

# VOODOO

by

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Volume Three:

# Summer's Spell



## PROLOGUE

These boys at school, at Scout meetings, bragging about girls, boasting, high-fiving, ordinary boys, Little Leaguers, your sons, your brothers—these are the boys who had cum on their chins last night. You know them. You know their names:

Frankie Patallero, puckish and eager and glad to be queer, sixteen-year-old New Age hippie who smells of marijuana and incense, smiley, dimply, squinting at the world in happy enthusiasm. Ryan Fox, little blue-eyed tiger, Golden Boy, ten-year-old jock, bratty, spoiled, always ready for a fight, sniffing for enemies, waiting for a friend. The Huckfeldt brothers, all three of them, Jimmy the oldest, fourteen, hillbilly gangster, Ozark punk with messy shaggy hair and killer stud body and itchy pecker, beware his wolfish grin. Joey next, eleven years old, call him JoJo, hyper yackety-yack clumsy clown, horny, silly, plucking and poking at his bulgy Batman underpants. Dallas the youngest, nicknamed Dally, affectionate little guy, only eight years old, reddish-blond crewcut and freckly Tom Sawyer skin, no inhibitions, loves to make mischief with the big boys, go ahead and suck him or play with his wiener, he'll smile and do the same for you.

And one more, twelve years old and just greeting pubescence, Khalid Robinson, everybody calls him Pepper, fleecy dark hair and pointy ears and skin like cocoa satin, Pan the Goatboy, clever as a riddle, sorcerer's apprentice, this child of a white mother and a black father, bashful boy, skittish boy, cuddle him and be thankful when he lets you touch and taste the twitchy hard meat of his dick.

Somewhere in Sandburg, deep in the quietude of Illinois prairie and farmland, these boys are waiting for you to find them, for you to love them. They're waiting.

## CHAPTER ONE

Frankie was no longer crying. He'd cried enough in the last few days. Old-fashioned Venetian blinds on the window of his bedroom. Also Star Wars curtains. Star Wars. His favorite movie. Han Solo and Darth Vader and the Millennium Falcon striated bright and dark, bright and dark, bright and dark from the sunlight coming through the blinds behind them. A stripey sunlit pattern of bright and dark also on Frankie's blue sweater, the color of spilled ink, strange for him to be wearing a sweater instead of his usual tie-dye and flannel. Strange, but necessary today because of the memorial service in Sandburg, ten minutes west of Frankie's home in tiny Stonerville.

Almost two weeks now since Doc killed himself. No family to make any arrangements, so his old colleagues at Sandburg College had finally sponsored this memorial service at a nondenominational chapel on campus. Frankie, even though it was a Thursday, was free to attend because of Spring Break, a whole week off from high school running through Easter Sunday. He drove to town in his red Honda Civic and parked on the street and walked across campus to the little red-brick chapel. He didn't go inside. Jake had said they could meet outside the chapel and go in together, better that way, more comfortable for both of them. They wouldn't know any of the college people at the service. Only each other.

Jake, at first, had been against even attending the service. Doc wouldn't have wanted it. Religious bullshit. "Jacob, Jacob," he would've said, "don't be party to such hackneyed, superstitious nonsense!" But Frankie had wanted to go. A sentimental boy, no grudges yet against God and Heaven, he liked the idea of a memorial service and persuaded Jake to attend. Outside the chapel he waited. Blue sweater, dark trousers with slightly draggy cuffs against the tops of his black loafers. Glossy

clean hair—dark blond, not quite brown—rubberbanded in a short ponytail that waggled against his neck as he glanced from side to side, watching for Jake. Two elderly men passed him on the way inside and smiled at the boy and then disappeared through the double wooden doors that looked heavy and formidable.

Jake was coming across the campus green when Frankie turned for another look. Branchy shadows were everywhere on the ground, crisscrossing, dancing, Jake striding through them, the shadows moving in a crazier dance as the April breeze shook the mostly bare limbs of oaks and maples and buckeyes overhead. Jake had taken a day off from his job at the post office. His lightweight jacket was zipped against the cool breeze. A man in his forties, red hair going gray, aviator sunglasses glinting amber—he could have been one of the professors on his way to an afternoon class. He waved when Frankie turned toward him, then put his hand to his forehead in a jaunty salute, anything to mock the solemnity and force a smile from the gloomy boy.

They came together and hugged and Jake said, “Well, here we are. I guess we should go inside.”

“I’m glad we’re doing this,” Frankie said. “It’ll be, like, a little bit of closure.”

“I suppose.”

“And then, dude, for sure when we scatter his ashes.”

“They’re in the car.”

“We’ll do it after?”

“No reason to put it off.”

“That’s right,” Frankie said, “we should just do it.”

They went inside through those heavy doors, the churchy smell greeting them—wood polish, beeswax and sputtery candle smoke, stale carnations, a whiff of tobacco and cologne from men’s suits, women’s dresses. They were met immediately by someone named Deacon Frost. Jake shook his hand and introduced himself as “Jake Brahms, an old

friend of Doc's, Doc Wilson's, one of his students from twenty-five years ago, a very old friend." So inadequate—a former student, an old friend. Frankie also smiled and shook the Deacon's hand and identified himself as "a friend." What else could he say? No more than Jake. Reality was too messy for a few words in a chapel doorway.

Together, Jake and the boy sat through the memorial service, Deacon Frost uttering generalities that might have applied to anyone—no mention of Doc's sexuality, of his love for boys, of his stories, those stories that first brought Frankie himself to Sandburg to meet the author, his hero. A generic eulogy that left both Jake and Frankie dry-eyed and unmoved and impatient to leave. It wasn't right, Doc being lauded by a member of the enemy camp, a churchman whom Doc would have scorned, a nice enough guy but a churchman nonetheless, a Man of the Book, a mortal nemesis.

The pews were hard, the chapel stuffy, confining, the gray-haired man in front of Jake constantly checking his watch. Perfume from somewhere close, one of the two women in the pew behind. Frankie cleared his throat and wiped his eyes and tried not to cough. Someone watching might have assumed he was crying, an emotional boy, choked up by the service instead of choking on some old woman's Eau de Stink. Later, back outside the chapel, he almost started to cry for real when he apologized to Jake, saying, "Dude, sorry, that was pretty awful, the whole thing."

"Well, yeah, I agree, but. . ."

"Sorry I made you come with me."

"No, no, it was necessary," Jake said, he and the boy ambling side by side through the branchy shadows, soft spring afternoon, students around them, passing them, oblivious. "You were right about coming here. It was necessary. We needed to be here. Like spies. To observe."

"Like undercover agents."



“Exactly, my wise friend. We couldn’t let these strangers memorialize Doc without being here to see it, to listen. But I’m glad it’s over.”

They came to the street bordering the campus and found their cars—Frankie’s red Honda, Jake’s white Volvo. Late afternoon traffic getting heavier. Cirrus clouds ghost-wispy in the blue dome of sky. Jake said, “Hey, by the way, you’re looking especially handsome today.”

“What, are you serious?”

“Very serious. In your nice sweater,” Jake smiled. “You’re adorable, good enough to eat.”

“I don’t feel adorable.”

“It’s a bad day, I know.”

“A bad two weeks, dude, to say the least.”

“We should go now, spread the ashes,” Jake said. “Get it over with.”

They drove, each in his own car, to the hilly countryside where Doc’s house sat in its isolated wilderness of woods and ponds and tall prairie grass. Jake’s second time back since discovering Doc’s body. Still having nightmares about the body, the blood, the mess left behind by the twelve-gauge shotgun. Nightmares when asleep, nightmares when awake, always the same, the horror-film images of Doc’s partial head, as if he’d been trying to blow away the cancer in his brain. “I think that’s why he used the gun,” Jake had said to Frankie, also to Pepper’s mother Holly. “He was killing the cancer at the same time. Killing the enemy in his head.” Often Jake thought: Thank god I found the body, not Frankie. It could have been either one of us. Thank god it was me—my nightmares, my horror film that never ends, and not his.

Jake’s second visit since discovering the body. A couple of days earlier he’d come back to clean up, empty the refrigerator, impose some life on this place of death. The police, until then, had treated the house as

a crime scene, forbidding access while photographing the premises and conducting their investigation. Jake had been questioned, routinely and politely. Now the investigation was finished and the case closed, officially ruled a suicide, no foul play. The autopsy, routine in suicide cases, had revealed that the tumor was malignant, a large neuroblastoma, almost certainly fatal. “A small consolation,” Jake had said after finding out, to Frankie, to Holly. “He probably wouldn’t have made it, anyway. He knew, I guess. He knew he was dying. He didn’t want to wait.”

Doc’s blue Ford pickup was still in the gravelly cul-de-sac that had always functioned as his driveway. Jake’s truck now. Jake’s truck, Jake’s house, Jake’s property—all left to him in Doc’s will, along with a large chunk of cash that had more than doubled Jake’s assets overnight, even figuring in the taxes and lawyer’s fee. The will and testament had contained one other clause: that Doc be cremated and his ashes scattered. Jake and Frankie had decided that the pond north of Doc’s house would be a good place for the job. “It was frozen last time I was here,” Frankie said, looking out over the water, clear blue jeweled by sunlight. “For skating.”

“That was a fun day. A fun weekend. You and Pepper. Jesus Christ, seems like a million years ago.”

“Doc looked tired that day, remember? He was sort of tired and grouchy.”

“I didn’t think you noticed.”

“Dude, sure I did. But I never thought. . .”

“We didn’t know he was sick,” Jake said, holding the white box of Doc’s remains, a box more suited for some small cake or porcelain figurine than for the reality of ashes and bits of bone ground to powder. “Anyway, let’s finish this and say goodbye.” He checked the breeze, afraid of some slapstick mishap involving errantly windblown ashes, then opened the box and said, “Adios, old friend,” and let them go, the cooperative breeze doing its part, catching the ashes and flying them over the pond in a dusty swirl that quickly dispersed into water and sky.

Frankie had tears in his eyes, on his cheeks. Jake put an arm around him, kissed him. "Life and death, my love, life and death."

"I only knew him for a few months, so it's almost stupid for me to cry."

"No, no it's not."

"With his stories, though, it was like I knew him a lot longer."

"Sure, that's true."

"I'm always crying at everything," Frankie said, "like a total idiot."

"It's very sweet. It's why I love you."

"He shouldn't have done it."

"I know."

"Especially not that way. Not the way he did it. And letting you find him."

"Well, that's true, but. . ." "To let somebody find him like that," Frankie went on. "Dude, I don't get it."

"I loved Doc," Jake said, "but he wasn't a conventionally nice guy. He was a great man, I think, and a genius, brilliant, but not a nice guy. He didn't worry about other people's feelings." Jake paused, as if to add a thought, then smiled at Frankie and shrugged, the best he could do for an explanation. The boy nodded, trying to understand. Evening sun bright against his left cheek, bright and flaring low above the western treetops. Almost no bird noise, too early in the season, just the breeze-blown rattle and rustle of bare branches, dried leaves, high brown grass.

They returned to the house—green one-story box surrounded by tall trees, by wild shrubs and winter-wasted weeds, sunflowers, thistles. Frankie asked, "What's going to happen to this place? It's so great out here."

"I'm not sure," Jake said. "It'll always be Doc's home to me. I'd hate to sell it. Wouldn't seem right."

"No, don't sell it!"

"Is that an order?"

“Yeah,” Frankie grinned, all squint and dimples, “it’s an order. This place is too awesome to sell. This house, and all the land, and the pond. Dude, it’s paradise!”

“It would need some improvements.”

“A satellite dish and a good TV. . .”

“Air conditioning. . .”

“Lots of stuff,” Frankie nodded. Excited boy, he let himself be corralled and hugged, Jake’s arm around his shoulders. “Some better furniture, like a couch, and. . . well, lots of stuff. A new carpet. A new bed.”

“Wow, very ambitious.”

“You could afford it. You’re rich. Dude, seriously.”

“Sit with me,” Jake said, easing the boy onto the battered old sofa, arm still around him. “Just sit. I need to catch my breath.”

“Are you OK?”

“It’s been an emotional day. I’m just worn out, that’s all. Headachy.”

They talked for a while longer about the house, about Doc, about the disappointing memorial service. The room growing dim around them. Neither of them with enough ambition to move, not even to turn on a light. Frankie’s leg bouncing, always restless, some part of him perpetually in motion, a constant spill-over of energy. Finally he sat up straighter and looked Jake gravely in the eyes. “Would it be sanctimonious, do you think, to have sex here? In Doc’s house?”

“Sanctimonious? You mean sacrilegious?”

“Oh shit, yeah,” Frankie laughed. He pushed hair behind his ears, floaty strands come loose from his rubberbanded ponytail. “So stupid! I meant sacrilegious. I must be nervous.”

“Well, no, I don’t think it would. Are you horny?”

“I am, yeah.”

“Dumb question,” Jake said, putting his hand on the boy’s dark trousers. Dress-up, go-to-chapel trousers. “You’re sixteen years old. Of course you’re horny.”

“I know exactly what we should do.”

“You have a plan?”

“You can fuck me to start,” Frankie said. A pause. Slightly embarrassed, even after four months. “Just to start. Because we like it. Then sixty-nine.”

“Adventurous.”

“We don’t have to swallow.”

“No, you don’t. But I might,” Jake said. He had Frankie’s pants unzipped and his hand inside on the cock-bulging underpants beneath. “You ready to give a real, genuine, honest-to-god blowjob?”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been practicing.” “Oh, right, with Pepper.”

“Dude, of course.”

“You’re not a blowjob rookie anymore. I forgot.”

“Yeah, Pepper let’s me do it.”

“And you’ve still got your special talisman, I see,” Jake said, Frankie now with his sweater off, and his shirt, a string around his neck holding a teabag like a locket against his scrawny bare chest, a curl of Pepper’s hair inside to work its magic, a spell of lust and infatuation. Jake added, “It must be working, this thing.”

“It could work better.”

“Better how?”

“I’d like to do fucking with him. Real fucking,” the boy said. His shoes off. His pants. He kept his socks on, gray ones, mid-calf on his pale, unmuscled legs. “He lets me suck him, you know, that’s all.”

“Don’t be greedy.”

Frankie grinned, holding his own boner. “Just wait, pretty soon, he’ll suck me, we’ll do sixty-nine, we’ll do everything!”

“Don’t make yourself cum,” Jake said, also naked now. On the couch. He turned on a lamp, reaching behind him. “You’re too excited.”

“He can cum, Pepper can. He’s done it. He even came in my mouth one time! I never told you, I should’ve, but. . .”

“Same with me. He jerked off. Then I licked what came out.”

“Seriously?”

“About three weeks ago. Right before everything happened with Doc.”

“He’s ready for more,” Frankie said, an effort not to shout, not to squeal, Jake’s finger inside him, his voice getting slurry, tongue lisping clumsily over the plastic braces on his teeth. “Oh fuck! If he was here right now! I’d have him suck me, I would, I’d. . .”

Jake said, “Bad news. I just realized. There’s no lubricant.”

“Vegetable oil, I bet, in the kitchen.”

“Good thinking.”

Jake hurried away to look, to find the oil, Frankie on his back with his legs up and his asshole showing, waiting. Once more he shouted, to anyone who might be interested, “If Pepper was here, dude, right now, I’d have my cock in his mouth and my tongue,” sticking it out, wagging it, demonstrating, “in his butt!”

“Wait for me,” Jake cautioned, voice raised from the kitchen. Banging through the cupboards. A half-empty bottle of Mazola above the sink. He grabbed it. Maybe, he thought, this really is sacrilegious. Just a little. Like fucking on someone’s grave. But Doc wouldn’t care. Doc would approve. Doc would laugh.

## CHAPTER TWO

Friday night, and Jake was still thinking about the day before. The memorial service. Scattering Doc's ashes. Then sex with Frankie—their best so far, fucking, insatiable, then the blowjobs, cumming in the boy's mouth and then taking Frankie's warm gush, swallowing it. Imagine, Jake thought, doing the same things with Pepper. Or with Jimmy.

Across the street, Jimmy Huckfeldt himself was busy moving his possessions into the basement, his new bedroom. Clothing, comics, old board games that no one ever played anymore. Cigar boxes and coffee cans filled with marbles, with toy soldiers, with bubblegum cards and unusual rocks and a thousand other little pieces of anonymous junk. A boombox and cassettes, mostly heavy metal. Posters for his walls—supermodels and actresses with big tits, Ozzie Smith from the St. Louis Cardinals, Arnold Schwarzenegger with monstrously huge gun as the Terminator. School books. A lamp. A rolled-up sleeping bag. Baseball gloves and bats and balls. Frisbees of many colors. A cardboard box stuffed with skin magazines scavenged from his father and from friends at school. Stuffed also with packets of rubbers, some cigarettes, chewing tobacco, a nickel baggie of weed, matches, Bic lighters, even a vibrating dildo stolen last year from a friend's mother in Missouri, in Jimmy's old hometown of Cassville, stolen right from the woman's bedroom drawer. Jimmy had found it, snooping, a weird-looking thing like a big plastic bullet or a pointy dick, irresistible, good for a laugh and fooling around. It would probably fit up somebody's butt, if somebody wanted to try.

Jimmy was moving into the basement after sharing a room with Dally and JoJo for the past three months, one bed and two sleeping bags among them, the bed often used by two brothers at once, maybe Jimmy and Dally, maybe Jimmy and JoJo, a convenient time to do some jacking off or some quick sucking, little Dally good for that, always agreeable, sucking a dick like sucking a thumb for him. JoJo more squirmy and

squeamish, harder to involve him, ticklish, usually in his Batman sleeping bag on the floor, singing to himself and playing with his own boner, diddling himself to sleep. Sometimes he let himself be sucked by Dally and sometimes he jacked off Jimmy to watch Jimmy cum, that always entertained him, watching his big brother's cumspurt. But now that routine had ended and Jimmy was getting his own room in the basement, JoJo and Dally left behind in the boy-smelly bedroom upstairs.

