves the dorm and walks home, just a few blocks but still a little risky because of the curfew for kids under sixteen. His ears are ringing from the music, like an alarm inside his head.

Couple of hours later, Mike Burroughs is also on his way home, the Mario's Pizza sign removed from the top of his red Honda. A 1990 Civic Hatchback, over 100,000 miles on the odometer. His apartment is on the east edge of Sandburg, about a five-minute drive from Mario's and the college, maybe ten minutes during the day when traffic is heavier. Nothing in Sandburg is very far from anything else. His apartment is in a complex called the Woodlands—called that for no apparent reason, no more trees out here than anywhere else in town—several three-story cinderblock buildings with the grim and gray uniformity of prison blocks. This is where the man has lived for the past six years, here in this

spartan one-bedroom unit—alone, no plants, no pets, nothing to demand his time or attention.

He puts on some music, some old Leonard Cohen stuff, anything to distract from thinking so much about Alex, about seeing Alex for the first time in six years. Not that he has anything to fear from the encounter. Nothing really to fear. Just a boy from the old neighborhood, after all. Just an ordinary boy. No other involvement. And yet, and yet—so many other memories from that neighborhood. So many dangerous memories.

Time for bed, time finally for that merciful refuge of sleep. Mike ends his nightly routine in the usual way, staring at the full bottle of Xanax in his hand. Turning it, feeling the reality of it. A bottle of two hundred Xanax tablets, the white ones, .25 mg—a little memento left behind by his dead father, gone now for almost a year, an octogenarian felled at last by congestive heart failure. Mike takes this moment at the end of each day to hold the bottle, to gaze at it, to imagine himself gulping a few dozen of those white tablets with several good guzzles of bourbon or brandy. A permanent adios and good night. The image is always a comfortable passport to sleep, to dreams.

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CHAPTER TWO

Another hectic Saturday night at Mario's. Mike is resting at one of the little round tables near the pinball machines and video games, near the front window bright with red neon, just sitting there with a root beer and a cigarette until his next delivery is ready. One of the other delivery guys, some skinny redneck with bad teeth who goes by the nickname of Scooby, is leaning against the take-out counter and yelling at Mario himself, laughing as he yells, calling Mario a stupid damn guinea, y'all don't know what the hell you're talkin about, stupid dago, I'm tellin ya, man, I'm tellin ya, the Cubs ain't never been to a World Series! Mike can't help it, he says, "They've been to several, the Cubs, several World Series."

"Bullshit," Scooby yells back, his bottom lip shiny with spit. "I know for a fact they ain't never!"

"Last time was 1945."

"Oh bullshit!"

"Last time was 1945. Also several times before that."

"Don't make up shit that ain't true, Burroughs!"

Mike responds by shaking his head in disgust and looking away. Scooby mutters something like, you see there, I done told ya, they ain't never. Mike is still scolding himself for getting involved, for not keeping his big mouth shut, when the door opens behind him,

hospitable ding-a-ling of the bell hanging from it, cool draft against his neck. Scooby, always eager to take charge, calls out, "Need some help there, chief?" "Well, maybe," a young voice answers. "Oh, hey, you've got Mortal Kombat!"

Mike turns his head toward the voice, just curious. He and Alex see each other at the same moment. The boy smiles and steps right next to Mike's table. "You're here!" the kid says. "I knew it was you last week."

"Last week? Where?"

"When you delivered to Seymour Hall."

"Oh yeah? At the college?"

"You're Mike Burroughs."

"OK. So?"

"I knew you delivered for Mario's. After seeing you last week. Anyway, damn, I don't know, just wanted to make sure it was you." Mike is listening, nodding, wishing he could get up and leave with a delivery. Scooby, in fact, has just been given a load of pizzas and sandwiches and six-packs and is preparing his list of addresses, no longer paying attention to Mike and the boy. Alex is still talking, repeating himself, it was just, you know, so strange to see you all of a sudden, but then you didn't seem to remember me, so I just wanted to make sure it was you. Mike says, "OK, well, here I am."

"I'm Alex. Do you remember me now?"

"Sure. Alex. From Tompkins Street."

"That's right," the boy smiles even wider. "I knew you had to remember."

“Any reason for this?”

“No, not really, I guess.” “Because, I mean, this is my job here.”

“Oh right, sorry, I’m being a pest,” Alex says. He’s a small kid and has a quick, excitable way of moving his hands and his head when he talks, also shifting from foot to foot, lots of high-energy movement and fidgeting. “I’ll stop bugging you.”

“I don’t mean to be an asshole.”

“No, that’s OK.”

“I just need to get back to work,” Mike says, finished with his cigarette now, rising to his feet. The kid beside him really is a shrimp, short for someone who appears to be in his early teens, slim as a twig. They exchange a “see you later” and then Mike disappears into the kitchen, more impatient than ever for his next delivery, anything to get out and get away. Alex, meanwhile, stays behind to play a game of Mortal Kombat, the arcade section crowded on this Saturday night, ten or twelve other kids milling around the machines, cussing, laughing, eating pizza and drinking pop as they play. The boy is still hunched over his machine when Mike returns from the kitchen with an armful of pizzas in their big thermal pouches. The man takes them straight out to his car and loads them, then comes back in for another batch. Mario says you don’t gotta take so many, you gonna be late. But Mike tells him not to worry, I’ll get them delivered on time, no problem. He finishes loading his car and then comes

running back inside for his cigarettes, left forgotten on the little table near the front window. Alex is still playing Mortal Kombat. Mike spots him, surprised, almost irritated—but hey, the kid's not hurting anybody or making any trouble, he's OK, funny little guy, baggy jeans, baggy yellow sweatshirt with a big black 16 on the back. Mike grabs his Camels and makes a hasty escape before the boy can turn and see him.

What does he know or remember about Alex Salazar? All week he's been thinking about this kid and now those thoughts and those memories come tumbling back with a fresh intensity. Alex Salazar. Three doors down, heading east, on Tompkins Street. The family moved in when Alex was a toddler. Older twin sisters. Father a professor at Sandburg College. Mother some kind of counselor or social worker. Mike always assumed them to be Latino, Daniel and Teresa Salazar and son Alex (what were the names of the sisters?)—maybe Mexican or Cuban or Puerto Rican, impossible to know for sure. It was years later when Alex himself informed Mike that he was Hawaiian, Filipino, Irish, and half Italian. The Hispanic surname was a Filipino vestige. I'm a mutt, he said. Yeah, Mike thought at the time, a gorgeous mutt. OK, maybe not gorgeous, not some knockout beauty, but so cute, wow, that amber skin, that glossy black hair, those sultry almond eyes. A very cute little mutt.

What else? Not much. Mike was so busy with the older boys of the neighborhood back then, six horny kids

always demanding attention, such a rowdy and out-of-control situation—well, with all of that going on, Mike paid scant attention to little Alex down the street. They talked together several times, they were growing friendlier as the boy got older, Alex even ventured into Mike's house once or twice to look around, to bum a glass of water or a can of pop, hard to remember now. But nothing intimate happened between them. Except once. Just one tiny episode nearly lost and forgotten in the randy free-for-all of those years, those delirious years. Alex must have been seven or eight, it was the summer that Mike moved away, cops at the front door in response to anonymous calls, anonymous complaints, that was the end, no other choice after that but to flee Tompkins Street, to escape the catastrophe of arrest and imprisonment that was sure to follow, just a matter of weeks, maybe even days. Reckless and overtalkative boys. Nosy neighbors. Inevitable disaster. But before all of that happened, before Mike ended up running for safety, he arrived home one hot afternoon to find Alex peeing onto an iris plant in the back yard, near the garage. Thanks for watering the flowers, he yelled to the boy. Alex jumped like a startled little cat—but then he turned and grinned all happy, not a bit upset or shamefaced, his shorts still pulled down, his penis still dribbling. Oops, he said. Oops. Grinning at Mike. Frisky young rascal. What was it he asked next? How did he word it? Do you like to kiss boys? That was it. Do you like to kiss boys? Mike tried to laugh it off, big joke, this

kid must have been hearing things from other boys around the neighborhood. And that meant danger. Those cops wouldn't be showing up for another few weeks, knock-knock on his front door—but Mike now had his first clue of real danger, real trouble. This little boy standing there in his back yard. Little pee-pee boy asking naughty questions. Grinning at Mike. Do you like to kiss boys? And then he ran off, then he was gone, that question of his left unanswered for the next six years.

And now, right now, this same boy is at Mario's, he's still there, Alex Salazar, he's just now finishing his game of Mortal Kombat and glancing around, welcome back to reality, a little glassy-eyed from staring so long at the screen. He wanders to the take-out counter and asks if Mike is still around. No, some woman tells him, he's out on his deliveries. D'ya wanna leave a message for him, hon? Alex says no, no, that's OK, I'll catch him some other time. In fact, this boy knows that he shouldn't even be asking, he knows that Mike already said goodbye earlier and doesn't want to be bothered anymore tonight. Alex knows and understands all of this. But sometimes he just can't control himself or make himself shut up. Sometimes he just can't stop.

Too early to go home, so the kid heads outside and gets on his bike and pedals slowly toward the campus, best place to find some action. Everybody knows him. Professor Salazar's son. His twin sisters Jennifer and Christina popular sophomores who live on campus, one in Seymour Hall, the other in Longfellow. Alex is like

everybody's favorite mascot, the little dude who's been around forever, oh sure, him, that guy, of course, we love Alex, he's great, give him a Coke, give him some pizza, let him try one of those beers, let him take a hit off that joint. Yeah, that Alex kid is a real trip.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

Every day the same, Alex or no Alex, Mike sleepwalks through his daily routine at the tavern and at Mario's and tries to convince himself that nothing has changed, that his numb and comfortable anonymity is intact. Then again, maybe it's finally time for a full, clean break with the past. Impossible while his father was still alive, still demanding care and attention, no one besides Mike to fill that role in the old man's life. But now his father is dead and maybe Sandburg is a prison that needs escaping. Amazing, really, that he's been able to avoid kids from the old neighborhood until now, an impressive six-year vanishing act, sure—but now Mike should probably move on.

Or maybe he should finally use that bottle of Xanax. Take a one-way journey to oblivion. Easy and quick. Holding that bottle one night, fondling it, Mike begins to weep in a way that shocks him, deep and shuddery sobs that ache in his throat and in his chest. Stop this, he keeps saying to himself, stop this bullshit, stop this! What could have caused such an upheaval? Alex? Just seeing Alex? Why? There was never anything special between him and that particular boy. Just those few innocent times they were together, those fleeting and insignificant encounters as the boy was growing up. Plus that one silly episode in the back yard. Do you like to kiss boys? Alex asking that naughty question and then

running off. Or did he? Did he run off? No, not at first, not before Mike laughed and told him to come over here, I'll show you, come over here, and the boy pulled up his shorts and rushed across the yard to the back porch where Mike was waiting, where Mike playfully grabbed him and tickled him between the legs, tickled him through those gym shorts that were damp with sweat and probably pee, both of them laughing, Mike continuing to poke and pinch at the little boy's shorts while also giving him that kiss he'd been wondering about, then another and another, three quick kisses right on the lips that left Alex giggling. Then it was over. Just those three quick and giggly kisses. Then the boy was gone.

How can you forget something like that? Or did Mike only dream that last part? Those three kisses? No, those kisses must have been real. And the danger, that also was real. More important than the kisses, more memorable, eclipsing everything else, the danger of that frisky and indiscreet little boy.

Mike finally puts aside the bottle of Xanax and turns his attention to a bottle of bourbon. It's his night off from Mario's, excuse enough to get drunk and enjoy the bleariness, the temporary forgetfulness. Some Leonard Cohen, always good, some Dylan, some Neil Young, music to drink by, hours passing, too much bourbon, too many cigarettes, Mike ends up loaded and restless and in his car, it's OK, it's late, the streets are mostly deserted and Mike, even drunk, can navigate

them easily and safely, he's a pro, he's a veteran, he could drive these Sandburg streets blindfolded.

Where to go? He stops at the White Hen for a couple of Hostess fruit pies and then drives to Lake Swanson to eat them and to watch the stars, sitting on the hood of his car in that perfect solitude and darkness. The whisper of water in front of him. The answering whisper of trees from behind. Thirty minutes later he's back on the road, back in town, cruising past the college for no particular reason and then, just for the hell of it, turning onto Tompkins Street. There's his old house. A new black slate roof. Also a new paint job, yellow instead of white. Not actually visible at the moment, of course, it's too dark—but Mike is well aware of these things, these changes, he's back and forth this way all the time with deliveries from Mario's. And there, three doors down, is the Salazar house. A big brick Victorian. Lights are on. Is Alex home? Mike laughs at himself, drunken moron, as he drives past, aimless in the night.

Inside that big old house, Alex is alone and wandering from room to room, nobody to bother him, sisters on campus again until Christmas, parents out somewhere doing something, who knows. They're always in and out with clients and colleagues and students, with meetings and parties, one night the house might be crowded with strangers, noisy as an asylum, the next night it's empty, nobody home but Alex, like now. He ends up in his parents' bedroom. He wants the gun. He wants to look at it, that's all. It's in the closet next to

a can of mothballs and a box of old bills and canceled checks. The boy stretches tiptoed to reach it, to bring it down. It's a Colt Woodsman .22-caliber pistol. An antique. Valuable. He looks at himself in the mirror with it, posing with it, doing the kind of thug poses you see in all of those hip-hop videos and action flix. Gonna bust a cap in your ass, motherfucka! But he's not serious, he's just being funny. Not really serious. Not really. He points the gun between the eyes of his own reflection. Kill them all, he murmurs at himself, at the world. Exterminate them all. Holding the gun like this, talking like this, always gives Alex an erection, every time.

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

It's a celebration, Alex's birthday, first weekend in October. The house is filled with people he mostly doesn't know, lots of his parents' friends, a few aunts and uncles and cousins, a neighbor or two. Just about every birthday and anniversary and holiday goes like this, a boisterous gathering of unknown or half-known adults and college students, food everywhere, booze everywhere, usually some good weed, people upstairs and downstairs, people on the porch and in the yard, as rowdy as most frat parties. To Alex it all seems perfectly normal, just another birthday at the Salazar house.

His mother has made his favorite cake, white frosting with coconut, layered with lemon cream. The guests all gather long enough to sing Happy Birthday and watch the boy make a wish and blow out his fourteen candles. An impressive collection of cards and gifts is piled messily on the dining room table for Alex to open later. His cousin Ray wants him to open at least one now. "You might have some new games or a camera or something we can use," he says to Alex, nodding at his own good idea, smiling, seems like Ray is always smiling.

"Patience, Raymond," Alex says in a comical grown-up voice. "You pitiful twerp."

"Oh nice."

"After the cake. You know that, geekwad."

“Geekwad doesn’t even make sense.”

“I know you don’t.”

“That’s so clever.”

“I’m definitely a supernatural genius,” Alex says with his biggest, goofiest grin. Ray starts laughing. Alex can always make him laugh.

Jeff and Carrie come back with pieces of cake. These are two kids who’ve never been to Alex’s house before, new kids from high school, freshmen same as Alex, the three of them have been friends for only a few weeks. Carrie is doing most of the talking, big exuberant girl with a shag of reddish hair and a loud, excited voice always on the verge of laughter. “You must have the coolest parents ever,” she says to Alex. “This place is so amazing!”

“It’s a zoo.”

“Exactly! So much fun.”

“I think your old man was smoking weed, Salazar,” Jeff says, his voice mumbly, hardly audible above the party noise, he and Carrie like some kind of vaudeville team, one cheerful, the other sullen.

Alex shrugs and says, “That’s not a big surprise. He’s like a social smoker, you know, not like a total dooper or anything, but he’ll smoke at parties.”

“Does he inhale?” Carrie asks, laughing.

“I assume.”

“Do you?”

“He doesn’t like me smoking. Bad for young lungs, he says.”

“That’s bullshit,” Jeff says.

“No, he’s probably right. Anyway, I don’t like weed very much.”

“Get high on life,” Carrie says, apparently not joking. Her loud, fluty voice makes everything she says sound almost like singing. She takes every opportunity to touch Alex while she’s talking, it’s obvious she’s already developed a giddy crush on him, poking his arm, grabbing his shoulder, anything to get a hand on him. Alex doesn’t mind, he likes Carrie, her energy seems to match his own. He gives both her and Jeff a full tour of the house, Ray tagging along, he’s a year younger than Alex and hangs around his older cousin like someone slightly smitten, like a little doggy following its master. All of them are carrying and eating pieces of cake as they roam from room to room, downstairs and up, Alex showing them his bedroom and his collection of CDs. He plays a few minutes of Beck’s *Midnite Vultures* to show off his sound system, then a few minutes of Carmina Burana to show it off even better, the *O Fortuna* piece, voices thundering. Carrie is thrilled that Alex shares her own interest in classical music. They both like Mozart. And they both totally love Beethoven. Alex digs out his DVD of *Immortal Beloved* and holds it up for Carrie to see, both of them laughing, my god, Carrie says, I own that too! Jeff says gimme a break, that shit is so boring, I can’t believe you guys are serious. Ray is chewing a last bite of cake, he’s smiling with white icing on his lips, all happy teeth and dimples. Alex has dimples too when he

smiles, but not like Ray, nobody has smiley dimples like Ray Salazar.

On their way back downstairs, Carrie asks Ray how long he and Alex have been friends. Ray laughs and says, "I'm not his friend, I'm his cousin."

"Wow, you guys are cousins?"

"Yeah, we're both Salazars. Our dads are brothers."

"Wow," Carrie says again, giving Ray another look. The boy isn't surprised by Carrie's reaction, he's been through this before, his family's surname and ethnic identity are always sources of confusion. "We're not really Mexican or anything like that," he says, his voice louder and louder now as they descend into the noisy living room. "Our dads were born in the Philippines. You know where that is?"

Carrie releases a contralto whoop of laughter at Ray's question. "Of course! The Philippines. Actually, though? I already know that part. From Alex, I mean."

"But Alex's mom is white and mine is black," Ray finishes, an explanation he's given many times, kids in elementary school and junior high always curious, you guys can't be cousins, Alex isn't black! Carrie half nods, half shrugs, saying, "I wasn't really wondering."

"That's OK," Ray says. "I'm like Tiger Woods, man, all mixed together!"

Carrie laughs again, she loves this family, everything about them, they're amazing.

She and Jeff and all the other guests are gone by midnight, the party's over—but Ray and his family are still around, his parents and Alex's parents downstairs playing cards and drinking and listening to Beatles albums, the boys up in Alex's bedroom going through his princely hoard of gifts. While Alex counts his checks and cash on the bed, Ray sits on the floor with the more substantial booty. "Oh hey," he suddenly says, "this is from that Carrie girl!"

"She got me a book," Alex nods vaguely as he counts.

"I know."

"About owls? Why is it about owls?"

"She thinks I like them. We were talking."

"Don't you like them for real?"

"I do, yeah, they're OK. You know, like in Harry Potter. Owls are pretty cool."

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"Carrie? You're stupid."

"Maybe she'll be my girlfriend. She was talking to me."

"Dude, please," Alex says. "She's totally older than you."

Ray acknowledges this with a gleeful nod and smile. His dimples are the biggest and deepest dimples you've ever seen. His eyes are the biggest and roundest and darkest eyes you've ever looked into. His face is as moony and guileless as a baby's. He says, "Older women are experienced, that's the best part!"

“Yeah, well, good luck with that, Ray-Ray,” Alex laughs.

Ray’s father comes upstairs a few minutes later and tells his son that they’ll be staying for the night, they only live across town but it’s so late, too much booze, not a good idea to be driving, maybe Alex will let you use his sleeping bag. The boys gladly agree to this arrangement. It’s been two or three years since they last had a sleepover, seems like they just don’t spend as much time together now as they did when they were little kids, especially with Alex starting high school, harder and harder for the two cousins to stay close. Ray wants to use this time before bed to play one of Alex’s new computer games. Alex, finished counting and recounting his money, says OK, we can do that—or maybe, he suggests with one of those brilliant Salazar smiles, we could play strip poker! “That would be something new and exciting,” he says in a funny game-show voice, still grinning that huge grin, more squinty than cousin Ray, his eyes squeeze nearly shut whenever he smiles this way. Ray gives him a glance that’s slightly startled, slightly confused, his own smile briefly replaced by a wide-eyed gawk, finally he says, “No, come on, I’m serious! Let’s play that new one with the vampires.” Alex, shrugging, again says OK, we can do that.

Bedtime finally, the boys take turns in the bathroom down the hall, they say good night to the adults, then they settle themselves down to sleep, Alex in his own bed, Ray on the floor in Alex’s old Jurassic Park

sleeping bag. Alex wearing just his underwear, same way he always sleeps. Ray still in the T-shirt and sweatpants he's been wearing all day. He says to Alex, "Remember when we were little? Whenever I slept over? How we always kissed each other good night?"

"Like this," Alex says, stretching himself over the edge of the bed until he finds Ray in the dark and plants a noisy kiss, poorly aimed, half on his cheek, half on his lips. "Right? Like that?"

Ray laughs, happy little chuckling sounds from the darkness. "You're crazy, Alex."

"Damn right!"

Silence now for several moments as the boys resettle themselves. Ray, in a whispery voice, finally asks, "Are you going to church in the morning?"

"No, no way, I don't go anymore."

"You should."

"Why? For what?"

"Because we all do, we all go."

"Oh yeah, dude, that's a good reason."

"And because," Ray says, "you might go to hell."

"Yeah, well, that's OK," Alex says.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

Almost out of cigarettes, almost out of coffee, Mike mutters a few curses and wonders if he should make a trip to the store. There's a White Hen next to the tavern where he works as the clean-up guy every morning, just a couple of blocks away, maybe he'll walk over there, take advantage of this warm October weather, get some exercise along with his nicotine and caffeine.

This restlessness is killing him. Just when he was finally managing to forget about Alex and clear his head, the kid shows up again at Mario's. Yesterday. He shows up again! Impossible to blame him, though. Mike was working a double shift, filling in for the sick daytime guy, when Alex dropped by to play a game of Mortal Kombat. They were surprised, in equal measure, to see each other. The boy even apologized, assuring Mike that he wasn't some kind of psycho stalker. He was just out killing time, he said, before his birthday party got started. Then he smiled (my god, that smile, that impish smile) and he said that Mike should come, everybody's invited, even people I don't know, you should stop by. Mike said no, thanks, anyway I'm working all day, straight through, no rest for the wicked. Then he told Mario to make the kid a large pie, whatever toppings you want, Alex, it's on me, happy birthday. The boy was delighted, obviously caught by surprise, still stammering his thanks when Mike, on his way out the door with a

delivery, said hey, no problem, have a good party, have fun.

So now, on this Sunday afternoon, Mike once again finds himself obsessed with Alex Salazar. Thinking about him over and over, seeing that smile of his, wondering how his birthday party turned out. How old is he, anyway? Either thirteen or fourteen, hard to remember for sure, he's such a runt, such a scrawny little devil. But there you go, Mike tells himself, you're being ridiculous again, it makes no goddamn difference how old he is or how cute he is, those days are over. But good intentions seem hopeless on this particular day. Just a few hours after his walk to the store, Mike is back at Mario's working his regular Sunday night shift, making his deliveries, when he encounters Alex yet again. The boy comes riding up on his bike just as Mike is loading his car for another trip. "Hey good," the kid shouts, "you're here this time!"

"Christ, Alex, you scared the hell outta me!"

"Sorry, didn't mean to."

"You were here before?"

"I was riding around the block a few times," Alex admits. "It's nice and warm tonight."

"So what's the deal?"

"Mainly I just wanted to say thanks again for yesterday. You know, for the pizza."

"That's why you came back?"

"Mainly, that's it, yeah."

“Well, OK then, you’re welcome. How was your party?”

“Oh, it was pretty good. I got a lot of cool stuff.”

“I’m glad,” Mike says. He makes a show of glancing at his Timex. “Sorry, Alex, but I gotta go. Duty calls.”

“Too bad you’re always so busy.”

“Yeah, that’s me, I’m a busy guy.”

“Do you ever go to a movie or anything like that?”

“No, not very often, not really.”

“That’s too bad,” Alex says again. He finally gives up and waves goodbye to Mike as the man climbs into his old Honda and drives away.

The boy is still sitting there, straddling his Schwinn, when another car with a Mario’s Pizza sign on top pulls up to the curb. Scooby is the guy who gets out, lanky hillbilly with a John Deere cap and a ratty mustache. He has to step past Alex on his way into the pizzeria. “You waitin for somebody, chief?”

“I was talking to Mike,” Alex says. He baby-steps his bike backward a few feet to clear Scooby’s path. “Mike Burroughs. But he left already.”

Scooby just shrugs, nothing important or interesting about what the kid is saying. He’s almost inside when Alex stops him, calling, “Hey, sorry, I’m just wondering, does Mike still live on Tompkins Street?”

“No, hell, he don’t live over there.”

“No?” the boy says, trying to act surprised. “So where does he live now?”

“I ain’t exactly sure, man, but somewhere on the east side. In them Woodlands apartments, I think. Ask him yourself next time.”

“Yeah, I should, I will, you’re right,” Alex says, satisfied with the information he’s gotten, that’ll do for now.

He calls Ray as soon as he gets back home. What’s up? What’s goin on? Not much, Ray says. Yeah, Alex says, not much happening here, either. Just watching the baseball game, Ray adds from the other end. The Yankees are playing tonight. Oh yeah, Alex says, I’ll probably watch that later. Too bad you’re not here, we could watch it together. Then he says, “Last night was cool. It was fun.”

“For sure,” Ray agrees. “It was awesome.”

“We should do more stuff like that.”

“Like hanging out?”

“Yeah, definitely. Like when we were little.”

“I always want to,” Ray says. “You’re the one who never wants to.”

“Dude, that can’t be true. Really?”

“I’m not kidding.”

“Damn, well, maybe you’re right. But never mind. You know, starting high school and stuff. Don’t be mad at me or anything.”

“I’m not mad at all.”

“I know, I’m just saying, it’ll be better from now on, we should be buds again, like before.”

“That’s so cool.”

“Of course. I’m a cool guy,” Alex says, getting a laugh from Ray. “Hey, before I forget, how close are you to that Woodlands place?”

“Those apartments?”

“Yeah, the apartments.”

“Pretty close, like only a few blocks. Why? Who’s over there?”

“Just some guy. It’s stupid. I was just wondering, that’s all.”

Phone call finished, Alex wanders downstairs and finds his father in the living room, what a mess, nobody has bothered to clean up after last night’s party, dishes and glasses and gift-wrapping paper and overflowing ashtrays are still everywhere.

“This place is a disgrace,” the boy announces in his favorite grown-up voice.

“The folks who own this joint should be horsewhipped,” his father agrees.

“Look, the Yankees are winning! Life is good.”

Before moving to Sandburg twelve years ago, Daniel Salazar taught history at a small college in New York State; now, despite living in Illinois, he still roots for the Yankees whenever he happens to see them on TV. Otherwise, honestly, he couldn’t care less about baseball. “What’s cookin, pal?”

“Not much, just talking to Ray on the phone,” Alex says. He flops onto the big leather couch next to his father, right against him, he still likes to cuddle with his dad or his mom same as he did when he was little. His father puts an arm around him. “So how’s old Ray-Ray doing tonight?”

“Same as always,” Alex says, chewing his fingernails, it’s an ugly habit, he really should stop. “He’s watching the game, too, the Yankees.”

“Good man,” Daniel says. He looks like his own son Alex aged about thirty years—bearded and bespectacled and showing some gray hair, sure, but so similar otherwise, that same lightweight and wiry build, that same rascally grin. “You guys have fun last night?”

“No doubt. Mucho fun.”

“Definitely a good party.”

“Hey Popi,” Alex says, “you remember that guy Mike Burroughs who used to live down the street?”

“Mike Burroughs? Of course I do. We were pretty good friends for a few years.”

“You were friends for real?”

“Sure. He was an interesting guy. We used to play cards with him, for one thing. Poker, bridge, whatever. Oh, and we were into trying different kinds of exotic beers and ales there for a while. Stouts. Porters. We’d trade bottles back and forth, like our own private beer-of-the-month club.”

“I don’t remember any of that,” Alex says. When his father doesn’t respond, he looks around at him and finds him grinning. “What’s so funny?”

“Oh well, you know,” Daniel says, “besides the beer there was also this truly incredible weed that Mike used to get. He worked over at the college, at the library, so I think he had some student connection.”

“Please, Popi, my innocent little ears!”

“I know, I know, I’m the worst role model in history, I’m guilty on all counts.”

“It’s strange,” Alex says, “I don’t remember him working in the library over at the college.”

“You were just a wee tyke. Anyway, what’s all this about Mike Burroughs?”

“I’ve seen him lately. He delivers for Mario’s.”

“Oh, right, I’ve spotted him a few times. When he delivers to the campus. So you’ve seen him around?”

“I mean I’ve talked to him. We’ve talked a couple of times.”

“Is that right? How is he these days?”

“Busy, I guess. He’s always running off. So why did he move? What happened?”

“I’m not sure. Some trouble with the cops? Maybe something with neighborhood kids and drugs? I never found out for sure.”

“He just left?”

“Well yeah, you must remember that much. It was just a few years ago.”

“Six years,” Alex says. Actually, it seems that the boy remembers more about Mike’s hasty departure than his father does. He remembers all those things that the older neighbor boys used to talk about, whisper about, laugh about. The jokes. The stories. And he’s not certain, but Alex seems to remember one time when Mike actually kissed him. But that was so long ago, and there were so many wild tales about Mike and the things that happened inside his house, well, memory and imagination can play tricks. Finally, still gnawing his nails, the boy adds, “I don’t remember much at all, really. Anyway, he seems like a good guy.”

“Sure, I told you.”

“Maybe I’ll go visit him sometime.”

“Oh yeah? Where’s he live these days?”

“In that Woodlands place, I think, those apartments over there. Would that be OK? Would you or Mom care if I went to visit him?”

“This isn’t some kind of devious drug scheme, is it? Something fiendish and illegal?”

“No,” Alex laughs. “You know I don’t even like weed. Or even beer. No way. It’s just, whatever, if I’m over at Ray’s, over that way, I thought maybe I’d go see him. Cheer him up.”

“Does he need cheering up?”

“He always seems sort of depressed.”

“My son, the humanitarian.”

“Yep, that’s me, I’m a very special young man,” the boy says. His father laughs and gives him a squeeze

with his arm. On TV the Yankees are scoring again. Derek Jeter is up to bat. Suddenly the game has gotten interesting. Father and son become quiet as they watch. Nothing more is said about Mike Burroughs.

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

Final time, OK, no more, the kid had his birthday, I bought him that pizza, he came back to thank me, now that's it, we're finished, haven't seen him in two weeks, it's over.

Mike says these things and almost believes them. And as each day passes, and as that tenuous belief solidifies—maybe it really is over, maybe it is—something like regret begins to ache.

But then, in an odd and surprising way, the boy returns. Mike comes home from his clean-up job at the tavern, it's a Saturday morning, and he finds an envelope taped to his apartment door. He assumes, as he lets himself in and opens the envelope, that it's some kind of note from the Woodlands management. He begins reading a message that makes no immediate sense, quickly he flips the piece of paper to find a signature, only then realizing that he's holding a note from Alex Salazar. A rush of adrenaline starts his heart pounding and puts a tremor in his hands. Blackmail. That's all he can think. Blackmail, threats, police. Then he forces himself to concentrate and he starts to read the note over again from the beginning:

Dear Mike,

This letter probably is a bad idea, but I'm not sure how else to do this. It's hard to talk to you because

you're always so busy and I thought maybe this might work. I know it seems like I'm spying on you and stuff because you never even told me where you live—so how did I get your address?!? Are you impressed? Or are you totally pissed off? I hope not! I found out at Mario's that you live out here, so then I came over and looked at the mail boxes in the different buildings and found your name and your apartment number. Easy! But now that I'm writing it down it sounds like I'm totally NUTS!!!

Anyway, I'm hanging out with my cousin Raymond this weekend. He lives at 48 Crescent Terrace, to let you know, which is only four blocks away. We're going to a movie this afternoon and you are officially invited! This is not a joke or anything like that. If you want to come with us, you can pick us up at about noon. We're going to the theater at the mall to see Meet The Parents. If you don't show up, boo hoo, I'll be sad because me and Ray will have to take our bikes and I'm lazy. Just kidding. But please come! It'll be fun, I promise.

I'm probably forgetting something important but I'll stop now and let you go. Oh yes! See, I almost forgot! I'm putting Ray's phone number and also mine at the bottom of this page. See you soon, I hope!

*Your Tompkins Street friend,
Alex Salazar*

Impossible. Mike can't believe what he's reading. Six years of meticulously cultivated privacy and security gone now, completely gone. He doesn't know whether to laugh at the kid's audacity or to curse him as a goddamn busybody. Either way, it's impossible. To accept the boy's invitation and go merrily off to the movies with him and his cousin—it's unthinkable, it's absurd. The kid has no idea.

Mike reads the note again, then reads it for a third time, finally putting it aside like someone attempting to awaken from an unpleasant dream. He finds the Jim Beam bottle and throws back a shot, just one shot, not something he would ever normally do, not this early and not between jobs, but he needs the fire of it now, anything to steady himself, to burn away this paralyzing dreampanic. OK, better, that's better, relax, it's just Alex, he's a good kid, no need to get all crazy. Mike smokes a Camel or two before fixing himself a grilled cheese sandwich and a can of soup, cream of tomato, Campbell's. He keeps glancing at the clock. When noon comes and goes with no apocalyptic fanfare, he feels a kind of relief, almost a pang of embarrassment, you idiotic asshole, making such a melodrama out of nothing. In fact, as he sits at the kitchen table after lunch and smokes another cigarette, Mike surprises himself with a decision that feels suddenly inevitable. He's going to finish his cigarette and he's going to drive to the mall and he's going to stroll from store to store for an hour or so, just wander around and do a little shopping, buy

some batteries, maybe buy a book or a CD—and if he happens to run into Alex and his cousin Raymond while he's there, well, that's OK. If not, that's also OK. He'll let fate and happenstance decide the outcome for him.

It's almost one thirty by the time he drives across town and begins his aimless walking tour of the mall. He can't help feeling moronic and conspicuous as he wanders among the families and couples and packs of kids, awkwardly solitary in this busy temple of American communalism, always the loner, the spy, the one among the many. He becomes less and less confident of his decision to come here, certainly this must be a mistake, he should be home, watching TV, taking a nap, anything but this.

He's been at the mall for almost an hour, seems like ten, he's resting on one of the benches when he sees Alex ambling in his direction with another boy. It's the cousin, of course. This Raymond kid is the same height as Alex, Mike would guess from looking at them that they're the same age, but Raymond is the heavier of the two, actually sort of pudgy with baby fat, something very childish about him and his roundly dimpled face, he keeps looking younger and more immature the closer he gets. Also he's black, or mixed, or whatever the current designation is. There's a definite resemblance between the two of them—the same dimples, the same high forehead, the same darkness to the full eyebrows and the eyes beneath. But Alex has that tropical, Hispano-Asiatic look about him, a telltale slant to the eyes, straight black

hair. Cousin Raymond looks very much a light-skinned black boy, fuller lipped, hair like tightly curled fleece. Mike sees and absorbs all of this as the two kids approach, they're still oblivious, it's easy to stare at them, to scrutinize them. He thinks for a moment that they might pass by entirely without even noticing him—but then Alex happens to glance over and spot him. What a reaction from the boy, what a smile! He slaps his cousin's arm and they come rushing to the bench, Alex in the lead. "Mike, you magically appeared! This is shocking!"

"It's a shock for all of us."

"What happened?"

"I decided to do some shopping," Mike says, holding up a bag from Walgreens.

"But I mean my note. Did you get it?"

"Yeah, Alex, I got it. Thanks for the invitation."

"Too pushy?"

"Not pushy, no. Just too much. Sorry. I can't explain."

"I know, it's OK," the boy says, seated now right next to Mike on the bench.

"Some strange guy cruising around with two boys he hardly knows. Doesn't seem like a great idea."

"Because people would think you're an evil child molester," Alex says. He declaims "evil child molester" in a loud, theatrical voice. Too loud. He claps a hand to his own mouth in startled chagrin, muffling a laugh. He looks around to see if anyone might have heard. "Oops,

sorry, my big mouth. Hey, I forgot, I'm so stupid, this is Ray, he's my cousin."

"Yeah, you said, in your note," Mike nods. "Hi, Ray. Is it Ray or Raymond?"

"Either one," Ray says, half smiling as he stands by the bench, as he watches, as he listens. He's holding, for some reason, one of those miniature packages of Kleenex in his left hand. "But usually it's Ray, I guess."

"Or Ray-Ray," Alex says in yet another of his comedic voices, baby-talking.

"Not Ray-Ray," says the boy himself. "Just Ray is OK."

"Only I can call him Ray-Ray," Alex shrugs, grinning.

"I'll remember," Mike says. He glances at his wristwatch. Alex shakes his head. "You see, you're getting ready to leave already," the boy complains. "Why can't you stay?"

"I'm not even sure why I came to begin with. Honestly. What are we doing here?"

"Just talking, that's all."

"Why? We hardly know each other, Alex. And I don't know Ray at all."

"That's not true," Alex says. "You and my parents were good friends. And you know Ray's parents, too. My Uncle Gabriel and Aunt Cleo."

"Gabe and Cleo are your parents?"

"That's right," Ray says, but he sounds distracted, he keeps sniffing and using the Kleenex to wipe his

nose, this warm Indian summer weather has his hay fever riled up.

"I didn't realize. We used to play cards together, all of us. So you're Gabe and Cleo's son," Mike says, more to himself than to Ray. "I didn't make the connection. You were just a tiny little guy."

"See, I told you," Alex says. He takes off the backward Yankees cap he's been wearing and actually uses it to swat the man's arm. "We're friends! Our parents know you! So what's the problem?"

"That was several years ago."

"So?"

"Things have changed, things are different."

"I know you moved away, but so what?"

"Come on, Alex, it's complicated, I can't explain."

"Did you go to prison?"

"No," Mike answers, so surprised that he has to respond with a laugh.

"Did you get arrested?"

"No, no, I didn't. There were some cops, you must know about the cops, that must be why you're asking, but they were just checking out complaints about noise. Disturbing the peace. Like that."

"Really? That's all? You dummy, why are you so paranoid all the time?"

"Did you just call me a dummy?"

"Sorry, I got carried away."

"Hey, no problem," Mike says, again forced to laugh, he can't help himself. Poor Ray is still standing

there sniffing and sneezing, he seems to be barely listening, just waiting to leave. Mike finally says, "Anyway, I'm paranoid now because I still don't get it. Your interest in me. I just don't understand it."

"It's sort of a mystery, you're right."

"That's your answer?"

"I'm just a friendly little geek," Alex shrugs, head coyly tilted, toothy grin, puppy-dog eyes. "But really, I swear, I'm harmless."

"I'm starting to believe that," Mike laughs again, this is ridiculous, to keep laughing this way.

"Look," Alex says, "we've been here together for about ten minutes and everything's cool."

"You're right, OK, but this is enough for now."

"You're going home?"

"Yeah, I am. I'm a little overwhelmed by this whole thing. I haven't talked this much to anybody in years."

"You've done a good job for being out of practice."

"You make me laugh, man."

"D'you feel better now?"

"Not really," Mike says. "I feel exhausted and confused. But you guys go ahead now, really, time to say goodbye for today."

He and Alex both stand up, the boy moving toward his cousin, Mike backing in the other direction. "Hey, by the way, how was that movie you guys saw?"

"Oh, it was totally funny," Alex says, Ray also grinning and nodding, yeah, way funny. "You should've come, you would've enjoyed it!"

“Be patient, it’s difficult for me, I’m one of the dead souls.”

“That’s Gogol.”

“Wow, I’m impressed, that’s obscure.”

“I’m a geek, I told you,” Alex says. Suddenly he’s moving toward Mike, something has occurred to him at the last moment. “Wait, I almost forgot, I need your phone number!”

“Now this could be a problem.”

“Why? You don’t have a phone? Because I checked and I couldn’t find a number for you.”

“It’s unlisted. But yeah, unfortunately I do have a phone, I need it for work, so they can call me.”

“But otherwise you never use it. Right? Because it disturbs your valuable privacy.”

“Bingo. Honest to god, Alex, I hate talking on the phone.”

“I won’t be a pest, I promise. OK? Please?”

“I still don’t understand this,” Mike says. “But OK, I surrender. D’you have some way to write it down?”

“Just tell me, I’ve got a good memory,” Alex says, tapping the side of his skull with one finger, dark eyebrows smugly arched. Mike recites the number for him, the boy nods his assimilation of the seven digits, then they say goodbye and walk away, Mike to the exit, Alex back to his cousin. Mike’s head is swimming. His legs feel a little shaky. He can’t resist one backward glance on his way out. The boys are still near the bench where he left them, they’re chatting back and forth,

conferring, making plans, looks like Alex is doing most of the talking. No surprise, he definitely seems to be the guy in charge, the leader, the instigator. He puts one arm around Ray's shoulders and together they stroll away, just like that, Alex hanging onto Ray, leaning against him, talking and talking into his cousin's ear, two young conspirators on the prowl.

Mike continues outside to his car. He can hardly catch his breath.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

What makes the three of them friends? Carrie and Jeff and Alex. What brought them together? Nothing special, prosaic really, Alex and Jeff met each other and started talking during the opening day assembly in the school gym, then they found themselves together again in algebra and biology, after a few weeks this familiarity became a casual friendship. Carrie made the twosome a threesome early on when she joined the boys for lunch in the crowded cafeteria, she said they looked lonely at their corner table, right from the start she and Alex were comfortable together, joking back and forth like old pals. Jeff never said much, his membership in this little alliance due mostly, it seemed, to apathy and inertia, easier by this time to continue hanging out with Carrie and Alex than to seek other company.

Now it's Halloween, actually the Saturday before, and all three of them are at the high school for the big party. It's called the Family Halloween Carnival and it's open to the whole community. Ray is there with his parents, his little sister, his baby brother. Alex's parents couldn't come, they're across town at another party, a Halloween get-together for Sandburg College faculty at the home of the Dean of Students. But Alex's mother did drive him and Jeff and Carrie to the school earlier this evening. Carrie was blown away to discover that Mrs. Salazar is the same Mrs. Salazar who worked as a

counseling psychologist at her elementary school. “Your mom was great,” she tells Alex. “Everybody loved her.”

“You had personal experience?”

“I was considered officially weird, yeah, I know it’s hard to believe. Does she still work there?”

“At Lincoln Elementary?”

“Duh, yes!”

Alex shakes his head no, she doesn’t, explaining quickly that his mother now specializes in early childhood education, that she contracts her counseling services to preschools around the area, that she does most of her work for the local Head Start program. It’s funny to watch him explaining this in his Harry Potter outfit—round black glasses (no lenses), long black robe, black turtleneck, orange-and-maroon striped scarf, his messy mop of dark hair perfect just as it is, a clear plastic tube of multicolored candies serving as a wand in his right hand. “I’ll have to ask my mom,” he says, “if she remembered you tonight. In the car. One of her more memorable wacko cases.”

Carrie responds with that contralto whoop of hers, that joyous whoop of laughter. She’s dressed as Hermione, of course, to Alex’s Harry—long witchy dress and shawl, homemade wand with a big crepe-paper star atop, her own naturally reddish hair teased into a suitably wild mane. Jeff is standing right beside her, you might think at first glance that he’s come to the party as a vampire, dressed all in black, pale-skinned as some undead prince of the night, spiky hair dyed platinum

blond. But no, this is Jeff's usual look, he refused to wear a costume tonight despite Carrie's encouragement, scorning such behavior as lame middle-class bullshit. A surprise, really, that he came at all, a rare Saturday night when he's not practicing with his Goth metal band in one garage or another, it's Jeff and three other boys, he plays bass, they call themselves Lung Cancer or Bloody Stool or possibly Vomit Chunks, they can't decide. None of the other boys, it would appear, chose to attend tonight's shindig, they're from Stonerville after all, the little town just east of Sandburg where Jeff himself lived until only last year. "This is so boring," he says now, mumbly as always, hard to hear him.

"Jeffy is bored, what a surprise," Carrie says. They've been here for almost two hours, mild weather allowing activities both inside and out—costume contests for kids and for pets, carnival games, hayrides. Jeff and Carrie and Alex are inside right now, in the gymnasium, which has been separated tonight into two sections by its massive floor-to-ceiling wooden divider, a divider seldom used these days but once essential in that pre-1972, pre-Title IX era when boys and girls were segregated for gym class. Tonight there's a Haunted House on one side (not very scary, mostly for younger children) and a dance on the other, music provided by a student DJ, hip-hop alternating with pop, Nelly followed by Britney Spears, Lil' Bow Wow followed by Backstreet Boys. Carrie and Alex have been dancing but Jeff refuses to humiliate himself, he's been hanging

around the DJ to kill time, now he's grouchy and bored, he wants to leave. Alex glances at the watch he always wears, a chunky black Swatch that looks as big and heavy as a manacle on his slender wrist. "It's not even eight o'clock," he says. "We said we'd stay until nine."

"That's when my dad is coming for me," Carrie nods, her frizzy Hermione hair wilder than ever after an hour of dancing.

"And we have to stay for the bonfire," Ray says. He just joined the group a few minutes ago after spending most of the evening with his own family, he sounds short of breath from overexcitement. "We can't leave before the bonfire!"

He's wearing his George Washington Junior High football uniform (he plays linebacker and second-string fullback) and he has greenish-gray greasepaint covering the normally coffee-brown skin of his face, also some bloody fake gashes on his cheeks, he'll tell you that he's either a dead NFL player or a zombie who plays football, a distinction that seems clear only to Ray himself. The others agree with him about the bonfire, even Jeff, who admits that he forgot about it, no shit, we can't miss a giant-ass fire like that, it'll be wicked! Still some time to waste, however, so Alex and Carrie hatch a modest plan for the group's amusement. All four of them attack the food tables for a fresh supply of popcorn and taffy apples, also for pocketfuls of candy corn and chocolate kisses, also for cups of fruit punch for Carrie and Ray and cups of cider for Jeff and Alex. A disco ball is

scattering light around the gym like a blizzard of glittering confetti, the whole place a bedazzled Halloween fantasia of pumpkins and squash and Indian corn, of skeletons and witches and black cats. Alex, mouth full of peanut M&M's, leads the others back across the dance floor to the stage where the DJ has his turntables and other equipment set up. It's the same stage where Carrie and Alex will be performing in the Fall Play come the end of November, a modern-dress production of Romeo And Juliet. Carrie will be playing Lady Montague, Alex will be Balthazar, Romeo's young manservant. "It's right here, this door," he says in the backstage darkness, the others right behind him as he sneaks his way through that unusually small wooden door and then down some concrete steps and into a maze of little dressing rooms, a rehearsal studio, a wardrobe closet, a storeroom for props. "Isn't this cool, come on, admit it."

"I always love it," Carrie says in a voice of breathy intimacy. "At night like this, especially."

She takes Alex's arm and makes a sound almost like cooing, Hermione snuggling against Harry, they make a slightly odd-looking couple, the girl taller and heavier than the boy. Ray is going through the props.

"Awesome," he says, quickly picking up and putting down swords, guns, boxing gloves, a papier-maché roast turkey, stuffed animals, a pair of bongos, Thor's hammer. "You guys are so lucky!"

Jeff is wandering, just looking, not touching. “Theatah,” he says with an affected, disdainful accent. “The magic of the theatah.”

Alex wriggles himself free from Carrie’s grasp. The girl laughs, but softly, just a brief gasp of laughter surprised out of her by Alex’s escape. She’s been chasing this boy without success for several weeks. They’re friends, yes, very good friends who eat lunch together every day, who sit together in Spanish class and study together as aspiring thespians in drama class, who can always make each other laugh with silly puns and insults and private jokes. But Carrie might finally have to admit that Alex Salazar will never be the real, kiss-kiss, passion-and-romance boyfriend that she wants him to be. The boy himself is having an impromptu sword duel with Ray, their dull aluminum blades clanging like two pie tins being banged together. Some bubblegum girlsong is playing in the gym, it’s either Britney Spears or Jessica Simpson, from back here it sounds washed out and echoey, the rumor of music from some parallel dimension. As the duel of cousins continues—Alex now using Thor’s hammer against Ray’s sword—Carrie decides to join Jeff, she likes Jeff, she thinks maybe she’s the only person who truly appreciates his wry humor, his troubled intensity, his talent for music and poetry and soulful introspection. She takes him to the music studio down the hall where she plays the piano and Jeff fools around on the acoustic guitar that no one ever locks away, it’s so old and beat up, nobody bothers.