He brought his boxes and junk, Jimmy did, down the wooden steps. There was one lightbulb controlled by a switch near the door, a few other ceiling bulbs with little pull-chains over here and over there. The floor was dirty concrete except for one carpeted area to the left of the stairs, a corner perhaps ten feet by ten feet now furnished with a cot and a small chest-of-drawers and a card table. Cinderblock walls painted a faded seafoam green. Jimmy filled the carpeted space with his stuff, put his lamp on the card table, his posters on the walls. Around the space, for privacy, he hung blankets on clotheslines at right angles, two makeshift walls that transformed the carpeted corner into a secluded den.

Already in the basement, no need to bring them down, were Jimmy's dumbbells and barbells, all the weight-lifting equipment he used every day. Strong boy, nicely muscled. Wide shoulders. Flat, sturdy hips. With his other business finished, his new bedroom set up, Jimmy went to his weights where they rested near the washer and dryer, not much else in the basement—a water heater, a furnace, old storm windows and doors, a rusted bicycle frame, a cluttered tool bench, amber bottles of weed-killer and pesticide now empty, other bits of debris from forgotten lives. The boy took off his black bowling shirt (one of many bowling shirts and Hawaiian shirts handed down from his father), took off his undershirt and khaki pants, took off his white briefs, kept his white socks on to protect his feet from the dirty, gritty concrete. He often got naked to pump iron when his parents were out (drinking tonight at Grady's Tap), safe with them gone, only his brothers around, no problem. Best to be naked to prevent his clothes from getting sweaty.



Best also because it felt good, and because Jimmy could watch his own reflection in the glass panel of one of those junky old doors as he did his weight-lifting, his body dimly reflected from the knees up like the ghost of some other boy facing him, lifting weights with him, staring back.

His clothing was piled on top of the washing machine. Jimmy also kept a towel there, same place, to use for drying his sweaty body at the end of his workouts. Doing reps, furious reps, until the sweat spattered the concrete around his stockinged feet. Dozens of curls with the dumbbells for his biceps. Dozens of squats with the barbells for his legs. More work with the heavy weights for his shoulders, his back, his pecs. Thirty minutes, forty minutes, not unusual for Jimmy to keep lifting until he was exhausted, the veins in his neck and in his arms pumped thick and ropery with a surfeit of blood. He could see all of this in the rectangular glass panel of the door that rested against the wall in front of him, the lightbulb on the ceiling over his right shoulder reflected like a tiny sunburst, the glare providing especially clear definition of his mirrored face staring back. Sharp nose and close-set eyes. Long wolfish jaw and thin lips in a grimace of exertion. Impossible however, in that dim reflection, to see the greenish-brown color of his eyes, the reddish chestnut tint of his shaggy brown hair, the slight curl of his hair where it covered his ears and where it touched his neck. Impossible to see the little dagger tattooed on his right hand, the coiled snake tattooed on his left biceps. Impossible to see the sweatiness of his armpit hair and his pubic hair, to smell it, to feel the heat from his body as he pumped and strained and grunted there in the basement, industrial rock crashing from his boombox, shivering the rafters.

Jimmy, because of the music, couldn't hear and didn't notice his brother JoJo behind him. Didn't notice until he paused to catch his breath and wipe his face with the towel and then casually turned and found JoJo taking a nosey peek at Jimmy's new bedroom, holding one of the blankets aside to do his snooping. "Stay outta there," Jimmy told him. "Ain't your fuckin business!" He had to yell above the industrial-rock din to get his brother's attention. JoJo looked around with his usual

blank and starey expression, as if not hearing or understanding, always like that with him, not from stupidity or dullness, just his way. “More room for me and Dally upstairs,” he shouted at Jimmy. “Y’all can stay down here!”

“Don’t go fuckin around with my stuff!”

“Your posters done fell down,” JoJo informed his brother, his blank expression finally giving way to a sudden outburst of grinning and giggling that had him bent forward at the waist and wriggling as if being tickled in the ribs. Jimmy, still wiping himself with the towel, crossed the basement to look at his posters. JoJo was right. They had fallen off the walls. Jimmy had tried to hang them with masking tape, unable to tack them, but the tape had failed to adhere to the rough cinderblocks. “Shit, now how do I make ’em stay up? This ain’t right, man,” Jimmy said, eyeing his fallen handiwork.

“Use more tape.”

“Maybe.”

“Put a lot on all four corners,” JoJo advised. He picked up the Ozzie Smith poster and held it against the wall, demonstrating. “Not on the back. On all four corners. Lots of tape, Jimmy. That’ll work.” “It’ll look like shit.” “But it’ll stay up. It’ll look OK.”

“Fuckin things,” Jimmy muttered. He took a moment to turn down the music—still blasting until now, forcing the brothers to shout. JoJo broke into another fit of grinning and giggling, as if tickled all over again by Jimmy’s predicament. Serious and helpful one minute, rudely amused the next. He was much thinner than his big brother, loose-limbed and gangly with none of Jimmy’s muscled sturdiness. Big hands, big feet. A gaunt, angular face with large Huckfeldt ears and thin lips and strong jaw, strong chin. His eyes, those odd starey eyes, were set much wider than Jimmy’s, a pale grayish-green. Skin also pale, like both of his brothers, pale and freckly. His hair was mousy brown and cut carelessly short with messy bangs in front, messy cowlicks in back. He kept laughing until Jimmy punched him, a hard thwap right on the shoulder. JoJo winced and dropped the poster and said, “You know

what, Jimmy? That don't even hurt." "Yeah, right." "You oughta hit harder so's I can feel it."

"Knock your fuckin teeth out," Jimmy growled. He slung the towel around his neck and held it, one hand on each end, posing. "Make yourself useful, stupid, and suck my pecker."

"Nope."

"So jack me off."

"No way."

"Just 'cause you're mad."

"Jack yourself off, don't be lazy."

"Y'all won't do it 'cause you're pissed off," Jimmy said, the whole time with an erection, not unusual for him to get hard while lifting weights and watching himself in the glass, to get excited, to want sex. His dick was up like a toy cannon at forty-five degrees, thick and straight, no curve to the ramrod shaft, no bend, its knob strangely puffy underneath—not so apparent now with the boy standing—puffy scars left over from a botched circumcision and infection when he was a baby. Big egg-shaped testicles beneath. All the Huckfeldt brothers with those big balls—even Dally, only eight years old but with a surprisingly plump sac-full. All three of the brothers, as well, with the same type of meaty, nozzle-like penis, the type that hangs out, not down, even when it's limp, always itching to cock itself stiff, to swell into a fistful of thick hillbilly boner. Jimmy touched it now, then said to JoJo, "Go on and get Dally, bring him down."

"No way."

"He'll do you, too."

JoJo headed for the stairs, hiking up his baggy jeans, saying, "It don't matter, he ain't even here."

"He ain't home?"

"He went across the street."

"To Jake's?"

JoJo nodded as he climbed out of sight up the dusty wooden steps.

Not a bad idea, going to Jake's. Play some Nintendo. Jimmy hadn't been there much in the last couple of weeks, not since referring carelessly to Pepper as a "nigger kid" and getting choked, as a result, by Jake. A flare of temper, Jake grabbing him by the throat, warning Jimmy not to use that word again, not ever again. The confrontation had cooled quickly, no real damage done, but Jimmy hadn't been eager to go back, a little uneasy, maybe embarrassed. Now he fetched his clothes and put them on and, leaving his posters on the floor, went across Whitman Street to Jake's house. The door was unlocked. Jimmy pounded on it even as he let himself in. JoJo had beaten him over and was already fiddling with the Nintendo joypads, untangling cords that had somehow gotten crossed and twisted. Dally was on the couch, as usual, Jake's ratty old couch, listening as Jake read from one of his comic books. An issue of Superman. Cozy, the two of them, Jake reading the story and doing all the voices, Dally resting against him. Dally's pants open. Jake's hand inside. An ordinary Friday night. Jimmy, who was chewing two pieces of Bazooka bubblegum, grinned at them—at his baby brother, at Jake. "You two fuckers is lovebirds, man."

Jake looked at him with a grin and a shrug. "Jimmy, Jimmy, what can I say? You here for Nintendo?"

Jimmy nodded, but made no move to join his brother JoJo on the floor. Was the Superman story finished? It seemed to be, Jake closing the comic and setting it aside, Dally relaxing with a big yawn and kittenish stretch, both arms above his head, both hands fisted. Handsome little guy. Coppery blondish hair cut close to the scalp, whorled up naturally in front above his high forehead as if swept back and up with a brush. Greenish eyes. Several missing teeth. Definitely a Huckfeldt. Same big ears as his brothers, same thin-lipped mouth and pale skin, lots of gingery freckles across his nose, his cheeks, even his forehead. A thin and gracile boy, like JoJo, but not so angular, not so gaunt-faced and lanky, softer in the cheeks and around the jaw, even his hands and feet more gently proportioned, more graceful, the only brother who seemed almost pretty.

Jimmy kept watching him and Jake on the couch, pacing in front of them. Jake's Sony camcorder, on its tripod, was pushed against the wall between the TV and the front door. It caught Jimmy's attention as he moved around the room. He asked Jake, "Don't you use this here thing no more?"

"The camcorder?"

"Yeah. This thing. Don't you want no more movies?"

"Sure," Jake said. "I just got sidetracked for a few weeks. You know. When my friend died. Doc."

"Yep," JoJo piped up from the floor, "that guy who done killed hisself."

"That's right."

"So," Jimmy wondered, "what movie did y'all make last?"

"When Dally and Pepper were wrestling," Jake reminded him.

"Oh yeah, right," Jimmy said. He blew a pink bubble with his gum. "That was the day." He didn't add, and neither did Jake, that it was also the day of the confrontation. When Jake grabbed Jimmy and tried, for one berserk moment, to strangle him. "Show it, man. Let's see."

Always a conundrum for Jake, showing his videos to the boys. They themselves were in the videos, of course, so knew about them and deserved to see them—but playing the things, showing them, always seemed reckless, unnerving. Like flaunting the evidence. Leaving himself at the mercy of any kid with a grudge, any kid with a big mouth. Begging for trouble. But how could he say no? This one, however, this particular video was especially provocative. Pepper and Dally wrestling naked on the hide-a-bed, Jake standing alongside with an erection. Then Jake slurping at Dally's boner and at Pepper's butt. Talking to the boys about blowjobs, about jerking off, about cumming. Then Jimmy's appearance, difficult to watch as he taunts Pepper and manhandles him and pretends to fuck him in the ass. Calls him a "nigger kid." Ends up with Jake's hands around his throat. Too much. Way too much. "Don't want to watch that now," Jake said. "Maybe some other time."

"Fucker."

“Settle down.”

“Let me take that thing, then,” Jimmy said, flipping a thumb toward the camcorder, pronouncing it “that thang.” JoJo, from the floor, said, “And you know what, Jake? You know what? We made the movie of my magic act! Remember, Jake?”

“That’s right, JoJo. You have that one at home, don’t you?”

Yeah, JoJo confirmed, he had the tape at home, but he couldn’t watch it because their VCR was busted. He was talking about a video recorded the day before Dally’s and Pepper’s, a video of JoJo in his Boy Scout uniform performing tricks from his Hocus Pocus Magic Kit. Rehearsing for a Scout talent show in April. Jake asked him, “When’s your big performance?” In two more weeks, JoJo told him. Jimmy impatiently interrupted. “So can I take the fuckin camcorder?”

“What for?” Jake asked.

“You ain’t usin it.”

“Not right now, not this second.”

“Shit man, maybe I’ll make somethin special for y’all,” Jimmy grinned. Still blowing and popping bubbles with his gum. He was wearing his favorite cap, a camouflage Jack Daniel’s baseball cap pulled low in front, its peak molded by months of use into a smooth semi-circular curve just above his eyes. “How ’bout that, Jake? I’ll make a special fuckin movie for y’all.”

Dally looked over his shoulder, up at Jake’s face, to see Jake’s reaction. The little boy had been amusing himself, now that the story was finished, with his red Power Ranger, his favorite toy, given to him by Jake as a Christmas gift. He was making it fly, his arm fully extended, making the Power Ranger whoosh and dive as he looked up at Jake’s face. “We can make us some movies,” he agreed cheerfully with his brother.

“All right,” Jake finally said, “you guys can borrow it. But be careful. Please don’t break it.”

JoJo looked back from his spot on the floor, Nintendo controls in hand, and shouted, “We won’t break it! We’s experts!”

Jimmy said, “Break it, shit! Y’all just wait, man. You’ll be good and surprised.”

He left, just a few minutes later, with the camcorder, the tripod, cords, jacks, blank cassettes. He stashed everything in his new room in the basement. Horny. Even hornier than before. Dark outside. Friday night in full throb. Jimmy went back upstairs and out to the garage and got his bike. An orange Huffy mountain bike with partially scraped-off flame decals. He was on his way to see Anita Lopez. His girlfriend. A sophomore at Sandburg High. One year older than Jimmy. She lived only a few blocks away, an easy bike ride through the sleepy small-town streets. She had two younger sisters and a younger brother named Sammy, kind of a strange kid who wore chains and sunglasses and talked about joining a gang. Jimmy didn’t mind him, he could be funny, but it was Anita who interested him right now. He was on his way to see Anita because she gave good head. That’s what he wanted. That’s why he needed to be with her.

## CHAPTER THREE

Easter Sunday. Another afternoon of cool blue sky and teasing breeze. Ryan Fox, finished with his big family dinner, was out on his bike, an electric-blue Schwinn Speedster still new from Christmas. Out exploring, up and down the neighboring blocks, cruising, enjoying the spring air. He came to Whitman Street and stopped several houses down from number 747. Jake's house. Ryan had been inside only a couple of times, and only briefly, but he knew the neighborhood itself pretty well. The Huckfeldts across the street, three weird hillbilly brothers including that stupid Joey kid. They were in the same grade, Joey Huckfeldt and Ryan, both of them in fourth grade at Butler Middle School. Joey was a year older but had flunked a grade at his old school in Missouri, holding him back. A few blocks away was the junior high where Ryan himself would be going in another two years. Right there, right near the school, was Pepper Robinson's house. Pepper was the kid who always hung around with Jake, who had come to one of Ryan's swimming meets with Jake a few months ago, who might have been Jake's nephew. Ryan wasn't sure.

A car was coming. Ryan straddle-walked his bicycle over the curb and onto the cracked pavement of the sidewalk. He stayed there and continued his vigil. Anyone spying from a nearby window would have seen a boy in blue jeans and baggy orange sweatshirt and new Air Jordans, bare-headed, his yellow-blond hair cut into a perfect mushroom cap, bangs touching his eyebrows. A smallish boy, compact, cat-quick and cat-supple beneath his clothes, his body made lean and hard by swimming, by running track. Something cat-like, as well, about his face. Blue eyes widely set, moistly myopic, a natural bruiness beneath them like bluish-green eyeshadow. Roundish, pushed-up nose. A wide mouth, slightly downturned, with a highly curved feline upper lip. A certain redness, always, to the bridge of his nose, his cheeks, his ears—even to his lips, as if delicately rouged.



Someone watching him, spying, might have wondered what he was doing there on the corner. Waiting for someone? Expecting something to happen down the street? Finally the boy made some sort of decision and mounted his bike and pedaled his way to Jake's one-story clapboard house near the middle of the block.

Inside, Jake was finishing a frozen pizza. A quiet holiday for him. In the past he would have been at Doc's house for dinner, all his holidays spent with Doc, a safe and comfortable routine, some beer and cigarettes, watching TV, chatting, making each other laugh. Now, without Doc, Jake felt alone in a deep and unfamiliar way, a spy cut loose in enemy territory. Abandoned even, on this particular day, by his own boys. Frankie with his family in Stonerville. Pepper at his grandmother's home in Joliet, where he spent every major holiday. The Huckfeldts gone somewhere unknown. Ryan, of course, with his family over on Tompkins Street, might as well have been Neptune.

Then, mysteriously conjured, Ryan himself came knocking at the front door. The least likely of all the boys to come visiting. The relationship between him and Jake always a tenuous one, Jake nothing but the Fox family's mailman at first, then gradually something more, Ryan inviting him to swimming meets, Jake gladly accepting, the two of them forming a cautious friendship, Jake doing his best to crack the boy's bratty, temperamental shell, to make him relax, to make him smile. Together, in early March, they had traveled to the Junior Olympics in Chicago and had stayed at a Holiday Inn where a bedtime massage had led to jerking off and to Ryan's first orgasm, a good shivery orgasm that had produced one aloe-clear, aloe-sticky drop of juice from the boy's ten-year-old cock. Nothing since then. No visits, no trips, Doc's suicide (among other more trivial events) conspiring to keep them apart. Now, as an Easter surprise, Ryan was suddenly on the front porch.

Jake opened the door to him, expecting one of the Huckfeldts, pleased to find Ryan instead. Hello, hi, hello from both of them. The boy

looked around at the empty living room. “So where is everybody? Are you alone or something?”

“Unfortunately,” Jake said. “Everybody’s spending Easter with their families. What about you? Shouldn’t you be home?”

“You want me to leave?”

“No, of course not, no!”

“We finished our ham already,” Ryan said. “We had a big ham. What’d you have?”

“Pizza. Frozen. Want a piece? There’s one left.”

“I’m full.”

“Soda? Twinkies? Oreos?”

“I’m thirsty. I’ve been riding my bike,” Ryan said. “You’ve never seen my new bike, I bet.” He grabbed the sleeve of Jake’s shirt and dragged him to the door and pointed to his blue Speedster parked at the foot of the porch steps. “You see, it’s the best. Do you see it?”

“It’s a beauty.”

“I’ve been riding all over.”

“And now,” Jake reminded him, putting an arm around his shoulders, “you’re very thirsty. Need a soda? Orange? Root beer?”

“I shouldn’t have too much sugar.”

“Want some water?”

“You always have Cherry Coke.”

“That’s true. For Frankie. It’s his favorite.”

“Who’s Frankie?” “You’ve never met him.”

“The Cherry Coke is for him?” “But you can have one,” Jake said, ushering the boy from the living room, down the short hallway—bathroom on one side, Jake’s bedroom on the other—finally to the kitchen at the back of the house. Again Ryan said, “I shouldn’t have too much sugar,” as he helped himself to a Cherry Coke from the refrigerator. In his white-stockinged feet. Always took his shoes off when he entered a house, any house, a well-trained boy careful not to dirty the carpets. He chose a glass from the edge of the sink to use for his soda. A drop of water hit the red-and-yellow linoleum floor. Ryan

wiped it away with the tip of his stockinged foot, like someone performing a delicate dance step.

Back in the living room, in the broken-down La-Z-Boy near the front door, Ryan sat and sipped his Coke and told Jake about the new track season, about his meets, two events in particular, the hundred-meters and the 400-meters, his specialties. He could chatter on and on about himself, so talkative and sociable at times, so tight-lipped and grouchy at others. Jake asked him, "Are you better at swimming or track?"

"Both. Just the same. Or maybe swimming. Just a little."

"Which do you have more trophies in?"

"Swimming," the boy conceded. He was watching Jake with something like a suspicious glare, as if Jake might be trying to trick him or make a joke of him. Jake, recognizing that glare in the boy's eyes, kept smiling and talking, smiling and talking. "Of course I'll have to come see you," he said. "Running track. I miss your swimming tournaments. They were fun."

"You can come. It's up to you," Ryan said.

"You'll have to give me your schedule."

"We have lots of meets."

"You know," Jake said, on the edge of the couch this whole time, leaning forward, forearms on his knees, leaning toward the boy, "I haven't seen you since Chicago. Since our trip. Our big night at the Holiday Inn."

"The Junior Olympics."

"That's right. About six weeks ago. We had a good time, right?"

"Oh yeah, wow," Ryan said, rolling his eyes, always sarcastic. Taking a sip of Cherry Coke. Cat-tonguing the amber foam from his top lip. "And then you disappeared. You always disappear."

"Sorry. March was a bad month."

"Why? Why was it so bad? It's just an excuse, I bet."

"No no no," Jake said. "Not an excuse. My best friend died."

“What best friend?”

“A man named Doc. Doc Wilson. He, well, he actually killed himself a few weeks ago.”

“No he didn’t.”

Jake had to put his head down and grin. An inappropriate grin. Discussing suicide. But the boy’s stubborn brattiness always amused him. “I’m totally serious, Ryan. I wouldn’t make up a story like that. About my best friend killing himself.”

“It’s stupid. Why did he do it?”

“He was sick.”

“Duh! I guess so! Sick all right,” the boy mumbled.

“Well, anyway,” Jake said, “that’s why I haven’t seen you recently. One of the reasons. So what’s your excuse?”

“What d’you mean?”

“You’re always welcome to come visit, you know. You didn’t have to wait so long.”

Ryan just shrugged. He had one foot up on the chair and was plucking at the floppy toe of his white sock. That sweatshirt he was wearing, the orange one, was from his school, Butler Middle School, and had the school’s snarling tiger mascot on the chest. A strip of undershirt was just visible at the neck, white against the orange. Jake was watching him, waiting, a Cubs game on TV, music from a radio in the kitchen semi-audible in the deeper background. Just then, the phone rang. A startling noise. Jake grabbed it. Frankie’s voice was at the other end, cheerful, a little lispy from his braces and from excitement, his words racing, tripping. He’d been cooped up all day with his family and various relatives. “So boring,” he said. “I’m going crazy. Ben and Amy are hogging the Nintendo so I can’t even do that, you know, like amuse myself or whatever.” He was talking about his little brother and sister, rarely discussed, never seen by Jake in the flesh, known to him only as vague and faceless pests. A pause for laughter, and then Frankie added, more seriously, “I’ve been thinking about you all day, Jake.”

“That’s very sweet of you.”

“With Doc gone.”

“It’s been lonely,” Jake nodded with the phone to his ear, only Ryan there to see him, the boy listening to Jake’s half of the conversation, taking sips from his nearly empty glass of Coke, staring boldly. Frankie’s voice said, “Dude, that’s what I mean. What I was thinking about. Lonely for you.”

“Well, I have some company now, at least.”

“The Huckfeldts?”

“No, not them.”

“Pepper? Dude! I thought he was in Joliet, you know, with his. . .”

“No no, not Pepper,” Jake laughed, watching the golden-haired object of this discussion huddled in the La-Z-Boy across the room. “It’s Ryan. You know who Ryan is.”

“That blond kid? The one who swims?”

“Yep. Ryan. He came to visit.”

“Really? Are you guys, like, doing stuff together?”

“No,” Jake said, again with a headshake that only Ryan could see, the boy perking up when he heard his own name being mentioned. His glass empty now. His up-curved tongue playing across his top lip, tasting for dew-drops of cherry soda. “Not doing much. Just talking.”

“You should show him some dirty movies.”

“Oh sure.”

“Make him horny.”

“A little risky, I think.”

Ryan sat forward and said, “You’re talking about me, I know.” When Jake nodded, the boy jumped up and pointed at the phone. “So who is that? Who is it?”

“It’s Frankie Patallero. You know, the Cherry Coke guy.”

“Tell him I drank one of his Cokes,” Ryan said, then stepped closer and leaned toward the phone himself and called out, “Hey, I drank one of your Cokes!” Frankie laughed into the phone and said it’s OK, no problem, drink all you want. Jake relayed the friendly message to Ryan, then invited Frankie to come over and “join the party.” Ryan, listening,

put both hands huffily on his hips. A moment later, with the phone call ended, Jake told him, “Frankie wants to stop by. If he can get away.”

“So what? I won’t even be here,” Ryan announced, for some reason displeased, impatient, hands still on his hips. Jake put the phone on the little wooden table beside the couch and flipped the cord away from his lap. “You’re leaving? Why? Stick around.”

“I can’t stay forever.”

“Do your parents know you’re here?”

“Not exactly.”

“You could call them,” Jake suggested, picking up the phone he’d just put down. “Would they be mad?”

Ryan shrugged and turned and started for the door, as if to leave, then made a show of changing his mind and came back. He walked—especially now, in his stockinged feet—with a dainty strut, up on the balls of his feet, almost tiptoed. “I’ll call. If my mom answers,” he said, leaving the thought unfinished. What if his father answered? What then? Jake had met the boy’s father a few times. Big and blond, manager of a Ford dealership, Rotarian, Chamber of Commerce, a no-nonsense guy, aloof and brusque whenever he and Jake found themselves face to face—at one of Ryan’s swimming meets, for example. Both he and Mrs. Fox knew Jake as their mailman, of course, a lonely guy with an ex-wife and son he never got to see and several anonymous nephews and their various friends. All lies, but necessary ones. No ex-wife, no son, no nephews. And, somehow, Ryan’s father seemed to sense the truth, though vaguely, distractedly, just enough to make him stone-faced and watchful, a little unfriendly. Ryan, apparently, could see all of this as clearly as Jake, maybe wary of his own father anyway, intimidated by him, big bullying patriarch. If his mom answered the phone, OK. But not his father.

He moved next to Jake to use the phone, to make his call, bending forward to get a better look at the numbers on the illuminated pad. Jake slipped an arm around his waist, saying, “Here, have a seat, right here,”

pulling the boy playfully onto his lap. Ryan sat awkwardly, surprised, more like falling than sitting. “Well god,” he said, “be careful.”

“Tiger boy,” Jake smiled, his nickname for Ryan, a name inspired by the snarling tiger mascot from the boy’s school but also by the boy’s own cat-like qualities. Tiger boy. Tiger. Ryan responded with an odd expression, his nostrils flared and his mouth downturned, like someone confronted by a strange odor. An odd expression but, to Jake, a familiar one, Ryan’s way of reacting to most things personal or affectionate or remotely intimate, as if sniffing for ridicule or insult. “Go ahead, make your call,” Jake told him, holding the boy on his lap. Ryan beep-bip-beeped his number into the phone and then waited, both hands clutching the white receiver to his cheek, his left cheek, the one nearest Jake. A voice came through distant and tinny, an insect voice, Ryan tensing when he heard it, but just for an instant. “Mom,” he said, like a sigh of relief, his shoulders relaxing. “Yeah, it’s me. I’m over on Whitman Street. Yeah, on Whitman. It’s not so far, it just took me a few minutes. At Jake’s house. Jake. Yeah, Jake. At his house. No, I’m not bothering him,” the boy said, glancing at Jake’s face as if to make sure. The man smiled, nodded encouragement. Ryan continued, saying, “I’m just telling you. I’m just calling. I know, I know. Not long. Yeah. I will. OK, OK, one hour.”

He handed the phone back to Jake, who asked him, “So? One hour? Is that your deadline?”

“I have to be home in one hour,” Ryan nodded. His ear was reddened, even more than normal, by the phone that had been pressed against it. Two tiny moles on his left cheek. Some light freckles across the bridge of his nose, noticeable only up close, like now, very close, Jake able to stir his hair with a puff of breath. Irresistible, that golden hair. Jake touched it, fingering a strand of it above Ryan’s scarlet ear. The boy flinched, but he didn’t get up, he didn’t move from Jake’s lap. Cubs game on TV. Sammy Sosa taking strike two. Music, some pop tune, murmuring from the kitchen. Ryan finally said, “So what are we gonna do?”

“Anything you want.”

“Like what?”

Jake pulled the boy tighter against his chest, Ryan still sideways, facing to the left, staring at the wall that divided living room from bathroom. “Oh, I don’t know,” Jake said. “How about a massage?”

“A massage?”

“Like in Chicago. Remember? Are you in the mood?”

Ryan just shook his head no and then asked, very quickly, “Where’s your camcorder? Did you sell it?”

“No, I didn’t sell it. The Huckfeldts took it.”

“They stole it? That stupid Joey kid?”

“No,” Jake said again, laughing. “JoJo didn’t steal it.”

Ryan repeated the nickname “JoJo” with a drawl of distaste. “Stupid name. He’s an idiot.” Jake squeezed the boy and kissed his ear, teasing little pecks on the ear that Ryan quietly allowed, no change in his expression. “Really,” Jake told him, “they didn’t steal anything. They borrowed it. The camcorder. Jimmy wanted it.”

“Jimmy,” with another drawl of distaste, contempt.

“I think,” Jake said, voice lowered to a conspiratorial mumble, “that they want to make a dirty movie.”

“Why?”

“They like to make dirty movies. You know.”

“With girls?”

“Don’t think so,” Jake said. “Don’t know, really. It’ll be a surprise. According to Jimmy.”

“Stupid,” was Ryan’s predictable conclusion. He turned his head to look at the ballgame. Jake could smell him—his clothes, his skin, especially his hair. The blond, new-grass smell of him. Can someone smell blond? Ryan did. He pointed to the Nintendo. “D’you have any new games?”

“Like what?”

“Extreme Assault?”

“No, sorry.”



“WCW Revenge?”

“Yeah, that one I’ve got. In fact,” Jake said, “it’s in the machine. JoJo was playing with it Friday night.”

“Spaz,” Ryan responded, getting to his feet. Jake let his hands slip down the boy’s body, held him by the hips as if he couldn’t bear to let go, Ryan twisting to free himself, Jake surrendering, releasing the boy with a backhanded swat to his blue-jeaned butt. Ryan crossed the room and sat on the floor, made the Cubs game vanish with a flicked switch, WCW Revenge garishly and noisily flashing onscreen to take its place. Jake was left to watch, to stare at the back of Ryan’s head, at his skinny neck, at his shoulders hunched and jerking as he worked the controls. The boy, now and then, glanced back, glad to have an audience, performing on Nintendo like performing in the pool or on the track, the same rush of competition, good to have Jake watching him, rooting for him. He never bothered to invite Jake to join him. Better to perform solo, just himself against the machine.

Thirty minutes later, Frankie came bounding through the unlocked front door. Tie-dyed, flannelled, his blondish hair loose and long against his neck, jeans ripped at the knees, black combat boots noisily thud-thud-thudding as he crossed the living room to give Jake a hello hug and kiss. Ryan paused in his game to watch the two of them hugging, the two of them kissing, then found himself shaking hands with Frankie, who came right over and introduced himself and grinned and said, “Dude, hey, is that your bike outside? Very cool!”

“It’s a Schwinn. A Speedster,” Ryan said, nostrils flaring as he sniffed for ridicule. Then he smiled, flattered, when Frankie asked permission to ride it around the block (a smile that showed his gappy teeth, especially the four front ones on top, not quite grown together, big gappy boyteeth.) He left the Nintendo game and tiptoe-strutted to the door where he stooped, then crouched, to put on his shoes. Frankie stayed behind him for a good view of his butt as he did his stooping and crouching, Jake also enjoying the view, pantomiming a sneaky grab-ass

move that had Frankie stifling a laugh, Frankie himself giving Jake a look that said, “Wow, he’s so cute!”

Together outside, the two boys chattered over Ryan’s new bicycle parked on the cracked sidewalk. Jake stayed in the house and observed through the jalousie door, through the dirty glass of the closed louvers. The boys seemed comfortable together, what you’d expect from Frankie, always a friendly kid, but not so from Ryan, always difficult for him to let down his guard. Standing shoulder to shoulder with Frankie, nodding, pointing, showing off his beloved Speedster, enjoying himself. Lively April breeze lifting and mussing his hair, also Frankie’s hair, that breeze now in Frankie’s face as he finally mounted the bike and headed down the block, his combat boots not the best footwear for the job, awkward on the pedals, but off he went anyway, once around the block, then once again. Ryan stood and waited with his fingertips in the front pockets of his jeans. He looked to his right, at Jake watching from the house, and he shrugged, and then he smiled.

By the time the boys were finished with the bike, Ryan’s hour was up and he had to go home. But first he came back inside to use the bathroom, Cherry Coke filling his bladder. On his way out, still adjusting his zipper, he stopped when Jake touched his shoulder to say goodbye. Stopped and faced Jake and seemed to be waiting for something, expecting something more than a simple goodbye. He had seen Jake earlier hugging Frankie, kissing Frankie. And now he seemed to be waiting. Jake quickly got the idea and wrapped both arms around him for a tight hug, half expecting a squirm of resistance that never came, not even when he gave the boy a kiss on the mouth. The boy kissed back cautiously, second time he’d done this with Jake, kissing goodbye like this, first time had been after their trip to Chicago. He was still waiting to see, perhaps, if any mockery or teasing might result. From Jake. Or from Frankie standing witness just a few steps away. But no one said a bad word, no one joshed him, nothing wrong with hugging or kissing at Jake’s house.

Frankie waited until Ryan was gone to say, “Whoa, dude, he’s really hot. For a little kid.”

“He’s pretty young, that’s true.”

“But old enough to mess around.”

“Definitely.”

“You’ve done it?”

“That weekend in Chicago,” Jake nodded. “I gave him a massage. You know. Naked. Jerked him off.”

“Excellent.” “He even came a little. One clear drop.” “I love that!”

“He seemed to like you.”

“You think?” “Hell, he smiled once or twice.”

Frankie was taking off his flannel shirt. Sitting to unlace and remove his boots. Getting ready for sex. “That’s a big deal for him? Smiling?”

“You bet it is. For Ryan? You have no idea what a grouch he can be.”

“He was friendly outside.”

“Exactly. He liked you. You complimented his new bike, made a fuss over him.”

“And I liked him all right, oh yeah,” Frankie said, trying to say it with a lewd expression, not very convincingly, squinty-eyed and round-cheeked and round-chinned, like a leering chipmunk. He and Jake ended up in the bathroom, in Jake’s extravagant new tub and shower combo, extra large with tiled benches along the inner walls and a steam generator for turning the whole thing into a cozy sauna. Frankie had an erection as soon as he finished undressing. Six and a quarter inches by his own measurement in December, slightly upturned bellyward, blood-red and frankfurter-slender. In the shower, shampooing and rinsing, he asked Jake, “What color is my hair, d’you think?”

“I’d call it blond.”

“Honestly?”

“Dark blond.” “When I was little? Dude, my hair was just like Ryan’s. Now it’s almost brown.”

“Dark blond,” Jake insisted. He waited until the boy had finished rinsing away the pepperminty shampoo, then moved against him, boner to boner, to begin the serious foreplay. “In your bedroom, we’ll finish,” Frankie muttered beneath the hot spray. Always keen to choreograph and direct the sex between himself and Jake. Not in a bossy way but cheerfully, one friend to another, eager to enhance his pleasure and the pleasure of his partners whenever possible. Like a thoughtful host at a dinner party. “In your bedroom,” he said, “we’ll finish. It’s more comfortable. On the bed.” Jake, kissing him, agreed.

Naked and not quite dry, still carrying their towels, they hurried to the bedroom a few minutes later to carry out Frankie’s plan. The TV was still yakking from the living room, monotonous voices, the baseball post-game show. The radio in the kitchen still providing its distant and discordant background of musical noise. Then another noise, soft knocking, Frankie the first to hear it as he and Jake were already beginning their sex, maybe the front door, then louder, definitely someone at the door, Jake impatiently grumbling, “Must be the damn Huckfeldts. Should we ignore them?”

Frankie was a little breathless, a little jittery from getting sucked. On his back with his knees spread. “Dude, you sure it’s them?”

“Oh yeah, pretty sure.”

“They’re still knocking.”

“Such bad timing they have.”

“Should you check?”

“And what if it’s them? Then what?”

“They can join the party,” Frankie smiled, showing his plastic braces. Jake said, “Well, yeah, I don’t know about that,” as he got up and put on his robe—gold corduroy—and headed for the front door. Always a momentary tremor of fear, not knowing who might be waiting there, friend or foe, boy or cop. But, on this Easter Sunday afternoon, Jake had nothing to fear. Two of the Huckfeldts were at the door, Dally

knocking, JoJo doing some clumsy acrobatics on the porch railing, straddling it, lifting one foot and then the other as if performing a fancy stunt, arms outspread, breeze ruffling his messy brown hair. Jake let them in, JoJo stopping in the doorway to point at Frankie's red Honda and ask, "Don't that belong to that guy? That there car?"