They jam for a little while, the bonfire won't be lit for another fifteen or twenty minutes, they have fun together, just the two of them.

Finally time to go, they reunite with Alex and Ray and head outside to the gravel parking lot where the bonfire has been constructed, it must be almost twenty feet high, just now two members of the Sandburg Fire Department are setting that whole enormous woodpile ablaze. Alex is munching on a taffy apple in one hand, sipping from his cup of cider in the other. Ray is just as busy with a sticky popcorn ball and his cup of fruit punch. The heat from the bonfire proves stunning as the flames roar to full strength. Jeff is chuckling, look at that, absolutely wicked. Alex says I've never seen him so happy. Carrie is standing between the two of them, she takes both of them by the arm and pulls them closer, Alex's taffy-apple hand is trapped but he doesn't resist, it's nice, the closeness and the warmth. If he looked beside him right now, at Carrie, he'd see the tears on her cheeks, he'd realize that she's been crying since the bonfire began.

Afterwards, faces still flushed from the fire's ravenous heat, the four friends split up, Jeff accepting a ride home with Carrie's family, Alex going back to Ray's, it's just a few blocks from the high school, Ray's whole family walks home together with the two cousins ambling lazily behind. "Carrie looked really sad," Ray says. "When we were all leaving."

“She gets sad a lot,” Alex says. He’s snacking on pieces of candy from his magic wand. “She’s sort of bipolar, I think.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You know, manic-depressive, happy then sad, up and down, up and down.”

“Oh yeah, like that. So is she your girlfriend yet or not?”

“Not,” Alex says, crunch-crunch of hard candy between his teeth as he talks. “But hey, what about your big plans? Remember you said, what you said, about you and her?” He puts his arm around Ray’s padded shoulders. Ray nods in grave consideration, yes he remembers, but, he now says to Alex, maybe you were right, maybe I ought to find a woman my own age. Alex laughs, every few steps he thrusts sideways and bumps his hip against Ray’s, the two of them lurch from side to side now as Ray starts to bump him back, hip against hip. Aunt Cleo glances back and calls to them, “Come on, you guys, don’t let the goblins catch you!”

“A tasty goblin snack,” Uncle Gabe chimes in. Their house is right up the sidewalk, its yellow porch lights are glaring a bright welcome. Keep walking another four blocks and you’ll come to Mike’s apartment at the Woodlands. But he’s gone now, of course, it’s Saturday night, he’s off delivering for Mario’s. Alex peers ahead into that farther, deeper darkness. Uncle Gabe and Aunt Cleo were amazed to find out, when he told them a couple of weeks ago, that Mike Burroughs

lives over there, just a few blocks away. They remember Mike, certainly they remember him, he was a good card player, always friendly, a nice guy. They agree with Alex's mom and dad that there's no harm in letting the boys visit him, befriend him, Aunt Cleo even did a Google search on him to make sure he's not on any sex offender lists, you can never be too careful these days even about people you know. But Mike turned up clean, no surprises or revelations from the Internet, nothing to change their favorable opinion of him. Even so, Gabe and Cleo seem to have some memory of trouble involving Mike on Tompkins Street, a visit from the cops, neighborhood boys, they discussed all of this with Daniel and Teresa and decided there must have been some problem with drugs, Mike was probably selling some of that pot he always had around, not a big deal to the Salazars, they enjoy the occasional party joint themselves—and, in any case, Mike was never arrested, the cops merely came and went, how bad could the trouble have been? Alex and his parents have talked about all of these things. Ray and his parents, too. The grown-ups tell the boys to be alert, to be smart, if there's any kind of nonsense involving drugs or sex or whatever, anything dangerous or illegal, you let us know. Or if Mike doesn't want you hanging around, then you leave him alone. No, it's OK, it's OK, Alex assures his parents and his aunt and uncle, I think Mike is glad to see some old friends, I'll have him call you, you guys should talk.

This was earlier, this was around that same weekend when the boys met Mike at the mall. Since then Alex has seen him two or three times, last Sunday he and Ray even made a visit to the man's apartment, it was early in the afternoon, Mike was predictably startled to see the boys at his door but it went OK, he was amiable, they watched the rest of the Bears game together, had some chips and root beer, then Ray walked home and Mike gave Alex a ride back across town, it made sense, he was going to Mario's anyway, Tompkins Street is only a few blocks farther west.

So now, back at Ray's house after the big Halloween carnival, Alex is wondering about another Sunday visit to Mike's. He can't fully explain, even to himself, this fascination he has with Mike Burroughs. Even Ray seems puzzled by it—always willing and happy to tag along, to do whatever his older cousin wants, but still puzzled, never quite sure why they're spending time with this guy. Not that anything is wrong with Mike, he's cool, he likes football and The Simpsons and he even has a black belt in karate, he lifts weights, he looks tough and strong, he's big. Maybe, if he really thinks about it, even Ray himself is becoming just a little bit intrigued by this Mike Burroughs guy.

The boys are together in Ray's bedroom when Alex finally says, "Maybe we should visit Mike tomorrow."

"To watch the football game?"

"Yeah. Want to?"

"Last week was pretty fun," Ray admits.

He's taken off his football uniform and shoulder pads, he's wearing blue plaid boxers and a white crewneck undershirt, he's using his mother's cold cream to remove the ghoulish greasepaint from his face. Alex is watching from across the room, his Harry Potter outfit has been replaced by an oversized yellow WBRG T-shirt, it has a radio antenna and dancing musical notes pictured on the back and the big red-lettered words YO, KEEP IT TUNED TO THE BURG on the front, it hangs like a tunic nearly to his knees, you can't even see the white briefs that he's wearing beneath. He's been using Ray's new tangerine iMac to check his Hotmail and now he's using it to surf porno sites—some straight, some gay, he enjoys them both. No need to be sneaky about it, nothing to hide, neither his parents nor Ray's are troubled by cyberporn, they think teenagers are old enough to see it—even if it is repulsive. This attitude might seem strange in a family of churchgoing Roman Catholics, but the Salazars have always been a stubbornly libertarian clan, they believe in a God of love, not vengeance. There's a lot of the tropical laissez-faire in this family—Filipino, Hawaiian, Sicilian, Jamaican—with little or nothing of the cold-blooded Puritan.

The boys agree that they will, yes, visit Mike tomorrow. Alex's attention returns to the computer screen, he doesn't even know which site he's looking at, so many windows keep opening one on top of another, naked bodies everywhere. "Oh my god," he says about something he's just discovered. "Ray, you've got to see

this. Look. Look at this guy's boner." Ray wipes the last of the cold cream and greasepaint from his face, some of the messy cream and grease still smeared into the curly black hair around his forehead. He crosses to the desk where Alex is sitting and leans forward, one hand on Alex's shoulder. "Oh my god," he echoes, laughing out the words. "That's unbelievable."

"It can't be real."

"You don't think?"

"It's so gigantic, no, jeez."

"You don't know."

"I'm pretty sure," Alex says. "But I'm not a boner expert, OK, you're right." Ray chuckles "boner expert" to himself as he turns away from the computer, it's getting late, Mass is at nine o'clock next morning, he needs to shower and wash his hair before bed. "Don't look at so much gay stuff," he says to Alex on his way to the door.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Some of those guys look disgusting."

"It's all good, clean fun," Alex says in his jovial game-show voice, mister comedy, he's working the mouse with his right hand, biting the fingernails of his left. Ray, at the door, says, "You'll end up warped or something."

"Hey good, warped, that sounds like fun," Alex responds. "Warped and corrupted and depraved."

Ray, smiley as ever, oh well, shrugs and turns and hurries off to the bathroom. Alex stays at the iMac for a

while longer, he's had an erection this whole time, it's becoming almost painful, he recalls a hundred different stories from the Internet about jerking off with your cousin or your friend or even your brother, he's read them all—but doing it in real life is never so simple or easy. He's joked with Ray about it, we should do what these guys are doing, ha ha, he's grabbed playfully at Ray's crotch, he's suggested playing strip poker, nothing has ever worked, Ray just smiles and tells Alex to get serious. Tonight Alex doesn't even make an effort, what would he do, what would he say? It's too difficult, much easier just to relieve himself alone, quickly, before Ray gets back.

The image on the computer shows a young blond man being sucked by a black woman with enormous tits that Alex, to be honest, finds really gross. Those huge, bloated breasts with their big nipples. Yuck. He concentrates instead on the muscular young man. There's a box of Kleenex, thanks to chronic hay-fever victim Ray, always kept readily at hand next to the computer. Alex yanks out one two three tissues and then pushes down his underpants, he lets them drop around his white-stockinged feet, he lifts his long T-shirt high enough to expose himself as he stares at the screen and gets busy, not wasting any time, fast and frantic, using his left hand on himself, strange, he's left-handed for writing and beating off but right-handed for everything else, this doesn't take long, he's fourteen and overflowing, give him one minute and he can make

himself shoot when he's in a hurry, like now, whack whack whack and he's done, the tissues are soggy with his gush.

He throws that damp wad of Kleenex into the wastebasket beside the desk and then just sits there, the yellow T-shirt once again covering him but still visibly tented above the half-erect boypole beneath, a dime-sized spot of leakage showing wet on the shirt's fabric right at that rigid point above his belly. He could hurry now to pull up his underpants but he doesn't. He just stays where he is and rests and waits, must be another five minutes before Ray eventually returns to the bedroom and sees him still seated there at the computer, leaning back in the blue swivel chair, white Hanes briefs around his ankles. "Man, Alex, what're you doing?"

"It's OK, I'm done. Sorry. I needed relief."

"Yeah, but I mean, Jesus."

"I'm warped and depraved, sorry," Alex says, finally he sits forward and reaches down for his underpants—but not to pull them up, no, to pull them off, grabbing and holding them in his right hand as he stands from the chair and faces his cousin, it's easy to see the wet spot on the front of his shirt. "Sorry," he says again, but his grin looks nothing like an apology.

"God, Alex," is all that Ray can find to say.

"What?"

"Nothing, it's just. . ."

"Everybody does it."

"I know."

“So?”

“It’s just funny,” Ray says, pointing to the spot on Alex’s shirt, his surprise mingled more and more now with curiosity, with amusement, this is just Alex being Alex, nothing unusual, he’s always acting goofy and joking around about sex, different now from when they were little kids, different since they started spending so much time together again and sleeping over, very different, an edgy humor and vigilance between the two of them that was never there before—but it’s OK, Ray isn’t stupid, he’s thirteen and he knows about puberty and how it changes things, he feels horny all the time himself and has wet dreams about girls at school and understands why Alex acts so funny these days, the dynamic between them seesaws between cautious randiness and cautious modesty. But this is something new, what’s happening right now is something very new, the cousins have never been actively sexual together, no way, they haven’t even showered together or seen each other naked since they were small children. Alex’s frankness now about masturbating is a shock that forces laughter from both of them. “Oh well,” Alex finally says to Ray as they stand there face to face, suddenly he doesn’t feel so bold. “Are you going to bed?”

“I have to get up early,” Ray nods. No need to ask if Alex will be going to church with them, he never does, he’ll be sleeping in as always until Ray and the others get back. Ray’s bed is shaped like a giant navy-and-orange Bears helmet, it’s large enough to accommodate

both youngsters. Alex used a sleeping bag for a night or two but not any longer, sharing the bed seems like a better idea to both of them, certainly more comfortable for Alex, who now says, “I guess I’ll just sleep like this,” meaning in just his long T-shirt. He puts his underpants with his other clothes, then his socks. Ray says OK, he doesn’t care, he stays in his usual boxers and undershirt as they get ready for bed, Alex makes a fast trip to the bathroom and then he’s back and climbing beneath the covers. The sheets and blankets are football themed to match the bed itself. Everything in the room, when you take time to notice, is related either to football or to horses and cowboys, those are Ray’s passions, kind of odd for a boy these days to be interested in horses and cowboys and Western movies but Ray loves them, he rides horses at Webber Stables just south of town whenever he can, he idolizes John Wayne, he’s crazy about reruns of Bonanza.

Together beneath the covers, long day finished, the boys say good night as they always do—’night, Alex; ’night, Ray-Ray—ending with a chaste kiss on the lips. Alex rolls away onto his side. He doesn’t want Ray to know, after what just happened, that his dick is hard again.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

The boys are about to leave for Mike's when Ray gets a phone call. It's his friend Charlie, they've been pals since kindergarten, same school, same neighborhood, Charlie has probably been feeling left out and a little hurt since Ray started spending so much time again with Alex. Now he's inviting Ray to watch the football game on his family's brand-new Hitachi fifty-inch television, an irresistible offer that Ray gleefully accepts. Alex, of course, is also invited, Charlie knows and likes Alex from when they all played together as little kids, they've drifted apart recently but there's no grudge or trouble between them. Alex, however, is committed to his original plan, he definitely wants to visit Mike today. And besides, he says to Ray, Mike can give me a ride home, like last time, dude, it's a sweet deal.

Colder weather has moved in overnight and Alex feels shivery as he hikes the four blocks to Mike's apartment. He's wearing his Harry Potter outfit from last night's carnival, it doesn't embarrass him, Alex is a show-off at heart, it's OK that he didn't bring any other clothes from home. The long black choir robe is flapping like bat wings in the chill breeze. The scarf is double-wrapped around his neck, Alex is grateful for its warmth. Mike can't help laughing when he sees the boy at his

door. "What's this all about?" he asks. "Is there a party somewhere?"

"Last night. At the high school."

"Oh right, that carnival thing."

"I'm supposed to be Harry Potter," Alex says, doing a theatrical spin to display himself.

"As if I couldn't tell. The hair is perfect."

"It's just my real hair."

"That's what I mean," Mike says. "It's perfect for Harry Potter." Alex wears his hair in a raggedy bowl cut, it's thick and black and always looks a bit funny from the side, how it protrudes in the front and in the back, funny and oblong in profile, from face-on you can see the careless part down the middle and the messy bangs pushed to each side of his forehead, also those wispy cowlicks at the back that seem permanently zapped by some static charge. "So where's Raymond today? Didn't he come?"

"He's with Charlie Gubakowski," Alex says.

"Charlie Gubakowski?"

"He's Ray's good friend, he's got some gigantic new TV, they're going to watch the game."

"Weren't you invited?"

"Yeah, I was, but hey, whatever."

"Well, OK, I guess I should be flattered," Mike says. He looks even more unkempt today than usual, big guy with a stubbly gray buzzcut and bushy salt-and-pepper Hell's Angel mustache, Fu Manchu style, the rest of his beard roughly unshaven for several days, tight T-

shirt over weightlifter muscles, dirty jeans, an odor of sweat and beer and cigarettes that Alex finds strangely appealing. The boy takes off his scarf and his robe, he offers Mike a piece of candy from his magic wand but the man just shakes his head no and turns on the television, five minutes until kick-off. “Hey Mike, you know what, maybe I should call my parents real fast. Is that all right?” “You’re the boss,” Mike says. He points to the phone on a table across the room. “Or do you have your own cell phone?”

“Not with me,” Alex says. He brings the phone on its long cord over to the couch where he can sit and make his call, it’s his father who answers, Alex says hi, Popi, it’s me, then explains quickly where he is, smiling, pausing to listen, finally he adds, “Yep, that’s right, I’m abusing poor Mike’s good nature and being a horrible pest.” He pauses once more to listen, then hands the phone to Mike. “Here, my dad wants to say hello.” The man makes a stricken face as he takes the phone and begins speaking to Daniel Salazar for the first time in six years. Now it’s Alex’s turn to eavesdrop, Mike says hi, how the hell are ya?—yeah, you’re right, I can’t believe how long it’s been—yes, yes, absolutely—no, Daniel, it’s my fault, I’m an asshole—no, you’re right, next time I’ll stop by, I promise. There’s a long pause after that, Alex is chewing his nails as he listens, then Mike looks directly at the boy and says no, no, it’s fine, he thinks I need some friendly companionship, maybe he’s right, he’s good company. Another minute or two of small talk,

then Mike ends with another promise to stop by, you can definitely count on it, finally he hangs up and heaves an extravagant sigh of relief. “Jesus Christ, what a neurotic idiot I am.”

“Why?”

“Look at me! Just talking on the goddamn phone, it’s torture. Ridiculous.”

“You have social anxiety disorder.”

“Thank you, Sigmund.”

“No, I’m serious,” Alex laughs. “And it’s funny, too, because look at you, you’re so big and everything, you could beat up pretty much anybody.”

“Don’t exaggerate. Anyway, we’re missing the game here.”

“The Bears will just lose like always.”

“No, man, this is a Packers game. Green Bay. The Bears are off this week.”

“You’re like Ray, he doesn’t care, he’s a football maniac,” Alex says. He removes his shoes and draws his knees up and hugs them to his chest. He’s never been crazy about football, it’s OK but he’s really not a big fan of any sport, he sits and watches the game now just to be polite. Mike, same as last week, provides chips and pop for the boy. Alex is restless and hungry so he also fixes himself a sandwich of peanut butter and blackberry jam from Mike’s fridge, then fixes one for Mike as well, he likes puttering around in the kitchen, he often cooks for himself at home or does a bit of baking for the whole family, sometimes a pie, sometimes a loaf of bread. The

boy eventually wanders to a box in the corner where Mike keeps his books, musty old yellow-paged novels by guys like Jack Kerouac, Ken Kesey, William Burroughs, Tom Robbins, Anthony Burgess, Ernest Hemingway. Alex kneels and starts going through them and finally asks Mike which one is his favorite. The man looks over his shoulder, not sure what Alex is talking about. "Those books? My favorite? Probably Earthly Powers. By Burgess."

"Why?"

"Hell, I don't know," Mike says. He turns his head back toward the TV, the game is almost over anyway, Packers about to lose to Miami. "I like the way he uses language, the way he can play with it. The humor. It's just brilliant, that's all."

Alex is nodding as Mike talks, also he's reading the first few lines of the book in question. "He's in bed with his catamite when the archbishop arrives," the boy says, lifting his gaze from the page, grinning. "Catamite is a young lover. Right? A young guy."

"The things you know," Mike says without looking around.

"Do I amaze you?"

"Constantly."

"Should I shut up? Are you trying to watch the game?"

"No, not really, it's pretty much over. Go ahead and talk."

“Excellent,” the boy says, invigorated now as he scrambles to his feet and returns to the couch. “Let’s have a deep and meaningful conversation.”

“Are you joking?”

“Would I joke?”

“Jesus Christ.”

“We can’t be best friends until we know everything about each other. Everything, everything, everything,” Alex says, he’s bouncing like a kid on Christmas morning, Mike can always detect a fragrance from him whenever they’re this close together, something coconutty and sweet. “Come on,” the boy insists, “it’ll be interesting.”

“This can’t be good.”

“It’ll be wonderful and productive. OK? We’ll do it like twenty questions.”

“I’m not making any promises.”

“No, no, no,” Alex says, “that’s not good enough. We have to trust each other.” He reaches boldly across Mike and grabs the remote control and turns off the TV, eliminating any distractions. The man covers his eyes and laughs at the kid’s impudence. Alex keeps talking. “OK, come on, you start. Ask me a question. Anything.”

“Holy Christ,” Mike mutters. The silence of the apartment compels him to continue. “All right, all right, I give up. Let’s see. A question. A question for Alex Salazar. OK. Is your first name really Alexis or Alexander?”

“Just Alex. It’s on my birth certificate like that. Alex Gabriel Salazar.”

“Gabriel? From your uncle?”

“He’s my godfather. Don’t stop. Keep asking.”

“Why do you always smell like coconut?”

Alex is tickled to laughter by this question. “That’s my shampoo. I took a shower at Ray’s and washed my hair.” He leans toward Mike and tilts his head so that the man can sniff his hair. “See? It smells good, right? Wow, that was an unexpected question.” He sits back against the arm of the couch and once again hugs his upraised knees, he’s facing Mike, the soles of his stockinged feet are pressed against the side of the man’s leg. “Go again.”

Mike tries to ignore those feet touching him. “What’re you going to be when you grow up?”

“That question isn’t very creative. But OK, I have to answer, so I’ll say either a chef or an actor. Not necessarily in that order.”

“Why and why?”

“Because I love to cook and I love to act.”

“Cooking, OK, I get that. But acting where? Where do you act?”

“In plays at school, mostly. Next month we’re doing Romeo And Juliet.”

“You’re Romeo?”

“Not quite, get real, I’m just a freshman. I’m Romeo’s manservant.”

“Balthazar?”

“Yeah, cool, you actually knew that, you’re smart,” the boy says, chin resting on his knees, he nudges Mike’s leg with his toes. “And have you ever seen that community theater group? You know the production of A Christmas Carol they do every year? I was Tiny Tim for two years, back when I was seven and eight.”

“Actually, now that you mention it, I remember that. I never saw it, sorry, but I remember your mom and dad telling me about it, how excited you were.”

“I was adorable,” Alex nods, dark eyebrows arched and lips pursed tightly in a look of mock sincerity.

“Funny guy.”

“It was at Sandburg College. They have a beautiful theater there, really, it was an awesome experience.”

“You spend a lot of time on campus.”

“Is that your next question?”

“Oh right. I should say, how often do you sneak into parties on campus?”

“I don’t sneak in. How rude! But not a lot. Sometimes. Lucky, too, or else we wouldn’t have hooked back up when we did.”

“When I delivered to Seymour, you mean.”

“When fate brought us together,” Alex says, batting his eyelashes this time, now he’s miming the coquette, again he gives Mike’s leg a playful nudge with his toes. “Next question.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“That’s your whole answer?”

“I like girls, my best friend at school is a girl named Carrie.”

“OK.”

“I’ve kissed girls.”

“That’s all?”

“Yeah, I’m a virgin,” Alex says, that comical look of phony sincerity back on his face. “Are you shocked?”

“I’m pretty much unshockable, man, believe me.”

“Maybe I’m bisexual.”

“Because?”

“I look at gay porno on the Internet.”

“That’s normal curiosity, I think.”

“Ray worries about me.”

Mike laughs, then asks, “Why is he worried? What have you done?”

“Like I said, I exhibit disgusting bisexual tendencies. He thinks I might be warped and I might go to hell.”

“Are you worried?”

“Me? Not really,” Alex shrugs, he realizes that he’s biting his nails again and quickly makes himself stop. “I’m just whatever I am, that’s all.”

“Good for you.”

“I’m all about self-affirmation. Hooray for Alex!”

“Good attitude,” Mike laughs again, it’s impossible to keep a straight face with this kid. “Americans are obsessed with labeling people and behaviors. Don’t worry about it.”

“You see, we’re having a deep and meaningful conversation, very cool. So ask me something else.”

“Are we finished with this particular topic?”

“I think I was refreshingly honest.”

“You were, that’s fine, very honest. Just go ahead, then, and tell me more stuff about yourself, whatever you can think of.”

“Anything? OK, um, let’s see. I was born in 1986, in Hamilton, New York. I like cats better than dogs. But I really, really like birds, I’d like to get a big old macaw when I move into my own place someday, that would be amazing. Also I’m a vegetarian.”

“A vegan?”

“No way, I’m not some weirdo fanatic about it, I just try to avoid meat, I think maybe it’s healthier. No meat, no cigarettes, no booze.”

“What about my secondhand smoke?”

“Uncle Gabe smokes, so I’m used to it.”

“Good, ’cause I ain’t about to quit,” Mike says in a convincing hillbilly drawl, Camel between his lips.

“Continuing now,” Alex says, feigning impatience. “My favorite book is Lord Of The Flies. Favorite movie is The Godfather. Favorite television show is The Simpsons, of course. And my favorite food is probably eggplant parmesan, my mom’s is the best, we always make it together.”

“You know, it’s strange, but I would agree with most of that. Even the book, maybe not my favorite anymore, but it was, once upon a time.”

“Now it’s Earthly Powers,” the boy says. “See, already how much I know?” He scoots himself lower until he’s stretched out flat on his back, he’s using the arm of the couch as a cushioned headrest, his legs are across Mike’s lap. “Do you mind? This is more comfortable.”

“It’s OK.”

“I can move.”

“No, stay there, you’re fine,” Mike says, he has no choice, he has to put his hands on the boy’s legs, his right hand holding the cigarette comes to rest lightly on the denimed thigh. “So, is that all?”

“I’ll tell you one more secret.”

“All right, I’m listening.”

“Sometimes, I know this is way stupid, but sometimes I take out my dad’s gun and have these fantasies about killing people. Like at school.”

“Fuck.”

“I’ll be like, exterminate them all, kill them all, worthless scum.”

“But why?”

“Seems like there’s always guys who hate me, idiot Neanderthals, especially in gym class. One of them? Maybe two weeks ago? He called me a little spic and a little faggot and then spit on me.”

“That’s so fucked up. I hate to hear this, Alex, I really can’t stand it.”

“Thanks, well, anyway.”

“So what happened? What’d you do?”

“Look at me,” Alex says, a helpless gesture with his hands, “there’s nothing I could do, I’m like two feet tall.”

“Oh, come on, you’re at least three,” Mike jokes. The boy half laughs and says, “Really, dude, I’m a smurf.”

“And the gun? That’ll fix everything?” “Sometimes I guess it feels that way. Those assholes at school. Pow, pow, pow!”

“Now stop it, I’m serious, don’t fuck around with your father’s gun,” Mike says, something almost dangerous in his voice, in his eyes, he’s giving the boy a command. Alex, startled into momentary silence, stares at him, shrugs, suddenly he appears ready to cry. Mike pats his knee. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“You look upset.”

“I never talked about this stuff before,” the boy says. “Saying everything out loud made me feel weird.”

“You’re not the only one.”

“But I’m OK.”

“What I just said about that fucking gun? You hear me? No more of that bullshit.”

“I hear you, yeah, but that doesn’t make the problem go away.”

“Listen to me, Alex, listen to me. Bullies have been around forever doing that shit. And you know what? It never stops. Those pricks at your school, the cops, your

boss at work, you're going to be putting up with unbearable garbage and abuse your whole life."

"I realize that."

"But when somebody spits in your face, hey, you feel like killing them. Right? I understand. I do. But it's unacceptable and it's insane and you can't go that way."

"So when I go back to school tomorrow and some asshole calls me a dirty spic? Then what?"

"Then you talk to your teachers about it, or to one of the counselors. Your mother is some kind of counselor, right?"

"Yeah, she is."

"Then you talk to her and your father. And you talk to your friend Carrie. And you talk to me."

"To you? Seriously?"

"That's what I said. Why?"

"Because, let's face it, you haven't been real thrilled by all this so far. Me hanging around. I can tell."

"That might be true," Mike says. "So I'm a grouch, so what? Maybe you're starting to grow on me."

"My charms are irresistible."

"Something like that."

"So talking about it will make it better?"

"Sure. Of course. And if there's any more spitting or hitting, anything physical, you report it. That's assault, man. Don't put up with it. Report it, talk about it, change it."

"Be proactive," Alex says, clenching a defiant fist. "Down with the bullies!"

“That’s the idea,” Mike laughs. “And always remember how many people love you and care about you.”

“OK.”

“And keep your hands off that fucking gun.”

“OK.”

“Promise me. Right now.”

The boy raises his right hand and solemnly says, “I swear that I’ll keep my hands off my father’s fucking gun. So help me Buddha and Allah and Zeus.”

“You’d better be serious, kid.”

“I am,” Alex insists. “Honest. Now that we’ve talked about it? It seems really idiotic and embarrassing.”

“There might be days when you feel different.”
“Then you’ll just have to remind me and keep me safe. See, Mike, it’s a good thing I met you again.”

“You might be right.”

“It’s ironic, though.”

“What is?”

“You never take any of your own advice,” the boy says, pointing an accusatory finger. “You never talk to anybody, you never ask for help, you hide from all of your friends.”

“OK, OK, I get your point.”

“So tell me your stuff, your secrets, it’s your turn.”

Mike glances at the digital clock on his VCR.
“Sorry, Alex, but I need to catch a nap before I go to

work. Normally, at this time, that's what I'm doing, I'm getting an hour or two of sleep."

"What about last week when we were here?"

"I was being polite. And I was practically asleep at the wheel by midnight."

"Oh great, make me feel guilty," Alex says. The man again pats him on the knee and then pushes the boy's legs gently from his lap and gets to his feet. "You just stay here, watch some TV or read or whatever, give me an hour."

"Then you'll give me a ride home?"

"You bet, no problem."

"All right. Sweet dreams," Alex says. He stays for a while on the couch, so much to think about, his brain feels overfull and noisy after his long conversation with Mike. Eventually he gets up and takes advantage of this opportunity to explore the man's apartment, you can't blame him, it's human nature, he ends up going through every drawer, every cabinet, little snoop searching for something odd or kinky or exotic. But he finds nothing—literally, in most cases, nothing. Nearly all of the drawers and cabinets are empty, some basic pots and pans and silverware in the kitchen, a set of Super Star barbells and dumbbells in one corner of the living room, those few boxes of books and music cassettes in another corner—that's about it, there's hardly anything else. Mike has lived here for six years, but you'd swear he just moved in and still hasn't bothered to unpack.

An hour later, as promised, Alex is getting a ride home in Mike's Honda, Alex calls it the pizzamobile, its interior smells permanently of onions and pepperoni and tomato sauce and cheese. Passing the college, he points to one of the older buildings, a two-story limestone edifice that might easily be mistaken for some Gothic Revival church or courthouse. "Is it true you worked there?" the boy asks. "In the library?"

"I did, for a while, it's true."

"Doing what?"

"I worked as a library tech. In cataloging."

"You have a library degree?"

"Not quite," Mike says, already the building is behind them, Tompkins Street is just ahead. "I was a history major, totally useless, so I ended up getting an AAS degree a few years later. Which means Associate of Applied Science. Good enough to work at the library in technical services."

"Why the library?"

"I like books, very simple."

"So why did you quit?"

"I quit when I moved. I needed the change. I wanted to disappear."

"But tell me why. What happened?"

"You already know," Mike says. "That trouble with the police."

"Was it drugs?"

“There were drugs, I guess. You know. Disturbing the peace. Loud music. Anyway, we’re out of time,” he tells the boy. “You’re home.”

“But Mike, I never got to ask you any questions!”

“You just were, just now.”

“I was just warming up,” Alex says, he’s Harry Potter again in his black robe and striped scarf. “Next time I get my full turn.”

Mike half shrugs and half nods, he’s not thrilled by the prospect—but OK, it’s a deal. The boy opens his door. “D’you want to say hi to my mom and dad? They’re probably here.”

“Quickly, maybe I should, but very quickly.”

“Really?”

“Surprised, aren’t you,” Mike says, now both of them are climbing from the car. He’s wearing a grubby old Bears cap and sunglasses, he’s glancing up and down the street like someone wary of trouble, the boy is racing ahead to get inside and fetch his parents for this exciting reunion. By the time Mike reaches the porch, Alex has already found them and dragged them out. There’s a flurry of greetings and handshakes and hugs, the usual, can’t believe it’s been six years, you haven’t changed, Daniel is clutching the much larger man by both arms as if to prevent his escape. “I can see that you still lift weights,” he says to Mike.

“Now and then, something to do.”

“We hope that Alex hasn’t been a nuisance,” Teresa says, she’s standing behind her husband and

smiling, a small woman with dark hair cut short, reading glasses on a fine chain around her neck. Mike says no, honestly, he's never a pest, just good company—but maybe I'm the one who should be asking you, he adds, if it's OK for him to visit me. Maybe you don't want your son hanging around an old bum like me. Both Daniel and Teresa laugh and wave away such a ridiculous suggestion—although it might be hard for them to disagree with Mike's description of himself as an old bum, he's gone so much grayer and he looks a mess, scruffy and unshaven and disheveled, as big and imposing as ever, true, but clearly a victim of serious self-neglect. “We know you,” Teresa says. “You're a friend.”

“And Alex can take care of himself. We trust him,” Daniel adds. The boy under discussion raises both arms in a “thank you, thank you” salute. His father looks at him and laughs. “We're just glad that he found you again. You moved away so suddenly. We worried about you.”

“Yeah, sorry, I'm a jerk.”

“This is silly, standing out here,” Teresa says. “Why don't we all go inside?”

“Thanks, but I'm on my way to work.”

“At Mario's?” “That's right. I'm moving up in the world.”

“Well, if not now,” Daniel says, “then we'll expect to see you some Friday or Saturday night for a rip-roaring game of cards.”

“Those are my busiest nights,” Mike says with a helpless shrug. “But listen, I’m sure I’ll be seeing you whenever I bring Alex home.”

“Don’t let him turn you into a taxi service.”

“Hell, you can practically see Mario’s from here, it’s no big deal.”

“Were you guys watching the game again?”

“Just the Packers,” Mike says. “Nothing very exciting.”

“How about your beloved Bears this season?”

“Please, don’t remind me. They’ve been a disaster so far.”

Teresa asks, “Was Ray with you this time?” “He went over to Charlie Gubakowski’s,” Alex says. “It was cool, though, because it gave me and Mike a chance to talk.”

“And I bet you talked his ear off,” Daniel says.

“It was good, it was nice,” Mike says. “He keeps me entertained. I’m not sure why, you know, why he bothers. Any idea? Any clue why your son cares about a pathetic old wreck like me?”

“See, there he goes again,” Alex himself responds. “He has severe self-esteem issues.” This comment gets all of the grown-ups laughing once more and effectively aborts any attempt to deal seriously with Mike’s question, Alex is just Alex, he’s this funny and inscrutable young scamp who does what he wants, no point in trying to analyze him or repress his eccentric spirit.

But now Mike really needs to get moving, he's already late, more handshakes and hugs to say goodbye and then he's hurrying back to his car. Alex escorts him.

"OK, admit it," the boy says, "that wasn't so bad."

"Relatively painless."

"Remember, next time it's your turn to answer my questions."

"Don't make it sound like a threat."

"No, it'll be cool," Alex says. Mike is already back inside the car, its engine is running. The boy leans with arms crossed against the open driver's window, he and the man are eye to eye as they talk. "Thanks for everything you said before, Mike."

"Stay away from that fucking gun."

"I know, I will, I gave you my sacred oath."

"OK, well, take it easy."

"OK, well, take it easy," Alex mimics in the man's own rumbling monotone. He leans through the window and plants a quick kiss on Mike's scratchy cheek. The man flinches like someone who's just been scratched or bitten. Alex smiles, he says, "Don't freak out, I kiss my dad all the time. We're a very touchy-feely family."

"Full of surprises," Mike says, then guns the engine and pulls away.

Later, over a dinner of lasagna and garlic bread, Alex asks his parents if Mike has changed, if he looks different. They say yes, yes he does, he looks older and grayer, he's heavier, his mustache is different. Honestly, Daniel says, it looks like he's not taking care of himself,

he's sort of a mess. Could be the result of depression, Teresa proposes, that's common enough. Alex confirms this, saying, "He never seems happy. Why is that? What happened?" His parents don't know, Daniel remembers seeing an obituary for Mike's father about a year ago—but he was an old man, it's unlikely his death could have had such a traumatic impact. Alex nods, he's chewing a piece of garlic bread, he decides to ask one more question. "Is Mike gay? Do you know?"

"That's anybody's guess," Daniel says, he looks at his wife, maybe she has a clearer idea. "We've wondered about it. He never said anything to us."

"It never came up," Teresa adds, returning her husband's glance, keeping her tone nonchalant as she looks back at Alex. "Why did you want to know? Any special reason?"

"Just because he's alone, you know, he's not married, he doesn't have a girlfriend, that whole profile."

"That's all? He didn't do or say anything else to you?"

"No, never, no way," the boy says. "That's so funny, really, because he hardly talks at all. He just sits and watches TV. And smokes his cigarettes. He's like the quietest, most harmless guy in the world."

"Anyone else around when you're there? Any other men?"

"Never."

"No drugs? Nothing dangerous?"

“Never,” Alex says. “Anyway, we’ve already talked about this. You’ve already warned me.”

“You’re right,” his mother says, she’s eyeing the piece of lasagna on her plate, it seems dry to her, overcooked, she’s not happy with it. “Just repeating the obvious.”

“But what if he is gay?” the boy wonders. “What if we somehow find out that he is? Would that change things?”

“I don’t see why it should,” Daniel says. “Just hypothetically. Your mother and I have gay friends, gay co-workers.” “So I could still visit him?”

“Yes, you could, of course,” Daniel assures the boy, an indulgent chuckle in his voice. “But please, Alex, don’t play junior detective, don’t badger the poor guy.”

“Me? No way.”

“I don’t think Mike wants some fourteen-year-old kid invading his privacy.”

“I won’t do that, I’ll behave myself,” Alex promises. He’s thinking that his mom’s lasagna is drier than usual, maybe it stayed in the oven too long, it could definitely use more sauce.

* * *

CHAPTER NINE

Alex tried this week, he really tried to follow Mike's advice about those asshole bullies at school, everything from talking to his parents about them after one particularly bad day to asking his guidance counselor about changing gym classes to joking about the whole miserable situation with Carrie. He and the girl were together after drama class, today they'd been doing relaxation exercises and improv techniques, Alex was waiting for Carrie to pack her bookbag, he said to her, "Well, oh boy, now I get to go to gym class and have Clay Olsen torment me."

"Still?"

"Are you kidding? There's also Doug Setzer and Ron Maddox. It's the moron gang."

"Don't let them treat you that way."

"Hey, have you ever looked these guys in the eye? They're crazy, I'm not kidding, they're genuine psychopaths."

"Switch to another gym class or I'll be very upset with you."

"I'm working on it," Alex said, but this day was already doomed, the three psychos took turns harassing and taunting him during calisthenics, during rope-climbing, during the touch football game outside, lots of faggot name-calling and bumping and pushing, the usual. Alex tolerated and ignored all of it even when the abuse

continued in the locker room, even when Doug Setzer shoved him from behind in the shower and sent him sprawling onto his ass, you'd assume that being pushed from behind would cause a fall forward but you'd be wrong, in a slippery communal shower it propels you forward with a violent disruption of equilibrium, it's like sliding and slipping on ice, but then quickly you lose your footing and end up the way Alex did, sitting on the hard tile floor, your tailbone bruised, the other boys having a good laugh at your humiliating pratfall.

Even then Alex endured the punishment and did nothing. But something else happened a few minutes later, Alex was returning to his locker and toweling his hair when Clay Olsen stepped in front of him, strangely cross-eyed kid with a permanent sneer, Alex looked up just in time to see the boy spit point-blank into his face. Something happened this time, he'd been spit on before but something snapped this time when Clay Olsen hocked right into his face and then stood there with that grin of lunatic smugness, Alex turned wildcat and lunged at him and sent him reeling backward with furious jabs to his chest, the look on Clay Olsen's face was something that Alex will never forget, shock and bewilderment and maybe even a momentary fear, suddenly to be attacked by your own victim this way, the predator assaulted by its own prey. But Olsen is a senior and much larger than Alex, much heavier and stronger, it didn't take him long to recover and begin his own counterattack and bring Alex's berserk charge under

control, they ended up tangled in each other's headlocks, a defensive stalemate, both of them suddenly and acutely aware of their own nakedness and vulnerability. A group had formed by now to watch, Doug Setzer and Ron Maddox among them, they were laughing at their friend's predicament and enjoying the show, this only managed to fuel Clay Olsen's embarrassment and his fury for revenge. He wrenched himself free from Alex's headlock and pointed his finger, aiming it like a gun. "You're dead, Salazar, you are so fucking dead," he announced for everyone to hear, nodding in terrible emphasis, his finger still pointing its judgment. "We'll finish this later. Guaranteed. We'll finish this."

In a quietly mounting panic, Alex rushed directly afterwards to the office of Mister Fitzgerald, his guidance counselor, where he again demanded to be transferred to a new gym class. "Because I won't go back there again," he flatly stated, describing all that had just happened. Mister Fitzgerald agreed that the situation was a bad one. "But remember, Alex, I just heard about this for the first time yesterday. I'm trying to get a clear picture. You're positive about switching your schedule?"

"Totally positive, no doubt."

"We don't like to disrupt a student's schedule this late if it's not absolutely necessary," the man said, he had Alex's file now in his freckled hands, his arms also freckled where his sleeves were rolled up, skinny red-haired guy with tired eyes. "That's not to say we can't do it. Or won't. It's just, well, you understand."

“I’m not going back there again,” Alex repeated.

“I hear you, believe me, I hear you. Any interest maybe in talking to our psychologist about this issue? Think that might be productive?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Sure about that? It might help reduce your anxiety.”

“I’ve got anxiety because a group of psychotics want to kill me.”

“Let’s be careful about our terminology,” Mister Fitzgerald said. “Nobody’s a psychotic. Nobody said anything about killing anybody.”

“Clay Olsen said I’m dead, actually he said I’m fucking dead.”

“Well, I understand that. We’ll look into that.” The man finally conceded, after more perusal of Alex’s schedule, that a switch might be feasible, a three-way shuffle involving gym class, algebra, and a third-period study hall. The boy listened and nodded, this was sounding good, once more he said, “It’s just, whatever happens, I’m not going back to that same class. No way.”

“I think we’re clear on that issue.”

The rest of that day passed uneventfully. Alex went straight from his last class to an afterschool rehearsal for Romeo And Juliet where he gave Carrie a full account of his busy afternoon. She clapped her hands like an excited little girl when he told her the happy ending, that he was being transferred to a new gym class. “But I’ve been

thinking,” he said. “What if this new class is just as horrible as the last one?”

“Don’t be a dope,” Carrie told him, they were hanging out backstage while the first scene was blocked and prepared, neither one of them was needed until later. “Those three guys are famous for terrorizing younger students. You’ll be fine once you’re away from them.”

“Until they catch me some day after school,” Alex said, still wearing his ordinary jeans and sweatshirt, no dress rehearsals for another two weeks—although even then, as he’s been told, his costume will consist of modern trousers and shirt, dark and formal as befitting his manservant role but no doublet or hose or codpiece, a disappointment to the boy when he found out, he’s always wanted to wear that sexy old-time stuff. Carrie was similarly disappointed about the modern costumes, denied her chance to perform in all of that wonderful Renaissance finery. Now she asked Alex, “You really think they’ll do something to you after this?”

“Yeah, of course, more than ever. I ratted them out and now they’ll probably be in trouble, they’ll want to kill me for real, I’m not joking.”

“Just stay away from them.”

“Every day? After school? But wait,” Alex said, sudden inspiration, phony excitement in his voice, “you can protect me, Carrie! Yes, of course, my good friend Carrie can protect me!” He hugged her and huddled against her like a little child seeking shelter in his mommy’s arms. Even though she knew he was just

acting silly, Carrie returned his hug with sincere tenderness and held him and blinked at the tears in her eyes, she honestly would have protected him if she could, anything for Alex. She did, in fact, end up helping that night by providing the boy with a ride home after rehearsal, her mother playing chauffeur, they didn't see anyone outside the school but Alex appreciated the ride and the reassurance of adult supervision. He and Carrie sat together in the back seat of the SUV and sang along with a tape of Beatles songs that the girl's mother was playing, Eleanor Rigby, all the lonely people, where do they all belong?

That was yesterday, that was Friday, now it's Saturday night and Alex has spent the whole day worrying about his situation, dreading the school week to come, maybe he just made everything worse by fighting back and pissing off the psychos, now he's transformed himself from one of their ordinary victims into their most hated enemy and biggest target. He doesn't know what to do with himself, how to calm this anxiety, he has a desperate desire to bring out his father's Colt Woodsman and hold it, fondle it, use it to fantasize a gory revenge scenario, his parents are out for the evening at a United Way reception so he could do it, he could go right now and get the gun—but he promised Mike to stay away from it and he intends to keep that promise. For now. He won't touch it. He won't fool around with it. But if those motherfuckers come after him and try to hurt him, no shit, Alex will use that gun to protect himself and to

dispense some swift and lethal justice. He swears it to himself. If he needs the gun, he'll use it.

But for now he wants to do nothing but forget, this is Saturday night, there must be somewhere he can go, something he can do for fun. Mike is working, of course. Ray is gone for the weekend, he and his family are in Chicago to visit some of Aunt Cleo's relatives. Carrie is in Stonerville with Jeff, this is rehearsal night for his band and the girl wanted to watch, she and Jeff have been spending more and more time together lately outside of school, maybe he'll become the boyfriend she couldn't find in Alex. Anyway, all of them are gone and unavailable for the night and Alex is feeling abandoned, he even tries calling Charlie Gubakowski, maybe Charlie can get a ride and come over and they can play video games—but the phone just rings and rings at the Gubakowski residence, not even a machine answers, nothing. It's about nine o'clock when the boy finally grabs a jacket and puts on his Yankees cap and leaves the house, there's always a party or two at the college he can crash, better at least than sitting around at home by himself, worrying and worrying. Maybe, who knows, maybe he might even run into Mike somewhere on campus.

Right now, if the boy only knew, Mike is at Mario's waiting for his next delivery, it's a slow Saturday for some reason, he's been here smoking cigarettes and listening to Scooby's idiotic chatter for almost thirty minutes. Some boys are at the pinball

machines and video games, the man watches them and wishes vaguely that Alex were among them, it's been a while since the kid last came in to play Mortal Kombat. Scooby won't shut up, he keeps going on and on about the election for president coming up on Tuesday, a confused rant frothing with scandals and rumors and conspiracy theories: George Bush is a cokehead with ties to some Colombian drug cartel, Al Gore is in the pocket of Israel and the Jews, Hillary Clinton is a lesbian and that's why Bill was always fucking around, Ken Starr is a well-known Jewish queer who was paid to get an impeachment. Mike finally yells to Mario, "Can't you make this jackass shut up?"

Scooby, who's in his usual spot leaning against the take-out counter, looks back toward Mario to see what the boss might say or do. But Mario just shakes his head and shrugs, he's fixing submarine sandwiches and doesn't want to get involved, he's too busy. Scooby grins like some kid who's just won a dare. "OK," Mike grumbles, getting to his feet, "I'll solve the problem myself." Scooby goes wide-eyed and takes a startled step backward from the counter. Mike is usually quiet and passive, the waitresses always say he's just a big gentle bear, but lately he's been different, more outspoken and volatile, veteran barflies like Scooby are familiar with Mike's reputation as a onetime tavern brawler who even worked as a bouncer for a couple of years after he graduated from college, he's not someone you want to anger or antagonize. Scooby doesn't know why the guy

has been acting differently these past few weeks—less depressed and withdrawn, easier to rile up—and frankly he doesn't care, he's backing off anyway just to be safe. But Mike only grunts at him and shakes his fist in a sham threat and keeps walking, he's solving his problem with Scooby by leaving, by taking refuge in the kitchen until his next delivery is ready.

About two hours later, some light rain falling, Mike has already been to the east side for one delivery run and now he's at the college for another. He stops at the outlying frat houses first, then moves on to the campus, some subs and Italian beefs for McNally Hall, more sandwiches and pizzas for Longfellow, for Seymour, for Harrison. At Seymour, as always, he half expects to find Alex, this is where he first encountered the boy in early September, one of the Salazar girls even lives here, Mike has seen her and recognized her a couple of times since. But Alex isn't here tonight, no real party going on, just a bunch of kids lounging around and watching Saturday Night Live on the big-screen television. Then, back outside, the boy is suddenly in front of him, or possibly not, darkness confuses identity and Mike immediately doubts his first impression of this shadowy figure on the sidewalk. "Alex?" he calls out, maybe two dozen feet between them. "Is that you?"

"Mike? Hey, Mike! My best friend in the whole world Mike!"

The kid is drunk, no mistaking the sound of booze in his too-loud, slurry, out-of-control voice. He rushes

forward and grabs the man by both arms. “Mike, did you come looking for me? Are you here? Are you here searching for me?”

“Whoa, man, settle down,” Mike says, gently he loosens the boy’s grip and holds up the thermal pouch he’s carrying. “Pizza guy, remember? I was making a delivery.”

“Pizza guy. You shouldn’t be a pizza guy, that’s stupid. You know that? It’s stupid.”

“Oh boy. This is going to be fun.”

“Fun! We need to have fun, Mikey!”

“You’re drunk, Alex.”

“No, don’t lie.”

“I thought you didn’t drink.”

“I’ll tell you a secret,” the boy says with lowered voice, he pats Mike’s arm, they’re moving slowly together toward the street. “I was only drinking peppermint schnapps, which is not really alcohol, alcoholic, it’s very sweet, pepperminty, I’m not drunk, that’s my theory.”

“Somebody gave you schnapps?”

“There’s a party at the Phi Delt’s.”

“And you sneaked in?”

“Not sneaked, never sneaked, never sneaked or snuck, wow, that’s hard to say.”

“And now you were coming over to Seymour and the rest is history.”

“And you came to rescue me!”

“Sure, why not,” Mike agrees with a tired chuckle. The boy is wearing his Yankees cap almost sideways, maybe intentionally or maybe not, Mike doesn’t know but he straightens it anyway, he doesn’t want somebody mistaking it for a rival gang sign and taking a shot at them, even in Sandburg that can happen. “Listen, Alex, I want you to ride with me, I only have one more stop and then I’ll take you home.” “Good, that’s a good plan, a most excellent and brilliant plan.”

The boy takes Mike’s arm and rests his weight against the man’s side as they walk to the car, he continues to pat the arm affectionately, my best friend Mike. By the time they get back to Alex’s house, the boy has told Mike about his miserable week at school and his scuffle with Clay Olsen and Olsen’s furious threats, and he’s told him about switching his schedule and his worries now about next week, all of it spilling from him in a frantic jumble. Only when they’re standing on the front porch does he realize that he’s back at his own home. “I thought we were going to your place,” he says. “That’s what you told me.”

“I said that I’d bring you home. Here. Your home, not mine.”

“That’s not fair.”

“You can’t come to my place so late. Anyway, I’m still working.”

“This will have to change,” the boy decides. “Too many rules and restrictions, not a good thing, we’ll have to change this.”

“OK, bud, whatever you say.”

“You’re right, whatever I say, you’d better believe it.”

“How about unlocking the door for us. D’you have a key? I don’t think your parents are home.”

“United Way,” Alex says, that’s his only explanation for Mike as he fishes the key from his pants pocket and opens the front door. “Shit, I’m all wet.”

“You were walking around in the rain,” Mike tells him. He puts his hand on the boy’s damp shoulder and guides him into the house, lights are still on from before Alex left, Mike hasn’t been inside this place for over six years but nothing has changed, it’s the same comfortable and inviting mess as ever—not dirty, just messy, always like the morning after a party. Mike’s favorite house, he loved it here in the old days: green plants everywhere, lots of brass and rattan and dark wood, old Persian and Turkish carpets, big overstuffed chairs and that huge leather couch, dozens of crammed and disorganized bookshelves, oil paintings and watercolors and framed posters and family photos covering the walls, the mahogany game table across the living room from the TV where they all played cards and drank beer and had some laughs, now there’s a half-assembled jigsaw puzzle of Notre Dame Cathedral scattered across the top. “Such a great house,” the man says, Alex nods in bleary agreement, the lights must be hurting his eyes because he keeps blinking them and lowering his head, he’s jacketless and capless now and his hair is an uncombed,

ruffled fright. Finally he grabs the sleeve of Mike's denim jacket and pulls him toward the stairs. "You have to see my room, it's this way, up here, up here, I'll show you my room, come on."

His bedroom is at the far end of the upstairs hallway. Mike doesn't like being alone with him in the house this way, especially not up here on the second floor, especially not in the boy's own room—but Alex waves his hand dismissively when Mike tells him this, his parents never get back before midnight and anyway they wouldn't care, don't be paranoid. "They'll care that you're drunk," Mike reminds him, and the boy makes a "good point, you're right" face and then abruptly crosses the hall to the bathroom for a much needed piss, easy to hear his urgent stream splashing into the toilet. The kid's room is neater and cleaner than you might expect, no athletic stuff except for a skateboard and a soccer ball off by themselves in one corner, no girlie posters or sports posters, instead the walls are covered with reproductions in various sizes and formats of famous paintings, several by Van Gogh and Dali, some Impressionists, a couple of Picassos and Rembrandts, a Caravaggio Eros, plus a few others that Mike can't identify. The only actual posters, three of them, are of movies and Broadway shows, one each of *Rent* and *Les Misérables* and *Billy Elliot*. The rest of the room is furnished with an unmade twin bed, a desk and its Gateway computer, a CD player and speakers, stacks and stacks of CDs and DVDs and cassettes, half a dozen shelves filled to capacity with

hardcover books about art and music and history and biography and dinosaurs and birds and just as many shelves filled with paperbacks by Dickens and Twain and Steinbeck and Golding and Tolkein and many others, quite a library for a teenaged boy.

Mike is busy with his inspection when Alex returns. The boy immediately points to the Billy Elliot poster near his bed. "Take me to see that, please, that movie, Billy Elliot, it's at the mall and I need to see it."

"It's too late for us to. . ."

"No no no, listen, listen to me, not tonight I know, tomorrow, we could go tomorrow afternoon, you have to take me."

"Go with Ray."

"He's in Chicago."

"Bears game is tomorrow."

"Bears Bears Bears, they'll just lose like always," Alex says, he moves next to Mike and again takes the man's arm in an intimate grasp and leans against the muscular bulk of him. "Take me to see the movie, Mike, please please please!"

"Maybe you can go with your parents. Or you can go next week after Ray gets back," the man suggests, no sooner does he say it than the boy slumps more heavily against him and moans, Mike thinks he's sick but he's not, it's a moan of despair and defeat. Slowly shaking his head, Alex mumbles, "I don't get it, you really hate me, why don't you like me at all?"

"You know that's not true, Alex."

“It is, it is true, you don’t like me.”

“Stop saying that.”

“It must be me, something about me,” the boy persists, his voice shakier, he’s starting to cry. “That’s why people beat me up and hate me because there’s something wrong with me, I know it’s true, people hate me, even you don’t like me.” He buries his face in Mike’s damp jacket and surrenders to self-pity and sobbing, long weeks of anger and fear and frustration flooding out in a boozy gush. Mike hesitates, this is more than he was planning on, but then he puts an arm around the boy and gives him a reassuring squeeze. “Come on, pal, don’t do this. Listen to what I’m saying. I do like you, I like you a lot. You’re just about the greatest kid I’ve ever met.”

“You’re just trying to be nice,” the boy says in his shaky, tear-choked voice. “I should probably just use that gun on myself, that would be easier, that would solve everything.”

“Oh yeah, that’s brilliant. That’s perfect. Emotional blackmail now. Well, listen up, your parents need to know about you and this goddamn gun. . .”

“This fucking gun.”

“What?”

“You usually call it a fucking gun. That fucking gun. Stay away from that fucking gun,” Alex mimics, he looks up at Mike and almost grins. “I’m sorry. Don’t tell my parents.”

“I think I probably should. Not about the alcohol, just the gun. I mean the fucking gun.”

“You don’t have to, really, I’ll be good, I’ll leave it alone.” Alex wipes his eyes and grins a little wider. “Just take me to the movie and I’ll be a good boy.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“I am, right? So you like me? You’ll take me?”

“Yes, I like you. Yes, I’ll take you.”

“I’m sorry, jeez, I think maybe I might be drunk.”

“Possibly, yeah.”

“I might be drunk,” Alex says again. He steps back and wipes his reddened eyes once more and peers at Mike, trying to focus. “Maybe I’ll be on TV and get my own talk show, that might be a good idea, like David Letterman, I could be good at it.”

“That’s really incongruous, but OK. Now listen, Alex, concentrate, I won’t tell your parents about any of this but you have to settle down and go to bed. Understand? You have to go to bed and I have to leave, I can’t stay.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now, right now,” Mike says, taking the boy by the shoulders and aiming him toward the bed. Alex nods, he understands, but he’s not ready for the man to leave just yet. “You have to tuck me in,” he says. “Was I crying? Why was I crying?”

“Because everybody hates you.”

“Oh yeah,” the boy smiles. “And that’s true, it’s true, everybody hates me, nobody loves me.”

He sits heavily onto the edge of the bed and makes a clumsy effort to untie his shoes, no good, he double-knotted them earlier while sober and now he's helpless to undo them. Mike sighs in exasperation, time is wasting but the boy is a wreck and needs a hand so he drops to one knee by the bed and untangles the knots and then tugs off the shoes, Adidas hightops still wet from walking in the rain, the boy's socks are also damp, Mike can smell them as he pulls them off, the smell of dirty boyfeet. Alex, at the same time, has begun to undress himself, starting at the top with his red rugby-style shirt, he stretches his arms and wrestles it over his head and manages to drag the undershirt off with it. He pauses for a deep breath and wiggles his bare toes as if just now noticing that his shoes and socks have been removed. Mike snaps his fingers, let's go, let's go, Alex nods and unfastens his jeans and stands halfway and pushes them down and then sits back onto the edge of the bed and holds his legs out straight for Mike to finish the job, which he does, pulling the jeans off with a rough yank.

"These are my underwear," the boy says, sleepy-eyed and slurry, sitting there in Hanes briefs that look remarkably white against the dark honey of his skin, sitting there in nothing but those briefs and the big black Swatch on his slender wrist, hard to see any hair on that young body, just a dark frizz on his lower legs that Mike noticed when stripping off the socks and then the jeans.

"Those are fine, Alex, just leave them on."

“Must not take these off,” the boy concedes in a grave mumble. “Not a good idea to take these off.”

He sprawls onto the bed and lets Mike cover him, his eyes droop shut in exhaustion but then reopen slightly and find Mike’s face. “I remember when you kissed me,” he almost whispers, one arm reaches up and drapes itself around the man’s neck, keeping him close. “I think I remember, I’m pretty sure, one day when you kissed me.”

“When? What’re you talking about?”

“Long time ago, you kissed me, right? Right? Say yes.”

“Could be,” Mike says, the boy’s fingers are playing with the collar of his jacket. “When you were little. Why? Was that a bad thing?”

“No, not a bad thing, no way. Do you sell drugs?”

“Not anymore.”

“Do you smoke weed?”

“Not anymore.”

“Do you have AIDS?”

“Christ no! I mean I’ve never been tested, but no, I don’t, I don’t.”

“Did the cops come to your house because of. . . what? Are you gay?”

“Damn, kid, what kind of interrogation is this?”

“It’s your turn to answer questions,” Alex reminds the man, one hand still on Mike’s neck, other hand feeling at Mike’s stubbly scalp, mustache, whiskers, like a blind boy exploring with his fingertips. “Tell me.”

“Let’s forget about the cops, man. Some neighbors called them because of all the kids hanging around, making too much noise, that kind of stuff. OK?”

“Are you gay? Because those kids used to say, to talk, you know, about things.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Just tell me,” the boy says, still in that whispery voice, eyes barely open.

“This isn’t a good idea.”

“My parents don’t care, honest, don’t be a wuss.”

“You’ve talked to your parents about me? About this?”

“Yes yes yes, I’m telling you, you don’t believe me, they don’t care, they like you. OK? Big wuss. Maybe I’m gay, too. OK? See?”

“Because you look at gay porn on the Internet?”

“I dunno, it’s possible.”

“Is this a trick?”

“A trick,” Alex laughs softly. “You’re such a dummy. Maybe a person, maybe a guy, it’s complicated, maybe you can mess around with other guys and not be gay.”

“I guess so.”

“Maybe there’s different ways of being gay.”

“Definitely.”

“Gay could be a stupid label, like calling Tiger Woods black, you know Tiger Woods, he’s that golfer and he’s white and Native American and African

American and his mother she's from Thailand but everybody calls him black. That's stupid."

"You're right," Mike says, he knows he shouldn't, not now, certainly not now, but he puts his hand on the boy's head and lets his fingers nestle into all of that shaggy black hair. The boy keeps murmuring, he's saying, "It's like me and Ray, we're a little bit of everything, lots of stuff, but everybody thinks he's black and I'm like Latino or whatever but it's more complicated. What was I talking about? Oh yeah, it's like gay. Maybe it's more complicated."

"You're right. About everything."

"Say more. Tell me."

"OK, well, OK," Mike finally says, he needs to give the boy some kind of answer and it's very late, it's almost midnight, he has to go. "Let's just say I'm not hetero, I'm not straight, you could say I'm gay or queer, the words don't matter, it's all just political bullshit at this point."

"Awesome, you're right."

"It's more complex, subtle, it's dangerous, people won't talk about the realities of it, of sex, the different realities, it's politics now and compromise and all about being normal, even if you're gay you have to be normal, well fuck it, let's just say I'm an outlaw, maybe that's the best word, an outlaw, I'm not hetero but I'm not some nice normal gay guy who wants to get married to some other old queen and be a middle-class couple, shit, that's not me, OK, you want to know, so OK then, call

me an outlaw queer, a renegade queer, that's the best description."

The boy just stares with those heavy-lidded and bloodshot eyes, the silence is becoming ominous, Mike is already regretting his impulsive tirade and wondering how best to backtrack when Alex finally grins. "Wow, Mike, you can really talk."

"Too much, I'm afraid."

"That was extremely amazing, dude, maybe I'm drunk, this is possible that I might be drunk, don't laugh, it's possible but wow, that's what I'll be from now on, a complex and subtle outlaw queer, yeah, that's so much better than being normal."

"Oh great, I'm a role model corrupting America's youth."

"Yes! Exactly! I'm all for corruption. Ray thinks I'm a pervert."

"You've told me, I know."

"I guess he's right because I'm totally in favor of corruption and depravity, I say hooray for corruption, that's my motto!"

"You're unbelievable."

"Sounds familiar, déjà vu," Alex says, he's been holding onto Mike's neck this whole time, fingertipping his face, staring at him. "Last time I slept at Ray's? When was that?"

"Last Saturday?"

"Last Saturday, right, last Saturday, that's when I stayed overnight and for the first time, never mind

everything, that part is stupid, but we were talking about Ray, I was saying something about Ray. . .”

“Sleeping at his house.”

“Oh right, right, at Ray’s I ended up sleeping with no underpants, just like in a long shirt, it was the first time I ever tried it and it was amazing, so what am I saying, it was amazing and so now I’ve been experimenting, I don’t wear anything now, this last week, just au naturel is what it’s called, no underwear or anything.”

“OK.”

“I’m just warning you,” Alex says, he finally releases Mike and reaches with both hands beneath the covers and does a brief contortion, even this simple maneuver becomes a chore but eventually he manages, that’s better, like this, and he produces the underpants he was just wearing, those white briefs with the gray HANES HANES HANES around the waistband, he holds them up in one hand for the man to see, a magician’s flourish, then lets his hand and the undies drop against his chest, that’s all, he’s exhausted. “Now you know.”

“Sure,” Mike says, “thanks for the information.”

“It’s an experiment to see, to test which way is best, most comfortable, and this way is pretty good, it’s all for science, don’t worry.”

“So you’re comfortable? Everything’s OK? Can you doze off now?”

“I think so,” Alex says in a sleepy little voice, he hands the underpants to Mike and pulls the sheet and the blanket up to his chin and lets out a long, slow breath. “You can pet my hair some more, it’s OK, you don’t have to stop.”

“But I do,” Mike tells him, then puts his hand back anyway and smooths the hair from the boy’s forehead, those dark eyebrows of his are set high and arched alertly even now, even in repose. “I’m going now, Alex.”

“Don’t forget the movie. Tomorrow. You promised.”

“You call me. Just in case you change your mind.”

“I won’t. Change my mind.”

“Call me, make sure.”

“OK, I’ll call you,” Alex says, his eyes have been shut but now he opens them and once more finds Mike’s face. “You really, really talked to me this time, that was cool, very cool, thank you.”

“I hope I don’t regret it.”

“No way, no way, we’re the outlaw pervert club. Was that it? Outlaw what?”

“Never mind. That’s enough for now. And let’s not spread that around for everybody to hear, OK?”

The boy brings forth one hand from beneath his cozy covers and pantomimes a zipper across his lips. “This club always keeps its secrets, have no fear, I’m your trusty amigo and sidekick.”

“OK, sidekick,” Mike says, “get some sleep, sober up, I’ll see you tomorrow.” He starts to turn but Alex

stops him with a hand on his sleeve. “Mike, no, you have to kiss me good night, me and Ray-Ray always kiss good night, so come on, come on, you kiss me!”

The man doesn’t argue, just quickly bends to the boy and gives him a kiss on his puckered and waiting lips, scratchy mustache meeting pubescent velvet. “I remember that other time,” Alex murmurs to him, grinning. “I wasn’t making it up, I remember how you kissed me that time, you kissed me and you tickled me, I remember it, I do.”

“I know, pal, I know. Now go to sleep, go to sleep,” the man says quietly, one more kiss between them and then he leaves. The house’s emptiness and silence feels strangely accusatory as he steals through it on his way out, this is ridiculous what’s happening, he’s just been in Alex’s bedroom with the boy drunk and undressed and no one else home, quite a scene if Daniel and Teresa had come back and found them. Or maybe not. Truth is, Mike didn’t do anything wrong, it would have been Alex who ended up busted and in trouble, Mike was just doing everybody a favor by bringing the kid home, by making sure he was safe, by getting him into bed. Nothing wrong with any of that. Not Mike’s fault that the boy took off all his clothes, and anyway it happened beneath the covers, nothing to see, no real nudity. But what about the kissing? Hey, that was the boy’s idea, too, just a simple good-night kiss, nothing illegal, no big deal. Mike stops on the porch to light a cigarette, it’s OK if Daniel and Teresa show up and find

him, maybe even better that way, he doesn't care. Nothing happened.

Except for those questions. Alex's questions. All of that reckless talk about being gay, being queer, an outlaw queer, so goddamn ridiculous to blabber like that to the kid, no excuse for it. Little by little, day by day, the man can feel himself falling into all of the old risks, the old traps, letting this boy seduce him, bewitch him, no one quite like this Alex Salazar before now, no one, not even those other boys from Tompkins Street, all of this talk about being queer and being a pervert, hooray for corruption, this is all new, a fourteen-year-old calling himself a pervert, how seriously do you take something like that? Is he actually gay? Is he really and truly homosexual? Funny, using those very labels on Alex after just agreeing to their uselessness. Better not to pin him specimen-like with clinical descriptors. Better just to let him be the teenaged boy he is, no creature more sexually omnivorous than that, fiercer and greedier in appetite than a puny word like "gay" can ever encompass or describe.

Too much, his head is aching, Mike flicks his Camel into the street as he walks to his car, still no Daniel and Teresa anywhere in sight. It's OK. The kid is home and safe. No harm done. Alex might not even remember most of this in the morning, just a lot of drunken goofiness and nonsense, a boozy blur. It's OK.

* * *

CHAPTER TEN

Alex calls mid-morning and catches Mike just getting home from his clean-up job at the tavern. The first showing of Billy Elliot is at 11:45 and that's the one they'll see. Mike will take a quick shower and pick up the boy after eleven.

He arrives at the Salazar house at the same time that Daniel and Teresa are returning from church, suddenly he finds himself being ushered inside for coffee and Danish, they all sit at the kitchen table with Alex among them now, even one of the twin daughters has dropped by for breakfast, or maybe it's brunch. There's no problem, of course, with Alex and Mike going to the movie together, Daniel says he's read good reviews of it but he wonders if Mike really wants to miss the football game. Mike says it's fine, they'll be back in time to see the last quarter. And then he'll drive the "critter" back here, same as always. The daughter—her name is Jennifer, her resemblance to Alex is striking—makes a disgusted face at her little brother and calls him a spoiled brat, such a spoiled little brat who always gets whatever he wants. Alex responds with his biggest and brightest and phoniest smile, eyes squinted totally shut, his wordless message is yep, you're right, I'm a spoiled brat, that's me!

At the multiplex, no time to spare, Mike buys a large buttered popcorn for them to share and Alex buys

himself a box of Milk Duds for later. They sit in the middle of a nearly empty theater, Alex chooses the seats according to some precise formula that he always uses, his eye-level needs to be exactly halfway up the screen and dead center from side to side, he'll compromise only when someone else has beaten him to that particular spot. He's been unusually quiet so far today, apologizing as soon as he got into the car for being such an idiot last night, he shouldn't have been drinking, thanks for not narking on me to my parents. It wasn't so bad, Mike told him, we had a good talk, you were fine. Yeah, Alex agreed, you were a good talker last night even though I was probably being a pain, sorry. But then he said no more about it, only fiddled with the radio and complained about the lack of a classical station in Sandburg and asked Mike if he'd ever seen *Immortal Beloved*, that's such a cool and amazing film.

Now they've settled into their seats and the lights have gone down and *Billy Elliot* is jumping on his bed to *Cosmic Dancer*. Alex leans against Mike while they share the popcorn and stays leaning against him even when the popcorn is gone, he keeps snuggling closer as the movie plays: Billy taking dance lessons, Billy letting himself be painted with lipstick by his best friend, Billy dancing defiantly for his father. Mike sneaks an occasional glance at Alex slouched against him, the boy's face is a dim silhouette in the screen's glare, a soft-chinned and childish silhouette, his mouth is open, he stares transfixed, finally he catches Mike glancing at

him and he grins and slumps low enough to rest his head against the man's shoulder. That's how they watch the rest of the movie—Billy's audition, Billy kissing his friend goodbye, Billy's triumphant Swan Lake—huddled together in the darkness.

Alex is stunned to tears by the film. His eyes are still watery when he gets to the car. Mike waits and waits for some comment from him but finally has to break the silence himself. "That was good, I thought. Very good. What about you? How'd you like it?"

"I can't talk about it yet," Alex says. "Wait a minute." For the next several blocks he stares out his window and pensively chews his fingernails, they're passing through downtown before he can find his voice. "When that comes out on DVD? I'm going to buy it and watch it at least a million times."

"I guess you liked it."

"Oh Mike, that was beyond good. What was your favorite part?"

"Well, let's see, maybe. . . maybe when Billy and his teacher were dancing together, that boogie song."

"Yeah," Alex says, "or when he danced for his father. Or the very beginning when he's jumping on the bed, that slow motion part, very cool. Or the end, that slow motion and freeze frame of Swan Lake, damn, blew me away."

"Good little flic, you're right."

"Did you think he was gay at first?"

"Not really."

“I guess he wasn’t.”

“They made sure he wasn’t. Very deliberate. He had to be straight.”

“Because why?”

“To play against the stereotype. To make it more accessible. You can be straight and manly and still like ballet and so on.”

“But his friend was gay.”

“Yeah, he was, interesting, the gay friend was like a compromise or a concession, we don’t want Billy to be gay but his friend can be, like a gay surrogate.”

“It’s all politics.”

“Something like that.”

“Anyway,” Alex says, “it blew me away. Thanks for taking me.”

“No problem.”

Mike was right about the football game, the fourth quarter is just starting when he and the boy get back. Alex flops onto the couch and starts eating his Milk Duds. His mind is still on the film. “Those shorts that Billy wore,” he says to Mike. “Did you notice those shorts?”

“Yeah, I noticed. They were real shorts. Not like the baggy shit that you boys. . . oh hell, never mind.”

“Those things were so much shorter and tighter. Did guys really wear them?”

“You know they did. Of course. You’ve seen other movies, TV shows, pictures. Like I said, those were real shorts.”

“And now? What are they now?”

“Short pants. Baggy short pants. You guys don’t wear shorts anymore, not real ones.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Don’t ask me,” Mike says, he’s been fiddling with the television and checking the thermostat and opening a new pack of cigarettes while having this discussion, now he comes to the couch and lifts the boy’s legs to make room for himself and then replaces the legs across his own lap once he’s taken his seat. “You’re the ones who want to dress like a bunch of goddamn clowns, you tell me why.”

“It’s just the style.”

“Styles change. Styles come and go. You’re fourteen and you’ve been dressing this way since before you can remember. No, it’s not just a style. It’s a uniform, man. It’s a goddamn dress code. So don’t ask me why.”

“You give me much to contemplate,” Alex says in a funny foreign accent of his own invention, something between Russian and German. He’s silent after that, maybe out of courtesy to Mike while the game is on, maybe thinking about the film, maybe a little hung-over from last night. Mike concentrates on the game and leaves him be, only after the Bears have beaten the Colts does he fully notice how quiet the boy has become, all day he’s been abnormally subdued but now he’s stopped talking altogether, he’s staring vacantly at the TV and nibbling a Milk Dud with his front teeth. Mike finally

asks him if he's feeling OK. Alex looks up with an oddly forlorn expression and nods. Mike says, "Are you sure? Something about last night upset you?"

"Last night? Like what?"

"Well, you know, we were talking about some sensitive shit, personal stuff, maybe too much."

"I remember we talked a lot, I remember most of it, just sort of fuzzy. But I wasn't thinking about that."

"What then?"

"Tomorrow. When I go back to school," the boy says, turns out he's been worrying about his new schedule, his new gym class, the bullies. Especially the bullies and what they might do when they finally catch him alone after school. "If I had the gun, my dad's gun, maybe I could at least scare them with. . ."

"No way," Mike cuts him off, he still has the boy's legs across his lap and now gives them a slap or a spank to the knees, probably harder than intended, he has a dangerously heavy hand. "You're completely obsessed with that gun. D'you remember what you said about it last night? About using it on yourself?"

"Did I? Really? I'm sorry, Mike, I'm an asshole."

"Yeah, you are. When you talk about shooting yourself or other people you're a major asshole."

"But what am I going to do? These guys want to hurt me, they're not fooling around, I feel like I'm going crazy."

“We’ll just have to discourage them,” Mike says, a menacing edge to his voice that Alex has never heard before. “How many are there?”

“Three of them.”

“Describe them. Give me details.”

Alex sits up halfway against the arm of the couch, suddenly he can sense a purpose in Mike’s voice and Mike’s eyes, a determination to end this problem once and for all. He provides every bit of information he thinks might be relevant: the three guys are seniors; they’re white; they’re big, not gigantic big but big enough, all six-footers or better, two of them are even on the football team; they always hang together at school and after school; they drive their own cars, which means they can stay around after school as long as they want, looking for trouble; Clay Olsen, the one who’s not a football player and impresses Alex as genuinely psychopathic, something cross-eyed and demented in his gaze, seems to be the leader of the pack, although Doug Setzer can’t be overlooked, there’s a meanness in his eyes that feels snakelike and chilling; the third one, Ron Maddox, is the biggest and probably the dumbest, he just follows the lead of the other two. Mike listens to this report, nodding and nodding along as Alex talks, there’s a contemplative silence between them afterwards and then the man makes his decision. “OK, Alex, now listen, here’s what we’re going to do. Unless you want me to stay out of it.”

“No, please, go ahead and tell me what to do.”

“Because if I get involved, man, then we’ve got a verbal contract, you and me. We do whatever I say.”

“Cool. I’m in your hands. Go ahead.”

“Well, it’s simple enough,” Mike says, pausing to light a Camel, Alex is waiting and watching and nibbling another Milk Dud. “First thing is for you to forget about that gun from now on. . .”

“That fucking gun.”

“Yeah, that fucking gun. I know we’ve been over this again and again but this is your final warning. No more gun. You don’t even think about it from now on. You don’t touch it, you don’t go near it. Right? You agree to that and we’ll move on.”

“I already swore a sacred oath.”

“This ain’t a joke, son.”

“I know, I know, I’m being completely serious this time. I trust you. I’ll do whatever you say.”

“OK, good enough. You do that and I’ll get rid of those worthless skunks for you. I’ll take care of them.”

“How can you do that?”

“Persuasion.”

“But how? I mean, like a Mafia thing? I don’t want you getting into trouble because of me.”

“No trouble. Quick and clean and painless. No parents, no teachers, everything’s fine.”

“But you told me before to talk to my teachers and my guidance counselor and. . .”

“And you did and that’s good, being in a different gym class is good. I’m just helping out, tying up loose ends. It’s something I know how to do.”

“Fighting?”

“Not necessarily. Not every time. Sometimes talking is enough.”

“Oh man, Mike, if you could actually do something like that. . .”

“I’ve done it a few times.”

“If you could do that, wow, I’d be your faithful servant forever!”

Mike looks at his watch, he’d like to take a nap. “No, I don’t want you to be my servant. Your part of the deal is staying away from the gun, that’s first and most important. . .”

“Agreed, totally, utterly.”

“Plus, and this is optional, I can’t force you. . .”

“Anything, you just ask.”

“I’d like you to start working out, maybe lift some weights, maybe I could even give you some help with self-defense, some basic karate, how to throw a punch.”

“Really? That would be awesome. What’s your black belt in?”

“It’s just a first degree belt in Washin-ryu karate. I’m no master.”

Alex scoots forward on the couch to bring himself closer to Mike, one more scoot and he’d be sitting on the man’s lap. “Dude, I’m getting excited! You’d teach me?”

“Some basics, yeah. But listen, this ain’t The Karate Kid, nothing like that. It’s just a way of making yourself stronger, more confident, you know. It’s something positive. It’s power.”

“Very, very cool,” the boy says, he takes one of Mike’s hands and folds the thick fingers into a fist and holds it like a big chunk of granite in both of his own cradled hands. “So that’s my part of the deal? No problem! When do we start?”

“That’s up to you.”

“Maybe on days after school, I’m just thinking, maybe I could come over here and I could work out.”

“Maybe.”

“Because I’m out of school by three o’clock and you don’t start work until five.”

“That’s true.”

“And I can always ride back to town with you, just drop me at Mario’s and I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

“You’ve got this all worked out.”

“I’m excited, like I said,” Alex nods eagerly, he lifts Mike’s fist and pretends to punch himself in the face with it, pow on the chin, bam in the nose, throwing his own head back each time in dramatic slow motion, this is what he imagines happening to his three enemies. Mike laughs at him and uses his free hand to give the boy’s cheek a gentle swat. Alex laughs back, happier now, the face of some Polynesian cherub. He looks at his Swatch. “What about your nap?”

“Thanks for remembering,” Mike says. “Am I permitted to retire for a snooze?”

“Sure. But Mike? What’s going to happen tomorrow? What’s your exact plan?”

“No big plan. I’ll meet you after school, we’ll find those guys, we’ll reach an understanding.”

“That’s it?” “Simple is always best,” the man says, then heads to the bedroom for his nap.

By the time he drives Alex home at five o’clock, the boy’s euphoria has faded, he’s gone quiet again, broody, fretful. He thanks Mike once more for taking him to the movie, it was great, he loved it, then he leans across the seat and gives the man a goodbye kiss on the lips, Mike was expecting it this time so kisses him back. “Don’t worry,” the man tells him, “you’ll be OK, you’ll be fine.” The boy nods and sneaks one more kiss, then he’s out of the car and gone.

Strange day, Mike thinks, nothing like he expected. The whole mess involving those punks at Alex’s school is no big deal, he spent two years as a tavern bouncer handling worse than that, he’ll worry about it tomorrow. No, what’s strange to Mike is Alex’s behavior, after last night and all of that talk about outlaw queers and perverts and hooray for corruption, and after the boy’s flirty routine about sleeping nude, after all of that, well, Mike was expecting a different Alex, anticipating with an uneasy mix of dread and excitement that the kid would be either spooked and standoffish or encouraged to some even bolder type of sexual mischief. Certainly,

Mike was figuring, he and this boy had reached some critical point in their new friendship and now, somehow, he would either have to backpedal and repair the damage or cope with the kid's aroused and reckless libido. But, in reality, Alex seemed no different, only quieter and more moody because of his troubles at school—nothing to do with Mike, nothing to do with last night, nothing to do with sex.

* * *

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alex's first stop at school Monday morning is Mister Fitzgerald's office, where he picks up a copy of his revised schedule and receives a handshake of encouragement from the counselor himself. The man also assures him that "the three young gentlemen in question" are being counseled separately, that measures are being considered—but Alex knows, along with everyone else, that Doug Setzer and Ron Maddox are virtually untouchable at Sandburg High because of their status as football players, suspending or expelling them would be too controversial, wildly unpopular. Clay Olsen, with his history of bullying and troublemaking and with no athletic value to the school, might find himself in bigger trouble, but probably just enough to fuel his anger toward Alex and make him even more dangerous.

At lunch Alex reports to Carrie and Jeff that his new gym class is OK, it went well, it seems to be fairly psycho-free. Carrie is delighted, she sees nothing but blue skies from now on, that's how she puts it, nothing but blue skies. But Jeff is disgusted by the whole situation, these same three guys and several others have been harassing him repeatedly this year in the hallways and the washrooms, calling him a freak and a faggot, tripping him, pelting him with wads of wet toilet paper. He tells Alex that there's a fascist jockocracy running the

school, always has been, and it's just about time for somebody to make the motherfuckers pay. Time for retribution, he says. Carrie shakes her head and puts her hands to her ears, she hates this, she tells Jeff to stop saying these horrible things, you're scaring me to death. Jeff rolls his eyes and reminds her that these are dark days, these are judgment days, his words come out slightly lisped because of the new stud in his tongue, already he has both ears pierced and he's planning on a nose ring sometime soon, of course his hair is platinum and spiked and on some days, like today, he gives himself raccoon eyes with mascara. He tries, not for the first time, to make Carrie understand the gravity of the situation, these people here are vermin and somebody needs to make them pay. He asks Alex to back him up, dude, come on, you know I'm right, it's time for some serious wrath of God action. Alex sympathizes, totally sympathizes, Jesus Christ yes, but he doesn't think another Columbine would be a good idea and anyway he's solving the problem in other ways—all of this he says while distracted, while peering at Jeff and wondering how this other boy would look in not just mascara but also lipstick, just like that scene in Billy Elliot, a bright red shade of lipstick.

For the rest of that day, through each of his remaining classes, Alex keeps glancing at the clocks and at his own Swatch to monitor the time, feeling its progression like a steadily tightening knot in his stomach. Twice he catches a glimpse of his three

enemies in the hallways between classes. One time he and Clay Olsen lock eyes and Olsen aims that gunslinger's finger at him, bang, you're dead. Alex looks away and keeps walking.

When the last bell of the day finally rings, Alex can hardly control his panic as he gathers what he needs from his locker. Some books, his black leather jacket, his Yankees cap. He's just finishing, ready to go, when a blow from behind propels him violently into the locker's metal door, face-first into that metal door, the shock of it leaves him breathless and whiplashed and only blearily aware at first of the blood from his nose and then the pain spreading behind his eyes, through his head. He manages to turn and see Olsen and Doug Setzer but can't tell who hit him from behind, it doesn't matter, and oh there's Ron Maddox didn't see him at first he's here too, laughing laughing all of them laughing at this hilarious joke, then it's strange but even Carrie and Jeff are here and Jeff is baiting the three assholes, you motherfuckers, you worthless pieces of shit motherfuckers, keeping his voice low enough to escape the attention of any adults who might intervene, he doesn't want that, he wants this settled in his own way, he dares the motherfuckers to meet them outside in the parking lot, Olsen says that's perfect you faggot, ten minutes, we'll slaughter you pussy bitches outside in ten minutes. Carrie is crying but Jeff ignores her and says I have to stop at my locker first and then we'll have fucking judgment day, Alex goes along, he's holding his nose with Carrie's handkerchief

and his vision is blurred from the tears in his eyes, they're tears of pain not of weeping, Carrie is begging the boys to stop this, stop this, it's so stupid and unnecessary, let's find a teacher or let's just leave, but Jeff has zoned out and isn't even listening as he grabs something from his locker and puts it into his bookbag and says come on, this is perfect, this is perfect, this is perfect.

Outside, they're now outside, an Indian-summery November afternoon that felt normal and fine until a few minutes ago but now feels warped and dizzy and unreal, the impossible weirdness of nightmare, Alex hasn't said a word since he was blindsided into the door of his locker, he's like the dazed survivor of a car crash, the handkerchief he has clasped to his face is soaked scarlet with the blood from his nose and maybe from his lip or his mouth, he's not sure, Carrie begs him once more to come back inside and find a teacher, this is insane, but Alex keeps following Jeff and reminding himself that somehow and somewhere in this nightmare he's supposed to meet Mike, where exactly he can't quite figure, supposed to find Mike, that was the plan, find Mike, meet Mike, so simple, but now there's only Carrie crying beside him and Jeff rushing ahead of them across the parking lot where that Halloween bonfire was burning just nine days ago, impossible, another lifetime, Jeff rushing ahead of them and clutching that bookbag and muttering, muttering to himself, shaking his head and muttering like someone locked in an argument.

Olsen and Maddox and Setzer are at the south end of the lot where the gravel gives way to a grassy field and, beyond that, to a wooded gully and its trickling creek. Alex stops beside Jeff and looks around, this is all wrong but he doesn't know how to fix it, he came out here to find Mike, to meet Mike, but now that makes no sense and now he can see into Jeff's bag where a silver 9mm has been smuggled, Carrie sees it too and lets out a horrified shriek that she muffles with her own hand, Jeff is shaking and still muttering at himself you idiot you fucking coward you fucking loser coward. Olsen walks right up to them with his cross-eyed smirk and says you pussy faggots are dead, then glares at Carrie and says tell this fat fuckin bitch to shut up, who the fuck is she, your mother? Jeff does nothing but stare at the ground and mutter, this is some kind of emotional meltdown he's having right here in the parking lot, Carrie grabs the bookbag from him and hugs it to her chest and backs away, come on she yells at Jeff and Alex but Olsen laughs and says these cocksuckers ain't goin anywhere. And it's true, Alex wipes away the tears that keep welling in his eyes and looks around once more and realizes how faraway the school is, a few other students are getting into their cars and leaving the lot but none of them seem substantial or connected to what's happening here, the three goons are standing directly in front of him, or no, just two of them are in front and Ron Maddox is now behind him, no way to outfight them or outrun them, there's only one solution and Jeff was right

but now Jeff is totally freaked out and useless so Alex turns to Carrie and reaches for the bag and its lethal contraband but the girl screams no and backs away another step, she's yelling I'm sorry I'm sorry but no you can't, no you can't! Then it's too late anyway as Maddox knocks the Yankees cap from Alex's head and Setzer crumples Jeff with a knee to the balls and then Alex himself is walloped by some new and astonishing pain somewhere in his stomach, his back, he's been hit but he doesn't know exactly how or where and he doesn't know exactly how or why he's moving now across the grass toward those distant trees, he and Jeff both being dragged toward the trees with shoves and kicks and snarly voices saying we need some privacy don't wanna have no fuckin audience I can't believe you cocksuckers are so stupid this'll be fun I don't think you'll be runnin your faggot mouth after this 'cause baby's gonna learn his lesson and this other faggot too believe me man you ain't never gonna forget this we're gonna have us a real party!

But then they stop moving toward the trees and Alex is suddenly free, bent with pain in his gut but free to take a breath and wipe the blood from his nose and spit the blood from his mouth and see that Olsen and Maddox and Setzer have all turned to look back toward the school, someone is shouting at them, Alex didn't hear the voice until now but he knows it sure enough, it's Mike's voice, Mike's big rumbly voice shouting don't move, not another step, not another fucking step you

pieces of garbage. Olsen and the others exchange quick and bewildered glances. Who the fuck is that? Have you ever seen him before? Anybody know what's goin on here? Alex straightens himself and finds Jeff and grabs him by the arm and starts back toward Mike, Clay Olsen says hey and reaches to stop them but Alex yowls like a fury and violently slaps away the outreached hand and keeps walking.

Mike pauses as he meets Alex and Jeff coming the other way, he tells them not to worry, you're OK now, just wait here. He's wearing his Bears cap and his sunglasses and a blue work shirt with the sleeves rolled up onto his Paul Bunyan forearms. He continues down the grassy slope to the threesome still standing there and staring, all three of them take an involuntary step backward as he comes upon them and abruptly halts his menacing stride directly in front of Clay Olsen, he's big enough anyway but on the slight upslope he looms before them like some avenging titan. Rule number one, he says to all of them, is that you stay away from Alex and his friends. Rule number two is that you stay away from Alex and his friends. And rule number three is, well, you know. Olsen is glaring at him with that deranged cross-eyed grin and starts to respond who the fuck are—but that's as far as he gets before Mike's hand is on his throat to end the discussion. I don't want to hear your voice, the man says, because listening to you would make me puke, listening to you would make me crazy, I might have to beat the living shit out of you. He gives a

slight push and sends Clay Olsen sprawling onto his back. Ron Maddox, the football-playing jock who's been muscling and bullying other kids since elementary school, instinctively lunges at Mike and shoves him with a powerful straight-arm to the chest—but nothing happens. He might as well have straight-armed a stone wall. He's balling his fist for a punch when Mike suddenly hunches and delivers a wicked jab to his gut that drops him gasping to his knees, he stays there like that for a stunned moment and then lurches forward from the waist and vomits at Mike's feet. Doug Setzer, last one standing, backs away and holds up both hands in a hopeless gesture of surrender. Mike readjusts his cap and says stand up, children, we're not finished. Olsen and Maddox climb to their feet and wait for the man's next pronouncement. "You didn't seem to understand me the first time," Mike tells them. "Should we go over the rules one more time?"

"Fuck it, man, OK OK, we get the message," Doug Setzer mumbles, he seems to have temporarily replaced Clay Olsen as ringleader and spokesman. Mike shrugs, a theatrical shrug of skepticism that says maybe that's true but I still need convincing. "Let me just emphasize a few points, gentlemen. Starting right now you all need to find a new hobby because this little horror show of yours is over. It's finished. You understand me?"

"Fuck, dude, we already. . ."

"It's finished," Mike continues, nodding, arms crossed, you'd swear his biceps would rip the fabric of

his sleeves. “You don’t go near Alex and his friends from now on. You don’t touch them, you don’t look at them, you don’t even know they exist after today. Are we all straight on this?” There’s a grumbled yeah from Setzer and a half-hearted nodding of heads from the other two. Mike takes a step toward them. “Let’s try this again. Are we all straight on this point?”

“Yes, OK, yes,” Setzer and Maddox say almost in unison, only Clay Olsen fails to respond, he’s standing between the other two and his gaze is fixed on the ground, for once there’s no smirk on his face. Mike takes off his sunglasses and leans forward like an impatient drill sergeant forcing eye contact with a stubborn recruit. “What’s wrong, son? Do we have a problem?”

“No.”

“Do you understand the rules from now on?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“More politely, son, and more convincingly. Because right now I’m still not feeling happy.”

“Yes, damn, I understand,” Olsen says in a horsewhipped voice, he’s a child again and this man in his face is some father from hell. Mike nods slowly, looking now at each of them in turn, then back again. “OK,” he finally says, “one last reminder. Any of you come near Alex and his friends after today and I’ll know about it, believe me, I’ll know about it and I’ll come after you. Believe this with every bit of your heart and soul, children. I will come after you, I will find you, and

I will bring you agony and destruction like you can't even begin to imagine. Understand?"

The chorus of affirmatives comes more quickly and loudly this time. Ron Maddox, who's still holding his stomach and trying to get his wind, dares to repeat everyone's original question. "No offense, dude, but who the fuck are you?"

"Hell, son, I'm God Almighty and my name cannot be uttered by mortal tongue," Mike grins. "Pray that you never meet me again." He turns and trudges up the grassy slope toward Alex and Jeff.

Carrie has joined the boys by now and all of them have been watching and listening to Mike's performance. No one speaks as the man steps among them, Mike just nods and puts his left arm around Jeff and his right arm around Alex and Carrie and shepherds them all back to the parking lot. There's a strange comfort in this silence and in the steady tramp-tramp of their feet, this walk up the slope and then across the lot to the street is a trek back from nightmare to a world suddenly real again, recognizable, the sunlight and the breeze and the noise of traffic all potent evidence of that world resurrected and whole and safe. Mike finally brings the group to a halt on the sidewalk to assess the damage. Alex is still using the blood-soaked handkerchief to dab at his nose and his mouth, Jeff is glassy-eyed and ball-sore and rumped but otherwise OK, Carrie is shaking her head and sniffing back tears, she's clinging with desperate tenacity to Jeff's bookbag

and Alex's Yankees cap. Mike checks Alex's nose with gentle fingers. "It's not broken," he decides. "A bloody mess but not broken. And you've got a lovely split lip, too. You'll be all right." He turns to Jeff and asks the boy how he's feeling, Jeff mumbles OK, the kid still has no idea who this huge guy might be and Mike can see the confusion in his eyes. "Listen," the man says, "maybe we should take a walk to my apartment, it's over in the Woodlands, I'll get my car and give everybody a ride home. My name is Mike. I'm a friend of Alex's."

"This is Mike Burroughs," Alex promptly confirms, suddenly he's found his voice and his mental focus. "He's great. Come on, we'll go with him, he'll give us a ride." His words are a little slushy and thick-tongued from his injuries, he sounds like a boxer after an especially rough bout. Both Carrie and Jeff have missed their bus and so they accept this offer readily enough, even now Carrie won't release her grip on Jeff's bag, Jeff will never get that gun back and he probably knows it and he's probably grateful, the trauma of this afternoon and the fear and the shame are specters that will never leave him. Carrie also has Alex's cap, something she's happy to return now as they begin their hike to the Woodlands. Mike points to it newly restored on Alex's head and says, "That's your lucky hat from now on, pal. Your young lady friend here knows what I'm talking about, don't you?" Carrie gives a vigorous nod and even smiles, finally the shock is fading, she and Mike spend the next few minutes telling the boys exactly what

preceded their unlikely rescue: how Mike decided to walk to the school today instead of driving; how he circled the building twice searching for Alex at each of the exits; how he finally wandered to the parking lot hoping to find the boy, saw no trace of him and was about to move on and search elsewhere when he noticed some girl pacing frantically and sobbing and then beginning to run back toward the school where she would have sought desperately for help except that Mike now saw and recognized the Yankees cap she was holding, Alex's familiar Yankees cap, and stopped her—hey, hold on, settle down, do you know Alex Salazar, where is he? And, well, you guys know the rest.

By the time they reach his apartment, Mike has learned Jeff's name and Carrie's name and where they both live, it's a brief stopover just to guzzle some water and to get Alex cleaned up, his nose and his lip have mostly clotted and stopped bleeding and now, with his face washed, he doesn't look so badly pummeled. The kids are becoming more and more spirited and talkative as time passes, even Jeff seems unusually animated, no one will ever really understand what hellfire he suffered through today, now he feels the continued shame of it but also the exhilaration of someone who just walked away from a plane crash, astonished to be alive.

It's Jeff, about fifteen minutes later, who gets delivered home first, he lives a mile or so even farther east of town than Mike in a trailer park called Prairie Gardens, it's OK here, he says, but he misses his old

house in Stonerville. He hesitates before leaving the car, any show of sentiment makes him uncomfortable but he needs to thank Mike, he wants to thank him, it's like I owe you some kind of gigantic favor, he finally says, no bull, you were like some total superhero back there, it's something I'll never forget. Again he hesitates and then extends his hand, Mike takes it and shakes it and returns a nod of appreciation. Only now does Jeff glance around at Carrie in the back seat, she's been conferring quietly with Alex about the bookbag and its deadly contents and now Jeff simply looks at the bag without comment and says I'll catch you guys later. He'll get the bag and his books back tomorrow, but meanwhile he'll accept whatever decision the others reach about that gun, that 9mm purchased about a month ago over the Internet by Jeff and one of his Stonerville bandmates with vaguely apocalyptic visions dancing between them, it was Jeff who ended up smuggling it into his locker for some ideal moment of reckoning, some opportune doomsday, finally today that ideal moment arrived but Jeff's fantasized blaze of glory turned into an agony of humiliation and terror that will keep him shaky for the rest of the week.

It's Carrie's turn next, her home is all the way over on the southwest side and the crosstown trip gives her and Alex enough time to tell Mike about the gun, to show it to him, to ask for his help. The man listens and takes a look at the silver 9mm without ever touching it, he can't quite hide the suspicion in his voice when he

says, once more, please tell me who owns this gun? He catches Alex's eye in the rearview mirror. You said it belongs to Jeff? Alex knows what Mike is thinking but before he can say anything Carrie has taken over and is explaining yes, definitely yes, she knows it's Jeff's and she knows how he got it, he was bragging about it last week and she should've said something or told somebody but she was afraid. OK, Mike says, I'll take it, I'll get rid of it, don't worry.