"Yeah. It's Frankie's."

"We know Frankie," Dally said, his too-large John Deere cap tipped back slightly on his round, crewcut head.

"Of course."

"Is you guys havin a party?" Dally asked.

"An underwear party?" JoJo also asked. He and his little brother were referring to a so-called "underwear party" from January, Frankie's turn of phrase, when all of the Huckfeldt boys and Frankie and Pepper had stripped to their undies after a wet and slushy snowball fight and then gathered in Jake's living room for hot chocolate and noisy horseplay. Nothing sexual, just boys being goofy and crude, having fun. "Yeah, sort of an underwear party," Jake confessed. He closed the door and locked it and asked about Jimmy. The boys said, almost in unison, "He's with his stupid girlfriend." Then Dally announced, as if Jake might not be aware of such things, "Today is Easter!"

"Sure, big holiday," Jake smiled. "Happy Easter, happy Easter," he said, a vigorous hug and kiss for Dally, then for JoJo, both boys with that faintly pissy odor about their clothes, their skin. JoJo, always hyper and flighty, turned his hug into a wriggly grapple and then, as he stepped away, reached out and tugged the exposed hair on Jake's chest. He asked, "Why ain't you dressed?"

"Took a shower before," Jake said.

"It's the best shower there is," Dally said, having used it with Jake once or twice in the past few months, the only Huckfeldt brother to do so and proud of it, something to make him feel more special than JoJo, than Jimmy.

"You know what?" JoJo said, ignoring his little brother. "You know what, Jake? Y'all is havin an underwear party for sure."

“Not even underwear,” Jake said.

“A naked party,” JoJo corrected himself, pronouncing it “nekkid.” He was plucking and poking at the crotch of his own jeans, not unusual, a familiar habit for him, a nervous fidget. Now he made a swipe at Jake’s robe, a quick gesture as if to grab it and open it, but only playfully, missing by several inches. Jake pretended to be spooked and surprised. He crossed his hands in front of himself and said, “Don’t you dare untie this robe! Don’t even think about it!” The brothers grinned as if challenged to an easy dare. Dally grabbed Jake’s arms from behind and pulled them apart, pleased by his improbable feat of strength. JoJo gladly did his part and yanked the belt loose and watched as the robe fell open. “So embarrassing,” Jake pretended to whimper, his dick about half hard. JoJo asked, “Is that your boner?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of a boner?”

“It’ll get harder if you don’t stop looking at it.”

“Guess what, I done seen it before,” Dally bragged. He moved around anyway in front of Jake to get a fresh look. “Ain’t I seen your boner, Jake?”

“A couple of times.”

“We done jacked off together,” Dally continued to brag to his older brother. JoJo didn’t say anything, but he did suddenly grab the shoulder of Jake’s corduroy robe and pull at it, yanked at it to remove it, not quite successfully, so he grabbed and yanked again, almost aggressive in his excitement, his curiosity. Jake said, “Ouch, wait, take it easy, OK now,” dropping the robe halfway from his shoulders so that JoJo could do the rest, stripping him all the way naked. JoJo appraised his handiwork and then bent forward in one of his fits of squirmy laughter. He finally asked, “Hey Jake, hey Jake, ain’t you embarrassed?”

“Extremely.”

“Is that a real boner now?”

“That’s the real deal,” Jake said, staying where he was in the middle of the room, letting the boys stare at him. Dally thought of a

naughty joke and took off his cap and hung it on Jake's erection. Jake laughed along with the two boys at the silly sight of himself. He captured Dally with an arm and hugged him to his side. "I thought this was going to be a naked party," he said. "Anybody going to join me?" Dally immediately nodded and started to undress. His elbow hit the John Deere cap and knocked it off Jake's erection. He glanced up at Jake and grinned his funny lopsided grin—the same expression he often got when concentrating on something, or when listening intently—a cute way of squinting his left eye while clenching his teeth on the same side. Like an eight-year-old Popeye. Or like someone biting down on a wedge of lemon. Jake smiled back at him and helped him out of his shirt. JoJo stayed put and kept watching them. Still plucking at the denim crotch of his pants with one hand, gnawing the fingernails of the other as he asked, "Where's that Frankie guy at? Where's he at now?"

"He's here."

"In the bathroom?"

"The bedroom."

"Is he sleepin'?"

"Could be," Jake said.

He helped Dally out of his jeans and his Superman Underoos, pale little-boy body peeled clean, Dally still grinning his funny Popeye grin, cuddling against Jake, snuggling, Jake's erection pressed against his bare chest as they hugged. JoJo, meanwhile, had wandered down the hallway to Jake's bedroom. He found Frankie, nude of course, standing at the dresser, putting away the porno and X-rated Polaroids that Jake kept in the top drawer. The two boys looked at each other and said "hi" and "what's up?" JoJo rushed forward in his usual herky-jerky fashion before Frankie could shut the drawer. Magazines, photo sets, books. From Germany, Denmark, Holland, Portugal. Soft-core Polaroids of Pepper. Hard-core Polaroids of Frankie himself, about a dozen that showed him masturbating, four cumshots in glossy close-up. He let JoJo have a look at them. "Jake's old camera," JoJo nodded. "Before he done bought his camcorder."

“Here’s some of you guys,” Frankie said. “Here’s Jimmy. Here’s you.”

“These are from the fuckin underwear party.”

“Yeah, dude, no doubt. Your Batman underpants. That was a funny day.”

JoJo brushed at his bangs with the back of his hand. “We done made that fuckin snowman with the big boner.”

“Awesome, yeah, I remember.”

“Had us that fuckin underwear party.”

“Are you here alone?”

“Dally’s here,” JoJo said, pointing a thumb over his shoulder. “He likes Jake, man, a lot, they’s always together and shit.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Jake likes to do this stuff here,” JoJo said with a rapid jack-off gesture. “With other guys. That’s what Jimmy says.”

“Jake’s the best.”

“Was you takin a shower?”

“Me? Yeah. Before.”

“You and Jake,” JoJo said, not a question, looking around at the wet towels. Also at Frankie’s pecker, which had been soft, pretty much, when JoJo came in, but was getting harder as they talked, as they looked at the pictures, quickly getting much harder. Frankie said, “So, dude, what’s goin on?” He closed the drawer, no more Polaroids to look at, JoJo not very interested anyway, short attention span, glancing around the bedroom, fidgety, biting his nails, brushing back his bangs, plucking and pulling at his denimed crotch. He said, “Me and Dally just came over.”

“Jimmy’s not here?”

“He’s at his stupid girlfriend’s house.”

“What’s Dally doing?” Frankie asked, then laughed at the alliterative “d” sound and said it again. “Dally doing.”



JoJo took no notice, his pale greenish-gray eyes staring in their strange and unsettling way from his gaunt face. “Him and Jake is nekkid,” he said. “Jake had hisself a boner.”

“No shit, bro, so do I.”

“You gonna do somethin or what?”

“Sure, yeah.”

“Y’all is havin a nekkid party,” JoJo said. He sat on the edge of the bed and started bouncing, noisily bouncing, a great squeaking of mattress springs as he trampolined on his bottom, up and down, up and down, once more saying, “Y’all is nekkid, you fuckers!”

“Dude,” Frankie said, late afternoon sunlight bright on his left side from the window as he faced the bed, “what about you?” Left arm, left hip, left leg all white with sunlight, dust motes floaty in the glare, five o’clock, JoJo still bouncing. “You should join us. I told Jake before, when we heard you knocking.”

“That we oughta join y’all?”

“Yeah, that’s what I told him,” Frankie said. He needed to do something with his hands, so he was playing with his own hard-on, pulling at it, keeping himself busy while he talked. His pubic hair was a bush of gilded fluff in the streaming sunlight. “You should take your stuff off, seriously.”

“Yep, like this here,” JoJo deadpanned, up quickly on his feet to undo his baggy jeans and let them sag to his knees, then to his ankles as he paraded to the window and back. Wearing the very Batman underpants that Frankie had mentioned just moments earlier. Holding up his brown pullover sweater and his undershirt to show himself. Frankie laughed, backing away to give the other boy room for his promenade. JoJo getting into it, performing, entertaining his audience. Goofy burlesque. “Like this here,” he said once more, giving his blue Batman briefs a shove to his knees, like a cinch around his legs now that made his Chaplinesque shuffle even sillier, the underpants soon slipping free to join his jeans in a wrinkly blue puddle around his feet. To the window he shuffled, then to the door, then back again with the slanty sunlight on

his face and on the bare front of his legs, long and knobby-kneed. On his bony white hips. On his hairless groin and his penis just like Jimmy's, that meaty pizzle that always appeared slightly stiff. Definitely now. More than slightly. Big dick and big balls for an eleven-year-old, something about all that plump and dangly but totally hairless equipment that seemed vulgar and raw and precociously indecent.

JoJo kept parading until Frankie nudged him, sort of bumped him, an excuse for them to push at each other. Playful touching. Frankie lightly slap-slap-slapping at JoJo's sweated shoulder. "You still have clothes on," he pointed out, continuing with his other hand to pull and squeeze at his own boner. JoJo responded by tugging the brown sweater and the undershirt free from his arms, but no farther, leaving the sweater and the shirt hanging from his neck, down his back like a ratty cape. "There," he said, as if he'd finished undressing. Then he laughed in one of his wriggly fits and spanked with both hands at the fleshy soft cheeks of his own ass, his stiffish dick bouncing as he spanked, like a toy on a spring. Frankie lowered his voice to ask, "JoJo, you want to jerk off or something?" JoJo wrinkled his nose and shrugged and kept spanking himself. Suddenly he yelled, "Hey Jake, Jake, y'all oughta come in here, look at us! Jake!" He stepped in front of the mirror above Jake's dresser and saw himself and went spastic with laughter all over again, the laughter itself like quiet hissing or gurgling at the back of his throat, hardly loud enough for anyone to hear. Like someone doing a comical ha-ha pantomime. He turned himself backward and looked at himself over his shoulder, at his own ass. Wiggled it. Spanked it again. Spread the cheeks to see his own anus. Frankie pressed beside him, what the hell, play along with JoJo, goof off, perform in front of the mirror. He bumped JoJo with his hip. Pretended to hump the dresser and then the side of JoJo's leg. Did his own funny sex dance that really, as he watched himself and JoJo in the mirror, was just a good way of jerking off, which he was doing eagerly now with his left hand. Masturbation as slapsticky horseplay.

That was how Jake found the two boys when he responded to JoJo's call. Dally was just behind him in the doorway. They'd been hugging and petting in the living room, Jake and little Dally, standing like naked dancers, when Dally had bent forward and taken the purply knob of Jake's grown-up cock into his mouth. Such a surprise for Jake—but not really shocking, Jake long having surmised that Dally probably gave blowjobs to his older brothers, almost certainly to Jimmy, the little boy all but admitting it at times, even sucking Jake's thumb or Jimmy's thumb in a childish coquettish way now and then as if rehearsing for fellatio. And then today, in the living room, wow, no more rehearsal or simulation, the boy doing it for real, holding Jake by the hips for support as he leaned forward to perform his job. No fumbling or hesitation. Good at it. Enjoying himself. A happy eight-year-old cocksucker. Then JoJo had called from the bedroom and Dally had interrupted himself and straightened and stood peering at Jake with his one eye squinted and his side teeth clenched in a sweetly expectant grin, an inquisitive grin. Jake, addled and sex-bleary, finally managed to say, "Well, damn, I don't know, I guess we should find out what JoJo wants." Dally nodded and softly said, "Guess so," and followed Jake to the bedroom, where they discovered JoJo and Frankie performing in front of the mirror. Jake said, "My oh my, it's boylesque! Sexy, sexy." Both boys looked around and laughed, both of them red-faced from excitement, exertion, from dancing and fooling around. Frankie said, "Jake, dude, amazing," bouncy-bouncy on his toes as he masturbated, not even slowing down, too far gone to be distracted or deterred. JoJo was mostly observing, toying with his own dick to keep himself occupied, the reflection of himself and Frankie still providing amusement, like watching TV. "Hey Jake, hey Jake, y'all like this here dirty movie?" he shouted, always too loud. "Y'all oughta use your camcorder!"

"Jimmy has it. At your house," Jake reminded him. "You guys promised to make a movie for me, remember?"

"That's right, we will," JoJo said. He slapped his white ass cheeks. "Is this how y'all celebrate Easter?"

Jake crossed the room to him, laughing. "Oh sure, it's a tradition at my house. Every Easter Sunday."

"You and Frankie?"

"I didn't know Frankie last year," Jake said. Right next to JoJo now. "Look at you guys!"

"Jake, you know what?"

"What, JoJo?"

"This here ain't my real boner." "It's pretty big."

"But this ain't the whole thing," JoJo said, flicking it, wagging it. Jake nodded and then took a moment, just for his own satisfaction, to remove the sweater and undershirt from around JoJo's neck. He'd never seen JoJo completely naked, completely without a stitch, and he wanted that pleasure now. "Step out of your pants," he told the boy, helping with his own foot to hold the jeans and underwear against the floor as JoJo obeyed and kicked free. Frankie was watching. Dally had crossed the room and was on the bed, on his back, apparently sleepy, sucking his thumb and not paying much attention to the other folks in the room, any slight curiosity focused on Frankie, someone not very familiar, a new body and a new boner to look at, sort of interesting.

Jake crouched in front of JoJo and took off the boy's smelly white socks. JoJo never protested as the man undressed him. He kept talking instead about havin an Easter party and then said look at Dally he's takin hisself a nap and I was watchin the Cubs game before and, you know what Jake, I can see you and me in the mirror right now. His body was a gangly and ungraceful assemblage of long arms and long legs and bony shoulders and broad bony hips with that rude hound-doggish pecker right in the middle. Directly in front of Jake's face as he finished removing the boy's socks. Now or never. Only Frankie in the room, and Dally, friendly witnesses, allies. Now or never. JoJo keeping still for a change. Jake ran his hands up the boy's bare legs and over his hips and onto his butt and then moved his head forward and opened his mouth and put it around JoJo's penis, letting the thing just find its way naturally into his mouth and nestle there in the moistness and the warmth. JoJo

finally stopped talking. He watched the reflection of himself getting sucked. Somebody said, "Jesus Christ," in a shaky mumble. It was Frankie. He had come around to where Jake was kneeling and he was stepping from side to side to view the scene from every possible angle. It didn't take long for Jake to notice him, to figure out what he wanted. Difficult to do, a real sacrifice, but Jake forced himself to stop, to release JoJo's penis. "Definitely a total boner now, JoJo," he said with an upward glance at the boy's face. JoJo looked down at his own thing sticking out big and red and straight. "Jake, I ain't sure, y'all might be right," he said, poker-faced and nodding.

"Frankie, how about it?" the man asked the desperately hovering boy behind him. "You want to do this? You want to take over?"

"No doubt, bro, move," Frankie monotoned as he impatiently took Jake's place on the floor and then actually sniffed at JoJo's penis as if savoring the aroma of some rare and spicy sausage. Sniffed and then licked at the head and then greedily devoured the whole thing with his mouth. JoJo objected to none of this, to being sucked by Jake and now by Frankie, his wiener being used like a sex toy. He said only, "Frankie, you got braces," able to feel them on his penis, causing Frankie to nod and to exhale a brief laugh as he continued sucking, making slurpy suctiony noises in his excitement. Jake was on the edge of the bed, lamenting to himself and then aloud that he had no camcorder to preserve what he was seeing. "I can't believe I'm not getting this on tape. Look at this. Jesus! You guys owe me something spectacular, JoJo. With the camcorder. You and Jimmy and Dally," he said, tickling the tummy of the little boy beside him on the bed. Dally responded with an agreeable but very drowsy smile, Jake deciding to leave him undisturbed, to let him drowse and thumb-suck in peace while he himself finished masturbating and concentrated on the X-rated show in front of him. Frankie feverishly giving head, using his right hand to fondle JoJo's balls and JoJo's ass while jerking himself off with his left. JoJo, at the same time, might have been getting a shoeshine for all his enthusiasm. Chewing his fingernails, absently bongo-ing his belly or

picking at his belly button, shadowboxing with his own reflection in the mirror. Jake finally tried to spark some involvement on his part, saying, “JoJo, maybe you and Frankie should, you know, suck each other. At the same time. Together.”

JoJo shrugged, still shadowboxing, and said, “That’s boring.”

“You can have the bed. Me and Dally can move.”

“Yeah,” Frankie joined in, swallowing extra saliva as he looked up, wiping his lips, “we can lay down. Dude, it’ll be more comfortable. On the bed.”

“It’ll be fun for you,” Jake encouraged. “You can relax. Take your time.”

Frankie stood up, eager to get moving, to continue on the bed. “JoJo, come on! It’ll be great. You know you’ll love it.”

“It’ll be too boring,” JoJo said again, now using Frankie himself as his sparring partner, pretending to throw little jabs at him. At his face, his crotch. Frankie said, “Boring? Dude! You’re nuts!”

“My nuts,” JoJo nodded soberly, then broke into a squirm of gurgly laughter. Impossible to make him focus or concentrate. Too hyperactive even for a simple blowjob. “Well, sorry guys,” Jake interrupted, “but I’m going to cum in about two seconds.” He grabbed a crumpled handful of Kleenex from a nearby box and waited for the gush. His announcement had suddenly galvanized both JoJo and Dally into action, Dally sitting up, JoJo stepping quickly to the bed. But not quickly enough for what he wanted. “Shit, Jake, you done spermed without lettin us see!”

“I didn’t know,” Jake said. “I mean, damn, here, you can still look.” He removed the Kleenex that he was using, right then, to capture his load. Too late for the main event, but still plenty of gooey stuff on the dick itself and plenty, even now, seeping from the tip. The two brothers bent closer for a careful inspection of Jake’s grown-up, cummy hard-on, then each used a finger to collect some of the spillage and to apply it, like lotion, to the heads of their own dicks. Dally’s was soft, JoJo’s still fairly stiff, a bobbing jack-in-the-box as he touched it with his finger.

“We coulda caught us some more,” he complained. Dally nodded, also disappointed, even taking the wad of Kleenex from Jake’s hand so he and JoJo could open it and look at the slime inside. Again poking it with their fingers. Smelling it. Dally probably shouldn’t have been so curious, having seen Jake’s semen before, but this time was different, his brother was with him, JoJo’s excitement contagious.

Frankie had been watching, not saying anything, but now he was ready to contribute. “You guys, you guys,” he called in a croaky voice, his hand pistoning faster and faster. “I’m gonna cum, like right now!”

“This time we’ll get us some,” JoJo said, he and Dally rushing into position in front of Frankie where they crouched, both of them, jostling each other, hands cupped as if to catch water from a fountain. Frankie was nodding yeah, yeah, that’s right. Aiming his boner at the boys’ hands. His legs trembling. Arms trembling. Belly concaved. Balls tight. Then his jizz came spurting and both Huckfeldt boys grinned giggly as they caught drippy gobs of it, Frankie thrusting and pressing point-blank against their grabby hands. He just kept moaning “shit, shit, shit” as he spurted.

JoJo and Dally once again inspected the cum they’d collected. Eyeing it. Sniffing it. Dally even touching his tongue to it. A taste that made him scrunch his nose and shake his head. And once again they both smeared it slippery onto their own dicks, JoJo really slopping it on, leaving his half-stiff penis glazed like some obscene pastry. “Hey Jake,” he wondered, “if me and Dally fuck a girl right now can she get pregnant?”

“Maybe.” “Don’t y’all know?”

“Sperm doesn’t live long, JoJo.”

“That ain’t fair.”

“Anyway,” Jake said, glancing at the clock, “maybe you boys should clean up. Clean your dicks. In the bathroom.”

“What’ll happen if we leave it on?”

“It’ll dry and get, you know, crusty. Like dried snot.”

JoJo said, “I’m leavin mine on,” already gathering his clothes from the floor. “See how long it keeps.”

“Me too,” Dally said.

“A science project,” Jake smiled. It occurred to him that JoJo had never achieved an orgasm of his own, his blowjob interrupted and never resumed. In fact, as he watched all three boys going to find their clothes, preparing to leave, Jake started thinking of everything they might have done together, should have done together, but hadn’t. The sucking and screwing and sixty-nining. Frankie with JoJo, Frankie with Dally, JoJo and Dally in a brother act. Jake with any of them. Later, though, the boys gone and Jake by himself, he saw a report on the news about Kurt Randall, arrested several months ago on a variety of sexual assault and abuse charges, a sensational case now gone to trial. A bench trial resuming tomorrow, the day after Easter. Kurt Randall facing twenty years or more in prison if convicted, which seemed inevitable. The same fate awaiting Jake if any of his own boys should happen to say a reckless or unwise word to the wrong person. Pepper, Ryan, Frankie, the Huckfeldts—any of them, at any time, could trigger the disaster. Suddenly, for Jake, horny frustration was replaced by fear. Always, lurking and ready to pounce, was the fear.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Pepper was back from Joliet, where his grandmother lived and where Pepper and his mother Holly spent all of their important holidays. It was Holly's plan, in fact, to move there permanently in June, after Pepper was finished with school. She wanted to be closer to her mother, whose health was rapidly failing. Also wanted to work at the family's greenhouse and plant nursery with her sister and brother-in-law. Get away from Sandburg and her tedious job at the post office, fifteen years since she'd met Jake there to start the friendship between them.

Pepper, on the other hand, wasn't so crazy about the idea. Sandburg was his home, and he didn't want to leave. What a pain to start over in another town, another school. Trying to make new friends. Leaving behind Marcus, his pal from seventh grade. And Frankie. And Jake. Leaving his whole life behind.

Home again now, Easter night, Pepper made sure to feed his fish, also to clean the litter boxes for his two cats and to change their food and water. He called Marcus and talked about nothing—Easter was boring, the Cubs lost, I played that new Nintendo game, yeah, OK, see ya tomorrow at school. Then he called Frankie and, as usual, mostly listened as Frankie rambled excitedly about this and about that in his clumsy-tongued voice, telling Pepper about seeing Ryan earlier that same day, what a weird kid he is, Ryan's new bicycle, a Schwinn Speedster, seeing Jake, also Dally and JoJo, pretty funny those guys, you should've seen them, all of us really, it got so bizarre, dude, jerking off, Dally and JoJo put the cum on their own dicks, so funny, wanted to get girls pregnant. Frankie could always make Pepper laugh with his dirty stories. He asked Pepper, "So, bud, when can you come over again? Maybe spend the night?"

"I'll have to ask," was Pepper's response. He knew why Frankie wanted to see him. Frankie liked sex stuff even more than Jake.

Whenever Pepper visited his house, they ended up doing something in bed. Sort of a strange arrangement, twelve-year-old Pepper hanging out with sixteen-year-old Frankie, visiting Frankie's house, staying overnight. But Pepper's mother was OK with it, assured by Jake that Frankie was a good kid, safe, not into drugs or anything risky. Frankie's parents, meanwhile, were long accustomed to his eccentric ways, this neo-hippie son of theirs, this loveable oddball of the family. His friendship with Pepper Robinson seemed harmless enough, no reason for concern or interference.

Later, after a shower, Pepper shut himself in his bedroom and sprawled on the Star Wars sleeping bag that he kept unrolled in the middle of the floor. Star Wars made him think of Frankie. Frankie's favorite movie. Always talking about it. Well, not always. Sometimes. Pepper was getting comfortable to look at his magic book, a new one from Red Dog Comix. Not parlor tricks or sleight of hand. Real magic. It was called Classic Spells and Enchantments, similar to a couple of other books he'd bought last year from Red Dog, such a cool store, lots of awesome stuff. He and Jake had used those books twice to work magic. Voodoo spells, Jake called them. Once to bring bad luck to the old woman who'd lived across the street from Jake. In the house where the Huckfeldts now lived. Too much bad luck. She had died, from pneumonia, in November. Another time they'd cast a spell to vanquish (that was the word in the book) some bullies at Pepper's school. Older kids always looking for trouble. They'd been expelled, just a few weeks later, for fighting and bringing pocket knives to school.

Now, on his sleeping bag, Pepper was looking for a new spell or charm, something that might discourage his mother from moving to Joliet, might convince her to stay in Sandburg for at least a few more years. Maybe some kind of happiness charm. Something simple, not a lot of weird ingredients or complicated steps. Pepper kept thinking about his plan throughout that night and for the next several days. At home, at

school. He never found a good spell in his new book, and eventually decided to try the two books he'd left at Jake's house: The Wizard's Reference and Sorcery and Enchantment. Maybe Jake could even help him decide on a good spell. Pepper called several times for Jake during that week but never got an answer. Finally they connected the following week and had a chance to talk, Jake explaining that he'd been spending a lot of time after work at Doc's house in the country, doing some chores around the place, cleaning it up. Pepper listened, never very talkative over the phone, then asked about his magic books. "Are they still at your house?"

"Of course," Jake told him.

"Are you sure?" "Absolutely."

"You didn't throw them away?"

"No, dear," Jake laughed, always amused by Pepper's way of teasing and quizzing his way through a conversation. "In fact, I'm staring at them right now, even as we speak. They're right here beside the phone. On the table."

"Because I need them. My books."

"Uh oh." "Did you say uh oh?"

"Yeah. But maybe I'm jumping to conclusions."

"Are you frightened?"

Jake laughed again and asked, "Should I be? What exactly d'you have in mind?"

Pepper explained his plan, his need for an effective and appropriate spell to prevent his mother (and himself) from moving out of town. Jake, at first, misunderstood. "A spell? For your mother? Pepper, don't forget what happened to Mrs. Dillon," he said, naming the old woman, now dead, from across the street. "I mean, it's not like we actually killed her, it was just a coincidence, but. . ."

"Not a bad spell," Pepper said. "Something good. If she's real happy, you know, maybe she'll want to stay here."

"That's logical, I guess. So you want to come over?"

"When?"

“Right now is OK,” Jake said. It was Friday, Pepper just home from school, Jake just home from work. “But I have to get up early tomorrow.”

“You’re working?”

“Yeah. It’s one of my scheduled Saturdays. So, unfortunately. . .”

“I can’t stay overnight.”

“That’s right.”

“I just want to look at my books.” “No problem,” Jake said. “Hey, I hear that you and Frankie got together recently.”

“Did Frankie tell you?”

“He said you were at his house again last Saturday.”

“Was I?”

“Yes sir, I believe so.”

“No, it’s a mistake,” Pepper protested in his boo-hoo whiny voice, always the sly jokester. “Maybe it was somebody else!” Frankie had invited Pepper to his house, of course, during their phone conversation on Easter night. “I’ll have to ask,” Pepper had responded, finally accepting the invitation the following weekend. Saturday night. Frankie mentioning it to Jake a couple of nights later. No details, just a quick mention, then on to discuss Doc’s house and other topics. Now, Jake was hoping to surprise a tidbit or two from Pepper himself. He was achy for the boy, five weeks since they’d been together, a memorable day, Jake giving Pepper a blowjob for the first time, seeing him cum for the first time. Then Doc’s cancer had been diagnosed, and Doc had killed himself, and Easter had taken Pepper out of town. Fate keeping them apart. Jake eager (despite the Kurt Randall trial) to resume where they’d left off. He asked Pepper, “Were you boys being naughty together? You and Frankie?”

“I can’t talk,” Pepper protested in his phony whimper, then said nothing more, just a twelve-year-old boy after all, not about to share his sexual secrets with some other guy, not even Jake.

“OK, anyway,” Jake said, “come over whenever you’re ready.”

“Right now?”

“D’you need a ride?” “I can walk,” Pepper said. Not far to Jake’s house, just a few minutes on foot. His old bicycle was broken and his mother kept telling him to wait, wait till we move to Joliet, buy a new one there, one less thing to take with us. So he walked to school every day, and now he walked to Jake’s. April sky gray and drizzly. Sidewalks damp beneath his feet. A slender and long-legged boy, much like JoJo in size and physique but more supple, more graceful in movement and stride. Red sweatpants. Baggy T-shirt showing from beneath an unzipped gray sweatshirt. Nothing on his head. Pepper never wore caps or hats (except for a Chicago Bulls stocking cap on the coldest of winter days). Nothing to cover his dark curly-cotton hair or the tips of his pointy ears—those ears, that hair, also that dusky cocoa skin of his all making him resemble a pubescent Pan, a mythical goatboy come to life. The misty drizzle was speckling his glasses. Pepper wore copper-rimmed glasses for nearsightedness. Big, owlish-looking glasses that usually rested on the tip of his flat-bridged nose. He took them off twice to wipe them dry, then gave up and stashed them in the pocket of his sweatshirt. Five blocks, six blocks, and then he came to Whitman Street and turned the corner and saw Jake’s house and then saw Jake himself standing on the porch, waiting. A self-conscious saunter immediately altered his gait. He let his gaze wander coyly from side to side as he came down the street, feigning an oblivious nonchalance, his way of teasing Jake, of being a wiseguy. A few feet from the porch he finally pretended to see Jake for the first time and broke into a big and suddenly sheepish grin, like someone caught in a prank. “Such a comedian,” Jake said to him as he trudged up the steps.

“I’m not funny at all,” Pepper said, trying to suppress his grin, that same sly grin that always seemed to be playing at the corners of his mouth. Jake ushered him quickly inside, a welcoming hand on his shoulder. The boy’s fleecy dark hair was dewy with droplets of rain. Jake hugged him when they were safely inside and pressed his face against the damp and wooly curls. “You smell like a wet puppy,” he said, Pepper allowing himself to be hugged as he always did, docile and

unresponsive, never hugging back, arms motionless at his sides. “Ready to do some research?” the man asked him.

“Research for what?”

“To find a magic spell.”

“Oh yeah,” Pepper said, slapping his own forehead, stupid me. “Let’s look!”

They took the two books with them into the kitchen, Jake cooking bacon and eggs for himself. Breakfast for supper. Pepper decided that he’d also have a little bacon and maybe even some Bisquick pancakes to go with it. He was already at the table and examining the books while Jake prepared the food. Fried eggs, a pound of Oscar Mayer bacon, a dozen pancakes with butter and syrup. The kitchen smelled like Sunday morning. Pepper kept looking through the books, flipping pages as he ate his bacon and pancakes, using his fingers instead of a fork, licking at the grease and the syrup after each bite. Jake sat beside him and read aloud from the books whenever they found some spell or charm or talisman that seemed promising, or even just interesting. As much as the books, Jake was also looking at Pepper himself, never tiring of that pretty profile. Those pointy ears and silken, upswept eyelashes and that sharp chin with its dimple like a thumbprint in brown clay. That long, coltish neck. That big Adam’s apple like a gawky announcement of puberty and sex. Jake, when they’d finished eating, put an arm chummily around Pepper’s shoulders just to enjoy the feel of him, the warm reality of him as they sat together at the kitchen table. “This maybe wasn’t a good idea,” the boy finally decided.

“No spells seem to apply,” Jake agreed. “But maybe we don’t need a spell for your mother. Maybe we’re using the wrong strategy.”

“Like how?”

“Maybe we need something like this talisman here,” Jake said, flipping back two or three pages to find it. “This one. See? It’s for attaining your heart’s desire.”

“Yeah.”

“So if your heart’s desire is to stay in Sandburg. . .”

“I should use this talisman.”

“And I could use it, too. My heart’s desire is the same as yours.”

“It is?” “As if you didn’t know,” Jake said to the boy, giving him a noisy smooch on the cheek. That cheek like satin against his lips. “What would I do without you?”

“Would we miss each other?”

“Very, very much. But,” Jake said, “if worst comes to worst, if you do end up moving, we’ll still see each other.”

“If I’m in Joliet?”

“We’ll still see each other. Yeah. We’ll visit each other all the time. It’s just a three-hour drive.”

“Have you been there before? To Joliet?” Pepper asked. He leaned sideways in his chair, letting himself rest cozily against Jake.

“Oh sure. A few times. It’s not bad. It’s close to Chicago. Lots of places to go and things to do.”

Pepper nodded in half-hearted agreement as he picked up the book. “This talisman. Should I draw it?”

“Good idea. Draw two of them. Or I can photocopy it at the post office.”

“No, I’ll draw them,” Pepper quickly decided, always eager for an art project. A talented draftsman. “I can do them at home.”

“You’ve got some supplies here.”

“I can draw them better at home,” the boy insisted. “I’ll do a really good job and then we can wear them.”

“They can be worn or carried,” Jake nodded, reading from the little book. “Then we can cross our fingers and hope for the best.”

“This is a very good idea, I think.”

“An excellent idea,” Jake agreed. “I’m glad you came over.”

“That’s OK.”

“Lord, you’re getting so big.”

“I am?” “I bet you’ve grown at least three inches since October,” Jake said, one hand on the back of Pepper’s neck, the other on his thigh.

Not timid about it. His hand on Pepper's left thigh, on the red sweatpants, rubbing gently. "But not just taller. You're bigger all over."

"My mother says I'm growing like a weed."

"I can even tell by your leg. It feels bigger, you know, heavier." True enough, although Jake was thinking to himself: still such a nice, slender little leg. Pepper leaned forward to snatch a last strip of bacon from his plate. The movement, whether deliberate or not, brought Jake's hand up his thigh and against his crotch. Jake took the soft bulginess in his fingers and squeezed. "Holy cow," he said, Pepper nibbling at the bacon with his front teeth, tiny hamster bites. "This thing is bigger too, I bet." The boy shrugged and looked at the ceiling as if inspecting for cracks. He finished his bacon and licked at each of his fingers while Jake continued squeezing and rubbing him between the legs, again saying, "I bet this thing is bigger than it was just a few weeks ago."

"I don't think so," Pepper said, trying not to smile. He knew, they both knew, what was coming next. Jake said, "Let's check it out," and pulled down the front of Pepper's sweatpants and white briefs. The boy's penis was just excited enough to be stiffly afloat above his balls. A snaky, circumcised dick. Jake, holding the pants and underpants down, used his other hand to touch the pubic frizz on Pepper's groin. There'd been exactly seven black whiskers in December, first time Jake had seen him naked, seven tiny pubic whiskers that Jake had counted one by one with his eyes, afraid to touch. Five weeks ago, their last time together, the whiskery hairs had been too numerous to count—still sparse of course, but frizzy all around the base of the boy's dick. Now that frizz was a little fuller and almost long enough to be curly. "You'll have a real bush pretty soon," Jake told him. "Very impressive for a twelve-year-old."

"No, not impressive," Pepper countered reflexively, automatically, staring at those cracks in the ceiling. Again trying not to smile. Jake couldn't know what was going through his head. Pepper remembering last Saturday night with Frankie. In Frankie's bedroom. Nintendo finished. Ben and Amy and Frankie's parents all in bed, asleep. Frankie



brought out his plastic baggie of weed and opened the window for ventilation and rolled a joint. The best way to smoke, he said. Better than a pipe. He undressed and made Pepper do the same. Frankie always in charge. Pepper playing along, happy to please him. Both of them naked on the twin bed. Pepper didn't care much for smoking weed, it made him thirsty, but he always took two or three hits and ended up feeling giggly and horny. Giggly when Frankie decided to teach him how to kiss. No, bud, not like that, like this, open your mouth. Use your tongue. Horny when Frankie made them lie head to dick and suck each other. It almost made Pepper gag, but he was willing to do it, the marijuana helping, making him light-headed and a little dreamy, not so bad when he felt the stuff in his mouth, it was OK, he could manage. But he wouldn't swallow it. No way. He spit it out. Much better a few minutes later when it was his turn to cum and Frankie suddenly put a finger up his butt and Pepper felt like his guts might spurt out his dick, so painfully sweet he couldn't stand it. Frankie swallowed every oozy drop and then kept sucking and licking until Pepper wanted to yell or scream or cry. Pepper remembering that agony of pleasure throughout the week. A confusing jumble in his mind of Frankie's voice and mouth and touch along with various girls from school. Fantasized images of them. Their breasts and butts, their mouths and hands sometimes replacing Frankie's whenever Pepper jerked himself off. Sunday, Monday, every day right through the week, jerking off every chance he got. Including today, Friday, right after school, just before he called Jake and then walked to Jake's house. The sucking and kissing with Frankie still vivid, mingling with fantasies of kissing girls, being sucked by girls. Also Frankie touching Pepper's new-grown pubic hair just as Jake was touching it now, telling him how nice, how cute, how really nice. Pepper getting hard as he sat there in Jake's kitchen, difficult to keep your dick down when someone is playing between your legs—but really, honestly, still spent and dry from busting a nut an hour ago, not totally in the mood. Jake was surprised when the boy said, “Maybe we should go to a movie.”