At her house now, time to say goodbye, Carrie smiles and weeps simultaneously and kisses Alex and then kisses Mike on his whiskery cheek and thanks him a million million times, you saved these stupid stupid boys and I think you're a real-life hero, Mister Burroughs, you were wonderful.

"Well, next stop the Salazar house," Mike says when he and Alex are finally alone in the car, the boy has moved to the front seat and nods in silent agreement, Mike mistakes this sudden silence for hurt or angry feelings about Jeff's gun. "Sorry I was suspicious about that damn thing," he says to the boy, pointing a thumb at the bookbag in the back seat. "I should've trusted you."

Alex stares at him and shakes his head, his lip is bleeding again but not badly, after a moment he asks Mike to please pull over, right here is good, just for a minute. As soon as the car is stopped he leans over from his bucket seat to reach his arms around the man, he can't say anything yet, Mike can hear him and feel him sniffing and softly crying so he just holds him and waits.

Alex manages to compose himself quickly enough but even then keeps his head against Mike's chest. "How can you sit here and apologize to me? Jesus. You're such a jerk."

"I thought you were pissed off."

"Pissed off? At you? Mike, you saved my life," the boy says, lifting his head now and sitting back, a drop of blood has smeared itself on his chin. "That was the greatest thing I ever saw. Don't you know that?"

"Hell, they were just kids, no big deal."

"No big deal," Alex mimics. "Anyway, I can't even tell you. What you did. I'll love you forever for that."

"Don't exaggerate."

"You dummy, I said I'll love you forever and I mean it! I will!"

"OK fine, I believe you," Mike laughs. "Hey, what about your parents? How much of this are they going to hear about?"

"All of it. Don't you think? They should know what happened. They should know what you did."

"You can leave that part out, it's not necessary."

"I want to tell them, I'm going to, definitely."

"OK then. I trust you."

"So, all right, I guess we should go. I'm ready," Alex says. "Oh but wait, but first, I almost forgot, I have to kiss you!" Again he leans forward and puts one hand behind Mike's head to pull him lower and closer and then carefully he presses his lips to the man's, Mike can taste the boy's blood, they lean apart for a moment after

that and Mike glances out the windows at the quiet street, there's no one nearby and no one watching so he looks at Alex and smiles and they lean together for another kiss and another taste of the boy's blood on both of their lips. This time when they separate, Mike licks his thumb to make it wet and then uses it to wipe away the smear of blood from Alex's chin. The boy grins as the man gently cleans him.

* * *

CHAPTER TWELVE

Winter has done its worst and Sandburg has probably seen the last of its snow and arctic cold for this season, Alex is glad, he prefers warm weather and summer clothing, he's a tropical boy at heart. This year spring also means the school musical, totally exciting. Carrie didn't manage to get a part this time (besides the Narrator, there's not much for a female to play in Dreamcoat and the senior and junior girls had priority) but Alex landed the role of Benjamin and he loves it, so much fun, not just acting this time but singing and dancing too. He never stops rehearsing his lines and his steps—at school, at home, at Mike's—mostly he sings chorus with the other brothers of Joseph, Benjamin is the baby, that's why it's so perfect, Alex says, Benjamin is the young cutie that everyone loves, it's so awesome to play him, there's even a number featuring him called Benjamin Calypso when Alex really gets to shine, mugging and dancing and hamming it up while his brothers sing his praises in defense of his innocence—this is what I was born to do, the boy says. His lesser highlights are a few featured lines in some other songs (“... and if we have the time we could see the Sphinx!”), plus all of that dancing and backup singing for the other brothers, his voice isn't trained or remarkable for its vibrato or timbre or portamento but it's strong and confident and pitch perfect, even Mike was surprised to

hear him the first time—damn, he said, you can really sing!

Of course more happened this winter than just Alex preparing and rehearsing for Dreamcoat. There was a big Super Bowl party at Ray's house end of January, first time Mike had seen the whole Salazar clan since Christmas, also the first time he'd seen them since Alex became his lover, he was nervous about it and a little concerned that Alex himself might behave or speak indiscreetly, hell, even before this the boy was always hugging and kissing and making a fuss over him so what might he do now? But Alex is a cunning rascal and seemed his usual convivial and affectionate self—sometimes sitting with Mike and sometimes not, friendly with everyone, talkative, bored by the football game itself, playing video games with some younger neighbor kids and Ray's little sister, same old Alex. Mike was foolish to doubt him. Next day, when they were alone and naked and making love, Alex said remember, Mike, I'm an actor.

Sunday before Valentine's was a landmark for the boy. He fixed brunch for his parents and mentioned to them, by the way, that he'd be attending a meeting of some new Gay Student Alliance tomorrow after school, the principal was letting them use the library at least for this first time. Alex said it might be interesting, I want to go and check it out. This was no earth-shattering announcement or revelation, Alex had made comments before about the possibility of his being bisexual or even

gay and about his disdain for what he, articulate lad, called the “cult of the normal”—but this seemed a pretty solid and unambiguous statement of sexuality. When his parents said sure, that’s your decision to make, just be positive you’re doing this for yourself and not for anyone else, Alex smiled patiently and said no, this isn’t for Mike’s benefit, I see your point but this is strictly my own deal, believe me, I’m here and I’m queer and I need more blueberry pancakes. That was the moment. No more ambiguity. His parents couldn’t keep from laughing and his mother had to shake her head and say my Lord, Alex, never a dull moment.

Alex, to be truthful, was more curious than enthused about that Gay Student Alliance, it was a junior named Josh Vantriglia who urged him to attend. Josh is one of those boys from theater who was dancing with Alex on New Year’s Eve and who takes his gay politics very seriously—which is precisely why Alex attended only one meeting of the Alliance and never went back. He told his parents only that it wasn’t worth his time right now but he gave Mike a fuller explanation, he said those kids are nice enough (eight of them, six boys and two girls) but they’re all about political and sexual correctness and who’s gay and who’s actually bisexual or just ambivalent or confused, then yak yak yak about the official name for the group—the majority finally decided on Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Students—then there was a long discussion about goals and philosophy and mission and

image, Alex said it got to be just so ridiculous after a while, like I'm sitting there thinking how cute Josh is and, you know, whatever, while they're all going blah blah blah, I mean they're nice but they're all so brainwashed and boring, they all want to grow up and be good upstanding gay members of society, it's so awful and stupid, like if they knew about you and me they'd be all shocked and tsk-tsk and think I'm some victim of sexual abuse or some lame orthodox bullshit like that, they don't even want to be free or make their own choices, they just want to play and pretend and go along with all the fucked-up rules and be normal and fit in and be accepted, god it's so dreadful. And anyway, the boy said, I don't really want to become some kind of gay activist around school, it's so pointless, worse than pointless, I hate political crap, you know, I think a low profile is better for me and you both, it's weird but now I understand why you get paranoid, why you're always so cautious. Mike said yeah, man, like I've told you, this ain't a game. Alex said but it is, it's the best game ever, that's why I don't want to screw it up with that stupid Gay Alliance or whatever it's called, they're just talking and pretending and acting important but this is real, Mike, this is so totally real.

It was at this same time, during February, that Carrie finally found out about Alex being gay, she'd suspected or known in some way for quite a while but now she knew for sure. They were discussing that new gay group at school and one thing led to another and

eventually Alex said yeah, I'm a happy little homo, no big secret, so d'you still love me? She hugged him and got all weepy, dopey me, she said, I'm not sad or anything, I'm happy, I'm so happy you told me, my sweetie. Happy, no doubt, because she could finally stop taking his romantic indifference as a personal rejection, now she knew the truth, also because, let's face it, if she herself couldn't have him as a boyfriend it was some consolation at least that no other girl could have him either. Some other boy was OK, that's no contest, no jealousy there, but some other girl could never have him and that was a relief. Jeff's only response, when he found out, was oh wow, big surprise, I'm so fuckin shocked. The only disquieting moment came a few days later when Carrie asked about Mike, it's none of my business, she said, but is Mister Burroughs gay? Alex surprised himself by immediately answering don't know, don't care, never asked him. There were new rules to this game now and he needed to follow them, more and more he was understanding Mike's cautious attitude. Honestly discussing his own sexuality with his parents and with Carrie and even with Jeff was OK, he wasn't going to hide who or what he was—but he needed to be careful about all of this, suddenly Alex Salazar visiting his friend Mike could become gay novice Alex Salazar visiting gay predator Mike and everything could be ruined. It was time to be quiet and be smart, not the best idea now to be wearing a big “Hey, I'm Homosexual!” sign around his neck. That stuff was fine for Josh

Vantriglia and those other kids who cared about sexuality but not sex, what a joke, Alex felt like saying hey Josh, you're gay, that's great, so come on, let's fuck! Or else what's the point? Why bother forming groups and telling everybody you're queer if it means nothing beyond identity politics and a silly pretense of empowerment, if it means surrendering real sexual freedom and choice while agreeing to live as a neutered and submissive child until you're eighteen? Alex had real freedom and real choice right now, he was living his real life right now—and it's ironic and it's hilarious but Josh himself would have been only too pleased and eager to take that life away from Alex, so would Carrie, so would everyone else, they'd label him a victim and steal his freedom and call him saved, they'd rescue him from his own desire and his own happiness and expect his gratitude.

So Alex ignored Josh's further entreaties to join the Alliance and went about his usual routine and his usual activities, February thawing gradually and becoming March. One Saturday night Alex convinced Mike to call in sick and together they went to Stonerville where Jeff was rehearsing with his band—Bloody Stool or Vomit Chunks or whatever it's called—the four boys were taking a break when Mike and Alex arrived at the garage, inside smelled of motor oil and mildew and marijuana, Jeff actually smiled and said holy shit, can't believe it, you guys showed up! He rallied the other boys back to work and they thrashed their way through covers

of songs by Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson and then a couple of their own original pieces. Mike listened and smoked cigarettes, Alex did some dancing, then Mike surprised everyone by borrowing the lead guitarist's Fender and doing some riffs from Hendrix and The Who and Led Zeppelin, simple stuff really but it all sounded flashy and impressive. Jeff was blown away, seemed like this Mike guy could do anything, the other boys were equally in awe of this stranger who looked like some kind of giant outlaw biker or maybe some villain from a pro wrestling smackdown. All in all it was a successful visit that pleased Jeff and left Alex feeling very proud of his man, Papa Bear he called him again that night. They were still in the living room watching TV when the lovemaking started and Alex decided to suck his first cock, poor Mike didn't last long with that boy giving him head, Jesus Christ almighty god that eager young mouth on him, that warm and hungry young mouth, it was over very quickly with Alex letting the man's stuff drool from his lips and tongue, wincing at the taste of it, definitely not swallowing any more of it after just one unappetizing gulp, finally rinsing his mouth at the kitchen sink and swigging some Coke for good measure, he said sorry, Mike, don't be insulted. Mike said hell no, I understand, the really grown-up stuff is horrible, don't even take it in your mouth next time. Alex said no, that part was OK, that part I like, I like the feeling of it and it's good practice, I'll just never swallow any more of it, are you sure you're not insulted?

Don't be crazy, Mike said, that was incredible, damn, I'm grateful, thank you. Again the boy grinned and said it's good practice, did I do OK? Way better than OK, the man said, you did perfect. Alex said that's good, I was nervous, first time ever, dude, major accomplishment—but I'm not totally sure, explain that one thing again, does young semen taste better, you know, semen from a kid? Oh yeah, Mike said, don't worry, there's a big difference. Alex said I'm glad, that's good to know.

A day or two later, idly curious, Alex wondered aloud to Mike if Jeff had ever wanted his gun back. Did he ever ask you about it? No, Mike said, never—why, has he mentioned it to you? No, me neither, Alex said, then promptly reassured Mike that he had no ulterior motive for asking, I swear, I was just being nosy. OK, Mike said, but what about your own father's gun? Have you ever been tempted to fuck with it again? The boy said no and then Mike finally confessed that he'd spoken to Daniel about the gun on Christmas Day, that the thing was locked up now anyway, hope you don't think I narced on you, pal, but I was worried. Alex wasn't upset, no reason to be, his father hadn't even mentioned it so no harm done, mostly he was surprised to learn that the gun was now locked up, he hadn't even known. Well, Mike said, I guess that proves you haven't been trying to fuck with it. Come on, Alex said, get serious, I've got new interests these days!

And he was right, lots of interests—and not just his love affair with Mike, there was also the production of

Dreamcoat with full rehearsals beginning that same week, also the Spanish Club and his cooking classes and don't forget the Outlaw Dojo, never for a moment did Alex lose his enthusiasm for the karate and the working out. Four months of lifting weights and growing as a normal and healthy adolescent had made a visible difference in his body, in his physique, he'd always be a small kid but he had some muscle now in his arms and across his back. It was common for all three boys to pose in front of Mike's big bedroom mirror and compare biceps and triceps and delts and pecs (that nude photo of Alex, and all those others that the boy had copied and given to Mike, were kept in a dresser drawer, securely out of sight). The boys would pose in their underwear or sometimes naked to monitor their development, predictably they often appraised more than just their muscles, they had a natural fascination with the stuff between their own legs and how it was changing, who was getting more hair, who was bigger. These discussions were always instigated by Alex but Ray and Charlie played along cheerfully enough. That was Alex's other and abiding interest during those weeks and months, maybe his fondest interest of all, the one game better than all the rest: seeing how far he could push things with the other boys, using their one or two get-togethers each week to flirt and manipulate and cajole and goad, a master of seduction, never saying anything outright but never letting them forget the liberating ethos of the Dojo—remember, it's private here, it's safe here,

this is our clubhouse and we can do anything, try anything, break the rules, sample the forbidden, we're the princes of our own freedom and our own pleasure here because no one can see us, no one will ever know. Forget about gay, forget about queer—even though Charlie and certainly Ray must have understood or recognized or even heard about Alex's sexual orientation, not much of a secret after all, and Ray had experienced enough of it himself firsthand—still the words were never spoken and the issue never discussed, Alex was just Alex here and queer was irrelevant and gay was meaningless and having fun was the only reality, all mischief was a joke, every taboo was a dare. This was the world of Mike's apartment that Alex gradually created and never stopped nurturing.

And all of this, in some way, was as much for Mike as it was for Alex himself, everything he did with the other boys was both for his own enjoyment and for the delectation of Mike as spectator. He was an actor creating a type of performance art for himself and his grown-up lover—look at me, look at us!—keeping the man not only removed and safe but also removed and faithful, look but don't touch, enjoy the show but don't get involved and later, as a reward, you'll get me, you'll get every ripe and naked bit of me.

No doubt the kid was incredible: he had himself and Ray and Charlie all showering together; he had all of them sharing back rubs and not-quite-naked massages, usually they wore underwear or just towels for this, Alex

always needed to remember that he was dealing with two basically hetero boys, every step he took was a careful and calculated one, yes Ray had indulged in some wild behavior on Christmas but that had been a boozy and very private aberration, here in Mike's apartment things were still a little different, inhibitions were loose and forever getting looser but some modesty and some limits still existed, stubborn codes of macho behavior were difficult to crack. Once or twice during massages Alex tried pulling Ray's underpants down or Charlie's towel off but the other boys only laughed and told him to quit. Another time he discarded his own towel during a massage from Ray but his cousin never strayed from regular back-rubbing and leg-rubbing, same as ever. The most intimate touching among them was still that funny habit they had of putting their hands into each other's back pockets. At first it was only when they were wearing trousers or jeans and only involved the pockets but eventually the custom expanded to shorts and underwear and sweatpants and even towels, no pockets in those of course so the boys simply stuck a hand into the back of whatever they each happened to be wearing. The protocol seemed to be friendly and nonchalant contact only, no rubbing or squeezing or such, nothing frankly homo, this was still supposed to be just a guyish buddy-buddy thing like patting each other's rear ends during a ballgame—but really, explain it any way you want, the bizarre reality was two kids, say Alex and Charlie, crossing the apartment to the kitchen for

something to drink, casually they'd both slip a hand into the back of each other's underpants or gym shorts and walk like that to the refrigerator, briefly disengaging to grab cans of pop and then back again the same way, often a smiley glance at Mike from both of them, a couple of teenaged boys holding each other's butts.

The full nudity and bolder mischief came while they were showering and changing and posing in front of that mirror, several times Mike wandered to the bedroom door to see what might be happening in there. One afternoon they went from appraising muscles to appraising pubic hair and Alex got all of them laughing when he reached out and started petting Charlie's fluff, saying "nice kitty, soft kitty" in an exaggerated baby-talk voice, the three of them standing there side by side by side and having a good time: Charlie still the skinniest of the group, bonier and thinner-limbed than the others regardless of exercise or weight-lifting, still with that wildly disarranged blond hair, not much dangle to his dick when it was limp, just an ordinary thirteen-year-old pink wiener, pink balls, enough pubic hair to make a curly and soft kitty for Alex to pet; Ray watching and smiling, that barely pubescent plush-toy boy, deceptively cuddly, husky in the shoulders and sturdy in the hips, still childish between the legs with a stubby penis and kid-sized nuts and some frizzy dark hair, Alex included him in the joke now by petting that sparse frizz and calling it "pretty bunny" in the same ridiculous goo-goo voice; then Alex himself, of course, in the middle and

loving every moment of it, that new growth of muscle handsomely apparent in his torso and even his legs, a healthy jiggle of boymeat and testicles and a full adolescent bush between those strong young legs, the hair on his head still uncut from September and now a glossy black mop that covered his ears and his earring and touched the tops of his shoulders in back and kept falling across his eyes in front, he stood there naked and dusky and long-haired like some lean and sultry jungleboy. No way the younger and less mature boys (especially tender Raymond) could compete with Alex in these puberty evaluations and comparisons—although Ray was actually the sturdiest and strongest and most athletic of the three, still he was the baby when underpants came off, Charlie a few months older and already in riper bloom, right behind Alex on the growth chart. But nobody cared about winners or losers, that obviously was never the point, they just wanted to look and inspect and have some fun, anyway a truly fair comparison of size was usually impossible because excitable Alex was almost never completely limp, being in the shower and at the mirror invariably made him feel frisky and horny and it showed in his pecker. The thing was always reddish and itchy and a little swollen and one time more than a little, he couldn't stop it or didn't want to stop it and the thing popped up all the way, big freakin boner, Ray had seen it before but Charlie laughed and couldn't quit looking at it, dude, laughing again each time he took another glance at it, Alex laughing right

along with him, glad to make a jest of it, oops, can't help it, man, it's the call of nature, you know how it is, Charlie nodding like yeah, sure, he knew, then laughing once more. It had to be funny and it had to be a joke because otherwise the last flimsy wall might crumble with nothing certain or familiar on the other side, humor and flippancy were still necessary for this boy Charlie and for Ray as well, we're just playing, funny when Alex got that boner and funny the next week when Charlie got one of his own, no special reason for it, no massage or goofing in front of the mirror, the boys were simply undressing before a workout and suddenly Charlie had a hard penis and nowhere to hide it, everybody together in the living room, nothing for the kid to do but blush red in the face and laugh at himself. Then sort of surprisingly he seemed to linger and enjoy it. He'd gotten a boner here in December after that naked massage but this was different, no turning away or hiding this time, very different, still embarrassed but showing it anyway, grinning when Alex said Charlie, hey, what a stud! Finally he decided to put something on and reached down for a pair of shorts with his back to Mike, this was deliberate, he liked what was happening, he liked the feeling of this, the wickedness of it—Ray was smiling but continued to change undeterred, Alex was watching and agitated and about halfway hard himself by now—Charlie stayed bent over and looked back grinning at Mike, braces showing upside down, first time he'd done this in months, inviting a spanking like this, something

different now with his dick hard and everybody seeing it, like a risky dare accepted and accomplished, now he was extending the dare to Mike with a grin and an upturned bare ass. Mike remembered and knew what the kid wanted so he said naughty boy and gave him a few smacks on the bottom. Charlie yipped on cue and called Mike a bitch and then made a devilish chortling noise and seemed satisfied as he grabbed his shorts and straightened up, time to work out, Alex still watching, flustered, aroused, glancing at Mike, holy shit.

Later they talked about it, Alex and Mike, the boy said I was so stupid just standing there, I should've done something. Mike said like what? I don't know, Alex said, chewing his nails, but something. This whole thing is fuckin nuts, Mike said.

By March Ray had finished with his wrestling and was waiting for the spring track season to begin in a few weeks, nothing to do after school until then so he and Charlie started showing up more often by themselves. All along they'd been having those occasional wrestling matches after their regular workouts and now those matches became more frequent, Ray loved to wrestle and Charlie was always happy to be his opponent and do some furious grappling. Alex was a late-comer to this activity, seemed that Ray and Charlie usually did it when he was absent, Mike even wondered at first if there might be some homophobic avoidance going on—but evidently not, a couple of those wrestling matches eventually occurred when all three boys were together.

Mike should have known better, but it was difficult for him to make sense of everything he saw these days. He understood his role of witness during these gatherings and played it willingly enough, sure he was also involved as trainer and teacher—always more moves and katas and techniques to show the boys, always plenty to do—but still, goddamn, so often he ended up feeling like an intruder in his own apartment, like a lech and a perv sitting there with that erotic boylesque taking place around him and in front of him: the changing and the showering and the nude posing and the massaging and all of the other dismaying intimacies among the three kids—like handling each other’s butts, or like Ray and Alex sometimes holding hands for several sweetly peculiar minutes while watching TV or listening to music, often a kiss or two between them at these and other random moments, such a freaky relationship between those young cousins, hard to imagine exactly what Charlie must have thought of them, of course all three of them had been friends for most of their lives so he was already familiar with their strange habits, just the Salazars getting all lovey-dovey again, shocking probably to an outsider but not to Charlie Gubakowski. Mike’s head swirled from the chaos of it all, from the nearness of the boys, from the odor of them and the heat of their bodies, their nakedness, their laughter, their glances, Charlie’s erection, Alex’s afterschool sex and cum, the boys themselves touching, teasing, always daring each other a little further, a little further, now this

wrestling just one more dare and one more spectacle, occasionally Mike was brought into the action to display his strength, grabbing and hoisting boys as they attacked him one by one or en masse, Papa Grizzly with his cubs, but soon enough he was back again as spectator, silent, smoking his cigarettes, sedated by Xanax and booze, in full surrender.

Probably it was the Xanax and the booze that caused Mike's accident in late March. The man was just starting his shift with a full load of pizzas and sandwiches and pop and his head was bleary and he still had the taste of Alex's semen fresh in his mouth and the smell of Alex's ass fresh on his fingers when suddenly the Honda was skidding on rain-slick pavement smack into a telephone pole. He was ticketed for unsafe driving and had the car towed to the Honda dealership after Scooby retrieved the items for delivery, only later that night did Mike take a cab to the emergency room and discover that he had a broken arm and three cracked ribs. He went home with his right arm in a cast and his chest wrapped with elastic bandages and no way to do his job for the next few weeks.

That's how winter ended.

* * *

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Alex is just finishing the first dress rehearsal for Dreamcoat, opening night is a week away, he's pleased with his Benjamin costume, nothing fancy, just a simple striped robe sashed at the waist and a white skullcap that sits cutely atop his head of long black hair. The boys are all supposed to wear shorts beneath their robes and Alex obediently brought a pair and wore them through the whole first act but then boredom took over, there's a long stretch beginning the second act with Joseph in Egypt without his brothers and Alex was hanging out backstage with the other boys, including Josh Vantriglia, they were all bullshitting and killing time and Alex ended up betting the others that he could do this last act with nothing under his robe. They all laughed no way, you're crazy, so of course Alex did it, off came his shorts and off came his underpants to a chorus of whooping and applause, Ms. Patterson the director stuck her head backstage to shoosh them, by the time they returned for their final numbers most of the boys had joined Alex in his prank, nothing but bare skin beneath their robes. It was so successful that first time, hey, why not try it again? Even fussy Josh found it amusing and joined in, now they do it at every rehearsal and they've decided to play the joke through to the very end, to be nude under their robes for the actual performances, so fuckin hilarious. A couple of the boys think it's stupid and

won't do it but even they've agreed to a complicit silence, go ahead, they grumble, be morons, who cares.

Opening night arrives and some of the boys chicken out, just the idea of being so nearly nude on stage ends up scaring them, for Alex and a few others that's the whole attraction, the feeling of your own illicit and shameless nudity beneath that breezy robe is intoxicating, dick and balls hanging loose, all that dancing, such a wild sensation. Alex teases his remaining accomplices, Josh among them, saying careful now, don't anybody get a boner out there, it'll show. Turns out, in fact, that all goes well, the prank is an enjoyable success for the impish boys involved and harms no one, the play goes off flawlessly, Mike attends wearing his cast and afterwards stays around to congratulate Alex. "You were great, pal. Better than great. I can't believe how talented you are."

"So much fun," Alex smiles. "During Those Canaan Days? Don't know why but I almost got too excited."

"Because of," Mike says, making a vague left-handed gesture at the boy's body, "your little stunt?"

"It's not so little."

"Comedian."

"But yeah, because of that. I thought oh damn, I'm busted, I can't keep it down."

"But you did."

"Through sheer will power and fortitude," Alex nods. "I can't wait until tomorrow night."

“You’re gonna do it again?”

“Heck yeah, I loved it!”

“You really are an exhibitionist.”

“I told you that a million years ago! It’s true, I am, I’d take the robe off and perform just like that, you know, with nothing on at all, just totally bare, if it wouldn’t get me expelled.”

“Is that really true? Would you really do that?”

“Yes! I’m not kidding even a tiny bit. I’d love to do it. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Modesty, shame, embarrassment, shyness, all that shit.”

“No way, I don’t care about that stuff, I like it when people look at me, it’s not embarrassing at all.”

“I should know that by now, shouldn’t I?”

“You should, Papa, that’s for sure,” Alex says, he and Mike are outside but keeping their voices low regardless, always cautious now, so much at stake for both of them. Mike walked here from his apartment, he still can’t drive with that cast on his arm and anyway his car was busted up beyond any reasonable repair, major engine damage and alignment problems, better just to buy a good used one when he’s able to drive again, until then he can walk and use cabs for his groceries, his beer, his cigarettes. Alex also uses cabs now to get home from Mike’s apartment whenever he visits after school, his parents even give him some extra allowance to help pay the fares, on weekends he usually rides his Schwinn back and forth, if the weather is warm enough and dry enough

it's an easy ten or fifteen minutes each way, good exercise.

But tonight Mike is walking home alone and Alex is going to a party at Josh Vantriglia's house, the man and the boy kiss discreetly in the parking lot and say good night and agree to a date on Sunday afternoon, Mike says I'll be waiting, Alex says I'll save myself till then, I'll store up a special treat for you, Mike says OK, sounds like a tasty lunch, Alex laughs and heads off to find Josh. Tomorrow night there'll be a party hosted by Ms. Patterson for the full cast and crew but tonight Josh is playing host to a smaller group at his home on the west side of Sandburg, that's where the money lives, his father owns a McDonald's franchise and has a big brick house on Maple Avenue. Alex and a few other kids bum a ride over there in Mister Vantriglia's new Cadillac, Alex sits wedged between Josh on his left side and a boy named Eric Horath on his right, they're both cute and Alex would gladly make out and have sex with either one of them—or with any boy in the car, or any boy at school, or on the planet. He loves Mike and loves the sex they have together but there's nothing about Mike or any other grown-up guy that he honestly finds sexy or exciting. He feels somehow that he's still waiting for the real thing, kind of absurd after giving and getting so much head these past few months, after having Mike's finger and Mike's tongue in his ass, after feeding the man with cum thirty or forty times—absurd, maybe, but part of Alex still feels like a virgin, like a student only

practicing and preparing for something larger, like someone in training—great training, no doubt, excellent training that he wants to continue enjoying for as long as possible, it's awesome, it's amazing, he's so lucky to have someone like Mike—but now he's desperately impatient for more, his whetted appetite feels voracious and he knows exactly what he wants, he knows, another boy, yeah, that's been his hunger since he started jerking off and thinking about sex a few years ago, that's the deepest and most urgent truth of himself, he needs to touch and smell and taste another boy.

Horny as he is, Alex manages to behave himself at Josh's party, Carrie is there with Jeff and she always has a restraining influence, she tells Alex how fabulous he was in the play and the boy doffs his beret and does a showy bow and flourish to thank her. The party has lots of music and dancing, great food, there's a huge game room in the basement with a pool table and two pinball machines and an old Wurlitzer jukebox. Alex is down there looking at the jukebox and its records when a disturbance of yelling and scuffling breaks out behind him, Carrie's voice is crying stop it, stop it, Alex turns and sees Jeff brandishing a pool cue at Josh, what the fuck, Alex can't figure out what's happening, this is nuts, Jeff is wild-eyed and calling Josh a fag, you stupid fag, Josh is shaking his head and telling the other boy to chill, I'm serious, just back off and chill, Jeff won't listen and keeps slowly advancing and yelling fag and then he's rearing back with that pool cue to wallop Josh

on the head and the other kids all duck back and Carrie screams for Jeff to stop but it's too late for that and then suddenly Alex is right there in the middle of everything, he moves quietly and quickly beside Jeff and grabs him in a wristlock without even thinking about it or realizing what he's doing, it's easy, he's done this a hundred times at Mike's apartment, he puts Jeff in that wristlock and forces him to drop the pool cue and then takes him down hard to the floor. That ends the disruption, boom, swiftly and cleanly, not even Mike himself could have done a better job.

But what the fuck just happened? Nobody seems to know, including Josh, who keeps saying I don't understand it, he just went off, I don't understand it, he totally freaked. Jeff himself stays on the floor, on his back, staring at Alex and the other kids gathered around him and mumbling some words that might be apologetic, he's sweating now and even more pale than usual. Carrie is already using her cell phone to call her mother for a ride, her cheeks are wet with tears. Alex helps her to get Jeff to his feet and then upstairs and outside, everyone along the way keeps congratulating and complimenting him, dude, you were so outstanding, that was so cool, so dope, like Chuck Norris, like Bruce Lee, where'd you learn that shit? Ordinarily he'd be savoring the attention but now he's too busy wondering and worrying about Jeff. The night is mild and the air is refreshing and the fifteen-minute wait for Carrie's mother is pleasant enough, Jeff seems calmer and more lucid now that he's

outside, Alex figures out from talking to him and to Carrie what must have created that bizarre scene in the basement: Jeff is a little high and a little drunk but also wired on speed, a lot of speed, he insists that Josh “put a move” on him and he was using the pool cue to defend himself, that’s all, he says, just trying to fuckin defend myself, stupid fag, I mean seriously Alex I know you’re like gay and shit or whatever but I’m not talkin about you or puttin you down, listen to me, it’s not my fuckin fault, this isn’t right, this isn’t right, suddenly he’s upset again but this time at himself, actually crying now, hitting himself with his own fists until Carrie and Alex manage to stop him and force him to sit on the front steps, he says I’m OK, I’m OK, I’m OK. Carrie is frantic and needs calming almost as much as Jeff, Alex hugs her and assures her that everything will be fine, just get Jeff back to his house or I mean his trailer and he’ll be all right, don’t worry, it’s just too much speed.

Later, after Jeff and Carrie have gone, Alex returns to the party and accepts another flurry of compliments and accolades from the other kids. Josh is still down in the game room and still unsettled by the earlier disturbance. He seems glad to see Alex and eager to protest his innocence, all he did before was tell Jeff that he has cool hair, you know, Jeff’s platinum-dyed hair punkishly moussed and spiked, Josh said he liked it and maybe even tried to touch it and that’s when speed-freaky Jeff went berserk and grabbed the pool cue and

started yelling at him. "The guy is a homophobic asshole," Josh says.

"I don't think so, not really," Alex says. "He just had a bad night."

"He's your friend, I know."

"He can be an OK guy, he's just kind of screwed up."

"Fine, super," Josh says, he's moving his feet to an old Michael Jackson song on the jukebox, "but he can be screwed up somewhere else from now on. I don't like him. Carrie is a sweetheart but her boyfriend, well, forget it."

"Whatever," Alex shrugs. "Jeff hates parties anyway, he won't care if he's ostracized."

"He's not being ostracized, jeez, drama queen."

"Jeff was right, you are a fag," Alex says, for a moment he keeps a sober face but then starts laughing, Josh laughs with him and never realizes that Alex meant exactly what he said, he wasn't joking. But maybe that's not fair. Josh did participate in the Dreamcoat prank so maybe he's not totally uptight after all. Alex can't help wondering about him, seems like the two of them should be closer friends and allies or maybe even real boyfriends, in a small town like Sandburg these two youngsters should feel lucky to have found each other, even that so-called gay alliance is composed mostly of students who are merely curious or ambivalent or straight but sympathetic, Josh is remarkable for his radical openness, even Alex is discreet and coy in

comparison—so why shouldn't the two of them cling to each other? Why aren't they the best of mates and comrades? Hard to say precisely, but somehow they just don't get along, Josh is Mister Gay Politics and Alex is bored by political bullshit, Josh is all about sexual orientation and Alex is all about sexual disorientation. Getting Josh to go nude under his robe earlier tonight was a satisfying little victory for Alex, he enjoys subverting Josh's notions of correctness and propriety whenever he finds the chance, that's just how Alex is and he can't help it, he loves to tease and flirt and play games, even now. He and Josh are still next to the jukebox, other kids are nearby playing pool or pinball or just chatting and dancing but the noisiness and loud music make Alex and Josh feel isolated as they talk. Alex tells his story about almost getting "too excited" during Those Canaan Days and Josh chuckles along with him before revealing, by the way, that he won't be part of the prank anymore, tonight was enough. "I think it's sort of disrespectful," he says. "We shouldn't do it again."

"Really? No, come on, be serious."

"You wanna know something? I didn't even do it tonight, actually not since that once in rehearsal, I just pretended since then."

"No. Why? Are you joking?"

"Peer pressure," Josh says, making quotation marks around the words with his fingers. "Being one of the guys, you know, whatever."

“I’m shocked,” Alex says with a melodramatic hand to his breast, he’s trying to be funny but it’s true, he is shocked, Josh tricked the trickster and Alex never had a clue. “But honestly, listen, you’re missing out, it’s major fun.”

“It’s sort of childish,” Josh says.

“Fucker.”

“Yeah, that’s mature.”

“Oh well, forget it, I’m all depressed and disillusioned,” Alex sulks, grinning anyway. He and Josh wander back upstairs and separate and mingle. Alex joins Eric Horath and two girls in the back yard where a smuggled pint of Southern Comfort is being passed and shared, Alex takes a sip each time it comes his way, five or six sips altogether, enough for a pleasant buzz, a giddy buzz. He and Eric sing Benjamin Calypso with their arms around each other’s shoulders and Alex wants to hug this other boy, he wants to kiss this other boy—but when their song is finished Eric turns his attention back to the girls and one of those girls even gets flirtatious with Alex, it makes him laugh, so ridiculous, why would he be attracted to somebody with a big doughy ass and squishy tits and nothing but a hairy slit for genitals? No, no good, no way, Alex wants the real thing, he’s impatient, he’s restless, he ambles back inside and finds Josh in the kitchen replenishing snacks with his mother, Alex helps out and then follows Josh into the living room with more chips and dip, it’s getting late and lots of kids have already gone home. Josh the exhausted

host flops onto the couch and Alex flops beside him and says Emily Taft just tried to seduce me outside, it was horrifying. Josh munches some Ruffles and laughs. “So what did you tell her?”

“I said I was saving myself for Josh,” Alex deadpans.

“No you didn’t!”

“Why not? It’s true.”

“You shouldn’t say things that. . .”

“OK, OK, relax, I’m kidding.”

“Oh,” Josh says. “Well. It’s just, you know, with the Alliance and people saying things, there’s a responsibility, I know you think it’s funny but it’s serious. To me. It’s important.”

“No problem. Because honestly? I’m pledged to my secret adult lover.”

“Jesus, Alex.”

“It’s true. I’m saving my orgasms for him until our next date. So there’s no chance for you and me.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Josh says. “You’ve been reading too many dirty stories.”

“You think so?”

“You don’t have to try to be shocking all the time.”

“You’re right,” Alex says. “Sorry. I was just making another stupid joke. I don’t really have a secret lover.”

“Duh, needless to say!”

“I’m just a pitiful little virgin.”

“OK, whatever.”

“So let’s kiss and make up.”

“Stop it,” Josh smiles, part of him must be tickled by this nonsense but he won’t allow himself to be tempted by it, he has responsibilities and obligations to a larger cause and that’s why he needs to stay aloof and blameless, no time for Alex’s constant fucking around. Alex himself can see this clearly enough and finally stops playing the coquette, he’ll leave Josh alone to the grim politics of sexuality and have his own fun elsewhere with the vulgar frolic of sex. Josh is cute but so is Ray. So is Charlie. Forget about gay, forget about queer, those are just words and they mean nothing when boys get horny, sexuality is irrelevant, Josh is striving for a freedom that already exists and Alex sees this more starkly now than ever before, Alex is an outlaw and that freedom is his right now—with Ray, with Charlie, with Mike—it’s a freedom that’s everywhere if you’re bold enough to find it, to take it, to use it.

* * *

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mike carefully calculates his finances and determines that he can live comfortably on his savings for about two years before he needs another job—so fuck Mario's, summer is coming and Mike decides to take a long vacation and do nothing but drink and sleep late and spend time with Alex and the other boys. He buys a DVD player, he buys a modest computer, he buys a good secondhand Honda Civic to replace the destroyed pizzamobile, his cast is off by May and he can finally drive again. A few weeks earlier he celebrated a lavish Roman Catholic Easter at the Salazar home—not Alex's, it was Ray's this time—delicious food, plenty of good wine, after dinner Mike and Alex and Ray all took a walk together and ended up at Mike's apartment where something unusual happened, for the first time Mike and Alex went into the bedroom while Ray was there as a witness. Alex grinned at his cousin and said we won't be long, Ray simply grinned back and nodded OK and stayed on the couch to watch TV. He must have understood that something sexual was involved—or maybe not, with Ray it's hard to tell, maybe he truly didn't realize that Alex was getting a blowjob in the next room. Two days later, more excitement for Alex, the DVD of Billy Elliot came out, after school he went straight to Best Buy on his bike and bought a copy and took it to Mike's. They watched it together and Alex

cried at the end and then he searched backward to rewatch his favorite scenes, finally he settled on the scene of Billy being painted with lipstick and he took off his clothes and jerked off while staring at the screen, he jizzed onto his belly and then waited, grinning, as Mike cleaned him with his tongue.

These were the weeks, through April into May, when the boys finally and fully claimed Mike's apartment as their clubhouse, when they finally and fully came to trust the reality of their own freedom here, their own privacy here. These were the weeks after Charlie got that unexpected erection and decided he liked it. These were the weeks after Mike broke his arm and the afterschool workouts became less organized, less focused, less about karate and more about just getting together and screwing around, wrestling, looking at pornography on Mike's new computer, joking about boners, taking showers, giving each other massages. These were also the weeks when Ray was often absent because of track practice, training for various sprints and relays over at the junior high, leaving Alex and Charlie as the only visitors to the clubhouse some afternoons, Mike usually half drunk and still nursing his arm and planted in front of the television with one eye forever on the boys, trying not to stare at them but, fuck it anyway, that was all part of it, watching them, looking at them, that was part of the game and part of the fun for Alex and for Charlie too. Something about being there without Ray seemed to intensify the heat between them, all of

their adolescent energy focused exclusively on each other, you could almost smell the testosterone rank and feral in the apartment on those particular days. A wrestling match between them, one afternoon, became a giggly struggle to remove each other's shorts and then continued with both of them naked and stiffly aroused and grabbing at each other's asses and dicks until Charlie called it quits and reclaimed his shorts for his workout and weight-lifting, he still thought there were limits, enough was enough. A massage, some days later, started in the usual way with Charlie wearing a towel but this time he cheerfully allowed Alex to remove it and the massage became a naked grope, Charlie even rolled onto his back to show his boner and then laughed ticklish when Alex touched it, once more they ended up wrestling and then took a shower and then—while still in the shower, impossible to stop or resist by that point, both of them so stiff, so horny—the boys masturbated together for the first time. Alex started and Charlie quickly and gratefully followed, no talking between them, silent, intent, stroke stroke stroke and then spurt spurt into the spray of the shower, everything washed away as soon as it came out, nothing really to see afterwards but two droopy red dicks as the boys soaped and rinsed. Charlie said we shouldn't tell Mike. Alex said Mike wouldn't care, believe me, but Charlie insisted no, dude, not cool, glancing up with his sleepy-eyed grin, braces showing, one step at a time for this boy, he still couldn't quite imagine that any adult, even Mike, would

approve of jerking off, not quite, not yet, he could hardly believe himself what had just happened.

Today is the first afternoon since then that Alex and Charlie have been together, of course Mike knows what happened, Alex told him everything. Again Ray is gone—out of town this time for an actual track meet—so Alex and Charlie once more have each other all to themselves on this May afternoon. There seems to be a slightly embarrassed tension between them, boys might jerk off together all the time in bad stories and overheated fantasies but the reality is something more precarious and complex, so many strange new feelings for Charlie, this unsettling intimacy with another guy, everything unfamiliar, impossible to know what might happen next. Even Alex feels the anxiety, this nervous suspense of not knowing, of wondering and hoping, of possibly somehow going too far and spoiling everything. Charlie, first thing, wants reassurance that their secret is still safe. Alex lies and says sure. “But Mike probably knows,” he adds, cagily hinting at the truth, he and Charlie are in the kitchen, voices lowered. “He’s not stupid. He was watching. You know. How we had such total boners and everything.”

Even this remark, this reminder, makes Charlie blush and look away. “Well maybe, but anyway. Shit, I know you didn’t tell Ray, come on.”

“Tell Ray? I haven’t even seen him,” Alex says, he’ll be getting his hair cut pretty soon but right now it’s still long, way longer than he’s ever grown it before,

touching the shoulders of the yellow T-shirt he's wearing, floppy and sheep-doggish across his eyes. He's fidgety and moving his feet and biting his fingernails, so much is starting to happen now, so much is possible, he wants to dance or shout or sing but he has to keep cool, he has to stay in control. Charlie shrugs, he seems uncertain about everything now, he turns to open the fridge for a can of pop, he's wearing oversized denim shorts or actually short pants that hang to his shins, a red-checked camp shirt long and loose above that. Alex steps behind him and says grab a Coke for me, dude, I need some caffeine, he lifts the tail of Charlie's shirt and slips both hands into the back of those baggy denim shorts and then right into the back of Charlie's stretchy briefs. Charlie flinches from the surprise of Alex's cool hands on his ass. "Bitch," he says, then he bends forward to grab the Cokes and uses the maneuver to shove his rear end at Alex, a sneak attack that catches his buddy pow in the nuts. Alex laughs you fucker and shoves back, he's holding Charlie by the hips, Mike comes wandering into the kitchen and sees them and mumbles you crazy guys as he pushes past them for a beer. "What's happening today?" he asks. "Any workout or training? What's up?"

"Free day, free day," Alex says, he and Charlie have moved aside for Mike but still haven't separated, Charlie is holding a can of Coke in each hand while Alex clutches him from behind, they look like they're fucking upright as they shove at each other butt to crotch and

crotch to butt, back and forth, like partners in some kind of lewd dance. Mike gets his beer and pauses to watch them. "More wrestling," Alex finally adds, he moves his hands forward in Charlie's underpants, all the way around now into the front, Charlie laughs faggot and retaliates with a harder wham of his butt against Alex, Mike puts an arm around both of them and suggests moving to the living room. "To do your wrestling," he says. "Or whatever this is."

"A fight to the death," Alex says, he and Charlie shuffle and stumble and shove against each other beneath Mike's guiding arm as they leave the kitchen. The man finally frees Charlie's hands by taking the Cokes and Charlie immediately reaches back to grab Alex's crotch. Alex laughs and quickly disengages and dances backward a few steps. He crouches to remove his shoes, his socks. Charlie stays standing, watching him as if not quite sure about continuing this game, as if this might be his last chance to stop, to turn back, right now, this is it. He looks back at Mike already seated in his big chair, the man raises his can of Bud in a friendly salute, cigarette between his lips. Charlie points at the cigarette and says hey, suddenly he sits himself onto Mike's lap, light as a bag of feathers, skinny kid, he wants to finish the Camel. Alex, across the room, undresses down to just his jeans and then pauses, hands on hips, to glare at the other boy. "Wussy," he says. "What're you, stalling? Wuss, wuss, wuss!"

"Shut up, asshole."

“Don’t worry about Mike. He won’t care.”

“Alex, damn, shut up!”

“Mike definitely will not care,” the man says about himself, for the first time in all these many months he touches Charlie’s hair with a tender paw, hard to believe after so much else has happened—but Charlie has never been the type to invite affectionate touching or caressing, Mike has never petted him before now, never petted that messy disarray of soft blond hair until this moment, something different now, something about the boy that wants comforting and encouraging and a calm hand to strengthen him. “You guys do whatever the fuck you want,” Mike tells them, saying it directly to Charlie, a final promise of secrecy, of camaraderie, of trust. “Just pretend I’m not here.”

“So hurry up,” Alex pesters, off come his blue jeans, black hair falling over his eyes as he leans forward to remove the pants, then again as he leans forward to take off his white Hanes, his dick already excited and bobbing half hard as he steps out of the undies and tosses them aside. Charlie is watching, even now the sight of Alex’s aroused penis tickles a brief laugh from him, it’s something you’ve always been taught to hide and suddenly there it is crudely on display, he can’t get used to it or tame his giddiness about it, one more puff on the cigarette and he’ll be ready. Then Mike decides to help out, to speed things up, the kid is right there on his lap after all, he reaches around the boy with both hands and finds the buttons on the front of his red-checked shirt and

starts to undo them one by one, Charlie not expecting this, another quiet laugh of surprise from him as he finishes the Camel and mashes it out in a souvenir ashtray shaped like the state of Texas. He's blushing again, fair-skinned boy, his whole face reddens when he gets flustered, he lets Mike unbutton and remove his shirt and then raises his arms to let him pull off the undershirt after that. Alex has come forward eagerly to assist by taking off Charlie's Reeboks and socks. Charlie responds with another little laugh, that's all he can do as Mike and Alex undress him, just go along with it and laugh. Alex is laughing too at what's happening. "Greek wrestling from now on," he says to Charlie.

"What's that?"

"You know, like the ancient Greeks, naked."

"Oh yeah, like that," Charlie says, obviously he could finish undressing now by himself but being undressed by his friend and by Mike has become today's joke, today's wicked dare, the start of it anyway. Alex is in front so he undoes the button and the zipper on Charlie's denim shorts and then Charlie lifts his hips and laughs yet again as Mike pushes down the shorts and the underpants from behind and Alex finishes the job by tugging everything down and off from in front, Charlie's pecker is up boing! like a spring as soon as it's released. Alex, just as hard, backs up and waves for the other boy to follow, come on, let's go, let's wrestle. Charlie gets to his feet but then hovers right there stooping in front of Mike, mooning him, probably what you'd expect from

this youngster with the booty fetish, Mike has only to lift his hand to give those rounded cheeks some gentle spans. Charlie just stands there stooped forward with his hands on his knees and his head turned looking back at Mike, dopey grin, Mike using both hands now to play bongos on the boy's ass. Charlie gives a squirm of approval and thrusts back a little farther for Mike to keep playing, keep smacking, there's not much fleshiness to that skinny ass and its crack is shallow and Mike has been staring at its rosy hole this entire time and finally he touches the hole with a fingertip that makes Charlie yelp, makes him jerk, still the boy stays stubbornly in position and accepts the fingertip touching him until Alex can no longer stand by and watch, he hurries forward and grabs Charlie and spans him and pulls him away from Mike, the man doesn't mind, he understands, watching is OK, he'll be rewarded later.