“Tonight? Now?”

“Is it too late?”

“No, no, it’s not too late. But what about this guy here?” the man wondered, finger-flicking at Pepper’s droopy, unenthused boner. Pepper said, “It’ll be OK if I cover it,” which made both Jake and himself laugh. “No one will see it.” “Very funny,” Jake said. He released the boy’s pants. “Whatever you want. You’re the boss.”

Pepper took the one magic book with him when, fifteen minutes later, he and Jake headed to the multiplex on Henderson Street to see *Lost In Space*. He was already planning and imagining how to draw the talisman, what type of paper to use, which pens and inks and colors. Already creating it in his mind.

## CHAPTER FIVE

On his way out the door, Jake grabbed his keys and sunglasses and wallet and then paused, just for a moment, to open his wallet and check inside for Pepper's talisman. It needed to be worn or carried and "gazed upon" at least once every day in order to release its power. For almost three weeks Jake had been carrying it. Pepper had drawn them—one for Jake, one for himself—on small cut-out squares of heavy art paper. Lovely, intricate designs of many colors. Loops and zigzags and curlicues all forming the pattern of a heart within a circle within a star. Perfect for folding and carrying inside your wallet.

Jake was headed for the high school across town, where Ryan Fox was running in his fifth or sixth track meet of the season. Jake wasn't sure how many. He'd been to two of the meets already, Ryan not doing very well in either of them, finishing no higher than third in any of his races. "Maybe I'm a jinx," Jake had said to him after the last time. Ryan had grumbled that Jake was being stupid and then grumbled further that "you probably don't even want to come watch me anymore." His eyes getting teary. Always distressed by not winning. Jake had tried, as ever, to reassure him.

Not many people were in the stands at the stadium. Nothing like the crowd for a football game. Maybe fifty or sixty spectators were gathered on the lowest bleachers nearest the track, the sun still behind them, an hour before noon, brilliant May morning. Much better, to Jake's way of thinking, than going to one of Ryan's swimming tournaments. Better to be outside than in. Easier to come and go, not so much fuss or confusion, somehow not as conspicuous being outside in the sunshine and the open air.

On the field, milling about and stretching and running in place, were the young competitors from all the various schools. Jake had no problem spotting the Butler Middle School boys and girls in their bright

orange shorts and orange-and-white sleeveless tops. Off to Jake's left, walking in a circle and clapping his hands, was Ryan himself, blond as a Viking prince, his bowl of hair looking a bit longer and shaggier than Jake was accustomed to seeing it. Circling and clapping to psych himself up for his first race of the day. The hundred-meters. Later, he'd also be running in the 400-meters and the 800-meter relay. Jake wandered to the railing at the bottom of the stands and stood there watching until the boy finally glanced in his direction. Jake smiled and held up the camcorder that he'd brought with him, just a few days since getting it back from Jimmy Huckfeldt. Ryan acknowledged him with a quick nod, nothing else, his upcoming race foremost on his mind. A few minutes later the boy was leaping and strutting victoriously, winner of the hundred-meters. Teammates slapping him on the back and the butt. Ryan looking again and again toward Jake in the stands, his best fan, his parents characteristically absent because of some golf outing or lunch engagement. Always something to keep them away.

Ryan went on, later in the day, to finish third in the 400-meters and first (with his teammates) in the 800-meter relay. A good day's work for the boy and his team. As they were leaving the track, Jake yelled "great job!" to them and kept taping with his camcorder, finishing the cassette. Ryan and a few of the other boys, still high from their triumphant meet, stopped alongside the track to pose for the camera. Musclemen poses. Flexing their biceps, turning this way and that, frontward and backward, off with their shirts to show their scrawny pecs and back muscles, hiking up the legs of their orange shorts to bare a few inches of very lean thigh. A performance that seemed surprisingly risqué for a family audience. Almost a striptease. Jake was thinking: Just one step away, for these boys, from getting naked. Just one step after that from getting hard. Then jerking off. Sucking. Each step as natural as the one before. Yet no one here, besides me, sees it. No one gets it. No one even wants to understand.

Jake followed the boys when they left the stadium, on their way to the gymnasium and its locker rooms to shower and change. As Ryan had often done after his swimming meets, he reappeared quickly without showering or removing his uniform, keeping it on like underwear beneath his jeans and his silver-and-black nylon windbreaker. Carrying his gym bag. He expected, by this time, that Jake would be driving him home. Of course he was right. The man was leaning against the chain-link fence that separated the gymnasium from the parking lot, waiting. He gave a disapproving scowl when he spotted the sweaty shirt beneath Ryan's jacket. "You should take time to change," he said to the boy.

"I do!"

"Not when I'm around, you don't."

"I thought you might leave."

"Don't be silly," Jake said, he and Ryan walking to the car, Jake's white Volvo, getting in. "Have I ever left without you?"

"Just because you haven't yet," Ryan said with a dismissive shrug. He had a husky voice that Jake often assumed might have something to do with his chronic tonsil problems and frequent sore throats. A husky little-man's voice that made Ryan sound older, at the age of ten, than JoJo or Pepper, for example (although Pepper's voice was just now beginning to change, to roughen slightly from puberty). Today Ryan's voice was even huskier than usual. He kept clearing his throat as he described his victories for Jake, going through each detail of each race as if Jake himself hadn't been there to see firsthand. Jake eventually asked him, "Are you feeling OK right now? You're sounding a little hoarse."

"I'm not sick."

"Even your eyes look droopy," Jake said, reaching across to feel the boy's cheek and forehead. "I think you're a little warm. Feverish."

"I'm overheated, duh," the boy scoffed. "I need a shower, is all."

"You sure?" "Don't be stupid." "OK, OK. How about my house? You can shower there."

"No-o-o," Ryan said impatiently, as if Jake had suggested something especially foolish. "My house."

“So we’re not going to spend any time together?”

“You’re coming to my house!”

“Oh, I don’t think so, tiger.”

Ryan cleared his throat again and then explained, more impatiently than ever, that his parents were at his sister’s dance recital, which just started about twenty minutes ago, which meant that the house was empty and Jake should stop being such a dork. Jake laughed at being called a “dork” and asked, “You mean that your parents let you stay home by yourself?”

“Of course!”

“They must really trust you a lot,” Jake said, thinking to himself that Pepper was also a latchkey kid, often home alone.

“Of course,” Ryan repeated. “My dad says I need to grow up and take responsibility.” Another nugget of hard-assed wisdom from Mister Fox. A real no-nonsense tough guy. Jake nodded and steered the Volvo onto Tompkins Street. Original red-brick pavement washboarding beneath the tires. Maples and oaks and hickories in full leaf overhead, the street aswim in their shadows. At the house itself, Jake again hesitated and said, “I’m pretty sure your parents would not approve of this. My being here.”

“They’re not even home,” was the boy’s only reply. He led the way into the empty house, using a key from his gym bag to unlock the back door. He took off his Air Jordans and left them in the mudroom with a collection of other sneakers and loafers and boots, Jake also removing his shoes and leaving them next to Ryan’s. The boy said, “come on” and took Jake downstairs to the so-called family room, an expensively converted basement with La-Z-Boy chairs and big-screen TV and pool table and two pinball machines and a fully stocked wet bar. Also a trophy case crammed with shiny hardware. Some of it won by Ryan himself, some by his college-student brother Chad, some by his sixteen-year-old sister Melissa. “You see,” the boy said to Jake, proudly pointing.

“Wow, I’m impressed.”

“Now my dad can add these,” Ryan said. He pulled the two first-place ribbons from his gym bag and put them on the nearby bar counter, his father’s job, apparently, to place them in the sacred case. Jake said, “You’ll probably have a couple more next week.” “From where?”

“Your next track meet.”

Ryan shook his head and said, “Today was the end of the season! Our last meet. Don’t you know that?”

“Already?”

“Seven, yeah, that’s all. Seven meets.”

“Well, gosh, I must’ve lost track,” Jake said. Ryan stared at him with that sniffy expression, then responded with a little smile and shook his head again and said, “That’s the dumbest joke.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty bad.”

“Lost track,” Ryan repeated. Still enjoying the pun. Jake touched him on the shoulder. “Weren’t you going to take a shower? Wasn’t that the plan?”

“Upstairs. Yeah. Have you seen my new CD-player?”

“You showed me your room a few months ago,” Jake nodded. “All your stuff.” He’d been snagged by Ryan one ordinary workday while delivering the mail, dragged into the house to see Ryan’s Christmas gifts, quite a surprise for the boy’s mother when she’d found her mailman in the living room. Ryan headed for the stairs and said, “Yeah, well, but you never heard it! Did you ever hear it?”

“Your CD-player? No, no, I never heard it,” Jake said.

“You can listen to it now.”

“If you say so.”

“When I’m taking my shower,” Ryan said, sidling up the stairs in front of Jake, talking over his shoulder. Jake feigned impatience and spanked at the boy’s blue-jeaned behind to get him moving more briskly, but really just to get his hand on those perfect buttocks, spanking and then squeezing at them until Ryan almost jumped up the remaining steps. Jake allowed himself, not very happily, to be stashed in Ryan’s bedroom, the CD-player pumping out hip-hop tunes while the

boy busied himself in the bathroom, taking his shower. All this on the second floor. Jake could see the street from the bedroom window. Nervous. Jumpy. Would he have time to get out if necessary? Could he get downstairs and out the back door? Crazy, to be plotting his escape like some burglar. What was he even doing here in Ryan's bedroom? What did the boy have in mind? He looked at his watch and decided to leave in another ten or fifteen minutes, no matter what.

Jake waited until his self-imposed deadline, then marched down the hallway to the bathroom and pushed open the door, intending to say goodbye to Ryan—while also hoping to get a glimpse of the boy naked, over two months since last having that pleasure. But Ryan was already in his white Jockey briefs and standing in front of the mirror of the medicine chest. Brushing and fussing with his golden-blond hair, admiring his left profile, then his right, fussing some more with his shaggy bangs, Jake noticing again that the boy's mushroom cap of hair was a bit longer and shaggier all over than it normally was, not quite as carefully cut and shaped. Maybe he was letting it grow out. Going for a new style. "Handsome as ever," Jake said. Ryan made an aw-shucks "psss" sound but couldn't hide a conceited grin reflected in the mirror. Jake stepped into the steam-humid room. "Feel better after your shower?"

"I'm still sorta hot," the boy admitted, then coughed and cleared his throat and coughed again. Jake moved behind him and reached around and felt his forehead. "Like I said before, pal, you're definitely feverish. And I can hear that your throat is sore. Am I right?"

"Sorta," the boy mumbled, still brushing lazily at his bangs and at the damp hair above his reddish ears. Jake bear-hugged him from behind. "Poor little tiger," he crooned, Ryan's body unusually warm against him. "Poor sick boy."

"My stupid tonsils again," Ryan self-diagnosed, putting the brush down, touching his own throat. "They make me sick!"

"Is that a joke?" "No! They make me sick! I hate them!"



“Nasty things,” Jake sympathized. No time to be getting horny, but he couldn’t resist sliding his hands down Ryan’s ribcage and into those tight little Jockey underpants, caressing the boy’s smooth belly and groin. Both hands now totally inside Ryan’s undies. Down along the insides of his thighs still moist from his shower. Ten-year-old balls in the middle. Jake’s fingers just brushing the sides of them. Feeling beneath them. The boy tensed and shivered. “Man,” he said, “your hands are too cold!” He elbowed Jake in the ribs and stepped away. Jake checked his watch and said, “Yeah, well, you know, I need to get going anyway.”

“Did you like my CD-player? Did you listen to it?”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

“Did you like my trophies downstairs?”

“Also great,” Jake smiled. “Really. Thanks for showing me.” He kissed the boy on his fever-warmed lips, then hurried downstairs and retrieved his shoes and left the house. Ryan followed as far as the kitchen. To get something to drink. Still wearing nothing but his white Jockeys, up on the balls of his feet in that dainty dancer’s strut. When Jake was still just a few steps from the back stoop, Ryan came to the door and called out, “Hey, you made a tape and I didn’t get to see it!”

“Come to my house,” Jake called back, “and we’ll watch it. Any time.”

“Hey,” the boy called again, more hoarsely, “did those Huckfeldt guys make their stupid movie?”

“Jimmy and JoJo?”

“Yeah. Their dirty movie.” Jake put a shushing finger to his lips. “It’s pretty. . . well, bizarre. Yeah. Dirty.” “With girls?”

“No. No girls,” Jake said, then told the boy to shut the door, get inside, you’re sick. He waved a final goodbye and headed for the street, for his car.

Just then, outside of town, on the two-lane road between Sandburg and Stonerville, a Chevy pickup made a reckless left-hand turn across

traffic and collided with a red Honda. Frankie's Honda. The boy swerved but couldn't avoid the collision that sent him headfirst into the windshield, no seat belt to restrain him. He was unconscious when the ambulances arrived.

## CHAPTER SIX

Sunday, quiet for some reason, no boys around to disturb the peaceful afternoon. Jake had lunch, put the newspaper aside to enjoy later, watched the video he'd made yesterday at Ryan's track meet, then replaced that video with the one Jimmy had hand-delivered a few days earlier. He'd already watched it three times. The production values were exactly what you might expect from the Huckfeldt boys: confusing edits, careless framing and focusing, bad lighting. There were maybe two dozen bits and pieces—a butt shot here, a dick shot there, Dally on the toilet, Dally in the bathtub, a close-up of boners that obviously belonged to Dally and JoJo, a quick shot of JoJo peeing. A few other brief scenes. Also three longer, more substantial ones.

First of these shows all three boys in a bedroom, only one bed and one sleeping bag on the floor, must be where JoJo and Dally sleep. The boys seem to be milling aimlessly at first, Jimmy in and out of the frame as he sets up the camcorder and positions it and angles it, making comments like, "This here'll be pretty good," and, "Watch this careful, Jake," and, "OK, this'll work out good, no fuckin doubt." He rushes back into the picture and tells Dally to undress, glances at the camcorder to check his position, barks at JoJo to move, asshole, get outta the fuckin way! JoJo actually steps more directly in front of the camera before realizing his mistake and sidestepping away. In those few seconds Jimmy has produced a pair of girl's pink panties. From his pocket? From the floor? He's clutching them and waiting for his baby brother to finish undressing, then holds them out low with both hands for Dally to put on. Dally steps into them one foot at a time, touching Jimmy's shoulder for balance. JoJo, near the camcorder but not visible, says, "He thinks he's a girl. See. See there. Thinks he's a fuckin girl." Jimmy glances back and nods. He's grinning his nastiest, big-bad-wolf grin. He says, "This here'll be a new experiment." He leans over the bed and picks up a white

plastic dildo and shows it to the camera and then turns the switch at the bottom to start the whole thing vibrating with a bumblebee buzz. JoJo reappears and takes Dally by the shoulders and guides him to the bed, Dally probably “hypnotized” by JoJo’s mesmeric powers, Jake familiar with variations of this routine—Dally being made to bark like Mongo (one of their noisy hounds) or to perform a dance. But nothing quite like this, now, with Dally supposedly hypnotized into being a girl, on the bed, on his tummy, wearing only those frilly pink panties that must have come from. . . where? Jimmy’s girlfriend? Or maybe one of her little sisters? Jimmy is standing to the right of the picture, at the foot of the bed, examining the dildo in his hand, placing it against his own cheek, fascinated by the action of it. He makes another mumbly reference to his “experiment” and then pushes past JoJo, who’s kneeling beside the bed and chewing his fingernails. Pushes past but suddenly changes his plan and fetches the camcorder and carries it jiggling crazily across the room, gives it to JoJo, orders him to aim it and hold it steady, you fucker, don’t move it! A medium close-up of Dally—from the side—shows him from the lower curve of his pale back to just above the knees. Only Jimmy’s torso and arm visible now, the whole scene strangely impersonal without faces, an experiment indeed, very clinical. Jimmy’s voice says, “Now this, this here, man, this is what girls like.” He’s already moving the dildo across the seat of the pink panties. Random, lazy movements of the buzzing, vibrating thing all over Dally’s bottom as if he’s testing it, just getting the feel of it. A minute or so of this and then he starts slipping the thing under the waistband and under the elastic at the legs, some twitchiness from Dally at this first contact of cold vibrating plastic with his bare skin. JoJo’s voice says, “Come on, come on,” getting impatient. Jimmy tells him to shut the fuck up, but then agrees that “it’s time to see some pussy” and uses the dildo itself to snag the panties and pull them down, Dally raising his hips to cooperate, Jimmy pulling the panties down and apparently off, impossible to see for sure, but Dally’s ass completely bare now, that’s the important part. Jimmy says, “Make fuckin sure y’all can see his pussy,” which causes the camcorder to

move quickly higher and a little to the right, JoJo obediently finding the best angle to shoot his little brother's exposed butt crack. The vibrating dildo is sliding along it lengthwise between the cheeks, wedging the cheeks apart to show the asshole, to show the pink boypussy. Jimmy's hand on the dildo, controlling it, his other hand suddenly appearing with a jar of cold cream, probably his mother's, then his voice, to JoJo, demanding, "Help me here, come on, do this!" JoJo lets the camera dip, several seconds of nothing but the floor, then back up again to show Dally's asshole slathered with white cold cream and the dildo vibrating tip-first against it, nudging into it, Jimmy's hand turning and pushing and turning and pushing until an inch or more of the dildo has disappeared into the cold-creamy hole. "Right up his pussy, man, beautiful!" Dally's hips have stiffened, getting shaky as the dildo vibrates into him, Jimmy's free hand pushing at the little boy's legs to spread them as far as possible, to get the dildo in deeper, deeper, deeper. Dally must have three or four inches of the hard thing inside him by now, vibrating inside his rectum, Jimmy sliding it in and out, in and out, the cold cream all greasy white along the plastic shaft. "He's a girl, he must be likin this," JoJo's voice says from behind the camcorder, which swings for a moment to show Dally's face, his eyes tightly shut and his nose scrunched and his mouth open like someone enduring a doctor's probe. "OK," Jimmy's voice says, "that's probably enough." The camcorder swings back to show the dildo coming out, Dally's asshole clotted with cream. JoJo says, "Put your finger in." Jimmy says, "Fucker, y'all do it yourself if you want," then holds up the dildo and says, "Here you go, man, put this here up your own pussy!" JoJo says, "Up yours, not mine!" The picture is lurching drunkenly between Dally's ass and Jimmy's chest, then Jimmy's throat and briefly his face, Jimmy himself saying, "You two fuckers got a pussy, not me." JoJo says, "I dunno," and then, "Maybe for just a minute," and finally, "I gotta take these here off," apparently talking about his own pants. Just then the camcorder turns off and the segment ends.