The boys finally manage to do some wrestling after that, lots of spanking continues to be involved, lots of goosing and pinching, a couple of times the rowdy grappling devolves into stalemate and the two kids sprawl for a quick rest on the orange shag carpet and then do some massaging back and forth as a restorative before resuming their wrestling once more. Now and then the competition becomes intense enough to distract from everything else and both of the boys briefly lose their erections, then a sweaty entanglement starts them giggling and goosing and grabbing all over again and they become more frantically aroused than ever. Alex

keeps getting leaky during this marathon bout and leaving glisteny streaks on the other boy's skin wherever his boner happens to rub, eventually Charlie notices some damp streaks on his own legs and realizes a bit squeamishly that Alex's dick is the cause. He sits back on the carpet and points. "Dude, no way, did you fuckin sperm on me?"

"Dumbass, no," Alex laughs, out of breath, pushing the sweaty hair from his eyes. He dabs at the clear leakage from his own penis and holds out his finger as evidence. "It's pre-cum, that's all, don't freak out."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, it's lubricant, it's not semen." "Is it like pee?"

"No, I told you, it's called pre-cum, it's just nothing, look," Alex says, he scoots closer, he pulls and squeezes his own dick to make it seep, like getting juice from a piece of fruit. "See, it's just leaky. Right, Mike? Am I right?"

"Sure, that's right," the man says, he's had several beers by now to keep himself numbed. "No big deal." He gets up and heads to the bathroom, leaving the boys alone for a moment. Alex says I told you so and then ambushes Charlie and drives him flat to the floor. "Loser has to jerk off the winner," he declares, his mouth practically against the other boy's ear.

"Cheater, no fair," Charlie mutters, trying to twist free, both of them so sweaty that it's difficult to get a grip, finally they give a mutual groan of exhaustion and

collapse and roll apart, no more, they agree, no more. Charlie stays spread-eagled on his back but Alex sits up on one hip beside him and rests a hand on him, on his chest, patting him, good fight, call it a draw. Charlie is trying to catch his breath, nodding, staring up at Alex, yeah, fuckin worn out. Alex grins and looks between Charlie's legs, big old boner he says, touching it, giving it a little rub, big old thang he says again with a funny drawl, suddenly he leans over it and gives the tip a sneaky kiss. Charlie is too startled for any immediate response but then shakes his head and chuckles that's so fucked, once more Alex grins and leans in closer and plants a naughty smooch on the tip of his friend's penis, still holding it at the same time, still rubbing it, then reaching lower to feel and fondle Charlie's balls. Mike is still gone, no one else in the room, Charlie uses this chance to touch that stuff leaking from Alex, he squeezes at Alex's thing to make it even juicier and then sniffs at the stuff smeared on his own fingers, no odor really, he reaches up and squeezes at the hard thing once more, fascinated by the seeping wetness of it, playing with it, loser jerks off the winner has become a mutual consolation prize, Charlie is getting his balls fondled so now he starts fondling Alex's, those things are also fascinating, plump and warm and fuzzy, so weird to be playing with another guy's junk like this. Then they're finished with fondling and playing and they're gripping each other's things and jerking off for real, no sound in the room but the low murmur of a ballgame on TV and

the thwap-thwap-thwap of two young cocks being eagerly pumped, only Mike's return just then briefly delays the climax, Alex doesn't care at all but Charlie stops and hurries to his feet and says "shower time" and then actually grabs Alex's hand to speed their escape, desperate to get into the bathroom and finish. Mike saw what was happening when he returned and now says it's OK, hey, do it here, just don't stain the carpet. Charlie makes a quick laughing noise but keeps going, for him the shower is the place to finish your kinky business, not in the living room with somebody else watching, not even Mike—sure it might be kinda fun, kinda freaky and exciting, sure, maybe it would be—but fuck, this whole thing is a crazy circus and Charlie can't think clearly, all he can do is rush to the familiar security of the shower, Alex going with him, happy either way.

Impatiently, under the shower's warm downpour, the boys resume where they left off, sharing each other's dicks as they masturbate. Charlie is rubbing Alex's when it starts to squirt, hard to tell though, everything is wet in the shower anyway, there's a strong throbbing and a warm gooiness and then nothing but more water drenching them. Charlie is frantic now to finish so he pushes aside Alex's hand and takes over on himself and produces his own milky little fountain with a few rapid strokes. "Fucking awesome, man, totally the bomb," Alex says. Charlie can only nod.

Afterwards, with Charlie gone, Alex gives Mike a detailed report of that final scene, then rewards his

faithful Papa with a loving blowjob. Mike is slightly drunk and takes a while to cum, he keeps muttering this is fucking nuts, man, fucking too much, out of control, man, fucking impossible—finally he manages to fill the boy's mouth.

He's snoring on the couch when Alex calls a cab for himself and goes home.

* * *

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Once you give boys the game of sex and let them start playing, watch out, you'll never stop them. Mike knows this. The game has overwhelmed him.

Alex, this afternoon, is at a special Spanish Club party, it's their last meeting before summer vacation—so today only Charlie and Ray show up at Mike's apartment, no one really thinks of it as the Outlaw Dojo anymore, it's a clubhouse now more than anything else, the boys still work out here but only in an informal and disorganized way. Ray, in fact, plans on joining a real karate school this summer to continue his formal training, to parlay the skills he learned here from Mike into something more substantial—like belts and diplomas and trophies. Charlie's interest in karate, meanwhile, has peaked, he's learned as much of it as he needs or wants, he still likes to lift weights and spar and punish the heavy bag but these days he's more interested in looking at pornography on Mike's computer, always hetero stuff, anything anal is good, backdoor action, Charlie sits there in his shorts or his underwear or just a towel and he chuckles at what he finds and he jokes about the wicked boner he's got, that's his favorite pastime.

On this particular day, this Friday afternoon, Charlie and Ray have done a brief workout and then some wrestling (not naked, not with Ray, not yet) and

now they're in the bathroom, drying themselves after a shower. Mike has been drinking beer after beer again and needs to piss, he lumbers into the bathroom and unzips and starts splashing, his back is to the boys, both of them laugh as he keeps pissing and pissing noisily into the bowl. Charlie can't help himself, curious little cat, he wanders over just as Mike is finishing and says wait, one second, let me see, peeking around Mike's body at the man's dick, fuck, he mutters, that's not bad. Even Ray is intrigued enough to take a look, he raises his eyebrows at what he sees and then leaves the bathroom to get dressed. Charlie stays behind. "Dry my back," he tells Mike, handing him the towel.

"Lazy bum," Mike says, just part of the game, Charlie doesn't have Alex to play with and he's still cautious around Ray so he's using Mike, he needs Mike, he'll be fourteen next month, he's a walking hard-on and desperate for a playmate. Mike sits on the closed lid of the toilet and towels the whole rear side of him, thin and pale boy, sharp shoulder blades, back speckled with tiny brown moles, hairless legs, hairless ass, some delicate fuzziness to his skin that shows golden only in the right light and at the right angle, only takes a moment to dry him and then Mike is just holding the towel and feeling him instead, running one hand over the naked back of him, over his legs, his hips, his bottom, reaching around in front to find his stiffly excited penis and give it a squeeze, a smaller handful than Alex's, no curve to it, a warm and slender rocket pointed for takeoff. Charlie

says wait a minute, wait a minute, then steps away to close the door, his hair is still damp and bedraggled from the shower and looks darker now than when it's dried and fluffed, he hurries back into place, into the same position, then bends forward with hands on knees to offer his behind like a prize ham. "Hey Mike," he says, trying to keep the jokiness in his voice, "why don't you kiss my ass!"

"OK. No problem."

"I bet you won't really," the boy goads. Mike says sure I will, first this cheek, leaning forward from his seat on the toilet to smooch Charlie's right buttock; now this other cheek, smooching the left one; now right on the mouth, he says, spreading the smooth cheeks with his thumbs and pressing his lips between them to plant a kiss directly against the rawly exposed anus. Charlie lets out a startled yip of laughter and then widens his stance and bends his knees and shoves his butt back farther for Mike to get at more easily, he glances at the door to make extra sure that it's closed, that Ray can't see what's happening now, this juicy rimjob that Mike has just started giving him. Charlie laughs like rapid hiccupping and says that's so gross, can't fuckin believe you're doing this, Mike just mumbles it's nice and clean back here, not even lifting his head, he spreads the cheeks wider and licks into the crack and into the hole, licking and then kissing and then slurping at the excess of his own saliva as it puddles in Charlie's sphincter and dribbles along the crack all mingled now with the odor

and flavor of the boy's ass, Charlie himself jerking off now, his legs trembling as he stands there bent forward. Mike slips a finger into him and makes him gasp and makes his knees start flexing, he's rocking and pushing back against the finger inside of him, Mike sliding it in and out and twisting it to get it deeper and deeper into the slick rectum, letting young Charlie Gubakowski really have the full experience of something up his butt, Mike's middle finger almost as long and thick as the boy's own dick, fucking him with it until each squishy stroke is forcing a little grunt from the kid. Finally Mike replaces the finger with his tongue and immediately can smell and taste the difference from before, the strong muskiness of rectum from all of that reaming and squishing. Charlie is shaking so violently now that Mike has to hold him steady with both hands on his hips and then the man can feel the boy's sphincter spasming, he can feel the squeeze-squeeze-squeeze of it on the tip of his tongue and he knows that Charlie is ejaculating, helplessly whimpering as he spurts and drizzles and produces a spattery mess of boycum on the pale green ceramic tiles at his feet.

Charlie straightens up and mutters a breathless "what the fuck" and then allows himself to be pulled backward onto Mike's lap.

"Just sit," the man tells him. "That's right. Just sit here. Relax. No hurry."

Charlie sprawls there with his arms dangling and his legs askew and his wiener drooped scarlet against his

white thigh with some last leakage of semen still oozy at the tip. Finally he says OK and stands up, his own spilled milk is in the way but he just grins at it and says dude, sick, then steps around it and opens the door and parades naked into the living room, not even bothering to clean his dick, god only knows what Ray must be thinking about all of this, seems that more and more sex keeps happening here just out of sight around him. Mike, still in the bathroom, crouches to wipe the floor with Charlie's own discarded towel, first though he can't resist dabbing at the boy's slime and then licking it like vanilla cream from his finger, tastes like Alex's, that same tang of adolescent sap still mild, still delicious.

Mike washes it down with more beer when he returns to the living room a minute later. Charlie is still defiantly naked, this place is becoming a brothel, he's sitting on the couch and smoking a cigarette and watching a rerun of *Saved By The Bell*, his penis still looks red and raw, one glance at the thing tells you exactly what just happened in the bathroom, so obvious, Ray must have seen it, Ray must know. That's what Mike keeps thinking lately: Ray must know. But the sweetly agreeable kid never says anything, just plays along with his cousin Alex and his friend Charlie, with their nonsense and horseplay, with their hands in his back pocket and on his butt, with Alex's cuddling and kissing both here and whenever he and Alex spend the night together, those crazy nights, sometimes even Ray gets a boner when they're in bed together but he never

mentions it, once he had a wet dream and needed to change his boxers, he won't sleep naked the way Alex does, when Alex has a wet dream it makes a mess on their sheets and they have to put a towel down to cover the clammy spot. Last time they slept together—must have been Easter night, yes, it was Easter night, that same day when Mike and Alex disappeared into Mike's bedroom while Ray stayed on the couch—Alex was especially worked up that night and brought a towel to bed with him and said just in case, then a few minutes later said oh fuck I'm not waiting and pushed the sheet back and proceeded to masturbate in the darkened bedroom, he nudged Ray and said come on but Ray just laughed softly and shook his head against the pillow and watched the dim figure of his cousin beside him and listened to the quickening friction of skin against skin and then saw the ghost of the towel being grabbed and lifted into place as Alex made funny little noises and finished and then relaxed and went silent. To Ray, these days, this kind of sex stuff seems normal, Alex and Charlie both always walking around naked, getting boners, jerking off, messing around with Mike. Ray definitely likes girls and he thinks about them all the time and sees them in his wet dreams and fantasizes about them when he masturbates—but sometimes he can't help thinking about this other stuff, about the other boys, he's becoming more and more curious about what he might be missing, feeling more and more like the odd man out as Alex and Charlie play their horny games and

have their fun, here's Charlie right now naked on the couch like a dare or a taunt, showing himself off, dick looking red and obscene, Ray can't explain why but it's exciting in a funny way, this isn't the casual nakedness of the locker room anymore, not with Alex and not with Charlie, no way, this is the nakedness of teasing and flirting and sex and even Ray can feel it, even Ray can see the difference and smell the wildness of it in the air.

He's sitting at the computer just now and browsing ESPN.com for the latest baseball scores and for news about the NHL and NBA playoffs when Mike steps behind him and makes him jump with a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry," the man says, "didn't mean to scare you."

"No, I was just, you know, concentrating," the boy says, he looks up and back at Mike with those huge Bambi eyes and that toothy smile.

"So how ya doin, Ray?"

"I'm OK."

"Keepin busy?"

"Checking scores and stuff," the boy says, he can hear that Mike is a little drunk again, not unusual these days.

"Good old Ray," the man says, rubbing the boy's shoulders through his T-shirt. "You're not bored?"

"No, I'm good."

"Look at Charlie, no manners at all."

"Yeah, really."

"Hey Charlie," Mike says, "you comfortable, pal?"

Charlie is staring at Saved By The Bell with half-shut eyes, mouth open, no cigarette now, he's slouched against the arm of the couch with his legs sprawled wide, one hand feeling a nipple, the very image of slutty indolence. He glances at Mike and nods and then grins when he realizes that he's being watched and discussed. "What's up? What's happening?"

"Nothing," Mike says. "Me and Ray are just admiring you. Adonis. Or Apollo. Or whoever the fuck."

"Yeah, right," Charlie says, he pulls both knees up to his chest to show the pale moon of his ass and then aims it and blows a fart at Mike and Ray across the room. "How's that?"

"Perfect, man. Very classy."

"Isn't this a beautiful sight?" the boy laughs, smacking at his own cheeks and then spreading them to display the hole, Mike and Ray are having a laugh along with him, Charlie adds to the dirtiness of the joke by touching his own hole and then maybe surprises even himself when he actually puts his finger into it and imitates what Mike was doing earlier, suddenly his grin is more of a grimace and he's probably not sure himself how to end this performance so he just keeps using that finger, working it in and out, goddamn, this is definitely weird but it's not funny anymore, Ray is sitting there watching and Mike is rubbing him on the shoulders and finally the strangeness is too much, too intense, Ray gets to his feet and playfully calls Charlie a total spaz and says we should go, come on. Charlie retaliates by calling

him a wussy faggot but quickly enough he relaxes and lowers his legs and removes his busy finger, of course he once again has a full and angry boner for everyone to see, he says oh well, shrugging, hopping from the couch to get his clothes. His dick is still up when he puts on his underwear, probably still up when he heads home a few minutes later.

Now it's two of them, Mike says to himself. Alex and Charlie both. And why not Ray eventually? All three of them, sure, fuck, why not? He's known since the beginning, since September, what would happen once he allowed boys back into his life, now Charlie has become a sexual accomplice and the risk has doubled, every ounce of pleasure is purchased with a pound of fear and Mike pays the price every day, every fuckin day, such a boring lament, OK, true, he's sick of the voice in his own head and that's why he uses the Xanax and the booze to keep it quiet. That old prescription of Xanax is almost gone now, forget about using those pills as part of any Final Exit strategy, Mike has been ingesting his own escape plan tablet by tablet for the past several months—but there's always more beer and more bourbon, good enough for now, lately Mike has been visiting some of his old drinking spots around town for no reason he can name, just for the variety, the change of scenery, something like that. Or maybe it's just to distract from the boys, that's what he needs, anything to break the spell and provide some pleasantly oblivious hours in a haven of noise and smoke and boozy anonymity.

On this Friday night he ends up at the nearby tavern where he used to work, always better to drink and walk than to drink and drive, especially after that accident in March. He sits at the bar and orders a shot and a beer and lights a Camel, the place is crowded tonight, some Country crap is on the jukebox, Tim McGraw or one of those other guys with the cowboy hats, they all sound alike but it's decent drinkin music. Mike is settling into a comfortable buzz when he hears his own name and looks around and finds Scooby on the stool beside him. "Oh fuck, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Hot damn," Scooby grins, same ratty mustache, same old John Deere cap pushed back on his head. "Thought it was you. Big Mike. What be the good word, my man?"

"Just hanging out, no big deal."

"How's the arm?"

"Not bad, not bad," Mike says, flexing it, his fist practically in Scooby's face.

"But you still ain't comin back to Mario's?"

"Not for now, nope."

"So where you workin at?"

"I'm on sabbatical, man."

"Which means fuckin what?"

"An extended vacation."

"Ain't that a bitch," Scooby says, about halfway through his beer, no telling how many he's already had. "How y'all keepin busy these days?"

Mike holds up his own glass of beer. "Drinking a lot of this. Minding my own business."

"How's that kid?"

"What kid?"

"Your friend. Came lookin for you at Mario's them times. Mortal Kombat."

"Fuck off, man."

"I seen you out with him and them others lots of times. All over. Y'all was at Tenpin Alley a while back."

"You're an irritating son of a bitch."

"Sneaky bastard," Scooby says with another snaggletoothed grin. "You ain't foolin nobody with them kids. Know what I'm sayin?"

"You're fuckin drunk," Mike says, his adrenaline is up, this is how it always happens, the lethal blow always comes from the blind side, unexpected, game over. Scooby takes another gulp of beer and keeps his eyes on Mike, nodding, nodding, pleased with himself. "Y'all got yourself a little posse there," he says. "Sneaky bastard. Better watch out. Be careful."

"Or what?"

"I'm just sayin."

"I should bust your goddamn head."

"I'm just givin you some advice. Oughta be grateful."

"You're nuts."

"I ain't the one hangin around them little kids," Scooby says, that smug grin wider than ever, he definitely must be drunk to keep going on like this,

suddenly though he looks very sober when Mike lays a heavy hand onto his shoulder, he tells Mike to take it easy, hey, I'm just yankin your chain. "Next time you see me, listen to me, keep walking, keep moving," Mike tells him. "Otherwise I might just beat the living shit out of you. Understand?"

"Just yankin your chain is all," Scooby mumbles, flinching from the hand on his shoulder. "I weren't serious."

"You might have a brain after all," Mike says, releasing him. Immediately Scooby makes a move to leave but Mike tells him not to bother, stay put, I'm outta here anyway. Then Mike finishes his beer in one guzzle and heads for home. He knows already that tonight has changed everything, it's a warning he can't ignore, even an idiot like Scooby can see what's happening. Time is running out for Mike and the boys. Maybe not tomorrow or next week or even next month—but eventually Mike will have to make a decision, either to end this free-for-all with Alex and Charlie and Ray or to end his own miserable existence, one or the other, take your pick.

* * *

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Would Charlie have done everything he ended up doing without Alex's influence and without Alex's encouragement? No, certainly not, he's like any other boy, he would have been content with looking at porno and jerking off by himself and waiting for some girl he could eventually fuck, the usual routine—but a friend like Alex makes everything possible and everything permissible, a friend like Alex is a constant provocation and invitation to think the unthinkable and then to try it, to do it, then to try something else after that—always a little wilder each time, a little freakier, always more, always more.

Masturbation, for now, is their activity of choice whenever they see each other at Mike's apartment, school is ending and graduation is next weekend and the boys show up nearly every afternoon—usually without Ray—to undress, to wrestle, to beat off, at first just in the shower but then right there in the living room with Mike watching, Charlie not caring anymore, all modesty gone now, better this way, more fun this way, he and Alex side by side on the carpet stroking themselves and stroking each other and never even bothering with Kleenex or towels, always a lovely smear of boyjizz on their hands and their bellies when they finish, then into the shower to clean away the mess. Karate lessons have been mostly abandoned by now. These two boys come

here for one purpose, to get naked and masturbate, no denial or pretense, they use wrestling and massaging as foreplay to extend and enhance the experience but the outcome is always the same, sexual pleasure is their only motive now, that's all they want.

Afterwards Alex always stays behind to give Mike his compensatory blowjob. He knows what happened between Mike and Charlie last week, Mike told him, no secrets between them, and honestly Alex doesn't mind, it's OK. "I'm glad, really," the boy tells Mike one evening when he stays a little later than usual, they're in bed together having a languorous, naked cuddle. "I think it probably loosened him up. You know? Like all the way. Like even when you're around."

"Probably true."

"You see how he is now, it's so cool."

"It's incredible, you're right," Mike says, wondering how he can ever force himself to end this delirium, this terrifying rapture.

"It's funny," Alex says, "but that stuff doesn't make me jealous anymore. It's like we've gone beyond that point, you and me."

"You should never be jealous, Alex."

"Because we love each other so much. Nobody else can touch that."

"Absolutely."

"Tell me," Alex murmurs. "How much do you love me?"

"Too much."

“Still?”

“Always too much. More than ever.”

“Thanks, Mike. I love you too. More than ever. My Papa.”

“Silly kid.”

“I feel like crying, I don’t know why.”

“Old sentimental Alex.”

The boy rests silently for a minute or two and then suddenly he laughs against Mike’s shoulder. “After you told me about Charlie? I did that same thing to him. A couple of days ago.”

“Which thing?”

“With my finger. When we were in the shower.”

“He loves that stuff. Anal. Spanking. Whatever.”

“No doubt. He’s always been funny like that,” Alex says. “D’you think he’d do, you know, now I’m embarrassed but. . .”

“Fucking?”

“Exactly.”

“Don’t ask me,” Mike says. “Maybe. Who knows. Charlie’s a wild one.”

“It’s fun to talk about.”

“You’re getting excited.”

“Hell yes. Just thinking about it.”

“You’ve sprung a leak,” Mike says, the boy’s dick in his hand. “You ready for more? You want it sucked?”

“How about something else this time?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Well,” the boy mumbles, his voice strangely nervous now, one last lesson to be learned, “since we were talking about Charlie and that stuff. . .”

“Yeah?”

“Anal stuff. . .”

“Intercourse?”

“That’s right,” Alex says, he rolls onto his back and then onto his other side, his bare ass suddenly against Mike’s erection, he’s ready for this final initiation, eager for it after six months of preparation, Mike has always wondered if they’d eventually come to this moment. “We’ll need something for lubrication,” he tells the boy. “We can’t do it dry.”

“Good. Go ahead. Use something.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“Totally,” Alex says. “We’ve waited forever.”

“You never said anything before now.”

“I know, I know. What’re you going to use?”

“Maybe Vaseline, I guess.”

“Whatever you normally use,” the boy urges, twisting his butt into a more upturned and accessible position.

“Normally?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Sorry, kid, I’ve never done this part before,” Mike confesses, he’s messed around with plenty of young guys but never this far, all boys want to be jerked off and sucked but anal intercourse is a whole different game, you don’t just stick your dick up Johnny’s ass and then

send him home for dinner—not in Sandburg at least, not in Mike’s world. Alex looks back over his shoulder.

“Are you kidding me?”

“Of course I’m not.”

“We don’t have to do this,” the boy says. “I mean if you don’t want.”

“Jesus yes, sure I want to do it!”

“OK, good, me too.”

“It’s just, basically, I never got an invitation before now.”

“Well, OK,” Alex says, ass still up-tilted, still waiting, “you’re officially invited. Right now. Please.”

It happens quickly after that. Mike rushes to the bathroom for the jar of Vaseline and then rushes back and greases himself and greases the boy, he tells Alex to speak up if it hurts, the boy nods, Mike is definitely big and maybe that’s one reason why Alex waited so long, maybe he was a little afraid of the size and the pain. Neither one of them knows now precisely what to do or what position might be best but then they’re doing it anyway, Alex Salazar is getting fucked for the first time, he’s half on his stomach and half on his side with one leg brought up forward to open himself wide for Mike riding him from behind, holding him, hugging him, the pain is exquisite and Alex can’t keep from groaning as Mike’s hard thing enters him and stuffs him agonizingly full, impossibly full, somehow the pain grows until it’s more than pain and more than pleasure and Alex can hardly breathe but never once does he consider stopping, never,

the more he's filled the more he wants, the more he aches the more he loves it, better and better now as Mike starts really humping, really thrusting, holding the boy with both strong arms and touching his face and then his mouth, touching the boy's mouth and letting him bite against his hand, Mike can feel the boy's teeth clamping down in brave determination and he can feel the clenched shivering of the boy's body, he can smell the coconutty oiliness of the boy's hair, before long there's a rhythm between them that builds and builds like some fatal dance until finally the man releases into the boy's bowels and makes him moan and shake, no condom, of course not, no need for one, Mike gives the boy a spermy enema and that's exactly how Alex wants it, the whole rough deal, every inch of cock and every drop of cum inside him, filling him, pumping into him, his own semen already on the sheets by this time, forced out of him minutes ago by the banging of Mike's dick.

What can they say afterwards? Amazing, outstanding, wicked sweet, the bomb. We'll have to try out different positions, Alex says when he can finally manage a full sentence, his voice still hoarse from exertion. Mike nods, yeah, definitely. The boy laughs and says well, I guess I'm totally not a virgin anymore, that's for sure. He feels invigorated now, not tired. He feels empowered. An outlaw ready to plunder and pillage. Watch out, lock up your sons, Alex Salazar is on the loose.

He shows up next day like a new boy, Mike is startled to see him, his long hair has been shorn to a brushy crewcut that gives his head a funny squarish shape but makes his round Polynesian face look even rounder and fuller. He's been wearing his beret every day this winter and spring but today he's bareheaded to flaunt his new look, besides the crewcut he's also added another earring, left ear and right ear both, rakish young pirate. No Ray or Charlie today, both of them at rehearsal for their junior high graduation, so Mike and Alex go straight to bed for what they both want, Alex getting fucked for the second time—on all fours this afternoon, doggy style, grunting into the pillow as Mike humps him—then sprawling onto his back after that for a climactic blowjob. Mike feels like the captain sucking the cabin boy's dick.

The following day is the last of the school year for Charlie and Ray, a morning-only session and then they're free, tomorrow night is graduation, now they both come running over to Mike's to give him special photos of themselves in caps and gowns—gold caps, gold gowns with green trim, the colors of George Washington Junior High. Alex is still at school, a full day for him, just Charlie and Ray for now. Mike thanks them for the pictures and hugs both of them and then watches as they play some kind of game on his computer. Charlie also got his hair cut this week, his mom wanted him to look “civilized” for graduation, it's not a crewcut like Alex's but it's radically shorter than

before, not quite so much like some kind of bizarre cartoon hairdo anymore. Still uncombed though, still tousled, along with those droopy, wide-set eyes of his he'll always look like someone just chased out of bed.

He and Ray keep playing their computer game, some space adventure, Mike bought it for them a few weeks ago but can't even remember the name of it. They eat most of a pan of brownies that Alex baked last night. They watch a few innings of a Cubs game on TV. Charlie wants to do some wrestling but Ray says no, not today, he's just hanging around till Alex shows up, he wants to talk to his cousin about tomorrow night's graduation party, big night, big plans. Charlie behaved himself for the first part of this afternoon but now he's getting restless, Ray's refusal to wrestle has him looking irritable and jumpy, impatient for Alex's arrival, while he's waiting he keeps stealing sips of Mike's beer and puffs from Mike's cigarettes until finally he's sitting on the man's lap with a beer and a cigarette of his own to pass the time. Just nonchalantly, just making himself more comfortable, he uses the hand not holding his cigarette to unbutton and unzip his pants and then goes "ahhh" in exaggerated relief, that's better, slumping more languidly on Mike's lap with his legs loosely spread. He takes a drag on his Camel and blows the smoke at his opened fly, then he does it once more with raggedy smoke rings, this gets him laughing, maybe he's a bit tipsy by now, he's having a terrific time just blowing smoke at his own crotch and then lifting the

elastic of his exposed briefs to aim some of that smoke directly inside where Mike can see the reddish meat of his penis and the curly blond fluff of his pubic hair—more hair now than five months ago, more even than just five weeks ago, Charlie’s fourteenth birthday is next week and he’s in vigorous adolescent bloom. “Giving myself a blowjob,” he finally says, that’s the joke, that’s why he’s laughing. Mike says oh yeah, now I get it, then plays along with the gag by aiming some smoke of his own at the boy’s crotch. Charlie laughs and says dude, this is a deluxe blowjob, his dick snakes up slowly sideways inside his blue briefs and then up straight beneath the gray HANES HANES HANES waistband that he’s stretching out with his thumb. Ray hears “blowjob” and glances at them from the couch but then returns his attention to the Cubs game, Charlie and Mike now aiming smoke rings at the target between the boy’s legs, trying to waft the rings onto the shaft. “OK,” Charlie abruptly announces, mashing out his cigarette, “it’s shower time!”

“A shower? You didn’t even work out,” Mike says.

“I’m dirty anyway,” the boy insists, as he sits forward he reaches a hand into his underpants and then brings it out and sticks it under Mike’s nose—you see, he says, I stink. The fingers smell of tobacco and pubes. He jumps up and starts discarding pieces of clothing as he crosses the room, once again Ray glances up from the ballgame only to look away just as indifferently as before, Charlie pausing at the bathroom door to finish

undressing, now out of his underwear, now hopping on one foot and then the other as he yanks off his socks, now into the bathroom and out of sight.

Mike looks at Ray and says hey, what's the score? Cubs losing three to one, Ray smiles, but Sammy Sosa's coming up pretty soon. Mike nods, it's never easy talking to Ray, he's generally a quiet kid and Mike usually doesn't say much himself, whenever they're alone they mostly watch TV in silence and wait for Charlie or Alex to arrive and start the festivities. Now Mike says, "Listen, pal, thanks again for the picture. It's great. Good-lookin devil."

"You're coming tomorrow, right?"

"To your graduation? Sure. I'll be there."

"And the party after," Ray reminds him, even now Mike is amazed by those dimples of his, Charlie and Alex are cute, very cute, sexy, you could even call Alex handsome—but Ray is downright pretty, those outrageous dimples, those huge dark eyes and their long black lashes curling up on top and curling down beneath, that perfect milk-chocolate skin, that large mouth and its cheerful gleam of white teeth, he won't be fourteen until the end of summer and it shows, something about him still unripe, still childish and cuddly. He tells Mike now, while they watch the game, about his plans for this summer: maybe taking karate lessons, definitely playing Pony League baseball, doing as much horseback riding as possible, swimming at Lake Swanson. Then Charlie ends the conversation by returning from his shower—

skin pinkened by the warm water, hair still damp, a white towel around his waist as a curious concession to modesty. “Did you drink my beer?” he wants to know, grabbing the can and giving it a shake, it’s about half full, Charlie grins his approval and takes a sip. “Too warm, yuck, this beer sucks.”

“Then don’t drink it, man.”

“Should I get a new one?”

“You’re asking for permission? Then no. You’ve had enough,” Mike says.

“I’m not drunk.”

“Good. Stay not drunk.”

“Whatever,” Charlie shrugs, he finishes his warm beer with a gulp and a grimace just as Alex finally arrives, it’s about time, Charlie says, Ray also brightening now to see his cousin, standing to greet him, to give him a graduation photo and discuss tomorrow night’s agenda, really there’s no problem to be solved or settled but Ray is excited and wants to confirm the time of the ceremony, the time of the party, whether Alex will be staying overnight. Hell yes, Alex says, I can’t wait! Charlie was also invited to spend the night but he’s having a party of his own, even his father will be here from St. Louis, that’s excitement enough for him, he’s happy.

Alex puts his arm around Ray’s shoulders as they wander talking into the kitchen for a Coke, on their way back Ray has his hand in Alex’s back pocket and says I oughta go, me and Charlie have been here all afternoon.

Alex looks at his chunky black wristwatch and says no way, it's early, you can't leave yet, I just got here! Charlie, now sitting cross-legged and toweled on the floor in front of the couch, says I'm not leaving yet, that's for sure, this is a special party day, dude, no more school! That's right, Alex says, party day, nobody can go home yet, Ray-Ray, you have to stay—pulling his cousin with him onto the couch, they nearly stumble over Charlie on their way. For these past couple of weeks, whenever Ray has been around, Alex and Charlie have waited for him to leave before messing around and jerking off, that's been the routine, Ray is the youngest and the quietest and until now has remained mostly aloof from the raunchiest antics of the other two. But today, as Mike watches, there's a feeling that the routine is being ignored, something different is happening as Ray smiles and agrees to stay a while longer. Alex nudges Charlie with his foot. "Hey, did you guys already work out?"

"No. Why?"

"Whadda you mean why? Because you took a shower!"

"Oh that," Charlie says, glancing down at himself with a groggy chuckle, he must be feeling the beer. "I just took one is all, no reason."

"Because he was dirty and he stank," Mike says, almost surprised by the sound of his own voice, the Cubs game has gone into extra innings and he's trying half-heartedly to watch it, he should be accustomed to this stuff by now but he's not, this boytease, crazy shit,

absurd shit. Charlie laughs and says that's right, my balls stank, that's the reason, I forgot. "And anyway, Ray wouldn't even wrestle," he adds. "You bitch!"

"Because your balls stank? I don't blame him," Alex teases.

"No," Ray laughs, "that's not why!"

"Because you're lazy," Charlie tells him.

"Shut up, I'm not," Ray says, he starts squirming now as Alex pokes him in the ribs and agrees with Charlie, lazy dog, Alex says, wouldn't wrestle—but come on, let's do it now, super death match! Ray never argues with Alex, he says OK, I guess so, again he laughs because now Charlie is taking off his shoes for him, it's like that day when Charlie himself was undressed by Alex and Mike, now it's happening again but this time to Ray, this time Charlie gets to help do the undressing, you'd swear that he and Alex must have planned this but probably not, probably just two horny kids sniffing the same opportunity and eager to get started, Charlie taking off the shoes and then the socks while Alex pulls off Ray's yellow WEBBER STABLES T-shirt, it's a warm day, that's all he's wearing on top. Ray is smiling as the other boys undress him—but it's a cautious smile, he's baffled by what's happening, some kind of practical joke that he can't quite understand. Alex says we always do Greek wrestling now, Ray-Ray, that's the new rule. Charlie rises to his knees and removes his own towel, he says fuckin right, Greek wrestling, that's no clothes, that's how we do it now.

Ray has been too busy with track these past few weeks to know about this, the totally nude wrestling has been happening without him, he's always worn shorts until now, sometimes Charlie or Alex or even Ray himself might briefly find themselves uncovered when shorts or sweatpants get pulled down—but real nudity has always been for afterwards, for the shower, not for wrestling. Ray is surprised that they're all going to be doing this but he says nothing to stop it, he does nothing to resist as the other boys share the unfastening of his baggy jeans and then drag them down and off, nothing to resist as his friend Charlie pulls down his tartan plaid boxers, suddenly young Raymond is naked on the couch next to a fully dressed Alex, the image is strangely shocking, the obscene juxtaposition of it. Ray glances embarrassed and flustered at Mike across the room but then quickly looks away, naked teddy bear, he hasn't changed much in these past several months, same stubby wiener and chubby little balls, not much pubic hair, baby-fat tummy and thighs, plump nipples. Alex smiles at him and then leans forward and kisses him, they share a long kiss on the lips as Charlie watches them, kneeling in front of them, one hand on Ray's knee. Mike has never seen anything like this outside of porno films, he gets up to fetch another beer but the boys don't even notice him now, they don't even look around.

Alex leans back after that affectionate kiss, smiling again, now it's his turn to be stripped. Charlie says come on, take his fuckin clothes off! Ray perks up and nods

and starts helping, maybe this is fun after all, Alex laughing as the other boys roughly and rapidly undress him, Charlie already with a boner and now here comes Alex's popping up hard out of his underpants for everyone to look at. Three very naked boys now in Mike's living room, only Ray still without an erection, they've all been naked here before but this is different and everyone can feel it—not just the casual nakedness of the locker room, of changing, of showering—no, not this time, not today.

The wrestling, if that's what you call it, starts right there on the couch. Charlie grabs Ray by the legs and tries to drag him onto the floor while Ray and Alex come together in a clinch that looks more like passionate hugging than fighting. Charlie keeps straining until he's managed to pull the entwined cousins off the couch and onto the floor where he joins them in a rowdy grapple, all three of them rolling and tangling and tumbling across the orange carpet, no rules, no referee, Ray against Alex, Alex against Charlie, Charlie against Ray, every boy for himself in this furious and sweaty fracas. Mike is still in the kitchen, standing by the refrigerator and gazing through the archway at this melee in his living room, he can smell the boys from here, the ruttish heat and musk of them, those three naked bodies entangled and twisting, brown skin and cocoa and white, Charlie's skinny arms and legs, Alex's lean ass and muscly back, Ray's husky shoulders and hips and the pale soles of his brown feet as he kneels or flops onto his

stomach. More grabbing and giggling now than wrestling, you can see Alex and Charlie abandoning any pretext and beginning their usual foreplay, holding each other's boners as they roll on the carpet, dry-humping more than grappling, Alex especially bold about it, frankly feeling and fondling, now slipping a finger into Charlie's butt to make him yelp, now getting Charlie onto his back and giving him one of those sneaky little kisses right on the tip of his straight-up pecker, now ambushing Charlie with a leaky surprise of pre-cum swiped across his cheek or across his chin—gross fucker, Charlie laughs. Ray keeps trying to do some actual wrestling during all of this but then the other boys discard any lingering restraint and make their twosome a threesome by grabbing and groping not only each other but also him, finally Ray discovers what he's been missing lately, now he becomes the giggly center of attention, it's time to initiate Ray-Ray, time to get at his dick and give him a boner and make him one of the gang. First Charlie tries to pin him down and then Alex but Raymond has surprising agility and strength and keeps wriggling free, he's being manhandled and tickled this whole time and can't stop laughing and can't catch his breath and you can see him losing the battle, you can see the gradual stiffening of his penis as it's touched and pinched and pulled by the other boys. Finally Alex manages to drive him onto his back and hold him down while red-faced Charlie manages to straddle and control his legs and end the struggle. Ray succumbs panting on

the carpet, sweat is dripping from all of them, Charlie and Alex take turns playing with Ray's dick and balls until he's as hard as they are, Ray himself still panting in speechless surrender, letting it all happen now, one of the club, his stubby erection twitching and twitching for more.

Then Alex leans down and gives his cousin's twitchy thing a quick kiss that makes Ray hunch in laughter and surprise and reach between his own legs with a protective hand. Alex apologizes for startling him by kissing him sweetly on the lips, something almost sacramental about it, a baptismal kiss of welcoming and belonging from one Salazar boy to another, Charlie still straddling Ray's legs and already masturbating as he watches. Now Alex sits back on his haunches and joins him, two boys jerking off and then three as Ray timidly follows along, time to finish this ceremony, this rite of passage, Mike staring from the kitchen, Cubs game long since ended in defeat, a rerun of Friends on TV, three boys quietly and intently masturbating in the living room, three boys each taking his turn after a few minutes of energetic wanking to clench and climax and ejaculate—first Alex, then Charlie, finally even Ray himself managing a spurt and a dribble as the others wait and watch, Jesus what a mess he is by now—cum on his shoulder from Alex, cum on his thighs from Charlie, cum on his belly from himself, all three of the kids have to laugh at the sloppy grossness of it.

Quite a day for young Ray, quite a day for all of them, they shower afterwards and joke with Mike about the awesome clubhouse he runs here. Ray is mostly silent but he keeps his smile and seems happy enough. Alex pampers and rewards him with hugs and with kisses throughout the rest of the afternoon, so pleased with Ray-Ray, so proud of him. Later, after the others have left, Alex opens Mike's pants without even asking and gives him a good blowjob, no intercourse today, it's late, even Alex has had enough, Mike needs and deserves relief though and that's what he gets. Alex spits and wipes his mouth when he's finished. "What a day," he finally says, nuzzling against Mike on the couch. "Wasn't it extremely incredible? Ray was so great."

"He looked embarrassed."

"But he enjoyed it, I think. I know he did. So much fun, Papa, seriously."

"It's too much, Alex."

"Say what? Too much how?"

"All of you here now jacking off. So much sex stuff going on."

"Don't you like it?"

"That's not the point," Mike says. "It's just getting out of control."

"You always worry too much. I mean, I understand, I do. But don't get all weirded out."

"Sorry, Alex, I just don't know how much longer we can do this."

“Now you’re scaring me for real,” the boy says, still leaning against Mike’s side, gnawing at a thumbnail. “First Jeff earlier today and now you. Everybody’s acting crazy.”

“What happened with Jeff?”

“He’s all upset because we never went back to see him and his band. He’s like clinically paranoid or something. He thinks you must hate him.”

“Oh Christ.”

“He’s getting totally psycho. Carrie is a mess about it. And now you tell me this stuff about, like, whatever, about us breaking up or something.”

“Bad timing. Sorry.”

“Damn,” Alex mumbles, he jabs Mike with a punitive elbow and then wipes his eyes. “Don’t scare me.”

“It’s just, hey, things are getting out of control,” the man says once more.

“I’ll make sure we’re OK, I promise.”

“You’re only fourteen, pal.”

“Yeah, well,” Alex nods, he’s thinking now, thinking hard, summer vacation is starting and that changes everything, three months of freedom and warm weather, Charlie home every weekday in an empty house, Ray and also Alex himself frequently home by themselves, acres of woods and parkland at Lake Swanson for secluded mischief—maybe it’s OK if Mike wants to reduce or even eliminate his role in all of this, maybe Alex can have just as much fun regardless. The

boy lifts his head now and kisses Mike on the cheek. "Papa, you'll be all right. Don't be upset."

"I'm OK, Alex."

"Should me and the guys not come over here so much? Would that be better?"

"I don't even know," Mike says. "I'm a fuckin mess. I don't know. It's just getting so dangerous, people are saying shit, like Scooby, you remember Scooby that hillbilly moron, he's seen me with you guys, I don't know, I fuckin don't know, Alex, I really don't."

"I didn't realize," the boy says. "About that Scooby guy and stuff. I'm sorry. That's fucked up."

"We have to be more careful, that's all."

"I understand."

"I don't want to move away, Alex, I love you like crazy, Ray and Charlie are great, watching you guys, messing around with Charlie, you especially of course, you're the best thing I've ever had in my life, but. . ."

"Don't move away."

"I don't want to, but. . ."

"Don't move away," Alex says again. "Don't panic. We all love you, we do, you're safe. But maybe we can, like, you know, chill out after this, maybe the Outlaw Dojo is finished anyway, I think maybe it is."

"You're probably right."

"Of course I'm right, I'm a genius," Alex says, big comical smile, eyes squinted. "Never fear!"

"You make me laugh, man."

“Admit it, Papa, today was amazing, wasn’t it? With Ray and all? No matter what else, you have to admit it.”

“Yeah,” Mike says, holding the boy, “it was. Definitely. Amazing.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There's a drizzly rain this night of graduation, no problem however because the ceremony is inside the gym. Charlie receives his diploma and pumps his fist and even gives a little bow to the crowd, Ray comes later and accepts his diploma with no theatrics or showboating, just his usual cheery smile as he strides back to his seat. Mike intended to sit discreetly at the back of the gym tonight but the Salazars spotted him and brought him forward to sit with them instead. Later he meets Charlie's parents and Mrs. Gubakowski's boyfriend for the first time, everybody friendly and polite—strange though, always uncomfortable to deal with the parents of boys who've just been masturbating in your apartment.

Afterwards is a marathon of picture-taking with cameras and camcorders, Charlie and his family finally move on, Ray continues to pose with various friends and classmates and teachers and relatives until it's time to head for the Salazar house on Crescent Terrace for the big party. Mike shows up for about an hour to give the boy a card and some money, earlier he also gave a card and money to Charlie, now he spends a while talking to Daniel and Teresa, to Gabe and Cleo, he eats a piece of cake and then hugs Ray and hugs Alex and leaves for home, happy to spend the rest of his night alone, drinking a few beers, enjoying the peaceful solitude,

doing some reading for a change, maybe one of his Burgess novels.

At Ray's house the party is just gaining momentum. The light rain has stopped and most of the kids are outside playing a game of tag in the dark, the adults are inside drinking, dancing, playing cards, Alex is in and out of the house to enjoy every available bit of fun with both groups. Ray's parents have rented a soda fountain for the night and that's where Alex eventually stations himself. It's a big chrome beauty with fancy handles and spigots and six flavors of syrup and three frosty bins for vanilla ice cream and strawberry and chocolate. Alex learns from Uncle Gabe how to use the whole contraption, how to make the milk shakes, how to inject the carbonation into the sodas, soon he's taken charge and pronounces himself Supreme Soda Jerk or just Supreme Jerk for short. Most of the young kids, some of them out-of-town cousins, end up making this soda fountain in the kitchen their prime hangout, Alex couldn't be happier, the focus of everyone's attention, he's still making shakes and sodas and sundaes when the party starts to break up around midnight.

Alex, of course, has further plans for tonight, any sleepover with Ray is always fun but after yesterday, wow, he's been itchy between the legs all day just thinking about it, he can't wait. But something will be different tonight from what Alex was expecting, stupid of him really, he should have remembered that Aunt Cleo's sister and her husband and two kids would also be

staying over, it's a big house with plenty of space and Aunt Cleo wouldn't think of making her sister's family stay at a hotel. There's one daughter, she'll be sleeping with Ray's little sister and baby brother. There's also a son, he's ten years old and his name is Benjamin or Benjie, a dark-skinned boy with reddish dreadlocks and big teeth like Ray's, seems to be a trait from Cleo's side of the family. Alex wonders now, as bedtime approaches, if tonight might be even better than he was expecting, maybe another cousin will be a cool thing, who knows, Alex and Benjie are practically strangers and this isn't some kind of cheesy Internet story, this is real life, Alex doesn't imagine an orgy of cousins tonight or anything totally kinky, anyway Benjie is only ten—but still, the prospect of another boy in the room is exciting, it makes that itch between Alex's legs even itchier.

One thing bothering him now as the night ends, probably no big deal but Carrie was invited to the party and never showed up, Alex even called her once but got no answer, it's not like Carrie to behave that way. She's been upset about Jeff recently and maybe that has something to do with it. Alex wishes more and more that she and Jeff would just break up and get it over with, Jeff is becoming such a nut case, poor Carrie, she doesn't deserve all of his bullshit. But hey, whatever, Alex is having too much fun right now to worry about that or anything else.

Hard to calm down after so much excitement, finally Ray and Alex take Benjie upstairs with them to Ray's bedroom shortly after one o'clock. The little boy loves Ray's football-helmet bed, it's so dope, but he's totally looking forward to using his own Pokeman sleeping bag tonight, like camping out, he's all toothy smile and twinkly eyes. Truth is, that football bed is too small these days for two growing teenagers, even Ray by himself is getting too old and too big for it—but never mind, Ray and Alex both know they'll be sleeping together, sharing that same undersized bed, they don't even have to discuss it. Alex can't help himself, he holds up a deck of cards here in Ray's bedroom and says dudes, hey, who wants to play strip poker? It's his favorite old ploy but no longer even necessary for seducing Ray out of his clothing, especially not after yesterday's wild romp, he's saying it this time for Benjie's sake, teasing the little guy, flirting with him. Young Benjie seems game for whatever the older boys might want to do but confesses that he doesn't know how to play poker. Alex laughs and says damn, too bad, maybe next time, OK, Benjie? The boy nods OK, he'll learn for next time. Ray nudges Alex's arm, a cautionary nudge, maybe it's not a smart idea to say too much around Benjie, he's only ten, he's not part of the club, he could repeat this stuff to his parents, to Ray's parents, to anyone. Alex, as if Ray has spoken this caution aloud, says I know, I know—but Ray has already turned away, his hay fever has been acting up tonight and his little

pack of Kleenex is empty so now he hurries to the bathroom for a roll of toilet paper, it's Charmin and it's soft and it feels better on his nose than regular tissues.

Alex tells Benjie that it's bedtime and then starts to undress in front of him. Benjie says OK and unrolls his sleeping bag, proudly he shows Alex a new pair of pajamas that were folded inside the bag until now, they're covered with those same Pokeman characters, must be his favorite cartoon. Very cool, Alex says, but you don't really need pajamas here, you can sleep nude, he finishes undressing as he talks and then does a little stretch and gives his own behind a happy spank with both hands and says see, Benjie, like this, feels good. Benjie takes a wide-eyed look at this other boy standing there naked, of course Alex has some bobbing stiffness to his penis, that's what Benjie is mostly looking at, he's never seen a big kid's thing for real and definitely not like this, not sticking out in this funny way. No, he says, that's OK, he wants to wear his new pajamas, quickly he sheds his own clothes down to his underpants—nimble brown body in white undies—then puts his pajamas on with those underpants still beneath. Alex, meanwhile, has found that long yellow WBRG T-shirt that he keeps here at Ray's and always wears as a make-do nightshirt whenever he's preparing for bed or using the bathroom, some modesty is necessary, he can't just wander naked through the hallways.

Ray comes back now with his roll of toilet paper, he's using a wad of it to wipe his runny nose. Alex takes

his turn in the bathroom and then Benjie goes last, he takes a while to return because he detours downstairs to say another good night to his parents and show off his new pajamas. Ray has stripped to his boxers by this time, now while they're alone Alex turns horniness into a joke by grinning "privacy at last!" and grabbing Ray in a lusty embrace and peppering him with kisses, he sticks a hand into the back of Ray's underwear and presses against him and keeps kissing at his face. Ray knows this joke is not really a joke, he knows and yet he responds with soft laughter and patient humor and a sweet willingness to play along, he's thirteen, he loves Alex—and yesterday is still fresh in his mind, still fresh in his body. He puts his arms around Alex and they're still hugging when Benjie comes hurrying back, it's OK, he sees it as a good-night hug and even joins in when Alex holds out an arm for him, sleep tight, Alex says, giving him a tickle, don't let the bedbugs bite, hugging him. Benjie likes this, he also gets a hug from Ray and then it's off to bed for everybody. Suddenly, damn, Alex remembers that he should definitely have a towel for what's coming up and he dashes to the bathroom to fetch one. Benjie has crawled into his sleeping bag by the time Alex gets back and Ray is also in bed, blowing his nose again with a fistful of Charmin.

Alex announces "lights out!" and flicks off the switch and then pulls off his T-shirt as he crosses the room, he's naked as he steps over Benjie camped out on the floor and as he climbs into bed with Ray. He

murmurs I got a towel for us and then he puts a hand onto Ray's stomach, groggy Raymond nods but keeps wiping at his nose, not really in the mood. Alex isn't waiting, he doesn't care if Benjie is still awake, he and Ray aren't even covered on the bed here in the darkened room, some moonlight silvery through the window, Alex is ready to start and his hand is already busy, he reaches into Ray's boxers and tries to kiss him at the same time but Ray can't fully cooperate, he's too sniffly and sneezy for any real kissing and cuddling, he says sorry, sorry. Alex says OK, anyway, we should still, here, these things—his voice trailing off as he pushes at Ray's underwear to get them down, these things, he mumbles again. Ray uses his free hand to help remove them, it's taken about nine months but tonight he'll finally be sleeping nude with Alex. If Benjie sat up right now he could see them, he could see both of his cousins naked atop the sheets and playing with each other's dicks, first time Ray has ever touched Alex's, it feels so much bigger than his own, rubbing it for Alex, getting his own rubbed in return, he's got himself a good boner by now, he doesn't feel frisky enough to do too much and he's still sniffing but this is OK, masturbating is OK, this is nice, especially with someone else's hand doing it, rubbing it, playing with it, strange how much better it feels with Alex's hand doing it for him. Then Alex is ejaculating, he's always had a quick trigger, Ray can feel the drippy stuff on his fingers and on his own hip and ribcage, Alex really shot a load and he's going jesus

jesus oh jesus loudly enough for Benjie to hear if he's still awake and listening. Ray himself lasts much longer, minutes and minutes longer, he tries stroking himself for a while and then Alex takes over again and finally Ray uses his own hand once more to get the job done. Alex has kept one hand on Ray's belly this whole time and now he knows that Ray is cumming because his hand is wet with it, not much, just a spritz and a sprinkle, Ray just isn't very juicy tonight and even he's a little disappointed. But Alex doesn't care, he's so happy to have Ray-Ray as his new jerk-off buddy—and now, best part, he eagerly gets his first taste of another boy's semen, he licks it from his own hand and Ray sees him doing it and Alex is glad, he's never done this with Charlie, never had the nerve until now to let another kid see him do this, licking the stuff, tasting it strange on his tongue, just like Mike said about it, you can't really say it tastes good but it definitely tastes exciting, it tastes potent and it tastes alive, real primal ooze still warm from another boy's testes, finally you forget about describing it and you just swallow it as Alex does now, he swallows the meager sample released by Ray and he wants more, he wants a mouthful.

But that's all for tonight. Ray says nothing about what he just saw, maybe it surprised him but not much, not after these past few months, not after yesterday. Alex uses the towel to clean the leftover spillage. He can tell that Ray feels shitty, he'd like to do more but contents himself now with snuggling, so nice just to be naked

together like this, Alex has been wanting this for so long, this wonderfully bare and indecent bedtime intimacy, his hand on Ray's butt as they fall asleep.

Benjie is the first one up and awake next morning. Alex hears him returning from the bathroom and opens his eyes and yawns and stretches, he and Ray are covered by a single light sheet, Ray flat on his stomach, still dozing. Benjie sees that Alex is awake and grins at him, it's only eight o'clock and the adults will be asleep for another couple of hours, he's not sure what to do with himself. Alex stretches and yawns once more and then climbs out from under the sheet, Benjie giggling to see how nasty hard he is. "Don't laugh at my wiener," Alex teases the younger boy. "This is a piss boner, that's all."

"What's that mean?"

"Don't you know? When you wake up and you have to pee real bad? Don't you get a boner like this?"

"I don't think so," Benjie says, he has that same wide-eyed and serious expression that Alex saw last night. "I don't remember."

"Check tomorrow morning," Alex says. "Maybe you'll have one." He uses the cum towel to wrap and cover himself as he heads for the bathroom, Benjie is nodding agreeably to his advice, OK, I'll check tomorrow morning. The small boy follows him into the hallway and hangs around outside the bathroom door, Alex leaves it open, nobody else awake yet, he takes off the towel and pees as Benjie continues loitering just

outside to watch him, curious little spy, Alex's penis just soft enough by now to allow for aiming his urine into the bowl, still he has to bend slightly forward to compensate. Benjie is smiling fascinated as he observes. Both boys scamper downstairs after that to forage some breakfast, Alex again wearing his towel, Benjie in his Pokeman pajamas. They fix themselves bowls of Lucky Charms and hurry back upstairs to the bedroom where they can watch TV on Ray's nineteen-inch Sony. A Bugs Bunny cartoon is on right now, Rugrats is coming up. Alex drops his towel and gets back onto the bed with his bowl of cereal and pats the few inches of mattress between himself and Ray, inviting Benjie to squeeze in, come on, he says, there's enough room. Benjie accepts the invitation, letting Alex hold his cereal while he crawls aboard and settles himself into place, only such a skinny little boy could possibly fit onto that overcrowded mattress. Alex hands him his bowl of Lucky Charms now that he's settled. "You can take off your PJs, Benjie, if you want. Be more comfortable."

"No, I'm comfortable," Benjie says.

"OK, but this is better," Alex says, stretched out naked as he starts to eat. Ray, on the other side, is just now opening his eyes and waking up. Alex looks over at him and smiles with a mouthful of cereal and milk. "Get up, sleepy head, get up!"

"Tired," Ray protests in a husky mumble.

"It's breakfast time!"

"Too early."

“Hey Benjie,” Alex says, “spank your cousin for being so lazy.”

“Do what?”

“Spank his lazy booty for him,” Alex says again, reaching over this time to yank the sheet away from Ray and leave him uncovered. Ray is still on his belly and makes an instinctive but lackadaisical grab for the sheet as it’s flung aside. Alex gives his bare bottom a smack and then Benjie happily plays along by giving it a few lively spanks of his own—then a few more for the sheer mischief of it, giggling like someone just discovering how to be naughty. Ray laughs and finally says stop it, jeez, you guys, he turns onto his side facing the other boys to remove his behind as their target, now Benjie gets a full view of this other cousin also naked beside him. Ray’s hay fever has subsided this morning and he’s starting to look more bright-eyed and cheerful as he comes entirely awake, his dick is a little piss-bonerish but not much, not as interesting as Alex’s, Benjie was probably hoping for something bigger and harder and more unusual than this ordinary-looking wiener.

Ray gets up a few minutes later to pee, when he goes for his boxers Alex stops him and gives him the towel instead—no clothes yet, too early—Ray doesn’t argue, he’s gone only briefly and then he’s back and shuts the bedroom door and discards the towel. Alex chuckles yeah, all right, our own little den of iniquity! Ray might know what he means, Benjie has no idea. Rugrats has started by now, Benjie says I’ve seen this

one but it's funny, it's a good one, still munching his cereal as he watches. Alex finishes about half of his own bowl and then gives the rest of it to Ray, who's once again on his side of the narrow bed and making no effort now to cover himself, Alex is mildly surprised, pleasantly surprised, you wouldn't expect Ray to be quite so nonchalant about staying undressed this way, especially in front of Benjie. Even young Benjie himself seems to be noticing the vibe and the attitude here now in the bedroom, starting to feel left out, like maybe he's missing the fun these older boys are having, he wants to be one of them, he wants to join them. Finished with his cereal, he lets Alex take the bowl and set it on the bedside table, then he sits forward and pulls the top of his pajamas halfway up his chest, arms raised and poised to continue. "Maybe I'll take these off now," he says to Alex.

"Your cool PJs?"

"I think I'll take 'em off," Benjie nods, still posed like a little mannequin, waiting. "Should I?"

"Dude, no doubt," Alex tells him. "Get those PJs off, get comfy and cozy!"

"Like you guys," Benjie says, free now to keep going, his rusty dreadlocks lifting as the shirt passes over his head and then flopping back softly over his ears and forehead. He jackknifes and wriggles to remove the bottoms, Alex gives him a helping hand, together they then peel his undies right off and Benjie giggles to be so suddenly and cleanly stripped, nothing but bare skin now

on this jam-packed bed as the three boys resettle themselves into a comfortably naked huddle, not even enough room for them to lie side by side so Benjie ends up wedged in the middle at a slight angle, his left shoulder against Alex's chest, his butt on the mattress, his legs across Ray's knees. Here's a surprise, the little guy has an uncircumcised penis, a dangly brown pizzle about the same size as Ray's. Alex has one arm around him with a hand on his chest, that's how they all watch TV for the next hour, Benjie sometimes shifting his weight from one hip to another, raising a knee, moving his legs to a more comfortable position, leaning now more heavily against one cousin and now more heavily against the other, lots of idle touching between bare feet, playing footsies with Ray and then with Alex, now also playing handsies with Alex, the two of them entwining each other's fingers like shy kids on a first date. Alex has an up-and-down erection during this entire time, Benjie keeps finding the hard thing against his left arm and accidentally nudges it with his elbow more than once, he laughs about it at first but quickly grows accustomed to it, Alex isn't embarrassed by it so neither is he, Benjie is loving every moment of this sensuous interlude.

Alex gets bolder and bolder as they all lie there watching cartoons, he knows about being careful and he keeps glancing at Ray to monitor his response and possible disapproval but Ray seems fine with what's happening, Benjie is on his own by this time, his clothes are off, look at him, he's a happy guy. So yes, Alex starts

touching him more and more intimately—pinching gently at his nipples, tickling his belly button, squeezing his thighs—each time, Benjie seems hardly to notice that he’s being fondled but then invariably he grins and pushes away Alex’s hand and returns his attention to the TV. And each time, undiscouraged, Alex finds another part of Benjie’s body to touch and explore, caressing the perfect smoothness of him, the perfect tautness and leanness of him, finally Alex puts a hand once again on Benjie’s thigh and lets his fingertips very lightly brush back and forth across the side of the younger boy’s scrotum. “Hey Benjie,” he says to him, as if just noticing, “look, look here, your thing is different from ours.”

“Yeah, I know,” Benjie says.

“I like it,” Alex says. “It’s cool. Can I look at it better?”

Benjie nods OK, grinning. Alex sits forward and uses both hands for his examination, Ray is watching, Benjie is staring down at himself as Alex holds his penis with the thumb and forefinger of one hand and manipulates the brown foreskin with the other, saying very cool, very cool, pulling the foreskin back to look at the hidden glans and then sliding the skin up and down, up and down, he can feel the whole thing getting stiffer as he keeps playing with it, the skin stretching tighter and tighter until the head of Benjie’s penis has pushed itself up totally exposed and raw and Alex finds himself holding a full-sprung boner, a handful of hard ten-year-

old dick, Benjie still staring but no longer grinning, Alex stroking him now with a little more vigor and friction, actually jerking him off, Benjie absolutely fuddled by what's happening to him here in Ray's bedroom, this must be what older boys do, this must be how older boys play, he's spellbound and makes no attempt to stop Alex's hand, even Ray is curious now to see what might happen if Alex keeps rubbing Benjie's thing long enough, Rugrats has ended but nobody takes any notice, Benjie's nuts have tightened like two brown pebbles and his tummy is clenched but then, shit, there's a noise from the hallway, the adults are stirring and suddenly the spell is broken and Benjie pokes anxiously at Alex's shoulder, don't, he says, that's enough. All right, Alex concedes, but he's rabidly excited by now and can't finish without giving Benjie a parting gift that surprises even himself, he wasn't planning to do this, to lean down like this and give Benjie's penis a goodbye kiss and then, oh what the hell, to put the whole thing into his mouth and hold it there with Benjie laughing startled and Ray laughing at the shocking sight of it and now Alex himself laughing through his nose but only through his nose because his mouth is filled with warm kiddie cock. Finally Benjie twists away, more noise now from the hallway, the little boy climbs over Alex and takes another glance at his own wet boner as if the thing must belong to someone else, it can't possibly be a part of his own body. Alex still isn't ready to finish, he can't just stop himself so abruptly, noise or no noise he can't yet calm himself and

now he pounces on Ray as his new playmate, Benjie is already getting dressed and Ray was just about to stand up and do the same when Alex grabs his arm and says wait, just wait, crawling almost on top of Ray to kiss him and rub against him, it's OK if Benjie is there, it's OK, Alex will gladly make love to Ray with the other boy watching and even Ray himself might have gone along with it a few minutes ago, there was a feeling in the room that nothing was too weird or too crazy to try—but now Ray is nervous and wants to put his clothes on and so he gently pushes Alex away to free himself and get out of bed. Alex could also stop now but he won't, no way, he rolls onto his back right there on Ray's bed and commences to masturbate, really pounding it, if the adults wanted to listen at the door they could easily hear the bedsprings going creak creak creak. Benjie might have thought the show was over but suddenly here's something new, maybe the best part so far, he stands next to the bed half dressed, just holding his shirt, staring amazed at the spectacle of Alex in front of him, it's a special thrill for Alex this way, creak creak creak of those overstressed springs, he spreads his legs to give the other boys an even better view of his balls and his ass crack and then he smiles at them and eagerly shows little Benjie what a teenager's dick can do, he's been building and storing this load all morning and now it comes spurting onto his belly and onto his chest, one pearly strand even hits the mattress up as high as his own shoulder. Benjie laughs "whoa!" and glances at Ray to

share his amazement at what they've just seen, being a typical kid he can't resist dipping a finger into the stuff and then giving it a sniff, this is what he himself will be producing in another two or three years and he wants to know how it'll feel, how it'll smell.

Alex uses that same towel of his to clean this new mess, he's hardly done with that and just getting into his underwear and socks when Uncle Gabe opens the door to check on them, only three or four minutes sooner and the man would have looked in to find his nephew ejaculating. Now, smiling at the boys and wishing them all a good morning, he tells Alex to call home as soon as possible, his parents have a message for him. Alex wonders if it might have something to do with Carrie, he should probably have brought his cell phone with him but he likes to get away from it now and then, already Benjie has scurried off and Ray is on his way to the bathroom as Alex finishes dressing and then hustles downstairs to use the phone in the kitchen. His mother answers, she tells him that he needs to come home, that something has happened and they need to talk about it. Jesus, Alex says, don't scare me like this, tell me, what happened? His mother says don't worry, it's nobody in the family—but something happened to your friend Jeff. She won't tell him any more right now, she says we'll pick you up in a few minutes, we'll talk about it then.

Alex knows now that he was right about Carrie, something happened to Jeff and that's why he didn't see her or hear from her last night. Maybe a car accident?

Some kind of fight or violence? A drug bust? With Jeff, it could be anything. Alex tells everyone that he has to be leaving, his parents are coming to get him, Uncle Gabe and Aunt Cleo respond with sympathetic nods, apparently they already know more about this mysterious situation than the boy himself. He only has time for a glass of juice before his parents arrive and then it's goodbye kisses for everyone, typical Alex but another surprise for Benjie to be suddenly kissed on the lips this way, Alex completes the surprise by giving him a hug and whispering into his ear, saying, "Awesome time, Benjie, so much fun, so cool." The little boy grins and nods, returning an enthusiastic hug of agreement.

In the car, on their way back across town, Alex's mom and dad tell him what he already knows, that something happened to Jeff. The details still aren't clear, they say. But it's a horrible thing. It's very upsetting. Alex keeps nodding and listening, the tightness in his gut getting worse. Finally his mother breaks the news. She tells him that Jeff is dead. She tells him that Jeff committed suicide last night.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jeff's funeral is the following weekend, it would have been sooner except for the unusual circumstances, the need for a police report and an autopsy, all of that ghoulish business. Everybody has a theory about exactly what happened to him, rumors, gossip, how it happened, why it happened—but nobody really knows the details, his parents aren't talking and Jeff himself didn't leave any note or explanation. Alex knows only that his friend killed himself at home, at the trailer, that he used some kind of gun, probably a shotgun, maybe he was emulating his idol Kurt Cobain in that final bleak moment. At least he didn't hurt anyone else. Like those Columbine kids did. That's what people keep saying. Alex stays quiet whenever he hears this, he knows better than anyone how close he and Jeff came to wreaking their own personal Columbine last November.

Carrie also remembers that terrifying day, now she says she'll never forgive herself for letting Jeff continue along that destructive path all these months without doing something to help him, to stop him, she goes on and on like this, how worthless she's been and how she should have seen what was happening to him, the usual guilt and self-pity, impossible to console her. Somehow she manages to attend the funeral but then relapses and withdraws again and does nothing day after day but mope and cry and blame herself for Jeff's suicide. Alex

is the only friend she'll tolerate during this time, Ray also comes along on a couple of these visits just to be supportive, he's always liked Carrie and the girl likes him, she gives him a weepy, grateful hug every time she sees him.

Mike has kept himself removed from this whole affair, he feels bad about Jeff but never knew the family, never met his parents, attending the funeral would have felt awkward and intrusive so he stayed away. Alex agrees with him, no reason to get involved. Again and again they discuss the suicide, Alex needs to talk about it and Mike is happy to listen, always happy to do anything that might help the boy feel better. A few days after the funeral, sunny June afternoon, they take a drive to Lake Swanson and hike to a secluded spot on the shoreline where they can sit and talk and pitch pebbles into the sun-sparkly water. Alex is thinking about Jeff again, he skips a small flat stone across the surface and then leans against Mike and smiles. "You know," he says, "that probably would've been me. Without you. Jeff, I mean. That would've been me."

"Don't be melodramatic," Mike says.

"I'm serious."

"You were always stronger than Jeff."

"I'm not sure that's true. Not always."

"You would've found your own way. You're pretty tough."

"Maybe, maybe not," the boy shrugs. "But I think you saved me. Honestly. That's how I see it."

“OK then. Thanks. Glad I could help.”

“But lately you’ve been worrying me.”

“I know. Sorry. I know.”

“If anything ever happened to you. If you ever did something. Like Jeff.”

“Nothing’s going to happen. Don’t worry.”

“Promise me,” Alex says.

“Promise you what?”

“That you won’t try to kill yourself with booze or whatever.”

“That’s what you think?”

“Either that or you’ll, like, disappear. Move away. Am I wrong?”

“Well, you know, we already talked about this,” Mike says, of course the kid is right. “But now with Jeff, with this whole mess, I could never put you through something like this again.”

“So promise me!”

“I promise. I won’t do anything. To myself. Sorry you’ve been worried.”

“And you won’t be leaving?”

“Not today. Not tomorrow. No emergency right now, I guess.”

“Goofy guy,” Alex says, giving the man a poke with his elbow. “You don’t know how to be happy. That’s what I think. You enjoy being sad.”

“Doctor Salazar.”

“That’s my diagnosis. You’re afraid of real happiness.”

“And of going to prison for twenty or thirty years.”

“But how? Not because of me. Or Ray. Or Charlie. Who’s going to say anything?”

“People are starting to notice, starting to talk,” Mike says. “Remember Scooby, that asshole, I told you about him. It’s a fuckin dangerous world, Alex.”

Maybe that’s why Mike goes back to the tavern later that same day, the tavern where he ran into Scooby a few weeks ago, maybe he wants to confront the danger and assess the potency of it. He sits at the bar and orders his usual shot and a beer, no sign of Scooby tonight, the asshole must be working, finally Mike decides to visit Mario’s itself and find out what kind of reception he gets. Mario is glad to see him, he thinks Mike has returned for his old job, hey, he shouts from the kitchen, look here, my best worker he’s coming back! Not quite, Mike says, just visiting. He accepts a free beer. Everyone seems happy to see him again, or at worst indifferent, he’s just finishing his beer when Scooby himself returns from a delivery run to the college, they spot each other and Scooby pauses near the door and mumbles holy shit, man, what the fuck? Mike just waits and watches, letting Scooby check in with Mario and complete his business before joining him near the pinball machines for a cigarette and a chat, telling him to relax, don’t worry, I just came by to say hello. “Wanted to make sure everything here is cool, you know, normal.”

“Couldn’t be better,” Scooby says, each word a spew of smoke. “How’s your posse, man?”

“There you go again,” Mike says. “You dumb motherfucker. Didn’t I just tell you?”

“Why? What’s the prob? Y’all is too touchy, man. So you’re back in business, so what?”

“Back in business?”

“Like the old days.”

“What d’you know?”

“Your old rep,” Scooby says. “I remember. People remember. Y’all handled some quality shit.”

“You think I’m dealing again?”

“Hey, whatever,” Scooby shrugs. “Better than workin here, man, that’s for sure.”

“Using those kids? To deal shit? That’s what you think?”

“I only said y’all should be careful,” Scooby says. “Last time. That’s all I said. Oughta be careful. Fuck, anyway, forget it.”

“Beautiful,” Mike says, then starts laughing. “No shit, man, you’re a beautiful guy. But yeah, right, I’ll be careful. Good advice. Smart man. Definitely.”

Scooby grins in slow-witted relief and satisfaction, somehow he’s managed to please Big Mike and that’s all he needs to know or understand. Mike just laughs again and thanks Mario for the beer and then leaves Scooby standing there next to Mortal Kombat, Alex’s old favorite, seems appropriate, yeah, totally appropriate, Scooby right next to Exhibit A in the case of Alex Salazar but blind to the significance of it. Mike feels like

an idiot, a paranoid idiot, he's laughing at himself more than at Scooby as he leaves Mario's and heads for home.

Not that everything is suddenly fine now, all better, no more problems—but Mike returns home tonight feeling safer than he has in months, the threat from Scooby was no threat at all, the suspicious gaze of an entire community was more imaginary than real. And beyond that, hard to explain, something about Jeff's suicide has changed the emotional landscape. The blunt force of it. The shock of it. Mike's own plans for self-extermination seem especially feeble now, pathetic, cowardly, he's ashamed that he ever considered putting Alex through something so grotesque. He's been a child lately, sniveling his way through each day while waiting for the big nasty bogeyman to come and eat him. How did he become this way? When did he turn into such a spineless pussy?

And now Jeff is gone, here for just a few years on this fucked-up planet and already gone. Why so eager to be nothing for the rest of eternity? Mike hasn't allowed himself to think about the boy until now, not really, not fully, weird kid, almost never smiled or seemed happy except for that one Saturday night when Mike and Alex went to visit him and watch him rehearse, maybe they should've visited him more often, he kept waiting for them, he always wanted them to come back. Damn. Weird kid. Thanking Mike for rescuing him on that terrible day in November, shaking Mike's hand, you're like some total superhero, he said. It's something I'll

never forget, he said. Now Mike can't remember those words without a sudden shimmer of tears in his eyes. Stupid fucking kid. A few years and gone. So impatient to become nothing. And yet, on that one day in November, so elated to be alive. I'll never forget, he said. I'll never forget. So elated to be safe and alive. What happened since then to change him? What happened to make him forget?

Mike lets himself cry for the boy, for the waste, for the hopelessness and the despair, for a sweet young kid alone at the end with a gun at his head or in his mouth, who knows, such an inconceivable hunger for death. Yes, inconceivable. Mike admits it to himself, inconceivable, his own flirtation with the idea of suicide never anything more than self-indulgent bullshit, that's obvious now, he doesn't want to vanish into endless nothingness, no, not yet. He'd rather stick around and enjoy Alex and Ray and Charlie and whatever crazy mischief they might come up with next, especially Alex, of course Alex, he's unique in the story of Mike's life, the man adores him and has no will or wish to leave him. And now tonight's conversation with Scooby has helped to untangle the knot of fear which has been tightening in Mike's gut for the past several months, no urgency now to leave, what he said to Alex earlier today was true, surprisingly true, no emergency right now, no immediate threat.

As he sits and watches the late news on TV, Mike allows himself a cautious smile. Suddenly he feels almost happy.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Poor Charlie, his birthday almost got lost in the horrible aftershock of Jeff's suicide, Charlie himself wasn't involved but his best friends were and his party ended up being postponed as a result. So now his mom and his stepdad (yes, they were recently married) have rewarded him with a special beach party at Lake Swanson with a couple dozen of his friends as guests, boys and girls both, Ray knows most of them but Alex doesn't, that's OK, he jumps right into the fun and has a great time anyway—swimming, water-sliding, paddle-boating, even helping to grill burgers and hot dogs for lunch, you'd swear he was hosting the party himself.

Today, for the first time, Alex realizes that Charlie is hot for some girl named Heather, he keeps hanging around her and talking to her and showing off for her on the water slide. Heather does a lot of giggling and eye-rolling and doesn't seem really interested in the boy, she probably thinks he's sort of cute in a goofy way, nice as a friend but not as a boyfriend. It's weird, a new experience for Alex, a new perspective, this same Charlie Gubakowski who likes to jerk off with other guys and feel a finger up his ass is also a girl-hungry hetero, it's just what Alex and Mike talked about one time months ago, labels mean nothing, Charlie can be just as eagerly queer as Alex himself when their clothes come off and their dicks get hard but then put him with a

girl and he's all hot for pussy, same with Ray-Ray, let's face it, boydicks just enjoy being hard and shooting their sperm, everything else is optional. Alex sees and understands this now more vividly than ever before, the pointless inconvenience of labels and categories, he knows what Mike has known all along, that boys everywhere are creatures of sex and always ready to play, the game never ends, ten years from now or twenty or thirty, no matter, Alex will still be playing with another Charlie or another Raymond and the game will be the same, forever the same and forever irresistible, the eternal frolic of men and boys together.

And, of course, boys and boys together, two or three dicks always better than one, after Charlie's party Alex and Ray ride with him back into town for an afternoon of hanging out at the Gubakowski house (Charlie doesn't mind his new stepfather so much anymore, they get along OK, but he'll always keep his real father's name). The boys, still in their baggy swimming trunks, spend some time in the above-ground pool that covers most of the back yard, then they move inside to snack on leftover birthday cake and look at Charlie's presents, he has the latest Mortal Kombat game which they all end up playing in Charlie's bedroom. Alex is the first to take off his swimming trunks and Ray is the next, they both have a bag with other clothes but for now they stay naked, Ray typically content to follow Alex's example. Charlie is slow to join in, unusual for him to be so restrained, his own house is different from

Mike's apartment and he probably feels more inhibited here, his parents are just downstairs after all—but he's been talking about Heather all afternoon and getting himself excited, insisting over and over that he'll fuck her someday soon, finally when he removes his own trunks he's got himself a pretty good boner, funny to watch him and Alex sitting there playing Mortal Kombat with their peckers straight up. The walls in this bedroom are covered with girly pictures and centerfolds and posters, chicks everywhere in bikinis and hot pants, it's Charlie's hetero paradise and makes Alex feel like laughing, it tickles him to see Charlie betray all of this macho crap by surrendering more and more eagerly to homo stuff, a challenge for Alex to push this whole adventure as far as he can—with Charlie but also with Ray, coaxing them, seducing them, exciting them little by little into a totally feverish queerness that none of them will ever forget.

But today is more tame than that, an old-fashioned circle jerk, this is the first time since that pre-graduation romp at Mike's apartment that all three boys have been together, their first chance to continue what began that day, like a reconfirmation, yeah, this is good, this is cool, all of them watching each other masturbate and cum, it's the perfect way to inaugurate the summer and their three months of freedom, just warming up, just getting started. Alex also has his digital camera with him today because of Charlie's party, he was taking pictures of the festivities earlier and now he's filling a new disk for his

own private collection. Charlie thinks it's hilarious, he loves the idea of being photographed, always a fan of porno, this is his chance to be a model himself, he's actually the one who encourages Alex to keep photographing even while they all jerk off, who insists on a close-up of his own spilled semen, who finally even offers the camera some poses of himself bent over and mooning and showing his asshole. Ray is goaded into joining this final display, his brown butt side by side with Charlie's white butt on a couple of these pictures, two full boymoons with cheeks spread and poopholes obscenely wide open. Alex keeps clicking and laughing, clicking and laughing, this is so perfect, so easy, both of these guys do whatever he wants and they love it, they have no clue, this is just the beginning.

What develops in the days and weeks ahead is all because of Alex, he's definitely the catalyst, without him Charlie would be confined to playing video games, watching TV, swimming, hanging out with Ray and other neighborhood friends, jerking off alone and fantasizing about Heather, looking at cyberporn, jerking off some more. Ray, without Alex, would be devoting himself exclusively to his new karate lessons at Hidden Dragon Dojo, to riding horses and swimming and bowling and playing Pony League baseball, to attending church every Sunday and serving as an altar boy, to talking about girls with Charlie and then masturbating later by himself as consolation, maybe even doing it with Charlie on some rare and random occasions, probably

wondering if God could see him. But with Alex, holy shit, there's always one other activity on the agenda, every day is charged with a sexual voltage that he creates and feeds, he has only one thing on his mind this summer and he finds willing partners in Charlie and Raymond, the past several months have prepared them for whatever might happen with Alex and they always seem to be ready for more, nothing they do together feels forbidden these days, everything feels possible.

The warm June weather seems to be another of Alex's accomplices, each day a sultry invitation to bare skin and randy mischief. Alex is keeping his bristly crewcut this summer and has taken to wearing pukka shells as part of a new beachboy look, a white pukka shell necklace always worn with an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, very sexy, those little white shells against his bare brown chest. Baggy shorts, of course. They all wear those same baggy short pants like some troop of tropical clowns. But those grossly heavy shorts often come off on these warm and lazy days, especially when parents and siblings are away and houses are empty, then the boys swim nude in Charlie's pool or go naked in Alex's back yard, sunbathing or picking strawberries, Daniel and Teresa keep a big patch and the berries are burstingly ripe right now and the boys feast on them nearly every day, fingers sticky with the juice, fingers even stickier when they jerk off together right there amid the strawberries or in the shade of the garage or back against the fence where sunflowers grow like

jungle flora, only that gappy and dilapidated old fence hiding the boys from neighboring eyes. Sometimes just Alex with Ray, or Alex with Charlie, sometimes all three of them together. Often they ride their bikes to Lake Swanson for a more rustic outing, lots of good places to strip down and enjoy the sun while having a leisurely wank. One time Alex and Charlie even take a paddle boat out onto the lake and get naked and masturbate in view of the beach, close enough to see and hear the people swimming, the riskiness is what makes these stunts so exciting, both of them shoot like hound dogs, it's always a contest now to see who can ejaculate the hardest and the farthest. Charlie's hips twist convulsively and some of his stuff lands on Alex. But that's OK, that's good, Alex swipes it with a finger and let's Charlie see him taste it for the first time, he says, "M'm M'm good!" like a Campbell's soup commercial and Charlie laughs, carefully watching him, then Alex says share and share alike and quickly smears a fingerful of his own stuff onto Charlie's lips. Charlie laughs dude that's sick!—but he cleans it off with his tongue and not his hand, both boys tasting each other now, Alex is becoming a connoisseur at this after Mike and after Ray but this is Charlie's first sample, the flavor is strange but not really too terrible, not too strong, he swallows without any problem, finally both of them reach down and ladle handfuls of water onto themselves to wash away the mess before they put their trunks back on and pedal the boat back to shore.

A few days later, the ground still damp from a passing front of rain storms, Alex is alone at his empty house and outside mowing the grass, afterwards he calls Carrie to cheer her up, maybe they'll go see Moulin Rouge! tomorrow for the second time, Carrie agrees that it might be fun. Now it's mid-afternoon and Alex is feeling horny and wishing for a dirtier kind of fun. Charlie is at Six Flags amusement park this weekend with his mom and stepdad but Ray-Ray is still around, busy with his morning karate classes and evening Pony League games but usually free in the afternoons, sure enough he shows up on his bike around two o'clock, eagerly smiling, Alex isn't the only one with dirty fun on his mind this summer. They leave their shoes in the house and wander barefoot into the back yard to pick and eat some final late strawberries, hardly any left now in the weedy patch, even while they scavenge for the berries they casually discard shirts and shorts and underpants and end up crouching like a pair of naked peasant boys amid the scraggly green plants, mud on their knees, red juice on their lips. It's wonderfully strange and exhilarating to be doing this, to be naked like this outside, no matter how many times they do it the thrill is always there for them, that sinful pleasure of undressing outside and feeling the air and the sun on their totally bare bodies, even Raymond gets hard now as soon as he takes off his clothes, it's like a Pavlovian response from him by this time, his dick feels the fresh air and it knows what's going to happen, it stiffens for

sex. For masturbation. And that's how it starts, yeah, that's how it starts, same as always, these two Salazar boys in this sunny back yard on Tompkins Street move from the berry patch to the sunflower patch and sprawl with their backs against the wooden fence and begin to jerk off, at first doing just themselves but then also each other, the juice still sticky on their fingers now making their dicks feel sticky as well. Alex pauses after a minute to lick his fingers a little cleaner, suddenly he says something about also cleaning Ray and leans down to do it, Ray thinks it's going to be another of Alex's sneaky little wiener kisses, the usual joke—but Alex meant what he said about cleaning Ray and now he's doing it, he's using his tongue, he's licking Ray's penis and Ray's balls and then using his entire mouth, this is no joke, nothing like a joke, Ray had no idea a few minutes ago that something like this could happen, a real blowjob, actually getting his cock sucked today for the first time ever, his whole thing somehow inside Alex's wet mouth now and the unbelievable feeling of it, older cousin initiating younger cousin here on the damp ground beneath the sunflowers, Alex lifting his eyes to meet Ray's, grinning as he sucks, Ray grinning back, silent encouragement, silent delight, sloppy sucking sounds out here in the back yard, Ray spreading his legs and watching Alex's crewcut head down there moving and working, ten minutes, maybe fifteen, finally Ray-Ray touches Alex's head as if to warn him and then he's cumming into Alex's mouth, he's feeding his cousin but

there's no way to see how much because Alex keeps sucking for more and ends up gulping every drop, Ray still watching, attempting a tired smile, nothing forbidden these days, everything possible. Alex is also finished by now, his own stuff wanked spurting onto the grass several minutes ago. The cousins stay there exhausted, gradually regaining their breath and their strength until Alex pats his stomach and says yummy in the tummy, dude, yummy in the tummy, making Raymond laugh, both of them finally standing up and realizing what a mess they are, mud on their feet and knees and butts, damp green bits of clipped grass stuck all up and down the back of their bodies. They grab their clothes and rush into the house for a much-needed shower.

This day cranks the voltage to a new and higher level, the sex play until now has been wild and reckless but mostly just traditional, mostly just the usual masturbatory raunch of boys everywhere, the venerable circle jerk—but after today the sex play becomes sex for real, what these boys now start doing together looks more like animals rutting than kids playing. By the end of the weekend Alex has given Ray two more blowjobs and Ray has even started cautiously to return the favor, he opens his mouth and lets Alex put his thing in and then holds it there for a few experimental seconds, so strange to have the hardness and warmth of another boy's boner actually inside his own mouth, the swollen throb of it alive against his tongue and his palate. He's

not overjoyed to be doing this but he doesn't mind, it's all right, he likes to make Alex happy—and anyway, to be honest, once his own testosterone starts pumping and his balls get achy, heck, it's like a fever that makes everything crazy, even sensible Raymond has trouble controlling himself.

Then Charlie comes back, he had an awesome weekend at Six Flags but he's glad to be home. On Monday he goes out with a group of school friends for a movie and pizza, Heather is there and Charlie sits next to her at the Pizza Hut and flirts with her and once again works himself into a horny lather. No doubt he brings this frustrated lust with him whenever he sees the other boys, Alex has become almost a surrogate for Heather and Alex is smart enough to know it, he's grateful, it's cool, Charlie is reeky with pent-up sex and that's excellent, Alex loves it. And now, hot damn, watch out, Charlie has returned to a game gone wild.

This week is warm but rainy, on Wednesday all three boys manage an outing to Webber Stables for some horseback riding but then the rains return and drive everyone back indoors for a couple of days. It's still drizzly when Alex rides his bike across town to Charlie's, his sisters are home today so his own house is no good for having fun. Charlie is outside removing the striped tarpaulin cover from the pool, his blond hair is looking freakier again as it grows back longer, he's wearing a new Six Flags T-shirt and denim shorts and brown sandals, he likes those leather sandals in the

summer better than regular shoes. Alex agrees, good idea, he wears those same Payless sandals himself these days, more like a beachboy than ever with those things on, baggy tan shorts, unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt and pukka shells, black crewcut shiny wet from the drizzle. Charlie is just finishing with the tarpaulin. "Figured we'd swim," he says, aware from an earlier phone call that his friend was coming.

"Might as well," Alex says. "I'm already wet."

"No doubt."

"It's warm enough."

"Hell yeah, it's warm out here, damn bugs," Charlie says, there's still some drizzle from the low gray sky, the air is muggy and mosquitoes are buzzing hungrily. Alex kicks out of his sandals. "Your parents aren't home?"

"Dude, why ask?"

"You never know."

"They're working, get real," Charlie says, unzipping his shorts and letting them fall, no underwear, this is his answer, exposing himself this way, he blows a loud fart as confirmation. "It's safe."

No time to waste with those hungry mosquitoes around, the boys quickly get out of their clothes and into the pool for a nude swim, some splashing and horseplay, the steady patter of raindrops makes the surface of the water appear to be lightly simmering. Alex starts singing, "I'm swimmin in the rain, I'm swimmin in the rain, what a glorious feeling, I'm happy again!" Charlie

is familiar enough with the old tune to get the joke, both he and Alex just relaxing now against the side of the pool, arms up for support along the rounded edge behind them as they lazily tread with their feet and float in place, their naked bodies showing ripply and sleek just beneath the surface. Alex stops singing and looks at Charlie. “Should we call Ray again?” They both were trying earlier to get in touch with him, without any luck. Charlie says, “I called just before. Bitch is out somewhere.”

“Oh well,” Alex says, all three of them have been together only once this week—for horseback riding on Wednesday—no time or opportunity for other stuff, for more secret and special stuff. “No Ray-Ray.”

“He’s probably got a game later.”

“Probably, yeah, we should go.”

“Unless it’s still raining,” Charlie says. “Or hell, you know, we could go to Mike’s later on, do something.”

“Maybe. But remember I told you,” Alex says, meaning an earlier conversation when he explained about Mike needing a break. They’ve all visited the man a couple of times just to say hello, Ray has dropped by an additional time or two for tips and advice about karate, Charlie snuck over there once for a beer and a cigarette and ended up masturbating on the couch, of course Alex himself has been there a few times for frank lovemaking and fucking, also just to chat and gossip and joke around with his friend—and, in reality, Mike seems

to be feeling better these last few weeks, not so paranoid as before, more cheerful. But right now Alex wants only to stay here at Charlie's and take advantage of the empty house, he's been waiting for this all week.

He starts asking Charlie about Heather, encouraging his friend to talk dirtier and dirtier about her, both of them know that it's time now to begin, peckers getting excited. Alex says "up periscope" when his erection breaks the surface, it's a familiar joke by now, Charlie lifts his own hips to bring all six glistening red inches of himself above the water's surface and then laughs and says, "Loch Ness Monster!" They could go ahead and jerk off now right there in the pool, they've done it before, always entertaining to watch the jizz as it coils and curdles in the chlorinated water. But Alex keeps joking and teasing about Heather, sexy Heather, oooh so sexy!, Charlie's hot-hot girlfriend, he's grabbing and pawing at Charlie as an extra tease, pretending to be Heather out of her mind with lust for the boy—kiss me kiss me!—all over Charlie here in the backyard pool, straddling him in the water so that they're floating and splashing chest to chest, boner to boner—oh Charlie oh Charlie!—kissing at his face and his drenched hair, water getting into Alex's own mouth and making him choke, making him laugh. A little risky doing this out here, the yard is open in back where it runs down to a shallow retention pond and it's screened only sparsely on the sides by some evergreens and lilacs, occasionally a stray kid or two will even come running through on a shortcut

across the neighborhood. Just swimming nude or even masturbating beneath the surface is safe enough but this is different, this aquatic sexcapade is unusually raucous and conspicuous, Charlie keeps giggling half-hearted protests and treading to stay afloat beneath this other boy riding him. Then Alex reaches back and grips Charlie's dick and pushes the knob between the cheeks of his own ass and rubs it back and forth along the crack, shoving backward against it, pushing and rubbing and pushing and rubbing until the knob has wedged itself about halfway into his own sphincter. Charlie clutches the side of the pool with both arms outspread to hold himself steady, Alex's lips against his ear, water lapping, rain still warmly sprinkling, then Alex shoves back against Charlie's dick once more and god almighty the whole knob slips in with a sudden wet suction and Charlie gives a reflexive thrust that sinks it in even deeper, very slowly the two boys writhe there in the water until inch by inch Charlie has worked his entire hard thing into Alex's bottom. But this is more like some kinky anatomical experiment than sex, it's just too awkward doing this in the water, now that the boys have accomplished full penetration there's not much else they can manage except some barely perceptible coital thrusting that creates a rhythmic wash of tiny waves against the side of the pool, they appear to be just floating there face to face, gently undulating, it feels incredible and for a few minutes they just keep doing it and loving it and saying nothing, you can see the

spectacle of intercourse ripply beneath the water's surface, Charlie's boner buried to the nuts between Alex's clenched buttocks, gently fucking, gently fucking. But really you can hardly call it fucking, there's no support for proper thrusting and humping and anyway Charlie has no experience at this, he's a little stunned and awkward and unsure of himself and finally he and Alex agree with a glance and a nod to leave the pool and find a better place to finish, his dick slides out and free as they uncouple and a bubble of air escapes with it like an underwater fart from Alex's asshole. Charlie is curious now, he needs to know, as they climb from the pool he asks about Ray. "Have you guys done this? You and him? This shit?"

"With Ray? Nope," Alex says, then he looks at Charlie with a fiendish Groucho flex of his dark eyebrows. "At least, I mean, not yet!"

"Dude, you're perverted," Charlie says, he's gathering his clothes to go inside when Alex stops him, "let's stay out here," Alex says, "it's better outside."

Charlie glances around the yard, his Six Flags T-shirt in hand, his erection pointed straight at his friend. "I dunno," he says, "we're like totally wet."

"So? That's no problem."

"Fuckin bugs, though."

"Wuss, shut up, come on," Alex says, always better outside, more exciting, he actually takes Charlie by the dick and pulls him down onto the concrete walkway that circles the pool. Charlie isn't sure what's going to

happen here, neither is Alex, maybe they should just jerk off now and get done and try that other stuff again later, some other time—but look at Charlie’s big old boner, succulent red thing, goddamn, suddenly Alex knows exactly what he wants, he says me and Ray do this, see, just like this, going down on Charlie as he mumbles, he’s wanted to suck this cock for months and months and now he’s doing it, oh man he’s totally doing it. Charlie lets out one giggly gasp but then goes silent and clenches his hands into fists and puts them to his head like someone with a migraine, maybe he should’ve known that a day like this would come but still it’s overwhelming, he was expecting to jerk off today with Alex, sure, the normal routine, but not all this. If a neighbor peeked now through those evergreens or if some kid came running through the yard, well, what a shock they’d get, the young Gubakowski boy naked on the ground with another naked boy sucking him, look at them for Chrissake, right there between the pool and the back porch, hair drenched on both of them, Alex’s crewcut wetly matted, gnats and mosquitoes in the air above them but not many attacking or lighting for some reason, maybe the chlorinated water is acting as a repellent. Alex is doing a slow and deluxe job on his friend, he’s good at this after so much practice, licking all between Charlie’s legs, all under and over and around his balls and then up to the tip of his dick for more slow and sloppy tonguing of the tender meat before doing some fuller and faster sucking of the whole thing, now

slowly down again licking and kissing from tip to balls and then back up, lucky Charlie to be getting this expert treatment, Alex giving yet another boy his first blowjob, presiding over yet another summer initiation. Without pausing or saying anything he scoots himself around on the concrete until his crotch is up near Charlie's head, Charlie watches this maneuver and stares at the hard dick practically in his face, maybe he's flustered and addled and doesn't understand what Alex wants or maybe he's just not quite prepared yet to put something like that into his own mouth—anyway, whatever the reason, he takes the thing in his fist and starts stroking it, giving Alex a handjob instead of a blowjob, rapid-fire Alex climaxes first and ejaculates lavishly onto his friend's chest, Charlie is ready now himself and keeps holding the slimy boner in his hand as he shuts his eyes and shivers and starts squeezing and squirting and squeezing and squirting right into Alex's mouth, of course Alex has a finger up Charlie's behind by now and the combination of sucking and fingering produces the juiciest orgasm that Charlie has ever experienced, he's never felt himself squoosh out so much cum. But when he eventually opens his eyes and looks down, very fuckin weird, there's nothing to see. He waits another few seconds, impossible to speak at first, Alex still suckling and licking at him, finally he nudges Alex's head and asks what happened, dude, where'd you spit it all? "Because seriously, I shot a motherfuckin load," he says in a hoarse mumble,

sounding almost drunk from the afterdaze of so much sex. “What’d you do?”

“Are you kidding? That was my lunch,” Alex says, grinning from between Charlie’s legs and still squeezing gently at Charlie’s tired meat, a last pearl of semen has oozed from the tip and now Alex collects even that with his tongue and then gives a final suck at the little urethral slit to complete his thorough job of cleaning and feasting. Charlie shakes his head and makes a guttural chuckling sound of disbelief. “No way,” he says. “You didn’t really. Not all of it.”

“Yummy in the tummy,” Alex says, it’s his favorite expression lately. “I wouldn’t lie. Wait till next time, you’ll see.”

“Damn, Alex, too gross!”

“You tasted some before. That other time.”

“Just a little.”

“Share and share alike, remember,” Alex says, he sits up now and scoops a drippy fingerful of his own cum from Charlie’s chest and then feeds it to him. Charlie shakes his head in apparent refusal even as he accepts the finger between his lips and suckles it like a tit, cleaning it like a good boy—but that’s enough for now, he gets up after that and washes his own chest with water from the pool. Now he knows for sure what Raymond learned over the weekend, all doubts and all questions removed, nothing forbidden these days, everything possible.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY

“So you want us to come over?”

“I do, yeah,” Mike says.

“You mean anytime? You won’t get all freaked out and paranoid?”

“I don’t think so. I’m feeling pretty much OK.”

“Because, you know, we’ve been trying not to bother you so much this summer,” Alex says into the phone. “Was that wrong?”

“No, pal, not wrong at all. It gave me a lot of time to think. Good perspective.”

“You’ve seemed happier lately, that’s the truth. But still I thought. . .”

“That I wanted to be alone. I know. And I wasn’t sure myself what the fuck I wanted lately. I had to wait. I had to find out. But I miss you guys.”