Second scene begins with no preparation, JoJo suddenly in front of the tripod-mounted camcorder in nothing but his red-and-olive Boy Scout cap and red-and-yellow neckerchief. Nothing else. Looking somehow extra naked in that cap and neckerchief. This, he announces poker-faced, is a special performance of his magic act that Jake missed in April—three weeks ago but JoJo still pissed off, still upset that Jake couldn't come, Jake working that day, unavailable. JoJo still mentions it frequently whenever he comes to Jake's house ("You know what, Jake? You know what? I can't believe y'all never seen my magic act!") So now he's providing this "special performance" on tape for his grown-up friend. He doesn't even mention that he's naked, such a natural way for any boy to get attention, to be funny, to make himself seductive, often all those things at once, no need to mention it or explain it, this age-old frolic of male instinct, this caper of men and boys together in primal heat. JoJo proceeds to go through his act, much more adeptly than during his rehearsals in March. A black plastic mustache is clipped to his nose. It's his "professional magician" mustache. Cap, neckerchief, fake mustache, stark naked otherwise, his penis looking meaty and jiggly and, as ever, just slightly stiffened, like a young hound dog's always excitable wiener. He cuts a rope in half and puts it back together. Makes balls and coins disappear then reappear inside a red plastic cup. Does various sleights of hand with playing cards. Finally produces several multi-colored scarves and improvises a new trick, pretending to pull them—abracadabra!—from his bare butt. It's his grand finale. He never cracks a smile as he moons the camera and pulls those scarves from his asshole—really, of course, from his fist covering it. He finishes, turns and bows, then crosses the room to the camcorder until his chest fills the whole picture. The tape jumps, after a moment of electronic snow, to the third and last major segment.

Jake, at first, thought he was still looking at JoJo's naked body. No face. Just a body reclining on a messy bed. The camera carefully positioned on its tripod to record only from the neck down. But the body isn't JoJo's. Too muscular and too old, with a dark bush of pubic hair

around a very straight, very thick hard-on. Definitely Jimmy lying there naked on that bed. Masturbating. Industrial rock, like newer heavy metal, is blaring from a boombox. The camcorder's unblinking eye remains focused on the boy's body as he pounds away at his pecker, nothing fancy or kinky about it, just thwack thwack thwack with his right hand, sort of monotonous after five minutes, six, seven, no face to look at, just the headless body, so impersonal. If only the camera would move closer, explore his body from different angles, show us his face. If only the kid would feel at his own balls, caress himself, spread his legs. Something. But still, it's a fourteen-year-old boy jacking himself off right there on tape, impossible to look away as he thwacks and thwacks to that frenzied music, his knees finally rising a few inches from the mattress in sync with his orgasm, his own hand and arm hiding much of the payoff but not all, some jizz suddenly ribboned across his belly, glistening like snot. For a few moments he's perfectly still. Worn out. Then he wipes at the snotty cum on his stomach and shows it to the camera, holding up two fingers like a gooey peace sign. He says, "That's all, folks." It's Jimmy's voice, of course. He's still flat on his back, still not revealing his face. "I'll make some more later, maybe," he adds, shouting over the loud music. Then, to someone who's been watching him from behind the camcorder, running it, he yells, "OK, OK, that's enough!"

The tape ends.

Jake had seen the Huckfeldt brothers only briefly since getting this video of theirs. Dally had grinned proudly about his contribution; JoJo had wanted praise for his magic act; Jimmy had run in quickly just to bum a cigarette—which Jake didn't have, once again trying to quit smoking—hardly any discussion between them, Jimmy leaving just as abruptly as he'd arrived, chomping his bubblegum, smirking. Now, after watching the video for this fourth time, Jake turned off the VCR and fixed himself some coffee to clear his head, then settled in the La-Z-Boy

with the Sunday paper that he'd set aside earlier. A story about the Kurt Randall case was on the front page. The "sexual predator" had been found guilty on multiple counts of assault, abuse, possession of child pornography. Sentencing was scheduled for next month. Several of the man's "victims" were set to appear for the prosecution, to testify regarding the severe and permanent emotional damage done to them. The psychological scarring. To testify why Kurt Randall should be locked away for as many years as possible. Jake grunted in disgust and turned the page.

He glanced at a headline about some traffic accident Saturday afternoon and started to turn another page when his eye caught the word "Stonerville." Then the word "teen." A Stonerville teen involved in a two-vehicle collision three miles west of town. Jake's brain couldn't quite process what he was reading. Words appearing in slow motion before his eyes. A name that looked like Patallero. Another name that looked like Frank. Couldn't be—but it looked like Frank M. Patallero from Stonerville. Maybe someone else, just a coincidence, a really weird coincidence. Frank M. Patallero, sixteen years old, from 78 Levitt Avenue in Stonerville. No doubt about it. Frankie in an accident. Frankie in the hospital. Frankie in critical condition. Frankie.

Jake read the article three times before he could control his breathing and feel his racing heart begin to slow, to relax. Only one thought repeating itself over and over like a desperate shriek in his head: Frankie has to be all right, Frankie has to be all right, Frankie has to be all right! Jake dropped the newspaper and hurried to the phone to call. . . who? Where? Frankie had been taken to Silver Cross Hospital, according to the paper, but Jake was in no position to phone for information, not being related to the boy in any way. He could try a ruse and pretend to be a relative as he'd done once before, months ago, when the old woman from across the street had been hospitalized, dying. But deception, in this case, seemed unwise, inappropriate. Jake finally decided on a straightforward call to the hospital with no trickery or nonsense, an honest attempt to get whatever information he could from



the boy's nurse. But then the nurse answered in ICU and Jake impulsively identified himself as Frankie's uncle, concerned about the boy, worried sick. His heart was thudding again, real fear shaking him as he waited for her response. Maybe the worst possible response. "I'm sorry, but we can't really go into any detail over the phone," is what the nurse eventually said.

"Oh right, right," Jake agreed, staring at a crack in the wall, afraid to look away, staring at it with the blank intensity of fear. "But he's. . . he's stable? He's doing OK?" "Yes, he's stable," the nurse conceded. Jake felt his shoulders sag with relief. Stable. Alive. Still alive. No other information, but that was enough. So now what? Now what? Jake wanted to call the boy's parents, but didn't. Bad idea. To them, Jake was known only vaguely as the father of some boy named Jimmy who lived on Whitman Street in Sandburg. Very complicated, Frankie's scheme, his way of getting to stay overnight at Jake's house while supposedly being across the street at Jimmy's. No way for Frankie's parents to double-check because, for whatever reason, the Huckfeldts' phone number was unlisted. Yes, very complicated, too complicated, Jake beginning to tire of so much plotting and deception. But now was no time to mess with the status quo. Impossible to call anyone for more information. Impossible to visit Frankie until he was moved out of ICU into a regular room. Till then Jake needed to be calm and patient and optimistic. Also he needed to call Pepper.

Holly answered the phone. She sounded tired, discouraged about the trouble she was having with her house, trying to sell it. Still, she was hoping to get it accomplished and to move to Joliet by sometime next month, in June. "Sorry you're having trouble," Jake fibbed, wondering if Pepper's talisman was exerting its power. Silly thought, of course. Pepper himself was at his friend Marcus's house, probably playing computer games. Jake left a message for him to call back.

The phone finally rang around six o'clock. Pepper, right off, asked, "What's wrong?" Jake told him the terrible news about Frankie. Pepper

betrayed no obvious upset or concern in his voice, in his tone, but he kept asking, “Is he real bad? How bad is he hurt? What happened to him exactly?” Not much that Jake could say in return. “They wouldn’t give me any details,” he said. “Just that Frankie is stable. Which is good. I mean, for now, that’s good.”

“When will they tell you more?”

“Don’t know. A few days, maybe. We’ll just keep hoping that he’s OK. That he’s getting better.”

“Yeah.”

“Keep thinking good, positive thoughts. Right?”

“Yeah,” Pepper agreed again. Off the phone, he rushed to tell his mother about Frankie’s accident and to look at the story in the newspaper sitting untouched (except for the comics) in the living room. For the rest of that day, he kept taking his talisman from the Chicago Bulls wallet that he carried in his back pocket, taking it out and staring at it and wondering about Frankie, sending out positive thoughts, positive energy. Heart’s desire. For Frankie. White magic. Heart’s desire.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Silver Cross Hospital was at the north edge of downtown Sandburg, an old red-brick edifice with newer wings on either side, also red brick but brighter, shinier, lots of glass. Frankie's room was in one of those new wings. The boy was just out of ICU, almost a week since his accident, his condition now listed as serious but stable. No longer critical. He was in a room with two beds, an old man with heart problems in the bed near the door, Frankie himself near the window. Late afternoon sunshine bright and warm across his legs. Too warm. His fitful daytime dreams troubled by images of red-hot ovens, of blistering sunburn, of charcoals slowly cooking him. He wanted the nurse to come and close the drapes. Wanted the nurse to come. Didn't have the strength to find the call button. So tired. Half asleep.

Downstairs, Jake was just arriving. Main entrance, waiting room to the left, reception desk ahead. Jake knew from past experience with his dying mother and father that a visitor could avoid the desk and head directly upstairs, no pass or badge necessary. Always a milling stream of people back and forth, easy to get lost among them and drift to the elevators and then upstairs to the rooms. Up to the fourth floor. Up to Frankie's room, number 415, right across from the nurse's station. If anyone else had been there visiting the boy, Jake would have detoured to one of the little lounges scattered around each floor, would have waited until the boy was alone. But no other visitors were in the room. Just the gray-haired heart patient watching Jeopardy on his wall-mounted television, the white privacy curtain pulled beside him, only the foot of Frankie's bed visible beyond, one of the blankets folded back and bunched messily. Jake strolled in and smiled hello to the man near the door and then fretfully crossed the room to Frankie's bed. The boy was on his back. His eyes were closed. Mouth open. Snoring quietly. Jake had to stifle a moan from himself. Frankie's face was a busted eggplant,

both eyes blackened, cheeks swollen and bruised purplish. His nose bandaged. His skull wrapped with a mummyish pressure bandage. Jake stood and stared until he could master his emotions, until he could look at the boy without feeling a sob in his throat. He stepped beside the bed and whispered the boy's name, then whispered it again and touched him timidly on the arm. Frankie opened his raccoon eyes and peered at Jake and nodded, expecting a nurse or a doctor to be there at his bedside. Peering up groggily, waiting, only gradually recognizing the person beside him as Jake. He tried to smile, then mumbled, "I fucked up. Dude. I totally fucked up."

Jake leaned forward and kissed him very gently on the lips. The boy had shimmery tears in his eyes. Jake stroked his cheek and kissed him once more. "It wasn't your fault. Not your fault at all. That jerk in the pickup turned directly in front of you." "Such a mess."

"You'll be fine." "I'm like a horror film," the boy said in that same croaky mumble, his usual lispiness now a thick-tongued slur, actually difficult to understand him.

"You'll heal up. Good as new. Handsome as ever," Jake said, careful about his choice of words, aware of the man in the next bed just behind the flimsy curtain. Frankie made a feeble shrug and wiped his eyes with the back of one hand, then pointed to the window. "Jake, please, can you close those drapes? The sun. It's so hot."

Jake happily complied, shutting out the bright sunshine with two tugs on the drapery cord. "How's that? Better?"

"Yeah, dude, it's a relief. I had a dream. A dream about. . . about being on a grill. You know. Cooking. Being cooked."

"A nasty nightmare."

"That's so much better."

"Anything else you need?"

"My juice maybe. I'm thirsty."

"Juice, absolutely," Jake said, grabbing the plastic cup from the tray beside the bed, orange juice, holding the cup for Frankie, letting him sip through the straw. Gulping, really. The boy pausing for breath, then

thirstily gulping some more. Jake kept murmuring, “Good boy, good boy,” thrilled to see him drinking so greedily. It seemed normal, reassuring. “Enough?”

“Yeah, enough, good.”

Jake set the cup aside and asked Frankie about his parents. “Are they here somewhere?”

“What time is it?” Jake glanced around the room for a clock. Nothing on the beige walls except sphygmomanometers and their dials, medical waste boxes, outlets for plugs, a framed landscape between the beds, a portrait of Jesus gazing heavenward between the two wall-mounted televisions. A bare screw near Frankie’s TV was a telltale clue. But no clock. Frankie said, “The battery died. They took it.”

“It’s OK, I’ve got a watch,” Jake said, showing his wrist, his Timex. “It’s exactly four seventeen.”

“My parents’ll be here pretty soon. They come and see me and eat in the cafeteria. For supper.”

“I shouldn’t stay too long.”

“Dude, you can’t go!”

“Your parents don’t even know me.”

Frankie responded with another feeble shrug. He was rubbing lightly at a jagged brown scab on the back of his right hand. “They should know you. This is ignorant.”

“They think I’m. . . who? Jimmy’s father? Is my last name Huckfeldt?”

“Jimmy’s father, I guess,” Frankie nodded vaguely, head against the pillow. “Not your last name, though. Never mentioned a last name. Anyway, it was just your voice. On the phone. They’ve never seen. . .”

“OK, but, even so. Probably a good idea for me to leave. Today.”

“You just got here!”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Jake said, taking the boy’s scabby hand, some freckles on the back of it, such a narrow and pale hand, thin-fingered, powerless. He kept his voice low, conspiratorial. “I’ll be back every day. Every single day.”

“Good. Every day.”

“I promise.”

“How’s Pepper?”

“He’s fine, fine. He knows all about your accident.”

“How’s Jimmy and JoJo and everybody else?”

“Same as ever. Nothing exciting. Hey,” Jake smiled, leaning even closer, “where’s your amulet?”

“My superb teabag amulet?”

“That’s right. With Pepper’s hair.”

“It’s with my other stuff. My parents asked me about it,” Frankie tried to smile, his cheeks swollen dimpleless. “They probably think I’m insane. I can’t wear it here.”

Jake gave the boy another kiss. “I’ve been so incredibly worried about you. Christ. You can’t imagine.”

“I look like Frankenstein.”

“Forget that. You’ll be fine. Just rest and recuperate. Enjoy your vacation.”

“School’s almost over, at least.”

“Right. One good thing. You won’t fall way behind everybody else.”

“I’ll have to take my finals.”

“No sweat,” Jake said. One more kiss, a real goodbye, then finally he forced himself to leave the boy’s bedside, the boy’s room. In the hallway, he looked out for Frankie’s parents, faceless strangers to him, true, but somehow Jake assumed he’d recognize them should they happen to wander past. He left the fourth floor but didn’t leave the hospital, only down to the third floor on the elevator and then off to visit one other boy: Ryan Fox. Just two days since Ryan had come to the hospital to have his pesky tonsils removed, Jake hearing about it from the boy’s mother while delivering their mail yesterday, unexpectedly thoughtful of her to let him know. Jake hadn’t mentioned any of this to Frankie. Plenty of time to discuss it later. Strange, two of Jake’s boys in

the hospital at the same time. Sex and horseplay suddenly replaced by illness and injury, surgical wards, intensive care.

Ryan's room was at the end of a third-floor hallway, its door currently blocked by a nurse's pharmaceutical cart. Jake squeezed past the cart and found the nurse herself, chubby black woman, taking the boy's temperature with a plastic gunlike device stuck into his ear rather than his mouth, something new since Jake's last visit to a hospital. No one else in the room, which was private, only one bed, Ryan's parents paying extra for their son's precious solitude. Jake thanked his good fortune—two visits in the same afternoon without encountering any unwanted fathers or mothers or other lurking relatives. The nurse finished her check-up and smiled and patted Ryan's knee. She glanced at Jake—the other adult in the room—and pronounced the boy “just perfectly fine, ready to go home tomorrow.” Jake nodded as if he were the responsible party. He waited for the nurse to leave, then advanced grinning to Ryan's bedside. “Hey, my tiger! What's up? How d'you feel?”

“My mom must've told you I was here.” “She told me. That's right. How's your throat?”

“It's real sore from the operation,” the boy rasped, clutching it as if choking himself. “You came here to see me?” “Of course! I was worried about you.” “My stupid tonsils.”