“So we should come over more? You’re sure?”

“Definitely,” Mike says. “Whenever you want. Feel free.”

“Damn, Papa, that’s good news. I’m happy for real.”

“The universe wants to play.”

“Say what?”

“The universe wants to play,” Mike repeats. “Somebody said that once. Some writer. And it’s true, I guess. We shouldn’t forget how to play.”

“Wow, this is a whole new liberated side of you! You’ve had, like, some rare epiphany.”

“Listen to you, smart guy.”

“I’m a genius, don’t forget.”

“How could I ever?”

Mike has no idea how far things have progressed since the boys last used his apartment as their clubhouse several weeks ago. Alex has been around, of course, and Charlie snuck over that one time to whack off—but the full three-ring circus has passed Mike by and Alex has been mostly silent about it, not wanting to tease him with the details. It’s one day before the Fourth of July when Mike starts to find out what he’s been missing. Sandburg is holding its annual July Fest this whole week, a big downtown carnival with rides and a funhouse and a go-cart track and a Ferris wheel taller than any of the buildings on Main Street. The boys have been busy here every day, back and forth on their bikes to enjoy the rides and the go-carts, to stuff themselves with corn dogs and fried dough and cotton candy, to see the bands that play on stage each night after six o’clock. Now Mike has returned to the action as chauffeur and starts driving the kids to and from the Fest, simpler for them this way, no need to use their bikes or worry about locking them up every time, plus the weather is sweltering right now and it’s easier and cooler for the boys to ride than to cycle.

This third day of July is another hot one, clear and dry, ideal for the fireworks tonight after the Pony League game at American Legion Park. This will be only the

first holiday display, there's another and much larger one tomorrow night at Lake Swanson. All three boys spend most of the afternoon at the Fest and then ride back with Mike to his apartment, Ray thanks him but then runs home to get ready for his game later this evening, Alex and Charlie stay behind. The whole gang will be reuniting after the ballgame to watch the fireworks but now there's free time to fill, Alex has been waiting and wanting to get Charlie alone like this ever since their private pool party, amazing how quickly the days slip away.

Maybe Charlie is a little nervous, maybe that's why he helps himself to a Budweiser from Mike's refrigerator, he's seen Heather a couple of times this week at the Fest so his hormones are definitely boiling. Alex has been teasing him about it and makes a joke now to Mike about Charlie missing his girlfriend, just like Romeo, he says, another tragic love story. "You just wait," Charlie says. "It'll happen. For real. We'll fuck, you'll see."

"Yeah," Mike says, "that's romantic all right." He's in his favorite chair, he's been channel-surfing with the remote but suddenly stops on a Seinfeld rerun and leaves it there because another show is starting on the couch in front of him: Charlie sipping and sipping at his beer while Alex undresses him, now Charlie switching the can from one hand to the other to help in the removal of his own shirt, now Charlie lifting his hips as his denim shorts and his blue Hanes briefs are pulled off, he sits

there in just his sandals and takes another gulp of beer as Alex glides a hand over the exposed bareness of him, he's suntanned above the waist and below the knees but starkly pale in between where his boner and his balls stand out so indecently swollen and red. He's sneaking anxious glances at Mike with those sleepy wide-set eyes of his, probably not sure even now that he and Alex should be doing this new stuff in front of an adult, too late though, no way to stop. Alex also glances at Mike to make sure he's watching and then goes down on Charlie and starts sucking him. Mike can only grunt and mutter in astonishment, holy motherfuck, look at these guys, both of them have grown and developed so much over the last several months, a couple of vigorous adolescent goats, Charlie still a skinny kid with gangly arms and legs but that prick and those balls of his are the real deal, man, Alex is making a noisy meal out of them right now, that's for sure. Then Alex pauses because he needs to remove his own clothing, he looks at Mike as he stands up, Hawaiian shirt quickly off and now his shorts, the scoundrel's not wearing any underpants today, such a handsome young buck standing there all darkly honey-skinned and sleekly muscled, crewcut hulaboy wearing pukka shells and two gold earrings and nothing else, no wristwatch these days, again he looks at Mike and grins and says, "The good old Outlaw Dojo, dudes, fun for the whole family!"

"Fuckin right about that," Charlie says, he guzzles the rest of his Budweiser and then tosses the can across

the room into the wastebasket and yells “two points!” with a pump of his fist, suddenly he’s on his feet and grabbing a dumbbell to do some arm curls, his erection dances waggly between his legs every time he lifts the weight. He seems a little freaked out and hyper, difficult for him to deal with what’s happening here this afternoon, getting his dick sucked by another guy while a third guy watches is like something from a gay porno site and Charlie can’t help feeling confused and self-conscious about it, all of the dares and challenges and mischief have brought him back here to Mike’s apartment where everything started last winter but now the games have become serious and he’s here to have real sex with guys instead of girls, he shouldn’t be so excited but he is, he totally fuckin is, he’s mad excited and ready for more but still it’s so weird, it’s so impossibly weird. Alex and Mike are watching him, now Alex turns to the man and shrugs, obvious that Charlie is flustered and stalling. Mike shrugs back but then decides to join the action, he’s messed around with Charlie before so what the hell, he gets out of his chair and crosses the room and takes the dumbbell from the boy, more fun on the couch than over here, he says, come on, I’ll give you a ride, hoisting the kid with one arm, making him laugh, just a few steps and then Mike sits himself down with Charlie sideways on his lap, nervous boy smelling of beer and sweaty hair. Alex sits on the other end of the couch, squinty Salazar smile now as he takes off Charlie’s sandals and handles each bare foot

like something new and remarkable, playing with the toes all dark with grime beneath the nails, Charlie squirming a little ticklish, Alex then petting along the veiny top of each foot and massaging around the bony ankles and up onto the shins and calves fuzzed golden and velvety to the touch, Charlie watching, Mike watching, Alex spreading those slender legs and nestling between them. Charlie is on Mike's lap so his ass is elevated and perfectly accessible to an eager tongue, Alex's eager tongue, Charlie still staring downward, open-mouthed, speechless, transfixed. His ass and his balls are unwashed and stinky and even Mike can smell them—but Alex, wow, he has a point-blank mouthful and noseful of them and couldn't be happier, that funky boysmell only excites and encourages him, the tip of his tongue is already wedged into his friend's sphincter and Alex is trying to work it in even deeper, trying to taste even deeper. And Charlie is trying to help—raising his hips, opening his legs as wide as they'll spread, pressing his butt tighter against Alex's face and Alex's burrowing tongue, Mike still holding him with one arm, gently pinching and rubbing at his nipples, gently kissing the animal mustiness of his hair. When Alex finally brings his tongue higher and runs it along the underside of Charlie's dick right up to the sensitive tip, damn, Charlie goes electroshocked and rigid and hisses a sharp intake of breath.

But giving a blowjob isn't enough for Alex right now, one look at Charlie tells you what has to come next,

his ass invitingly raised on Mike's lap with its hole displayed like some moist rosebud target, his legs just as invitingly spread for mounting, one of them up on the back of the couch and the other dangling off the edge of the cushions. He's still wet and slick with Alex's saliva and now Alex hastily slathers his own penis, of course it's already leaky with its own pre-cum and slippery as a greased dildo, he scoots forward on his knees and climbs onto Charlie and sinks into him. Charlie has always liked to have his asshole touched and fingered but the shock of another boy's cock actually penetrating and entering him is something else, there's a crazy disbelief to it and a wild thunderstroke of pain and pleasure like nothing he's ever felt or imagined before, Alex pushing in deeper, pushing in harder, a fever of new sensation for both of them, Alex has been fucked before by Mike many times but this is his first chance to do the fucking.

Mike is just as astonished as the kids themselves by what's happening here on his lap, this is something you never get to see in real life, in the flesh, two young boys actually screwing this way, the overwhelming carnal immediacy of it: the odor of the boys so close, the heat and the sweatiness of them, the sounds of their breathing and their bodies straining together and the softly rhythmic squelch of the anal intercourse itself, on and on the vulgar sound of it, both boys resting their heads against the man for comfort, for support—Charlie's blond head lolled sideways against his chest and Alex's black crewcut pressed and pushing against his

shoulder—on and on that coital squish-squish-squish, Charlie with his eyes shut now and his mouth still open emitting tiny uh-uh-uh grunts in sync with Alex's relentless humping, twice Alex's boner pops out and he shoves it back in and continues but then finally it pops out once more already spurting, some of that gush is still inside Charlie but now the rest of it is puddling around Charlie's balls and lower belly, Alex muttering look at that, look at that, holy shit! Quickly, no time to rest or cool down, Alex now lies back on the couch and offers his own ass to Charlie and tells him to go ahead, hurry up, dude, it's your turn! Charlie nods and scrambles to his knees with his back to Mike and his friend's semen still on him, he makes an attempt to mount and penetrate but there's no lubrication and no success and finally he pulls back frustrated. Alex grins and says that's OK, hey, do some prep work, you know, like I did on you, get it good and wet, reaching with both hands to spread his own upturned buttocks for easier access. But Charlie shakes his head, no way, he's not going to stick his tongue into another guy's dirty ass crack, that's too much—so OK, OK, Mike has already hurried to the bedroom and returned with the Vaseline, he expected this, he holds the jar for Charlie as the boy dips a finger and greases himself and then hesitates, it's also his job to grease Alex, oh well, he won't use his tongue but a finger is all right, he glances at Mike and grins a little embarrassed to be doing this, touching another boy's butthole like this and now even working his finger inside

of it, finally it's ready and he's ready and once again he mounts his friend and this time his boner slides right in, the delicious suction of penetration actually startles a laugh from him, what a crazy sweet feeling now as he starts humping and humping, the Vaseline and of course Alex's smeared mess of semen making a swampy squishing noise between them even louder and cruder than before, now as Charlie humps and humps there's an oozy glisten between his own pale ass cheeks from the enema of Alex's cum leaking back out.

Mike is staring at all of this as he opens his own pants and begins to masturbate, sitting on the edge of the crowded couch near Charlie's feet, using his free hand to caress the boy's legs and the boy's tirelessly flexing and thrusting backside, those scrawny white cheeks and their spermy crack. Charlie responds to the man's busy hand by glancing back over his shoulder and grinning, then grinning even wider with braces showing when he sees that Mike is jerking off, hot damn, he mumbles, check you out, party time! He's been humping for five minutes, six, seven, this could take a while, now and then he arches his back and makes an agonized face as if he might be ready to ejaculate but then he just keeps going, maybe in his mind he's fucking Heather instead of Alex, pretending his cock is in Heather's cunt and not Alex's bunghole—or maybe he doesn't need to pretend, maybe his fourteen-year-old pecker is perfectly happy in another boy's booty, better than any fantasy. Finally he makes another of those agonized and contorted faces and

says now, oh shit, now, what should, what should—in or out, that’s what he wants to know, should he ejaculate in or out? But Alex has his eyes closed and his teeth bared in a rapturous grimace and isn’t responding and Charlie can’t control it, he can feel himself start to cum inside his buddy’s ass and he panics and arches himself backward and finishes with a few more healthy squirts that land like creamy lace all crisscrossed on Alex’s scrotum and stomach and pubic hair.

All three of them are silent after that. Mike has also climaxed by now into a wad of Kleenex and his pants are refastened, he keeps petting Charlie’s legs and rear end until the boy eventually stirs and rolls himself sideways against the back of the couch. Alex stretches out his legs with his feet on Mike’s lap and scoots himself a little toward the outer edge of the cushions to give Charlie more room on the other side. The two of them are like halves of a cream-filled cookie just pulled apart, their genitals and their bellies smeared with each other’s mingled semen. “That’s a lovely mess,” Mike tells them, still amazed, so this is how two boys look after they get done having real sex together, true hard-core fucking, languorously naked and cock-droopy and fragrant with sperm. Alex smiles now as he regains his energy. “Enough here for dinner and dessert,” he says, using a finger to scoop a little from his own belly, a little from Charlie’s. “Mike, watch this! Watch what we do!” He licks his own finger and then collects another generous sample and offers it to his friend, Charlie hesitates and

checks Mike with a cautious eye but readily enough he opens his mouth and lets Alex feed him, the finger goes in dribbly with boyslime and comes out clean, he's consuming his own stuff along with Alex's but no matter, it all tastes the same, that strange tangy flavor that seems strongest on the back of the tongue. Another fingerful for Alex, then another for Charlie, there's so much of it, now Charlie himself is doing some of the scooping and feeding, both boys trading back and forth, using two or even three fingers to spoon the slop into each other's mouths, finally it's Charlie himself who decides to include Mike in the feast and who offers him a dainty fingertip of cum fished from Charlie's own belly button, the man leans forward and takes the boy by the wrist to pull his hand closer and to lick his finger. Alex laughs as Mike finishes, he nods toward Charlie and says, "Last time, I guess it was last week, Charlie wouldn't believe I swallowed all of his stuff when he, you know, when he came."

"Shut up," Charlie half smiles.

"He thought it was so grrross!"

"Bitch."

"So much at one time."

"It's easy, man, no problem," Mike says, offering expert testimony.

"I told him," Alex says. "Yummy in the tummy, I said."

"Well, after today," Mike says.

“This was different,” Charlie says with that same half-smile, difficult to maintain any hetero dignity reclining here naked on Mike’s couch, another boy naked beside him.

“Oh yeah,” Mike teases, “no comparison, very different.”

“It’s OK,” Alex says, smugly grinning. “I’ll show him. Later. Full demonstration. Right, Gubakowski?”

“Don’t be so perverted,” Charlie says, still trying stubbornly not to smile.

An hour later, back in their baggy clothes and looking like any other normal American kids, Alex and Charlie ride with Mike to American Legion Park to see the last few innings of Ray’s ballgame and then to watch the fireworks display afterwards. Gabe and Cleo are there to cheer for their son (whose team finally wins) and now they invite Mike to join the whole Salazar clan tomorrow for their Fourth of July picnic at Lake Swanson. He’s already been invited by Daniel and Teresa but he accepts for a second time, he says sure, that’ll be great, I’ll bring some beer. Everyone hangs around on the bleachers or spreads a blanket on the field itself as the last sunlight fades and fireworks start booming overhead, nothing fancy or spectacular, no musical accompaniment, just a simple small-town sky display on a warm summer night. Alex and Charlie are huddled with Ray, still in his uniform, on the bottom bleacher several feet from the adults, lots of talking and laughing among them, very chummy and conspiratorial.

Gabe smiles during one of the lulls between explosions and says just look at those guys over there, hatching some kind of mischief. Mike nods and smiles back, thinking yeah, you're absolutely right, you're more right than you can possibly know. Alex, of course, is doing most of the talking, nudging at Charlie, nudging at Ray, teasing, inciting, probably giving Ray-Ray a colorful account of today's action at Mike's apartment, preparing him, titillating him. Mike always wonders how much the boys say to each other about the things they do together, how frank their conversations get, how graphic. He can see Alex's manic intensity now, his obsessiveness—the kid discovered himself sexually this year and nothing else interests him these days, he's addicted, he's fixated, he's a giddy spermoholic and Mike understands, Mike empathizes, it'll take a good long while before Alex can settle down and start thinking about anything besides cocks and cum. This summer, no doubt, will be unique in his life, never another adventure quite so thrilling or so blissfully shared with all of his closest friends, by next year Charlie will be fifteen and could easily have a serious girlfriend, even Raymond might be discovering real girls and dating by then, now is the moment for Alex's sexual paradise and he's taking full advantage of it, devouring every morsel of pleasure.

Next day is a real July scorcher, cloudless and sun-dazzled and buzzing with the dreamy crescendo of cicadas. By noon mostly everyone has gathered for the picnic at Lake Swanson and now a volleyball game is in

progress, Mike is a monster on his side of the net and keeps pounding home point after point in a lopsided victory that has even the losers laughing, he and Ray are teammates and the boy is loving it, setting up Mike again and again for deadly spikes, high-fiving him, grinning proudly just to be his friend. Teams are shuffled in subsequent games to keep the competition lively but Ray tries to stay with Mike throughout, he's always admired the man's size and strength and athleticism, he'd like to be just as big and just as strong when he grows up. He hasn't said anything about it lately but he felt bad about not visiting Mike these last several weeks, he missed him as a friend and as a teacher, a couple of times he did go over there by himself to say hello and talk about karate and about the new Cubs season but the old fun and excitement were missing. Now, according to Alex, Mike has emerged from his funk or his depression or whatever it was and he's happy to see visitors again, he wants the boys to come over more often and that's good news for Ray, always cool to hang out at Mike's apartment.

While these volleyball games are going on, Alex is busy as usual with the younger kids, playing with them on the beach, taking them down the water slide, just helping the parents generally to entertain them and supervise them. One boy has his special attention this afternoon and that's Benjie—yeah, little Benjie is back for the day, it'll be a quick visit, his family is driving back to Chicago right after the fireworks show, he and Alex both are disappointed that he won't be spending the

night, so much fun last time. Alex says oh well, that's OK, we'll have some awesome fun today before you leave. Benjie agrees with nods so eager that his rusty dreadlocks bounce over his ears, his toothy megawatt smile is as wide and gleeful as ever, he's thought about Alex many times this summer and he's looking forward to playing more of the older boy's naughty games, no hesitation at all when Alex invites him to share a paddle boat, Benjie's parents say fine, make sure you wear your life jackets, have a good time. Alex tells him, as they pedal together across the lake, I know a special spot, it's private, we don't even need clothes. Benjie says OK with a nervous little giggle, ready for whatever Alex wants to do. They're wearing only swimming trunks and life jackets and now, far enough out that no one can see them, suddenly it seems stupid to wait, impossible to wait, Alex says let's just get comfortable right now, he stops pedaling long enough to take off his trunks and then Benjie follows along with another nervously excited giggle. Excellent, Alex says, that's totally better, his liberated boner saluting the midday sun overhead, both boys with orange life jackets still on but nothing else, a pair of nude young castaways now as they finish their trip and scramble ashore, safely secluded here, their life jackets swiftly off, their bodies now starkly bare to the sunlight and the heat, birdsong all around them in the tall trees. First thing for Benjie to learn is kissing, real kissing, serious kissing, then other lessons with mouths and hands and dicks, pebbly ground beneath him and

Alex with water lapping near their feet, Benjie learning fast and learning well, big smile as he licks Alex's leaky wiener and nibbles at it playfully and rubs his cheek against it and then alertly ducks his head to avoid a faceful of cum, laughing at the near miss, agreeing to taste some, then some more, now kissing again, so much funny kissing and hugging, Alex's mouth all over him making him squirmy and hotly aroused, ten-year-old uncircumcised cock up hard now and showing its little raw knob and twitching for someone to touch it and play with it, Alex does better than that, he sucks young Benjie to his first orgasm there beneath the sun-dapple of the trees, the kid is shivering and whimpering like some wounded little animal by the time they finish, Alex swears that he could taste a drop or two of something organic and boyjuicy when Benjie spasmed in his mouth. We'll just cuddle for a while, Alex tells him afterwards, calling him my sweetie pie, my baby, still caressing him between the legs, petting his penis, kissing him.

Benjie is like Alex's affectionate puppy dog after that, he and Alex are inseparable for the rest of the day. Tomorrow Alex will call Mike and tell him what happened here today, he'll say Papa, I'm serious, I've got myself a genuine boyfriend, it's so stupendously awesome and amazing, Benjie really loves me and it's extremely mutual, believe me, we've been messaging on the computer since he got back home and next summer Benjie says maybe he can come here and stay for a few weeks, that would be so cool, but I'm sure we'll also get

together before then, no doubt, oh man I'm so fuckin horny!

But even before that phone call, even here today at the picnic, Mike can see that Alex has found himself a special little lover. The man has been startled since yesterday to witness Alex's power over these other boys, his transformation from student to master, his nimble ability to make boyfriends out of ordinary kids who think of themselves as hetero and dream of fucking girls. Now this Benjie kid (what is he? a second cousin? a cousin once removed?) now he's under Alex's hot-blooded spell just like Charlie and Ray, so obvious if your eyes are open to it, so lovey-dovey, especially here during the fireworks display, everyone encamped on the beach or on the grassy slope just behind to watch the pyrotechnics bursting and sparkling over the lake, each explosion reflected in colorful shimmers on the water's glassy dark surface. Alex and Benjie are sprawled on the sand just off to Mike's left, Benjie's head on Alex's shoulder as they stare skyward at the display, Alex's arms around the smaller boy, now and then a furtive kiss between them. No one else is watching them, Mike assumes—but he's wrong, Raymond has also been spying on his cousins and maybe that's why he suddenly moves closer to Mike here on the warm sand, maybe he's feeling a little jealous and left out and wants a cuddly friend of his own. He's so quiet that Mike doesn't even notice him at first, finally the man glances to his right and discovers him and says oh hi. Ray smiles and then dabs at his runny

nose with a Kleenex, poor kid, his hay fever is acting up tonight, it always seems to be worst when he's tired and now being outside only aggravates it further. Music is playing from the PA system along the beach, some old patriotic classics as well as some banal pop tunes that sound and feel oddly inappropriate for an Independence Day celebration. Ray wipes his nose again and then sneezes and pulls a fresh Kleenex from the little packet he has in his hand. Mike puts a comforting arm around him and immediately the boy snuggles closer, the man feels a tingle of surprise at the eager surrender of Ray's body against him, really the two of them have never been intimate in the past, hardly any touching between them, a few friendly hugs and kisses and nothing more. Funny to think in those terms, of course, about someone you've watched masturbate on your living room floor—but it's different with Raymond, he's never been a young sex hound like the other boys, he and Mike have always had a more regular-guy, buddy-buddy kind of relationship, lots of interests shared between them: martial arts, sports, especially the Cubs and the Bears, bowling, even those old Westerns that Ray likes so much, Mike likes them too, he watches reruns of Bonanza every day at lunchtime. When you think about it, Mike actually has more in common with quiet, easygoing Raymond than with talkative, high-spirited Alex, it's just that he and Ray both have been revolving in Alex's orbit until now like two parallel moons, never quite intersecting or making significant contact. Tonight, because of Benjie's

intervention, the orbits have shifted, the moons have collided. Mike gives the boy's shoulders a gentle squeeze. "I had allergies like yours when I was a kid," he says. "Hay fever."

"You did? Really?"

"Yeah. Bad. It's miserable, I know. But you'll outgrow it, just like I did."

"I hope so. I hate it," Ray says, wiping his nose, sniffing, sneezing, wiping again.

He rests his head wearily against Mike's chest and smiles when the man kisses the curly dark fleece of his hair. If Alex turned now and saw them, what would he think? How would he feel? Jealous? Pissed off? Probably not. A few months ago, sure, he had a problem with jealousy, he wanted Mike all to himself, his very own mentor and teacher and special infatuation—but these days, not really—he's graduated to another level and now he and Mike are more like comrades and allies than some passionate or romantic couple. Even so, he's going to be hornier than ever after Benjie leaves and then all of that heat will be focused on Charlie and Ray-Ray, definitely Ray-Ray, no real jealousy now, that's true, but always the greedy need and the greedy appetite and the outrageous thrill of seducing and possessing the other boys, of making them his lovers, his sweethearts, that's what Alex wants, these days that's all he wants.

After the fireworks, party over, Mike ends up on Tompkins Street back at the Salazar house with Daniel and Teresa and with Gabe and Cleo and all the kids, time

for the adults to play some late-night poker and have a few more drinks. Mike has been here several times this summer to play cards, just like the old days, once or twice he's guzzled too many beers to drive home legally and has even stayed overnight in Alex's bedroom, in Alex's own bed, the boy himself insisting on the arrangement, taking Mike by the hand and leading him upstairs, no one else objecting or finding it odd—OK, good night, see you guys in the morning! But tonight it's not Mike who's been drinking too heavily, it's Daniel, the beer and the heat and a furtive joint or two and now more beer have all left him feeling woozy and a little nauseated, suddenly he mumbles a few words to Teresa and leaves the big mahogany table where everyone is gathered for poker and he disappears upstairs. Teresa explains that he's all right, don't worry, just needs to take a break and lie down. Maybe fifteen minutes later, time to pee, Mike uses the bathroom and then wanders upstairs to check on his friend, he passes Alex's bedroom where the boys are playing video games and listening to music, they wave at him as he passes, he waves back and keeps going down the hall to the master bedroom where Daniel is resting. Mike sticks his head through the doorway and smiles. "Poor old bastard can't even hold his liquor anymore. How ya doin? You OK, man?"

"Hey, it's Mike," Daniel says with a tired chuckle. "You came to view the corpse?"

"Yeah. Morbid curiosity. You feelin better?"

“Sure, not too bad, I’ll survive.”

“All that heat today.”

“Right, that’s all, no problem.”

“Well, OK, I’ll let you get. . .”

“No, come in, don’t go yet,” Daniel says, sitting up against the headboard behind him. Mike stops just as he’s turning away, he takes a step or two back into the dark bedroom and reaches for the cigarettes in his shirt pocket. “What’s up, professor? What’s wrong?”

“Oh hey, no biggie, just wanted to ask you, just wondering how our Alex is doing these days.”

“He’s right down the hall, he’s in his. . .”

“No, I mean in general, speaking in general, wondering how he’s doing. You would know. Better than anybody.”

“I think he’s doing fine. I think he’s great,” Mike says, the flare of his Bic briefly illuminating the room as he lights his Camel. “You’re worried about him?”

“Sure, I’m always worried. Paternal duty. He’s a teenager, get real, worried, are you kidding? But no, nothing special, not like that, nothing specific.”

“Seriously, Daniel, I think he’s fine.”

“He’s having fun this summer. He’s busy.”

“That’s true, yeah, he is.”

“Is he staying safe? Taking care of himself?”

“I’m not sure what. . .”

“I’ve talked to him myself,” Daniel continues, still mumbly in the darkness, he waves for Mike to come closer and then takes the cigarette from the other man’s

hand for a quick puff, just one, then he gives it back. "I've talked to him. About safe sex and condoms and all that jazz. AIDS. But I can't help worrying about him sometimes."

"He's safe, he's smart," Mike says. "He takes care of himself."

"You're his friend, not his father, which is good, you're close, he trusts you and he loves you."

"And I love him."

"I know, sure, we know that. Our Alex. Keep being his friend," Daniel says, he takes Mike's hand and holds it, a typically intimate Salazar gesture. "That kid. Suddenly he's gone all boy-crazy, I'm not surprised, hell no, I'm not surprised, that's just Alex, he's always been the devil, no big shock, as long as he's happy, that's good. But watch him, Mike, watch him."

"I will. I do."

"Him and Ray-Ray, those two, couple of rascals."

"They're great kids."

"Just like me and Gabe when we were young. With all of our cousins and friends."

"And your Uncle Samuel."

"Yeah, our Tio Samuel. That's right, sure, we talked about this before," Daniel says, finally he releases Mike's hand and slumps lower once more against the pillows. "Hell, too much beer. I'll have a Yankee Doodle hangover. But you go ahead, go play some poker."

Mike nods, backing away, so strange talking to Daniel here just now, so much like talking to Alex that

one Saturday night when the boy was drunk on schnapps, Daniel exactly like his own son lying there so sweet-tempered and sentimental, Mike has to resist actually leaning down and giving him a kiss. Thank god for the Salazars and their un-American iconoclasm and laissez-faire. Thank god for Daniel and Gabe, for Alex and Ray, for each and every one of them. Finally Mike turns away and heads back to the poker game downstairs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Alex prepares a dinner of poached salmon fillets with pasta salad and lightly sautéed zucchini, he says this is proper summer fare, nothing too heavy or rich. Delicious as always, Mike tells him, the boy hurrying back and forth between kitchenette and living room with plates and silverware and a bottle of wine and three glasses, he and Mike and Charlie all using the coffee table, sitting around it on the floor. Charlie says it's OK, the salmon, but he's not wild about fish, picking at it, reaching for more wine, it's Chablis, Mike bought it to go with the salmon and agreed to let the boys share it—in moderation, of course—now he tells Charlie to slow down, one more glass, that's all, no more. The boy drains what he already has and then refills his glass to brimming, it's good, he says, I never had this stuff before, it's really good. He's sitting there with his back against the couch, legs crossed and no pants on, just his sandals and his white Six Flags T-shirt, Alex also in just his leather Payless sandals and one of his gaudy Hawaiian shirts unbuttoned and hanging open, white pukka shell necklace, bare chest darkly suntanned and beaded with perspiration. Mike has an air conditioner in his bedroom but only a fan out here, that's one reason the boys are already half naked. Charlie takes a last bite of salmon and shrugs his final lukewarm verdict. "We

oughta go to McDonald's later," he says. "When Ray gets here."

"Maybe," Mike says. "We'll see."

"Prick," Alex playfully grumbles at the other boy. "You have no taste."

"But this wine is the bomb," Charlie says. "Better than beer even. Such a good buzz. I'm feelin OK."

It's hard to see the wine's effect on him, he always looks sleepy-eyed and groggy anyway, maybe his funny, crooked grin is a little more devilish and carefree than usual, his giggle a little sillier now when he takes another gulp and then manages to burp and fart at the same time. Alex laughs and calls him a filthy pig. Charlie nods with another happy belch, his butterscotch hair feathered and plumed in untamed, sweaty disarray.

Alex finishes eating and fetches himself a glass of lemonade with ice. When he starts to clean up, Mike says don't bother with that, I'll do it, you've done enough. Cool, Alex says, I'll just relax with Gubakowski here. He sits on the couch and slides behind Charlie and then swings one leg up and over him so that he's sitting with his friend between his legs, straddling him. One hand is holding his lemonade, the other hand starts playing now with Charlie's hair, combing through it with splayed fingers. Charlie protests at first with an irritable shake of his head but then submits and lets Alex pet him and then even lolls his head contentedly, enjoying himself, resting his elbows on Alex's thighs to make himself more comfortable. Alex uses his free hand to

reach down and give Charlie's T-shirt a tug, no other encouragement necessary, Charlie sits forward to peel off the shirt and then settles back again between Alex's legs, he's finished with his wine by now and his empty glass is beside him on the floor. I'm buzzed, he says once more, dude, I'm feelin totally OK. Alex takes a drink of lemonade and then leans forward to set the glass onto the coffee table, he has an erection by this time and it presses against the back of Charlie's neck until he leans back again, his right hand is wet and cold from holding the glass and he makes Charlie flinch now just by touching his bare shoulder. Sorry, he says, my fault. Charlie says no, that's all right, it feels pretty good, it's like refreshing. Alex grins with sly inspiration, he's been chewing on a piece of ice but now removes it from his mouth and holds it with his fingertips and begins to run it slowly across Charlie's shoulders and neck, again Charlie flinches from the shock of it but quickly relaxes and chuckles his approval. With his other hand Alex pulls Charlie's head backward and runs the little chunk of ice over his cheeks and his exposed throat, the back of Charlie's head now resting against Alex's hard-on, the ice is gradually melting in a cold trickle down Charlie's shoulders, he can feel Alex's hard dick behind him and he starts rubbing the back of his head against it, rubbing his hair against it in a gently teasing way.

This is what Mike sees as he keeps glancing from the kitchen into the living room, more sexual heat between these two kids, only Raymond once again

missing because he's home babysitting his little brother and sister. Alex was probably hoping to wait for him but now Charlie is feeling tipsy and frisky so forget about waiting, peckers are hard and ready right now, testicles are full and achy right now. Alex is still massaging the dribbly ice water around and around on Charlie's throat and shoulders, he slumps himself a little lower now and spreads his own legs to let Charlie's head nestle back more cozily into his welcoming crotch, blond hair fluffy soft against Alex's penis and balls as Charlie lays his head back all the way and continues to move it in teasing circles, looking up backward now at Alex, sticking out his tongue and then grinning and mouthing the word "bitch" at his buddy grinning back down at him. Alex pats him on the cheeks with chilly hands and wipes a wet finger across his lips, Charlie licks away the water and Alex wets his lips for him once more and then pushes the finger fully into Charlie's mouth, it's the middle finger, Charlie mumbles "bitch" again and lightly bites down on it, gnawing on it, Alex using it now like a fishhook to pull Charlie's head to the side, turning him, yeah, that's better, come on, over here. Charlie suddenly has Alex's boner pressed against his left cheek, Alex slumps just a little lower, even better, Charlie turns himself a few more inches so that he's sitting on his left hip and looking directly at the thing in his face, the smell of it so pungent and close, balls hanging, sweaty pubic hair, this is something Charlie figured he'd never do, too weird, too gross. Alex removes his finger but Charlie keeps his

mouth open, waiting, something he'd never do, too gross, Mike watching from the kitchen archway as Alex lifts his hips and directs his erect penis carefully into Charlie's open mouth, Charlie just as carefully closing his lips around the tip of it but only the tip, just holding it at first, goddamn, leaky and sticky thing, working it cautiously with his tongue and his teeth, making it even leakier and stickier. Alex can feel the roughness of Charlie's braces against his dick, this is good, this is awesome, Ray-Ray got this far a couple of times and Benjie did OK but Alex has never received a full blowjob until now from another boy, no stopping this time, no way, won't take long, never does. He holds Charlie's head in both hands and pulls it closer inch by inch until Charlie's mouth is stuffed full with cock and actually sucking, really sucking, nothing timid or cautious now, Charlie is giving his friend a total blowjob and doing it well, surprisingly well, tongue and lips and teeth and even those bumpy braces all doing their work, Alex still holding him by the head and slowly thrusting his hips, banging Charlie against the tonsils and causing him to gulp reflexively and bulge his eyes, so weird for Charlie, so sick, feasting on another guy's big nasty boner like this, feeling it all slippery and throbby inside his own mouth, Charlie can't believe he's doing this, can't believe it, especially with Mike watching, can't believe it, still he keeps doing his job with eyes fixed straight ahead and cheeks puffing and hollowing as he diligently sucks and sucks until suddenly—sickest and

weirdest of all—he's gagging on a mouthful of Alex's warm spew, terrible, so much of it, so overpowering, some of it goes down but there's way too much and quickly Charlie pulls himself away and grabs the empty wine glass from the floor and holds it to his mouth to catch the excess of spermy slop now drooling from between his own lips.

Alex hardly lets him finish before pouncing from the couch to get at him and do some zealous sucking of his own, pushing Charlie onto his back there on Mike's orange shag carpet, he says now I'll show you, dude, now you'll see, the wine glass discarded next to them and tipped onto its side with Alex's jizz oozing toward the rim like some creamy liqueur spilled and forgotten. Charlie's sandaled feet are up on the cushions of the couch with legs widely parted to let Alex kneel in between, Alex's Hawaiian shirt still on and hanging loosely over his bare haunches as he hunkers over Charlie and vigorously cocksucks him, really going at him. Charlie keeps making low chortling noises and frogging his legs, flexing at the knees as if trying to pump the overabundance of juice from his own tightly swollen nuts, Mike standing a few feet away and holding a dish towel and staring at these two kids who were bashful about seeing each other naked just a few months ago, Charlie more so than Alex of course, everything so new for them back then, showering together, comparing dicks in front of the mirror, wrestling, giving each other massages. So inexperienced, so cautious. Now they fuck

each other in the butt. Now they ejaculate in each other's mouths. And now, watch this, their latest performance, Charlie's parted and upraised legs trembling as he loses control and starts clenching and spurting, clenching and spurting, Alex staying right on him to catch every last trickle and drop, OK, that's all, no more, Charlie goes slack and exhausted and then Alex shows him, oh yeah, Alex lets him see, opening his mouth now to let Charlie have a good look at his own semen still in there, all of it right there on Alex's outstretched tongue like a glistening mouthful of runny yogurt, finally Alex closes his mouth and swallows and then swallows once more to get all of it down, smiling at Charlie, told you so, good stuff, yummy in the tummy. Charlie can't even answer, he just laughs.

Mike is finishing the dishes, still trying to deal with the impact of this latest spectacle, when Raymond finally shows up. The kid shakes his head slightly but never loses his cheery smile when he sees Alex and Charlie there on the floor, they've hardly moved in these last several minutes, Charlie still with his sandaled feet up on the couch as he watches TV practically upside down, Alex beside him, still touching him, running a single fingertip around and around Charlie's belly button and nipples, grinning now as he sees Ray-Ray, damn, he says, you're late! Charlie suddenly perks to attention when he sees his best buddy, he sits up with a droopy half-boner and reaches for his Six Flags T-shirt, it's about time, he shouts, let's go to McDonald's, I'm

starved! Alex moans in protest but Ray likes the idea—so, about ten minutes later, everybody climbs into Mike’s Honda and heads to the McDonald’s on Main Street for Big Macs and fries and shakes, of course Alex usually doesn’t eat meat and anyway he already had a good dinner so he gets himself only a shake and nothing else. “No milk in these,” he points out to everyone else at the table, “that’s why they’re just called shakes and not milk shakes.”

“Tastes good anyway,” Charlie says.

“Hey Gubakowski, Gube, what’s this remind you of,” Alex chuckles, taking a hard pull on his straw and then opening his mouth to show the slushy mess inside.

“Oh my god,” Charlie laughs, Mike also laughs and shakes his head, Ray doesn’t get the joke at first but then Alex reinserts the straw and starts sliding it in and out between his lips, fellating it, suddenly Ray understands and blushes a reddish shade of brown, oh man, he mumbles, dimpling in a big flustered grin. Charlie joins the game with his own shake, it’s chocolate, he fills his mouth with it and shows the frothy slush and then swallows and says, “Check it out, for real, that was Ray’s stuff, comes out brown!”

“Yeah, that’s intelligent,” Ray says. “Yours must come out albino.”

“It’s white, duh, pretty obvious.”

“Oh yeah,” Ray concedes, laughing at himself, lightly slapping his own forehead. Mike puts a hand onto the boy’s neck and says don’t worry, just ignore these

two psychos, nodding across the little table at Alex and Charlie, even louder laughter now from those two, yep, that's us, major psychos!

Later, in bed with Mike, listening to some Beethoven on CD, Alex finds himself wondering aloud about his own obsession, about his own boundless appetite. "D'you ever get enough?" he asks in a drowsy voice. "The sex stuff, I mean. Other guys. Boys. D'you ever get enough of it?"

"No way, man, never."

"Really? Because, I'm serious, sometimes I feel like I must be sort of insane."

"A one-track mind."

"To say the least. Exactly."

"Hey, it's OK, you're lucky," Mike says to the boy in his arms. "Enjoy yourself. Take advantage. You're not insane. Well, maybe just a little, but. . ."

"Hilarious, as always," Alex smiles, pulling a tuft of Mike's grizzled chest hair to punish him. "Anyway, know what? You should take your own advice. About enjoying yourself. Taking advantage."

"I thought I was."

"You could do more."

"Oh yeah?"

"Like with Charlie, I mean. It would be OK with me."

"I've done stuff with him, I've told you," Mike says.

"You mean like even blowjobs and stuff?"

“Well, no, not with Charlie, but. . .”

“With Ray-Ray?”

“Christ no.”

“So? Why not?”

“This is your deal, pal, not mine. I just tag along.”

“I mean, for example,” Alex says, assuming a more pedantic tone, he still has that wonderfully coconutty scent, it’s fragrant on the pillows and the sheets from his frequent visits to Mike’s bed, “why don’t you ever invite Charlie to spend the night?”

“Here? In my apartment? Oh sure, his mom and stepdad would love that. Come on, be serious.”

“You’ve got a point. His stepdad especially. He might get a little, let’s say, suspicious. But what about Ray?”

Mike doesn’t answer right away, it’s a good question, finally he has to respond with a shrug that lifts Alex’s head along with his own shoulder. “Don’t know. Just never invited him. Never invited you, either. Know what I mean? You always invited yourself, I never had to ask, even tonight.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“You’ve spoiled me.”

“OK, but,” Alex says, pausing abruptly to listen to some passage from Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto that he especially likes, he’s silent for most of a minute before managing to regain his focus. “So about Ray, anyway, you should let him sleep over. He’d like it, I know.”

“With you? All of us together?”

“Not necessarily. It could be just you guys by yourselves. You could watch sports and stuff, he’d have a good time.”

“This is strange,” Mike says. “What’s the deal, Alex? Why d’you want to play matchmaker for me and Ray? And me and Charlie? What’s up?”

“You deserve it, that’s all.”

“That’s your reason? Seriously?”

“Honest to god,” Alex says, rising slightly on one elbow to cross his heart. “It’s just, you know, I feel selfish lately, monopolizing everybody. Like next time, what I’m saying, you should do stuff with Charlie when we’re here together, take advantage, enjoy some variety.”

“OK, we’ll see what happens.”

“No, none of that, no equivocating, just do it.”

“Equivocating,” Mike repeats with a chuckle.

“It means avoiding the topic.”

“I know, smartass, I know.”

So, just as Alex proposed, variety becomes the new standard, quite a surprise for Charlie later that same week when Mike ends up giving him head there on the couch, Alex just sitting alongside and contentedly observing, nodding finally in approval and vicarious satisfaction when Mike achieves his first mouthful of Charlie’s sperm and gratefully swallows. No telling from day to day what might happen or how: sometimes Mike still just watches as the boys have sex in front of him;

sometimes, yes, the boys take their own turns as spectators, each one getting his chance to see his buddy being sucked off; sometimes Charlie will even watch as Alex blows Mike, what a sight, his friend slobbering all over that grossly huge dick. Most enjoyable, for all of them, is when the boys have anal intercourse and Mike sucks the pecker of the boy getting humped—the orgasms are ferocious, the ejaculations are wild. Charlie loves all of it, the whole freaky arrangement, he even shows up by himself now and then to have Mike suck him, always with a finger up his ass to heighten the pleasure, that's essential, he needs that finger up there whether it's his own or Mike's, no matter. One day in late July he ends up on Mike's bed with the man actually fucking him, finally even this last taboo shattered between them, Charlie is on his back and his skinny legs are up and kicking and Mike has to keep shushing him because he's groaning and yelping so noisily, he's like a crazy boy with that big cock up his butt, eventually he chews on the pillow to muffle himself, the coconutty smell of his friend Alex must be strong in his nose as the bedsprings creak and creak and creak beneath him. Next day he returns with Alex himself but it's Mike's king-sized thing that he wants again, it's that overstuffed and unbearable feeling that he craves again, Alex's turn to be surprised now when his friend comes right out and asks for it, telling Mike to do it again, like yesterday, do it just the same way, all of them moving to the bedroom—Alex smiling OK, go ahead, I'll watch, this I gotta see—

Charlie doesn't care, no shyness or shame anymore about something even this blatantly homo, on his back now as Mike greases him and greases himself and then carefully mounts him, Alex sitting on the edge of the bed to enjoy the show, Charlie rolling his head and baring his teeth in a crazed grin and keening like a young savage, skinny legs up again like yesterday and kicking the air above Mike's back, the boy now arching his back, yipping and yowling, Mike going shhh, Alex laughing, Charlie out of control, delirious, ejaculating like a fiend without even touching himself as Mike bangs and bangs against his prostate and pumps his rectum full of cum. Afterwards Charlie just stares toward the ceiling and shakes his head, mouth agape, stupefied, inconceivable to him what's happening these days, all of this, inconceivable, unthinkable, nothing makes sense anymore, nothing makes sense, July sun bright through the window like any normal day and the familiar sound of someone's stereo from next door but Charlie can only stare and slowly shake his head and wonder because nothing feels normal these days, nothing.

Raymond, through this entire sexual frenzy, has been mostly absent, no mystery why, it's simply that he's the only one of the boys who's maintained a normal routine with other daily activities, off at karate class or Webber Stables or one of his ballgames while Alex and Charlie are inventing new ways to screw and suck each other. It might also be that Ray is the most reluctant of the three boys to step over that final line, to risk that final

loss of self-control, ironic perhaps, this youngster who has done so much with Alex in the past, practically a lifetime of kissing and hugging and hand-holding, walking around with their hands in each other's pockets and then directly in each other's pants, all of those dirty pictures from Christmas, now sleeping nude together whenever they stay overnight, jerking off together, even trading blowjobs more and more freely—well, still tentatively on Rays' part, not quite going all the way—still, even so, he'll allow a dick to be put into his mouth, that's not bad for a kid who says his prayers every night and frets about the difference between venial and mortal sins. But despite all of that, regardless, it's Charlie who has become Alex's most adventurous and eager partner and not Raymond, it's Charlie who has raced forward while Raymond has hung back, a little surprising maybe how hesitant Ray has been lately.

Then again, if you could peek into the boy's mind, you'd realize how much he's been thinking about Mike and about being at Mike's apartment these past few weeks, sure he's been busy elsewhere and missing the excitement but recently he's also been coming over here more and more often by himself, dropping by usually early in the morning just to talk about his latest karate lesson or maybe to practice a move with Mike and do some quick sparring, sometimes they'll talk about the Cubs and Sammy Sosa and how many home runs he might end up hitting this season, other times Ray will show up a little later in the day and eat lunch with Mike

while together they watch one of those old Bonanza reruns they both enjoy so much, most of the hour can pass with hardly a word between them, no need for chatter, comfortable this way, just happily sharing each other's company. It's easy for Raymond to drop by like this, only a short walk from his house to Mike's apartment, it makes for a pleasantly casual friendship between them free of schedules and deadlines and crosstown commutes. Somehow he manages to find Mike alone on most of these random visits, the man begins to wonder by the end of July if Raymond might even be deliberately avoiding the other boys. And maybe, at least for a while, he was. Maybe he needed some time to evaluate his own feelings, to decide whether or not he wanted to keep involving himself more and more deeply in something so dangerously intense and sexual, this whole bawdy escapade with Alex and Charlie and even Mike that feels like the devil's own perversion—irresistible, filthy, wonderful, terrifying, depraved, delicious, utterly confusing. But finally, subtly, he seems to make a decision about what he wants, he seems to surrender to desire and pleasure despite any lingering doubts or scruples he might have, the summer captures him, his love for Alex and his lifelong camaraderie with Charlie and his blossoming friendship with Mike and his own steamy teenaged hormones all conspire to lure him back into the gang, into the club, into the romp and the raunch.

He's visiting Mike again, they've just finished a lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches and they're talking about Ray's birthday coming up in two weeks, middle of August, he'll be the last of the boys to turn fourteen. Charlie's beach party at Lake Swanson was so much fun that Ray has decided to have the same kind of party for himself. Mike agrees with him, you're right, that would be a good idea. Just then, as if summoned by the discussion, Charlie himself arrives pounding for entrance at the door. He's wearing an orange T-shirt that says "STONERVILLE HIGH SCHOOL. . ." on the front in black letters and ". . . SUCKS!!!" in even bigger letters on the back, it's one of Alex's shirts, somehow Charlie ended up with it in all of the dressing and undressing they do together. He grins his usual drowsy-eyed grin when he sees Ray here in the apartment, then he looks around for the other Salazar and scowls. "Where's Alex at? He said he'd be here."

"Haven't heard from him," Mike says. "What's goin on?"

"Just whatever," Charlie shrugs. "Hangin out. What're you guys doin?"

"Having some lunch. Watching Bonanza."

"That stupid thing."

"Heresy, blasphemy," Mike says. "Did you hear that, Ray? What Charlie just said about Bonanza?"

"Blasphemy," Ray agrees, he's already wearing his Pony League uniform for a game later today, this is the last week of his team's season, he's a Bronco, number

16, white pants and a red jersey with yellow lettering and trim. Charlie joins him on the couch and accepts the offer of a grilled cheese sandwich from Mike. Bonanza is almost over, Hoss slugging it out with some bad guy. “This is such a cool fight,” Raymond says. “One of my favorites. Watch this.”

“Mike could beat that Hoss guy,” Charlie says.

“I bet you’re right,” Ray quickly agrees, obviously he’s had the same thought himself. “Mike’s even bigger. And he knows karate.”

“He’d totally kick this guy’s ass.”

“No doubt.”

“Hey Mike, isn’t that right? Who’d win? You or Hoss?”

“Oh, definitely me, no contest,” Mike jokes, making a slow tour of the room to open a window over here and turn on a fan over there, the day heating up, the apartment getting hot. He gives the big workout bag a powerful wallop with his fist as he passes by. “There you go, man, Mike Burroughs by a knockout!”

Charlie is still chewing the last bite of his sandwich when he jumps up inspired and starts doing some of his comically frenzied sparring, Wild Boy dancing and hopping around Mike with funny jabs and kicks and maniacal Kung Fu yipping. Mike laughs and finally captures him with one arm, Charlie gladly yielding and relaxing in the man’s grasp but then straining once more to move the both of them toward the bedroom, he says it’s cooler in there, come on, come on! Of course he

wants to have sex and Mike understands. Ray glances at them now as Bonanza ends. "Charlie wants to spend some time in the bedroom," Mike says, not sure how else to explain what's happening. But it's OK, Ray just nods and says I should probably be going anyway. That's how they leave him there on the couch. Nothing unusual. And nothing unusual in the bedroom, either. Charlie takes off his shorts and sandals but stays in his orange T-shirt while Mike mounts and humps him from behind, that's how they always do it now, doggy style, that's how the boy likes it best, letting Mike's thing pound and pound inside of him for five minutes or ten or twenty with his butt way up and wide open this way, the man reaching around from behind to jerk him off at the same time, it's this combination of cumming while getting banged in the ass that makes Charlie crazy, he's the noisiest kid Mike has ever been with, really uncontrollable, getting screwed like a dog makes him yelp and yowl like one, too. No problem, though, because Raymond must be gone by this time, nobody else in the apartment to hear the uproar from the bedroom.

But Mike is wrong, today is different, today there's a surprise waiting for him and Charlie when they finish and return to the living room. Ray is still here and now so is Alex, the cousins are on the couch together. Ray was ready to leave when Alex showed up and urged him to stay, already they could hear the noise from Mike's bedroom, sex noise, Ray considered leaving once more and then seemed to make his decision about rejoining the

romp, rejoining the raunch, no more leaving after today, he decided to stay, he wanted to stay, he and Alex held hands and walked to the couch and sat together and laughed at the freaky sounds from the bedroom, those animal sex sounds. Alex could see and sense his cousin's renewed willingness, a look in Ray's eyes that hadn't been there in recent weeks, an eager and complicit look that seemed to say OK, OK, I'm ready to play again, I don't want to be left out anymore, I'm ready, let's go. "Listen to Charlie," Alex chuckled, doing his own ah! ah! ah! imitation with a rapturously contorted face, leaning against Ray and then kissing him, it had been a while since they'd done this together and it felt good, felt natural, familiar—but maybe never quite like this before, something different this time as they kissed and hugged right here in Mike's apartment, something different or heightened or more brashly uninhibited than ever before, more gleefully unrestrained, Alex always ready for this kind of passion, hell yes, and Ray always willing enough to play along, to cooperate, but today finally more than willing, suddenly displaying some passion of his own here on the couch with his cousin. He'll always be a fundamentally hetero boy who likes girls, sure, but sex is sex and pleasure is pleasure and Ray obviously has determined to enjoy everything that's available to him right now—just like his friend Charlie. Today becomes Raymond's final embrace of the forbidden, summer captures him, he totally wants to stay.

So this is the scene that surprises Mike and Charlie, they're familiar enough with the cousins sharing hugs and kisses but this appears overheated even for them. Alex's shirt is off and his khaki shorts are open, Ray's uniform pants are also unzipped and open, both boys are kissing with tongues as their hands keep pulling at each other's clothes and pawing at whatever bare skin they can find, reaching again and again between each other's legs. Mike has never seen two boys tongue-kissing this way. Charlie mumbles holy fuck. The cousins know they're being watched and Ray's eyes dart sidelong once or twice but he never wavers, his pants now down to his knees, Alex's shorts on the floor, hands tugging to remove underpants, Alex making devilish chuckling sounds as he and Ray-Ray continue to kiss open-mouthed more noisily and sloppily than they've ever kissed before, Alex now fully stripped and naked, Ray's pants and underwear now down around his ankles with his red Broncos shirt pulled up and Alex masturbating him and Ray masturbating Alex, right away Mike notices that Raymond has matured in the last couple of months, his dick is still puppyish and stubby but definitely thicker than before and his testicles look bigger and plumper and his pubic hair has grown into a longer and frizzier bush, this late-bloomer is finally blooming and he's got his legs open to show everyone the proof. Then Alex leans back against one elbow and Ray comes leaning forward with him, they've been kissing this whole time but now Alex nudges his cousin to go down, go down, Ray-Ray

quickly doing it, he's rehearsed this and experimented with it and now he's really doing it, he's sucking Alex, giving his older cousin a blowjob here on Mike's couch with the others watching, again his eyes dart sideways at Mike and at Charlie with just the hint of a grin at the corners of his mouth as he works up and down on Alex's erect penis. Alex himself is smiling a lot more broadly and boldly, he's a proud teacher showing off his favorite student, one hand on Ray's curly head to offer gentle encouragement while the other hand continues busily between Ray's legs, jerking him off.

Charlie, still half naked in only his orange T-shirt, wanders closer, first time he's ever stood by and watched a pair of boys his own age actually having sex like this, they've all jerked off together this summer and he's watched Alex doing stuff with Mike but this right now is a whole new deal, Ray and Alex together this way, Charlie can't understand why he should be so turned on by the sight of two guys queering off together, Ray sucking Alex's dick like this, sick really, still he wanders closer and closer until Alex smiles right at him and reaches for Charlie's arm and pulls him down to one knee beside the couch and then puts his hand behind Charlie's head with his fingers in all of that tangly blond hair and pulls him forward and starts to kiss him the same way he was kissing Ray. Charlie reflexively pulls back and shakes his head—no kissing another guy, forget it—but Alex pulls his head forward once more and starts kissing him again and this time Charlie succumbs

to it and leaves his mouth open for Alex's tongue and Alex can smell the cheese on his breath and feel the rough bumpiness of his braces and taste the cheddary pungence of his spit. Charlie's eyes move just then to glance sideways at Ray and he meets Ray glancing back, each of them fascinated by the lewd spectacle of the other, Ray's dick has been neglected since Alex reached away to grab Charlie and now Charlie notices and takes over the job himself, Ray gratefully turning his hips to accommodate Charlie's hand between his legs. That's how this three-way ends, Alex moaning into Charlie's mouth as he starts spilling into Ray's, Mike can see Ray gulping, doing what Charlie never has, swallowing all of that boycum filling his mouth, wincing at the strong flavor of it but gamely consuming everything that comes squirting and squirting from his cousin's cock, just a little of it escaping as a dribble down his chin. His own stuff is on Charlie's hand by this time, also on the cushion beneath him, a generous ejaculation from those nicely chubby balls of his. He raises his head finally and wipes the dribble of semen from his chin and then looks around grinning at the assembly of witnesses looking back.

It's almost as if Alex and Charlie are dedicated, after this day, to helping Raymond enjoy everything he's missed in the last few weeks. Mike can't help wondering, from long habit, if the risks have finally become too grave. What's happening now is definitely not normal. Jerking off together, yes, boys do that

commonly enough. Even some occasional fellatio, OK, you suck mine and I'll suck yours, boys try it, they're curious, it feels good. But all of this kissing and fucking and all of this hungry cocksucking and cum-drinking is way beyond the norm, let's be honest, Charlie and Raymond have been inspired to these extremes by insatiable Alex and his months of flirting and coaxing, he's given them the excuse and the opportunity to indulge in these exotic pleasures. And Mike can't stop wondering about some possible downside. What happens if Charlie or Raymond panics and starts regretting this whole sex spree? But Alex, one more time, says not to worry. He's more confident than ever that the other boys are just doing what comes naturally and enjoying every bit of it, Charlie is a superfreak at heart and Ray-Ray is a sweetheart from way back and both of them are happy accomplices to this summer of love, that's what Alex calls it, our own little summer of love. Why argue with him? He's been right about everything else so far. From the very beginning. Even as that little eight-year-old in Mike's back yard on Tompkins Street, even then he was a clever and clear-sighted observer. Do you like to kiss boys? Even then he was cheerfully straightforward about something that Mike has always perceived as furtive and dangerous. The universe wants to play. Mike said it himself. And it's something that Alex has always known. Why start doubting him now?

Especially after watching him and the other boys in the days that follow—Raymond in particular, he'll never

be a noisy wildcat to match his friend Charlie but he quickly becomes a shameless fiend for pleasure, no more holding back, he loves this whole decadent scene, Alex was right. The night of his last baseball game, must be Friday, he comes back to Mike's apartment with Alex. Charlie was here earlier by himself but now he's gone, out with Heather and that other gang. Just the cousins here tonight. Ray's team won their last game for a respectable third-place finish in their Pony League, now he and Alex and Mike are celebrating with pizza and chocolate sundaes and a collective impatience for something more, there's a new kind of naughty eagerness to Raymond that Mike has never seen before, the kid has a horny bulge in his white uniform pants that he doesn't even try to hide. Alex sees it too as they all finish their sundaes, he halfway unzips Ray's pants and pokes a finger inside to tickle him, both of them laughing now and up on their feet to take their empty sundae dishes to the kitchen—first detouring, however, to collect Mike's dish, each of the boys giving him a kiss as they pass—something else new from Raymond, kissing the man this way just as Alex has always done, big smooches from both of these Salazar boys with chocolate on their lips for Mike to taste.

Ray, first one back from the kitchen, glances at Mike with a bright smile and a quick what-the-heck shrug and then starts to undress, no hurry, like someone just casually disrobing for the night, unfastening his pants all the way, untucking his red Broncos jersey,

crouching to remove his cleated red shoes, his white socks. Mike says, “Time for some fun, eh?”

“Yep, I think so,” Ray says, another little shrug, pulling his jersey up and off. “Alex said. You know. In the kitchen.”

“Great. Good idea. You guys go ahead.”

“I heard my name,” Alex says as he returns. “Is it party time?”

“Looks that way,” Mike says, Ray also nodding yeah, loveable kid, nervous and a little shy and totally excited all at the same time. Alex is carrying a glass of ice, he likes to chew the cubes and already has one in his mouth. He’s been shirtless and barefoot all evening and his baggy tan shorts are halfway down his slender bare hips, obviously no underwear beneath, not unusual for him this summer to go without, his own boner is helping right now to keep the shorts from falling. He puts down the glass of ice and hugs Ray and then finishes undressing him, giving him grins and kisses and calling him “my Ray-Ray” as he strips him of pants and underpants and undershirt down to nothing but brown skin and erect penis. My Ray-Ray, my baby, he keeps saying. He likes to infantilize with petting and kissing and silly endearments—first with himself as Mike’s little lover, recently with cuddly young Benjie, always with Ray, his favorite, his special Ray-Ray. He lets his own shorts drop now and steps forward into a naked embrace with his cousin, boners pressed together, Alex’s definitely bigger, more pubic hair, saggier balls, all of it

rubbing against Ray's smaller stuff—smaller but big enough, ripening handsomely these past couple of months, sturdy boy with strong legs and shoulders and meaty full buttocks and that cutely pubescent wiener rubbing and rubbing against Alex's as they hug and kiss in front of Mike, partly lost in the moment, partly showing off, the experience never complete for Alex unless he's being watched, performing. He holds Ray's head between both hands and looks into his eyes. "My Ray-Ray," he says once more. "Who's my baby?"

"I am," Raymond says, murmuring, expectantly smiling, arms around Alex's shoulders as they continue to rub against each other.

"Who's my sweetie?"

"I am."

"You're Mike's sweetie, too," Alex says with tiny kisses whenever he pauses. "Right? Mike's baby, too." He and Ray both glance at the man who suddenly gives a smile and raises his hand in a strangely timid salute. "I guess so," Ray says, not a show-off like his cousin, he'll never be absolutely comfortable with displaying himself this way, standing here with his dick up, getting ready to have sex, he's jittery, he wants to stop talking and abandon himself to the doing. Maybe Alex can feel his impatience. They sink to the carpet and Ray stretches out on his back with the pale soles of his feet toward Mike, his knees look scuffed and dry, his frizzy black pubic hair ruffles briefly every time the oscillating fan blows across him. Alex sits on the floor beside him and takes a

fresh cube of ice from the glass and starts running it along the naked front of him, Alex has done this before with Charlie, using the ice this way, now it's Ray's turn to flinch and gasp from the startling pleasure of the icy wetness against his bare skin, Alex artfully tantalizing him with it, sliding it along his thighs and hips and up onto his belly and his chest, Ray grinning and giving a spastic squirm every time the ice touches one of his pudgy little nipples, Alex bending over him from time to time to slurp away the excess of water melted on his warm skin, still concentrating on his nipples, teasing them with the ice and then sucking at them and tonguing them, now doing the same with Ray's belly button, using a fresh chunk of ice and slurping away the water as it pools there inside. Ray's knees are slightly spread and raised, Mike has the perfect view to watch the excited tightening of his hairless testicles, one of them a little tighter and higher than the other, his pecker up stiff and now clenching even stiffer and getting all reddish and twitchy as Alex starts teasing it with the ice and with his mouth, Ray's legs opening wider until Mike can see the dark hole of his sphincter, Alex sucking him now, sucking him and then straddling Ray's face backward so that his own balls are suddenly pressed against Ray's mouth for Ray to lick, that's right, Ray's tongue is out and licking the balls of his cousin, Alex enjoying that wet tongue on his testicles for a minute or two before lifting and shifting his hips to find Ray's mouth with his hard-on and slip it inside, the Salazar boys now giving

each other head right here in Mike's living room, Alex making contented little yummy sounds as he savors Ray-Ray's penis and then suckles and drinks the oozy discharge from it, Ray himself with an overflowing mouthful already taken and swallowed, he's still licking and kissing at the inflamed meat of Alex's prick drooping spent against his lips.

This is the night when Raymond sleeps over for the first time. Alex, by nine o'clock, gives goodbye kisses to him and to Mike, telling Ray that he should stick around, call your mom and dad and let them know—seriously, dude, keep Mike company tonight. He's obviously playing matchmaker for these two people he loves so much. Ray seems to like the idea and follows Alex's advice, he calls home and tells his parents that he's at Mike's, that they're going to watch the rest of the Cubs game on cable and then maybe a DVD—so is it OK if he just sleeps over? There's a moment of discussion between Gabe and Cleo before Gabe, the phone spokesman, gives his permission, telling his son to be good, get home tomorrow by noon, your mom is taking you to the mall for some new school clothes. Ray hangs up and smiles at Mike and says it's all right, I can stay. Later, after the ballgame and the movie, he happily accepts his second blowjob of the night, this is another new experience for the boy, he and Mike have never done anything sexual together until now, until this moment, so strange to feel the man's whiskery cheeks against his bare thighs and belly, soon enough Mike is

getting his first taste of this kid's semen, the sweet tanginess of it spilling onto his tongue as Ray himself stares wide-eyed and pumps his hips and tries to stop shaking. These two friends now lovers, now together in Mike's big bed, naked here in the darkened room as they caress and kiss each other gently to sleep.

A few days later, just before the weekend of his birthday party, Raymond is at Charlie's for an afternoon swim. They're alone and they swim nude, it's Charlie who gets bored first and encourages a move into the house, both of them still glistening and dripping as they grab their shorts and dash inside. Charlie seems curious about Ray's new willingness to do the really dirty sex stuff, he keeps eyeing him, goosing him, pinching at his dick, something excitingly new and nasty about doing the really dirty stuff—the really queer stuff—with his closest and oldest buddy, different from doing the same things with Mike or even with Alex. Very different. Charlie and Ray are best friends, they live in the same neighborhood, they talk about girls together, they've been classmates at the same school since way back in kindergarten. Masturbating together this summer has been fun, lots of fun, maybe a little weird at first to see each other's boners and to see each other openly stroking off and ejaculating—but not nearly as weird as seeing Ray actually give head to Alex last week in Mike's apartment, Charlie can't forget the startling sight of it or stop thinking about Ray enjoying it so much, swallowing cum, grinning.

Now they're together and they're alone and they're naked and Charlie feels a nervous confusion and anticipation about what might happen here in his own living room. He and Ray are sprawled side by side on the couch, just resting after their swim, not saying anything, just watching TV. Each of them is probably waiting for the other one to start. Now Charlie is getting an erection and he nudges Ray's arm, check it out, he says, fuckin boner, man, look at that fuckin thing. Ray grins and nods, yeah, no doubt, suddenly his own thing is getting excited and getting bigger, all part of a normal day now, nothing unusual—do some swimming, watch some TV, have some sex, all routine. A little strange though without Alex, not the same, being alone makes both Charlie and Ray feel uneasily self-conscious, better not to talk or think about what's happening, better just to go ahead now and do it. Ray is slouched with his legs slightly spread, waiting. Charlie nods in response to some unspoken question and then he scoots himself into position and takes his friend's penis delicately between thumb and forefinger and stares at it as if really and truly seeing it for the first time, as if inspecting every obscene detail of it—then briefly he glances up and exchanges a look with Ray that seems to say dude, no joke, you're straight and I'm straight, we both like chicks and not guys, so why am I getting ready to suck your cock? Why are we doing this? But then he leans closer and puts the stiffly aroused penis into his mouth and goes to work on it, the tip of his nose against the frizz of Ray's pubic hair

as he tongues and sucks and absently stares at Ray's brown stomach and stops wondering or caring why. A few minutes of this and they decide to switch and now Raymond does almost the same hesitant routine as Charlie, first holding the erection of his buddy in a nervously dainty fingertip grip to really look at it, as if just now discovering the actual size of it, the smell of it, the throbby heat of it, doing all of this before finally opening his mouth for it and licking at the red knob as it slips between his lips and nuzzles itself firm and warm between the roof of his mouth and the back of his tongue. Ray never once imagined, in years past, giving his pal Charlie a blowjob, but this summer has changed everything and now he's doing it—and now he tries another new trick by reaching his middle finger down into the crack of Charlie's butt and finding the hole and carefully feeling inside of it, pushing and twisting his finger into it, he knows that Charlie is crazy for this, having a finger inside of him like this, possibly more strange than anything else Ray has done so far, putting his finger inside another boy's behind this way and feeling the funny warmth and slickness way up in there where no finger should ever be, suddenly he's wondering how it would feel to have his dick up there instead of his finger and yet he can't believe he's even having such a thought, he thinks that maybe Alex and Charlie and Mike have done it but he's not sure, those wild noises from Charlie in Mike's bedroom last week, other clues, Alex hinting about it—something different, something

special—Ray doesn't know but he wonders and he lets his imagination roam where it never roamed before as he continues sucking his friend and fingering inside his ass, waiting any moment for a spermy gush—curious, to tell the truth, about how Charlie's stuff might taste. But maybe Charlie is still nervous about getting a blowjob from Ray—whatever the reason, he can't seem to reach orgasm or ejaculate in his friend's mouth. Again they switch positions but now Ray is having the same problem, seems like both of the boys are just too tense and trying too hard, eventually Charlie sits up and says fuck it, stupid shit, he and Ray both laugh quietly at themselves and decide to finish by simply relaxing and masturbating as they watch television, easier like this, feels good anyway, it's ample relief for both of them now just to get all of that stubborn cum out of their balls and onto their bellies.

Ray's birthday party at Lake Swanson brings this Summer of Love to something like a climax. The boys will continue to see one another afterwards, of course, nothing actually ends or stops here today. But all of them will remember this day as the moment when energy and eagerness and opportunity sparked together and blazed hottest, three fourteen-year-olds dripping with sweat and testosterone and running out of vacation time, school starting soon, this becomes their day to try everything, to exhaust themselves, to devour one another like ravenous young beasts.

The party itself is a boisterous success, only Benjie and his family are missing from the guest list, they're vacationing right now in Florida. Everyone else spends a brilliantly sunny and sultry mid-August day swimming and picnicking and playing volleyball on the beach, Raymond once again choosing Mike as his favorite teammate, an invincible combination. Carrie is also here today, both Ray and Alex made a special point of inviting her, she's finally surfacing from her severe depression following Jeff's suicide and being here at Ray's party is a good sign of recovery. Alex spends most of the afternoon with her, talking about new music, new movies, all the shark attacks in the news, the weird Chandra Levy case, the upcoming school year and what the Fall Play should be. Mike watches him and remembers what a gentle and generous spirit the boy possesses when he's not busily lusting after other guys, easy to forget sometimes, easy to think of him as nothing but a horny schemer and provocateur. But Mike knows better. It's not fair to blame Alex for so much good fortune this year or for so many willing partners. He's a teenager. He likes sex. He'd be a fool not to take advantage.

The private party begins around eight o'clock—after the beach has been closed to swimming, after all the marshmallows have been toasted, after all the guests have said goodbye and headed for home—that's when the three boys decide to hang out for a while longer at the lake. Their parents say it's OK as long as Mike stays

with them and brings them home by ten, secretly the adults are happy and grateful for some quiet time to themselves away from their overexcited kids. With the sun setting and everyone else gone, the boys crawl into the back of Mike's Honda with the hatch open and sit there side by side by side with their feet hanging out as Mike drives them from the parking lot toward the woods that encircle the lake. There's a dirt road leading into the twilight trees and then dirt sidetracks farther along that divert toward the water or away toward clearings in the woods or even farther away toward the grassy and sunflowery meadows beyond. The Honda bounces slowly along these tracks while the boys start getting playful in back, Charlie and Alex on either side of Ray, their sandaled feet protruding from the open hatchback on either side of Ray's soiled and scuffed Reeboks. It's Charlie who seems most nervously hyper and agitated and who can't wait to start and break the tension in his own tight gut and frantic imagination, he lifts his hips and pushes his unfastened shorts and his blue Hanes briefs down to his knees, up pops his boner, he says yeah, OK, some cool breeze on my fuckin sweaty nuts! Alex reaches across and feels him between the legs and then sniffs his own fingers and laughs—whew, no doubt, sweaty goodness! Ray also takes a curious grope-and-sniff and laughs at Charlie's funky odor and then laughs again when Alex says hey, come on, let's make the birthday boy here more comfortable! Oughta be wearin his birthday suit, Charlie agrees. Raymond squawks a

playful “help!” as the other boys cheerfully strip him and toss his shirt and shorts and his underwear and his sneakers and socks over their shoulders into the back seat, tickling him at the same time, pinching at his nipples and now at his uncovered erection, young birthday boy squirming and naked with hands all over him.

Mike turns the Honda down one final little road that brings them to the last of the trees and the edge of a secluded meadow twinkling with fireflies in the dim glow of sunset. It takes a moment or two for the boys to disengage in back, Ray is being kissed by Alex and fondled between the legs by Charlie, finally they notice that the car has stopped and they pull themselves apart and come climbing out, Raymond already fully naked and aroused and grinning at the indecent spectacle of himself, now Charlie and Alex pausing just outside the car to remove their own disheveled remnants of clothing, only their sandals stay on, Ray says “oh yeah” and ducks back into the car for his Reeboks and puts them on, leaving them untied and floppy around his bare ankles, something about wearing just those shoes and nothing else that makes him look even more starkly and inappropriately naked out here in the open, more like a lewd streaker than a casual naturist. “So,” Charlie says, his erection pointed at Mike, “where the heck are we?”

“The lake’s behind us, way over there,” Mike says. “This here is about as remote as we can get. Have fun, man, don’t worry.”

“What about the park security guys?”

“We’d see their headlights long before they’d see us.”

“It’s perfect,” Alex says. “Nice and private.” He and the other boys spend another minute to spray themselves with insect repellent before running off to race each other around the grassy field and to chase the winking yellow lights of the fireflies, they’re just having aimless and hectic fun in this last silvery dimness of nightfall, the half-moon already climbing above them from the east. For a while, as they race to see who can capture the most fireflies, the kids briefly forget their main reason for coming out here and even manage to lose their stubborn boners, suddenly they’re just three bare-bottomed natureboys enjoying a moonlight gambol. Mike is watching them from the back of the Honda where he’s sitting and smoking a cigarette, the hatch open above his head like a windowed awning. Finally Alex comes jogging over to him and stands smiling in front of him, breathing hard, hands on his hips, it’s almost the same pose he struck last year for that photograph on Mike’s bedroom dresser. “Look at you,” the man says. “Handsome devil. Sexy.”

“Remember that first time?”

“Which? For what?”

“When I was Balthazar?”

“Oh Christ yes. That first night. You’ve done a lot of growing since then.”

“For real?” the boy asks, now chewing the fingernails on one hand, hard to break old habits. “Tell me.”

“Well, you know, taller, bigger, more muscles. Your shoulders. Probably even your dick. Bigger, I mean.”

“It knows you’re talking about it, see, look at that.”

“No shit,” Mike says, flicking away his cigarette to free his hands and hug Alex onto his lap, definitely a bigger and heavier boy these days, less than two months until his fifteenth birthday, a lean and potent young stud wearing nothing now but his sandals and pooka shells and his two little gold earrings as he sits back against Mike’s chest and turns his crewcut head for a kiss. Mike says jeez, man, you smell like bug spray, kissing him anyway, reaching down to jerk him off, Alex stretching backward like a contented tomkitten till his ribs are sharply showing and every muscle taut, feels so good, he says, so good. Then he calls to Charlie and Ray, you guys, you guys, come on! They look over and wave and come tramping across the darkened field with fireflies still flickering around them, they know it’s time for some kind of sex, you can already see them getting excited, their wieners growing and stiffening as they approach until they both have total hard-ons going wiggle-waggle in front of them, eager puppy-dog tails on the wrong side.

Alex holds out his arms for both of them. They duck into the open hatchback and into Alex’s embrace

and then these three fiercely horny boys are all pawing at one another's nakedness and all kissing, even Charlie is kissing, the weight of them all is against Mike as they lean and press together. Charlie is mostly kissing Raymond now and Alex pulls back just enough to encourage them. Ray exhales a little surprised laughter as he finds himself kissing Charlie this way, Charlie's tongue in his mouth and the taste of Charlie's spit, the two of them breathing together and licking together as Alex continues to hold them around the shoulders and offer silent encouragement for them to take each other and enjoy each other. Alex has had fantasies about Ray-Ray and Charlie together, these two hetero boys making love, that's why it's so hot, the taboo of hetero guys getting wildly queer together, that's why Alex encourages them to pair off whenever possible and especially here tonight. And that's why he and Mike finally climb out of the car and give the whole space to Ray and Charlie, these two are really beyond any control at this point, both of them very aware of what's happening and very aware of being watched but still not willing or not able to stop the crazy homo stuff they're doing right now, kissing this way—not kissing with Alex or Mike, no, but with each other, way different to be frenching each other this way, in a couple of weeks they'll be in class together at school but now they're sprawled and tangled in the back of Mike's Honda and they're naked and they're kissing with wetly opened mouths. One of them has to make the next move and

finally it's Ray who takes the initiative and draws back and grins at Charlie and then shrugs all breathless and flustered and hunkers lower between Charlie's legs to get at his friend's hard penis and stinky balls and that sweaty bush of pubic hair. Charlie welcomes him by spreading his legs and lifting his hips, no nervous tension this time, he's happy to get sucked by Ray tonight and won't have any trouble cumming, no way, he's practically shaking with readiness as Ray gives him a slobbery blowjob, oh man, not even Alex or Mike has ever done better than this, Ray is going freaky with his tongue on Charlie's balls and on Charlie's dick, rubbing Charlie's dick at the same time, this is a blowjob and a handjob both at once, Ray is working his way back up the penis with his mouth and his hand sharing the job when Charlie starts to ejaculate nearly into his face. Ray quickly puts the thing into his mouth to catch as much as he can, swallowing as fast as Charlie can squirt, Charlie's head is thrown back and his eyes are shut and he's making a noise like sobbing and laughing both at the same time. Now he brings his knees up and hugs them to his chest and suddenly Ray has his buddy's bare ass in his face and he hesitates but then starts using his tongue on it and in it, Charlie pushing up against him with both cheeks to get more of Ray's tongue inside, so wet that Ray keeps pausing to slurp at the overflow of his own spit until he's had his fill and he can't wait any longer and he climbs into position on his knees with his head pressed against the roof of the Honda, he's still

wearing just those Reebok sneakers, he finds the squishy hole of Charlie's ass with his own madly impatient boner and he sinks deeply into it, fucking now for the first time in his life, a special treat for this birthday boy, fucking his pal Charlie, staring down at him, Charlie staring back and holding Ray by the butt as if afraid he might change his mind or slow down or stop.

Now, as Mike lights another cigarette and stands witness, Alex perches himself on the edge of the Honda's back end and from behind he slips his hand gently in between his cousin's sweaty thighs, finding and fondling Ray's nuts and then feeling with his fingertips along Ray's hard penis until he can also feel the cheeks of Charlie's ass and the very spot where the penis is sliding in and out of the hole, right there at the damp and suctiony bull's-eye of penetration where boy is fucking boy, Ray's balls rubbing and rubbing across the upturned palm of Alex's hand as the intercourse continues, maybe five minutes, breath quickening, sweat dripping, suddenly Alex can feel a slimy leakage on his fingers and he realizes that Ray is ejaculating into Charlie, full coitus now achieved between these two fourteen-year-old boys who've been friends since kindergarten, full sexual intercourse with cum warmly oozing, finished.

Then it's Ray's turn to surrender the last virginal bit of himself, one more birthday thrill. Charlie stays right where he is on his back because Ray is still above him, Ray is on his hands and knees now with his ass up and waiting and then he's pushing helpfully backward to

greet Alex's erection as it enters him, it's wet enough, it's OK, it works, he grunts as the hard thing penetrates and fills him, he groans as it fucks and fucks inside him, just a matter of minutes now before Ray himself receives a milky douche from his cousin to make his own deflowering complete. Later, as a luxurious bonus, the boys will return to Ray's house for a sleepover and all three of them will share Ray's big new bed that he just got for his birthday, dicks will be hard again by early morning and Alex will feign drowsiness to enjoy once more the sight of Ray and Charlie making out and making love, the two of them petting lazily to begin and kissing face to face on the same shared pillow, then taking turns to kiss nipples and kiss dicks—dark and curly-haired Raymond with his big eyes and big dimples so eager and rascally now, blond and sleepy-eyed Charlie looking all pink-cheeked and tousled and freshly horny—they'll kiss and taste each other's naked bodies and then they'll tangle in hotter and harder embraces, more and more desperate to finish. Alex will still be watching and indolently masturbating as they have sex right there beside him on the bed, both of them spilling a mess onto each other and onto the rumpled sheets.

That, more or less, will be how summer ends.

* * *

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ray is still in bed this Saturday morning when Alex arrives at Mike's apartment. The television is already on, seems like it's been on almost continuously since last Tuesday, that bizarre day like some kind of fever dream when Mike took his car to the Honda dealership for an oil change and wondered why the waiting room was crowded with customers and even mechanics staring transfixed at the TV, something about the World Trade Towers in New York and the Pentagon and airplanes crashing, hard to make sense of everything he was hearing and seeing, there were images of the towers falling but that was impossible, only after continuing to listen and to watch and only after seeing those same outrageous disaster movie images again and again could Mike begin to comprehend what had happened earlier that morning while he was in bed, sleeping late, oblivious. Now it's the weekend and time for memorial services and concerts and special programs, funny to say but there's an almost holiday feel to this whole ongoing event, it's easy sometimes to forget the disaster itself and to enjoy the whole astonishing spectacle as drama, as tragic performance, as thrilling communal extravaganza.

Mike is at the stove, he's making pancakes and frying bacon when Alex walks up behind him and hugs him and stands on tiptoes to kiss the back of his neck. The boy is letting his hair grow again and it's beginning

to show a little shaggier from beneath his black beret, his old favorite—he's resumed wearing it now that autumn is approaching and the weather has cooled. "Hey Papa, did Ray-Ray sleep over?"

"He's still in bed."

"Still? Damn, you guys must've had some major fun last night."

"Always, no doubt, your cousin is amazing, he's a real athlete."

"He is," Alex smiles, "he's great, you're right."

"But that's not why he's sleeping in. It's that goddamn hay fever of his. It keeps him awake at night."

"Yeah, I know."

"It wears him out, poor guy."

"I know, I hate that hay fever shit," Alex says, you'd think he was bemoaning his own affliction and not Ray's. Maybe it's the aroma of pancakes and bacon, maybe it's the voices of Mike and Alex, maybe it's just coincidence—but suddenly Raymond himself comes shuffling barefoot from the bedroom, cute young sleepy head, he's wearing the Bears jersey that he gave to Mike for Christmas, he uses it here as a nightshirt now that the weather is cooler, it covers him nearly to the knees. He waves a groggy hello before disappearing to use the bathroom, then he's back with a kiss for Alex and an even bigger kiss for Mike and a hug that lifts him off his feet into the man's powerful arms. They all end up around the coffee table in the living room to eat their breakfasts and to watch the special shows on TV, a

memorial service from Washington, another service and concert from New York, Peter Jennings talking to a bunch of kids on ABC. “This is becoming, like, sensory overload,” Alex finally remarks.

“We can stop watching any time,” Mike says. “Maybe go bowling or to a movie?”

“But we might miss something,” Ray says, since breakfast he’s been huddled on the couch with Alex, now he’s lying on his side with his head on Alex’s lap and Alex’s hand playing with his hair, petting him. He’s been the saddest and mopiestic of anyone since this whole thing happened on Tuesday, just a few minutes ago his eyes were wet again with tears during an especially plaintive rendition of *Amazing Grace*. Alex is always ready with comforting hugs and kisses and sometimes has needed a few reassuring embraces of his own, so many upsetting emotions this week, so difficult not to lose control every now and then. Mike has been sympathetic and supportive the entire time but, to be brutally candid, after the initial shock last Tuesday he’s felt mostly unmoved by this marathon of national grieving and weeping—the chauvinism of it, the self-indulgence of it—everyone going on and on about not feeling safe or secure anymore, about trying to cope with this heightened level of dread and anxiety, so scary to have their lives unsettled in this way. Hey, Mike keeps thinking, welcome to my world! Try living your entire life as heretic and outlaw and then tell me about never feeling safe or secure, then tell me about the anxiety that

never goes away, the dread, the emotional torture of spending every day in disguise, undercover, faking, lying, pretending, despised by your own culture, a fugitive and an alien in your own home. Try loving boys in America. Then tell me about fear.

Raymond finally rouses himself to take a shower, early afternoon by now, immediately Alex sits forward and smiles at Mike to report some intimate news, this seems like a good time to break the gloom and to chat about something more enjoyable. He happily supplies Mike with fresh information about some boy he met recently, some kid named Ryan, he's been mentioning him the last few weeks but only vaguely, just brief comments about this new kid and how cute he is, wow, you should see him, he's so awesomely blond, he's got the greatest blue eyes, the bluest blue you've ever seen. Now he says, "I'm serious, Papa, I've found myself a new boyfriend for sure, you can't even imagine."

"I thought Benjie was your ultimate boyfriend."

"Oh yeah, Benjie is cool, I love him, but he's so faraway and he's still so young."

"So this Ryan kid is the new prize, eh?"

"We're becoming really tight," Alex nods. "I told you he lives right there on Tompkins Street, didn't I? Just like four blocks east of our house?"

"Did he just move in?"

"No, no way, he's always been there. So close yet so far, right? Maybe you even knew him. Maybe you remember him."

“Oh Christ, I doubt it,” Mike says, not exactly eager to dredge up old business from Tompkins Street, that was a messy situation best forgotten. “He doesn’t really sound familiar.”

“His last name is Fox. Such a cool name. Fox.”

“There might’ve been a Fox kid around back then. But not a Ryan. Maybe something like Chris or Chad or Chuck.”

“There’s an older brother, I think. Maybe that was him. But I guess Ryan would’ve been too little back then.”

“To register on my queer radar?”

“Yeah, queer radar, for sure,” Alex laughs. “Anyway, we’re spending more and more time together lately. It’s getting to be so great. Really intense and passionate. He’s like my dream come true.”

“Listen to you.”

“Seriously, he’s so perfect,” Alex continues, on his feet now, almost dancing in place with excitement. “You should see him! I can’t believe we’ve lived on the same street all these years and never even. . .”

“How’d you finally meet him? I forget. You’re on the same bus together for school?”

“Not quite. Same bus stop, same corner, but a different bus. He’s still in junior high.”

“Still in junior high. That’s right. You told me last week.”

“Yeah, I told you. Remember? He’s thirteen and a half. Almost exactly,” Alex says, nodding, chewing his

nails, so excited. “He’s like this total star athlete. Swimming. Track. Damn, I can’t even explain how perfect he is.”

“But why just this year all of a sudden?”

“They moved all the bus stops. Destiny brought us together! But seriously? When we were both in elementary together? Like three or four years ago? We must’ve ridden the same bus together back then. We must’ve seen each other and stuff. It’s weird.”

“You were just little kids.”

“Exactly! I didn’t even notice him! No sexual electricity. Same with Charlie and Ray-Ray. Until last year. Then pow, dude, everything changed!”

“OK, so anyway, what makes this Ryan Fox kid your new boyfriend?”

Alex grins and nods even more vigorously and then plops himself onto Mike’s lap for this best part. “It was just a vibe at first. Like, when you first meet him, he comes across all weird attitude and grouchy and stuck-up, sort of a jerk, but that’s all a front, I could tell, I figured he was just lonely, I think he probably has a low social IQ, you know, poor social skills.”

“I love it when you diagnose.”

“I’m always right.”

“You’d think he’d be popular,” Mike says. “Being such a star athlete. So cute. According to you.”

“But that’s what I’m saying! Low social IQ! He needed a Prince Charming to show up and save him.”

“Oh my god.”

“I’m serious,” Alex says, still grinning, now he admonishes Mike with a light punch to the shoulder. “He needed a friend like me to love him.”

“Excuse me for saying this, man, don’t hit me,” Mike smiles, “but what about a girlfriend? Maybe he’d rather have a princess than a. . .”

“I’m positive he’s queer,” Alex says. “That’s the vibe I was talking about. And now that we’re spending more time together, hanging out after school, well. . .”

“Wow, interesting. You can tell?”

“Couldn’t you tell with me last year?”

“Sure, I guess, eventually, but. . .”

“Like with Ray-Ray, he’s such a total sweetie and loverboy but he’s basically straight. And Charlie of course, never a question, he totally likes girls, that’s why he always got so horny before, thinking about Heather and stuff, all of that transferred sexual energy.”

“Yeah, I miss the horny Charlie,” Mike says, almost three weeks now since the boy finally managed to get a real date with Heather, she won’t go all the way yet but she gives the boy head and seems to keep him happy and satisfied—still he’s been back a couple of times to mess around with Mike and with the other boys, Heather is great and Charlie is sincerely infatuated with her but he hasn’t quite lost his craving for those wilder pleasures of this past summer, one time he ended up on Mike’s couch with Ray screwing him and Alex sucking him, he had to chew his own fist to keep from howling, Alex could hardly swallow the whole savage gush of his

semen. Now it's been several days since Mike has seen him, more and more it's only Raymond and Alex who use the man's apartment as their love nest, they share Mike now and they share each other in ways that Mike still finds astonishing, until these last several months he never believed that young boys could really and truly become lovers with each other in this way, it's something you see in porno flix and read about in bad Internet fiction but it doesn't actually happen in real life—that's what Mike always assumed until the Salazar cousins and Charlie showed him different. Now Charlie has started to drift away, too bad, but Alex and Ray continue to astonish, they do everything in front of Mike, so utterly shameless, nothing they won't do together, nothing.

Mike couldn't help it, last Sunday he came right out and asked Raymond if he might be worried about all of this sex maybe being wrong, being a sin. The kid had just been to church that morning with his family, serving as an altar boy, and now here he was on Mike's lap with his good slacks pushed down to his knees and his erect penis in Mike's hand, watching the Bears game while being jerked off, he was holding a bouquet of white Kleenex partly for his hay fever and runny nose and partly to catch his own ejaculation whenever he felt himself ready to squirt. He shrugged at Mike's question. "I guess sometimes I worry a little. I say prayers. Acts of contrition. Just in case."

“You think God cares? You think he’s watching you?”

“I think God wants us to be happy,” Raymond said. “As long as we don’t hurt anybody else. He probably doesn’t worry too much about sex stuff.”

“Seems like he does. According to the Bible.”

“You think so?” the boy asked, turning his head halfway to glance at Mike. “Could a person go to hell, d’you think?”

“What I think, seriously, is that hell and heaven are right here, right now. We make them ourselves. This right now is heaven, man.”

“I think God knows what’s good. I think it’s OK,” Raymond said, funny to be discussing sin and salvation while someone is playing with your pecker. “I’m not worried. But I say prayers anyway.”

“Just in case,” Mike smiled. Now here he sits almost a week later with the other Salazar boy on his lap, Alex telling him about this new friend of his, this Ryan Fox kid, Alex happily convinced that he’s found himself a new and special boyfriend, only a vibe at first but now he’s positive because of what has been happening lately after school, especially after what happened just yesterday, so totally cool, so perfect. He arrived home on the bus to find Ryan already there, riding nonchalantly back and forth on his Schwinn near the bus stop, it seemed a little strange because Ryan himself usually gets home only ten or fifteen minutes before Alex, he must have rushed to his house and hastily changed clothes and

then come rushing back on his bike to be there waiting—apparently by coincidence—for Alex’s bus. They talked for a minute on the sidewalk before deciding to hang out at Alex’s house, nearer to the bus stop than Ryan’s, nobody else home at that time so Alex decided to do some extra flirting today with his new friend, to test his instincts about this other boy. He took him upstairs and said dude, prepare yourself, I’ll show you some funny shit, then he produced all of those X-rated photos he’d been taking with his digital camera since Christmas and he let Ryan look at them. Ryan responded with a moment of quiet surprise but then just shook his head to dismiss what he was seeing—that’s how he is, always competitive—he said that he and some of his friends used to make even better stuff than this before they moved away last year, way better stuff, real movies with a camcorder. Wow, Alex said, so you and those guys did real stuff together? Like queer stuff? Don’t call it that, Ryan said, suddenly a little red in the face, nostrils flaring, he gets agitated easily. It’s OK, Alex said, deciding to push further, watching Ryan’s face, I’m gay or queer or whatever so don’t be insulted, I’m just asking, I think it’s cool. Ryan listened to Alex’s disclosure and then just shrugged, once again trying to appear unimpressed, he said I’ve got a friend who’s gay, even two friends, they live together in a cool house way out in the country, you can’t shock me or anything like that. Alex said good, most excellent, I’m glad you’re unshockable. He was taking pictures of Ryan and paused

just then to give him a kiss on the lips, a final test, that's when Alex really knew, Ryan letting himself be kissed that way—he'd had experience, he'd been kissed before, somehow Alex had suspected all along. Yeah, no doubts anymore, no questions anymore, Ryan grinning vainly for the camera as Alex continued to photograph him, Ryan loving the attention, relaxing more and more, agreeing to take off his shirt and then even his pants to do some macho muscle-posing, his skin still golden-brown from summer's sun except for his pale and pinkish thighs, his blond hair pure Viking yellow. Alex said you're getting me all excited. Ryan just shrugged as usual and continued posing but soon you could see his own excitement as the bulge in his underpants kept swelling bigger and harder, finally Alex asked him to show it for the camera and he did, no problem—the past few weeks leading to this, preparing both of them for this, Alex could feel the truth all along and maybe so could Ryan, he'd done this before and you could tell, you could see the cunning in his eyes. He kept his underpants pulled down and told Alex to take more pictures, you should have a camcorder, he said, camcorders are better. He had the reddest boner Alex has ever seen, hot red, sunburn red, his balls too, stunningly red against the whiteness of those down-stretched underpants and the cool cream of his bare thighs and groin, Alex moving closer with the camera, Ryan's pubic hair the same true yellowy blond as the hair on his head, Alex almost laughing out loud at his own good fortune—

this wasn't just another straight boy horny for whatever makes him ejaculate, no, this was a genuine queerboy lonely for a new friend and lonely for love, Alex was sure of it, Ryan was flirting and seducing just as much as Alex himself was flirting and seducing, they were the same, that's why Ryan had been hovering at the bus stop, Alex could see it in his gaze, in his grin, even in the way he walked and gestured and talked, something subtly provocative about him, a star athlete on his school and YMCA teams yet still somehow dainty and coquettish and pretty as a flower. But time was against them on this afternoon. Ryan had to leave and get back home but first he took off his underpants so that Alex could get some final quick pictures of him completely naked, posing there in just his white socks for the clicking camera. Then he let Alex come closer and touch his pubic hair and handle his hard wiener and his balls while he himself unzipped Alex's jeans and pushed a bold hand inside and pulled down at the underpants to get at the good stuff and feel it all stiff and hairy and sexy there between Alex's legs. Oh yeah, he'd done this before. He knew. He wanted this. But I need to go, he said again, my dad will kill me if I'm late, come over tomorrow, you can spend the night. Fuckin right, Alex said, I'll be there! Suddenly Ryan was in control, teasing Alex, making him wait, arranging their next date, preparing their honeymoon. Alex helped him get dressed now, loving this newly submissive role, delighted to be serving and pampering beautiful Ryan this way, helping

him into his underwear and his pants and his shirt, this exhilarating new intimacy between them, each of them so certain now about the other, no more doubts or reservations after three cautious weeks of flirting and playing around and waiting, they kept looking at each other now and chuckling and sharing happy kisses and finally shared a much longer and wetter kiss at the door downstairs before Ryan ran outside to grab his bike and ride home.

“Well,” Mike says after hearing this whole account, “sounds like you definitely have yourself a real boyfriend. But is that all true? Honestly?”

“Would I lie?”

“No, I’m sure you wouldn’t. Not after everything I’ve seen. You’ve got the talent, man. You’ve got the mystical touch.”

“Thanks to you.”

“To me? How?”

“I learned everything here! With you! Don’t pretend like you don’t know.”

“I’ve learned as much from you, pal, believe me.”

“You’ll make me blush,” Alex says, hugging the man’s neck. “Big jerk. Anyway, I just wanted you to know the latest about Ryan. I’ll be with him a lot from now on.”

“I could tell the difference already. You’re not around as much after school.”

“That’s true, I guess. But tonight, damn, I can’t wait. When I sleep over with him.”

“Good. Have fun.”

“You won’t be jealous or upset or anything?”

“Not really,” Mike says, Alex’s coconutty hair against his cheek. “So do I ever get to meet him? Your stupendous new boyfriend Ryan?”

“Eventually, of course, hell yeah. But we need to become like total lovers first, I think. Before I can bring him over here.”

“Because?”

“You know, like for security. I’ve only known him a few weeks. One step at a time, Papa. I haven’t even sucked his dick yet.”

“You’re a sensible man, you’re right, take your time.”

“And then he can meet you. I’ll bring him over, no problem. Is that OK? Am I being selfish?”

“No way. That’s fine,” Mike says. “And anyway I’m pretty satisfied right now. No complaints.”

“With Ray-Ray. You love him.”

“Yeah, I do, of course.”

“And he loves you. I’m glad,” Alex says. Raymond himself is just now returning from the bathroom, once again he’s wearing only that oversized Bears jersey, his curly black hair is still damp from the shower, he smiles when he sees that Alex has stayed around for a longer visit. Both of them will have to be leaving in a while but first they invade the kitchen to fix some lunch for themselves and for Mike. Another memorial concert is on TV, more sad music that has Ray and Alex tearful

again as they sit and munch their sandwiches of peanut butter and blackberry jam on toast. Mike, once more, suggests that they turn off the television and do something more enjoyable. "It's OK," Alex says, "I need to go pretty soon anyhow."

"And me too," Raymond says. "I should go home for a while. But I'll be back tomorrow." His hay fever has cleared up today and he's looking bright-eyed and frisky for a change. He glances at Alex and smiles, maybe there's time enough after all for something more enjoyable than this dreary televised vigil. It's been a long and miserable week. Yeah. Maybe there's time now for some silly pleasure, for some happiness, for some love. Alex checks his wristwatch and then smiles back, he was planning to save himself for Ryan, sure, but Ray-Ray looks so tempting and tasty sitting there all freshly showered and bare-legged in nothing but that navy-and-orange football jersey, oh man, impossible to resist. The boys stand up and quickly cross to where Mike is sitting and pull him to his feet. Come on, they tell him, we'll have some fun, we've got time, let's go. Alex turns off the TV as they all head for the bedroom. Nothing to worry about right now, the world and its problems can wait. Mike and the boys are safe here together. They have one another. That's enough.

* * *

THE END