“I knew last week, remember? You were definitely getting sick,” Jake said. The noise of a TV program was jibber-jabbering from the little speaker box that Ryan had resting on the mattress near his left hip. Jake turned at the waist to look over his shoulder, to see what was showing on the television suspended behind him. Ryan croakily informed him that it was an episode of Goosebumps, not as good as the Power Rangers episode that had just finished but it was OK. The boy was wearing pajamas that Jake had seen once before, months ago when Ryan had been home sick, waiting for the mail. A short-sleeved top and knee-length bottoms with Warner Brothers cartoon characters all over both, Bugs Bunny featured largest on the chest, munching a carrot. The

sheets and blanket were folded back, Ryan uncovered, his right knee raised and rocking restlessly from side to side, the leg of his shortie pajamas flapping and flapping against his pale thigh. “You didn’t bring me ice cream,” he said in his irritable croak.

“Very thoughtless of me, I know.”

“Like in all the TV shows.” “I should’ve brought ice cream,” Jake agreed once more.

“But anyway I’ve got some,” Ryan said, grabbing a small red-and-white carton from his tray, holding it up to show Jake. Chocolate, half eaten, going mushy. He dug some out with his white plastic spoon and held it up for another display and finally put it in his mouth, turning the spoon upside down and licking at the plastic to get every speck of the runny chocolate. “And my mom and dad brought me strawberry,” he boasted. “The nurses keep it in the freezer.”

“Lucky boy.”

“My mom is here right now.”

“Your mom? Where is she?”

“She’s smoking a cigarette,” Ryan said, licking at another spoonful of chocolate mush. “She brought my pajamas.”

“Those are my favorites.”

“You’ve never seen them.”

“Once, last year, when you were sick,” Jake reminded him, drawing nothing from Ryan but a dubious shrug. “You’ll outgrow them pretty soon.”

Ryan’s mother returned just then, a good-looking blond woman with a year-round tan and expensive clothes, today a dark green pants suit with a ruby-red silk scarf, small gold earrings, gold bracelet. She seemed genuinely pleased to see Jake. They joked about smoking cigarettes, both of them forever trying to quit, Mrs. Fox lamenting that she was “a dreadful example for the kids. My husband can’t stand it. Always on my back. Which is understandable. I don’t blame him.”



She and Jake commiserated for another moment or two about their nasty habit, then discussed Ryan's successful surgery, the relief that his "darn nuisance tonsils" were finally out, the fact that he'd be going home tomorrow. "They do their job and then, bam!, they kick you out the door," Mrs. Fox said. "It's the insurance companies, you know. Right out the door."

"Insurance companies," Jake nodded. "Crooks." He kept thinking about Frankie. If only poor Frankie could be fixed up and "kicked right out the door." Ryan was still watching his Goosebumps program while half listening to the conversation of the grown-ups. Grinning slightly. Happy to be the object of attention. The same late afternoon sunlight that had so bothered Frankie was also bright across Ryan's bed, across Ryan's bare legs, but for him it wasn't a problem. He seemed to be enjoying it, like a kitten lazing contentedly on a sunny windowsill. "Tell them I hate Jello," he announced suddenly, looking at his mother.

"Did you make out your dinner menu?" "Yeah. But yesterday they got it all messed up."

"Well, I wouldn't worry," Mrs. Fox said. She was in the black leatherette chair beneath the television, one finger twirling a strand of hair near her right cheek.

"I ordered chocolate pudding," Ryan went on. "They better bring pudding this time. Not stupid Jello."

"You're going to OD on chocolate," Jake teased him. The boy rolled his eyes and said, "I doubt it," in his raspy voice. "I only ate one thing of chocolate ice cream and now one thing of pudding. If they bring it."

"Oh well, I guess you'll be OK."

"You can't eat too much chocolate," Ryan scoffed. "That's stupid. Can you? Can somebody eat too much chocolate?"

"No no no," Jake quickly reassured him. "I was kidding." He glanced at Mrs. Fox with an apologetic grin. She laughed politely. Hardly paying attention. "It'll be here soon enough," she said, not quite to the point, maybe distracted by her craving for another cigarette. Jake

didn't want to overstay his welcome, so made his goodbyes to the woman and to Ryan and left the room.

He saw the boy briefly next day while delivering Saturday's mail, Ryan just back from the hospital, waiting at the front door with his Walkman on, headphones pushed back off his ears. Jake asked, "Did you get your chocolate pudding?" Ryan said yeah, he got it, but it wasn't very good, his voice still sandpapery, still healing. After work Jake returned to Silver Cross Hospital, fourth floor, to see Frankie. "Every day, just like I promised," he told the boy, giving him a kiss. The gray-haired man from the other bed was gone downstairs, being tested for his heart, easier to talk and be comfortable without him in the room. "You look better today."

"Seriously?"

"You seem a little stronger," Jake nodded. "You even have your TV on. What is that?"

"Deep Space Nine. You know. Star Trek," Frankie mumbled, attempting a smile, still a painful chore. "I missed last week's episode."

"My god, that's right. A week ago today."

"I was trying to get home. To see it. But I missed it."

"To say the least. Should we watch this one now?"

"Dude, no," Frankie said, raising himself with a squirm of shoulders and elbows and hips against the three rumpled pillows behind him. "Talk to me. Tell me everything. It's been so boring."

"Now I'm certain you're feeling better. Getting bored. Getting restless. That's good."

"Maybe I'll survive after all."

"And to make your life more enjoyable," Jake said, "I brought you a few things." He held up a plastic shopping bag and pulled out a batch of comic books. "Lots of pictures, so you don't have to strain your eyes."

"Good idea. Thanks, Jake, thanks."

"And, so you can listen to some music, I got this Walkman for you. And a couple of cassettes. Grateful Dead. Phish."

“Dude, I can’t believe it!”

“You probably already have a Walkman at home, but. . .”

“An old one,” the boy said. “I can definitely use a new one. Did I tell you? How did you know?” “There must be some psychic connection between us,” Jake smiled. “Plus I saw Ryan today with his Walkman. That made me think of one for you.”

“Ryan? How’s Ryan?” “He just had his tonsils taken out,” Jake said, then told Frankie the whole story of Ryan’s track meet, of going to Ryan’s house, of Ryan’s fever and sore throat. “Same time you were having your accident. My god. Terrible.”

“So is Ryan OK?”

“He’s fine. I think, I’m not sure, but I think he’s letting his hair grow.”

“No. Really?”

“Definitely getting longer. Shaggier. Amazingly cute.”

“Such great hair,” Frankie mumbled. He reached for his cup of juice, grimaced, reached again. Jake quickly stepped forward and grabbed the juice and held it for the boy as he’d done yesterday, holding it while Frankie sipped and swallowed, sipped and swallowed. Late afternoon clouds covering the sun outside the window, a possibility of rain, no need to close the drapes today. Frankie let his head drop back when he’d finished drinking, shut his eyes, released a tired sigh. Jake stroked him on the cheek with the back of his hand. “Should I go?”

“Dude, sorry, I get so exhausted,” the boy said, his eyes open again, suddenly wet with tears.

“Of course you do, of course you do.”

“My head hurts a little.”

“Poor boy. My poor Frankie. Would you like to doze off again? Take a nap?”

“I think so. Sorry. Sorry.”

“Don’t be silly,” Jake told him. More kisses between them, both of them teary-eyed, the man trying to control himself for the boy’s benefit, then forcing himself to leave so Frankie could rest. On his way to the

elevator he passed a man and a woman who might have been Frankie's parents. A certain resemblance. Something about them. Jake wanted to stop them and ask, find out, tell them that he loved their son. Loved their son with every bit of his heart. Instead he kept walking to the elevator without a word, without another glance, then waited a moment and doubled back and strolled casually, slowly past the door of Frankie's room. Sure enough, the man and woman were there at the boy's bedside, the wife mouthing a few words very quietly to her husband, being careful not to wake her son. The comic books and the Walkman and the tapes were all resting on the bedside tray along with Frankie's juice and water and a box of tissues. What would the boy's parents think, Jake wondered, when they noticed the mysterious gifts?

He had a chance to find out next day, Sunday afternoon, when he returned to the hospital. Frankie's parents were already in the room, along with the gray-haired heart patient and a woman obviously his wife. So many people, Jake almost turned back at the door. Then mustered his courage and went in. Nodded hello to the old man and to the woman seated anxiously, looking concerned, near his bed. The privacy curtain between the beds was pulled again, same as Friday, the boy himself hidden on the other side, his parents in two chairs against the wall beneath the television. They looked at Jake as he approached, quizzical anticipation on their faces, waiting for this stranger to introduce himself. Nothing about Mister Patallero appeared Italian or in any way Mediterranean. He was probably third-generation American, family bloodlines diluted by seventy or eighty years of Irish or Slavic or German stock, both he and his wife fair like their son, fine-boned, brown-haired. He had a St. Louis Cardinals cap in his lap and kept fiddling with it and fiddling with it in a way that seemed distracted and jittery, also much like his own son, such a fidgety boy himself. Jake was smiling at the man, about to speak, to say hello, when Frankie himself intervened. "Here's Jake," he said, excitement in his voice as he squirmed himself more upright against the pillows. His unwashed hair

was sticking out in scarecrow tufts above and below the pressure bandage wrapping his skull. “Dude, this is my mom and dad.”

Jake kept smiling as he came forward and shook hands and wondered exactly what he should say to these people, to these parents of his teenaged lover. But it was Mister Patallero who took the initiative, saying, “Sure was nice of you to buy those things for Frankie.” He waved his Cardinals cap at the comics still on the bedside tray. The Walkman and the cassettes were actually on the bed itself, on the mattress where Frankie must have set them when his parents arrived. “Just a little token,” Jake said. “No big deal.”

“I told them you brought me this cool stuff,” Frankie explained. “We were talking about you.”

“I’m still a little confused,” Mister Patallero said, standing now beside his chair, maybe to be polite, maybe just grateful for the chance to stretch his legs. “We’re a little confused,” his wife agreed from the chair closer to the window, a cheerful lilt to her voice. Mister Patallero glanced at her and nodded and said, turning back to Jake, “Aren’t you the father of. . . who is it? Jimmy? Jimmy’s father?”

Jake could feel the heat rushing to his face. Too many people in the room. Behind him, in front of him, all around him. Frankie’s parents watching him, waiting for an answer. He finally shook his head no, but slowly, hesitantly, as if confused himself, trying his best to understand the question. “I live across the street from Jimmy. The Huckfeldts are good friends of mine. The kids stay with me all the time.”

He paused, encouraged by the nods from Frankie’s parents, the story so far making sense in his own head. “I guess the confusion is understandable. Frankie probably thought I was Jimmy’s real father at first. Right at the beginning.”

“Dude, no doubt,” Frankie chimed in, his left foot bouncing nervously beneath the sheet.

“Sometimes I feel like Jimmy’s father. And his brothers’. He has two brothers. They’re always at my house.”

“Jake takes care of them all the time,” Frankie said, eager to corroborate. “He’s like their real father. As far as I’m concerned. Seriously.”

“So Frankie visits your house? Stays there?”

“With Jimmy, sometimes. Or at Jimmy’s house,” Jake said, nodding, shrugging, not so sure anymore how all of this was sounding. “They’re no problem. I don’t mind.”

“Jake’s great, Dad,” Frankie said, anything to help. Mister Patallero looked at his son with a smile that still appeared bewildered. “That’s good, that’s good,” he said. “But you told us that Jake was Jimmy’s father, didn’t you? I’m just asking. Just to be clear.”

“He’s like Jimmy’s father! Like a father or a big brother for everybody around there. Where he lives.”

“That’s OK, don’t get worked up,” Mister Patallero said, reaching out to touch his son’s foot bouncing beneath the sheet. “Settle down.” His wife also got up now and stepped beside the bed to offer Frankie some water. “Or some juice,” she said. “It’s important to keep drinking.” Jake apologized, saying, “It’s my fault for showing up uninvited. Too much confusion.”

“Nobody’s fault,” Mister Patallero said. “We’re glad to meet you. Figure out what’s going on.”

Frankie, just swallowing his juice, said, “It’s an excellent event for all of us. See how happy I am!” He used both hands to lift the corners of his mouth into a plucky little smile. His parents looked at each other and laughed. Jake laughed along with them. “He must be feeling better. Clowning around.”

“You got that right,” Mister Patallero said. “A lot better these last few days.” The confusion about Jake’s identity was temporarily forgotten as everyone began to share stories about the boy’s accident, that terrible day, finding out, seeing him in the hospital for the first dreadful time. Jake continued standing and so did Frankie’s parents, standing and chatting and smiling until Jake finally excused himself.

“I’ve taken up enough of your time. Really. Just wanted to stop and say hello.”

“Nice of you,” Mister Patallero said, more talkative than his wife, still holding his red Cardinals cap in both restless hands. “Right, Frankie?”

“Jake’s the best, Dad.”

“I’ll stop by tomorrow. After work,” Jake said, an announcement for all to hear, a cautious declaration of affection in front of the boy’s own parents. No hugging, no kissing, nothing to embarrass Frankie or make his parents uncomfortable—but still, a small act of defiance on enemy terrain.

Back home Jake made a phone call to Pepper to give him the latest news about Frankie. But it was Pepper who had the biggest news. “My mom thinks she found a buyer,” he said.

“For what?” the man asked, a stupid question, his mind distracted by thoughts of Frankie and the events at the hospital.

“The house,” Pepper said, followed by an impatient little laugh that made him sound, for just a moment, like Ryan. “Our house!”

“Oh damn. Really?”

“She’s happy about it.”

“This is definitely not good news,” Jake said. “Is she sure about this deal?”

“I think so. Pretty sure.”

“I’ll find out from her tomorrow morning, I guess. At work.”

“Are you sad?” the boy asked from his end of the line.

“Very sad. This has been a terrible year. With you moving away. And Doc. And Frankie.”

“Frankie should be OK.”

“Well, that’s true. You’re right.”

“We probably used up our heart’s desire to make him better.”

Jake, phone to his ear, said nothing for two breaths, three breaths, not certain what Pepper was saying. “Used it up? You mean our talismans?”

“I think that must be how it works.”

“But. You think the talismans are used up? No good anymore?”

“I think we used all their power on Frankie. That’s why he’s getting better,” Pepper said. “But now I have to move away.”

“You’ve really thought about this.”

“Does it make sense?”

“Assuming it’s real at all,” Jake said, “yeah, it makes a lot of sense.” He dug his wallet from his back pocket and then held the phone between cheek and shoulder while he retrieved the folded talisman, the elaborate heart within a circle within a star drawn by Pepper in April. “We exhausted our energy, its power, on Frankie.”

“But that’s a good cause.”

“Oh, I agree.”

“But now I have to move away,” Pepper repeated in a voice that sounded almost comically woeful. “Soon as my mom finishes selling the house.”

“Don’t know what to say, Pepper.”

“Do you feel like crying?” “Sort of. Do you?”

“No, that’s OK,” the boy said, as if politely refusing a Coke. “Should I visit you before I leave?” “More than once, I hope. You haven’t stayed here overnight since. . . when? I can’t even remember.”

“Probably in March.”

“In March, yeah, the weekend after St. Patrick’s Day,” Jake said, on the same couch where Pepper had lain naked, getting his dick sucked. “Two months ago. Christ. Why has it been so long?”

“It’s a mystery,” Pepper said, making himself laugh, which made Jake laugh as well. “We’ll have to fix this problem,” Jake decided. “As soon as possible. Maybe next weekend. Keep your schedule open, kid.”

The boy said OK in that same voice of exaggerated woe, all whimpery and fretful, sly young jester. Said OK, I’ll try to be free, I’ll try, I’ll try. Jake grinned into the phone and said yeah, you try real hard. Hear me? Next weekend. We’ll do something.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Over six weeks since Jimmy moved himself and his stuff into the basement. He was feeling comfortable down there, at home in his cozy, secluded den. An odor of mildew, damp wood, damp earth, stronger now as spring brought rain and warmth and more rain, a pervasive moldiness and humidity that Jimmy hardly noticed, the basement still the coolest and best place in the house for doing his workout, lifting his weights. He had a new poster, some lady wrestler named Chyna in a black leather bikini showing her bulgy muscles, Jimmy holding the poster against the wall with one hand as he taped it with the other. The masking tape worked OK, plenty of it on all four corners, the only way to stick anything effectively to the cinderblock walls. Jimmy took a step back to assess his handiwork. Not bad, maybe just a little crooked, but good enough. And Chyna was hot, as muscular as a guy but different. Different from a guy. Tits. Flat at the cunt. Not like a guy.

Jimmy's parents were out for a few hours at some big afterschool Boy Scout thing with JoJo, also with Dally, who was thinking about becoming a Cub Scout himself. Alone in the house, Jimmy had sneaked a beer from the refrigerator, a Miller Draft, just one, otherwise his father would notice the missing cans and whip some serious ass. Anyway, one can was enough when you spiked it generously with Jack Daniel's. There was more bourbon than beer left inside, Jimmy grabbing the can from the card table behind him and giving it a shake to check the weight and the sound, a tinny splish-splash of whisky-reeking brew. He took a swallow. He was naked from lifting weights and had an almost hard pecker and was thinking about jacking off, nothing better to do, Anita off with her fuckin girlfriends. He thought about her brother. Sammy. Probably useless. Starting to rain anyway. Too wet to ride a bike. Too fuckin wet.

The boy quickly dressed and, with his bourbon-laced beer, ran across the street to Jake's house. The man had just gotten home from visiting Frankie. Wondering which to do first: fix something for supper or call Pepper? He was kicking off his shoes when Jimmy came pounding at the front door and tried to let himself in. Unsuccessfully. The door was locked. Jake mumbled a curse or two and turned the brass bolt on the inside door and the flimsier latch on the screen door and then stood aside as Jimmy swaggered past. The boy said, "Hey, man, how's your friend?" "Frankie? He's doing pretty well."

"Oh goodie."

"Should be home next week."

"Goodie goodie," the boy said again, every word fuming bourbon into the room, strong enough for Jake to smell. "Get his lazy ass outta that there hospital."

"Such a sweet guy you are." "As sweet as honey, man, all over," Jimmy said, pacing around the living room in a way that seemed aimless and sluggish. Wearing his camouflage pants and a black bowling shirt with a red collar and red trim and the two top buttons undone, bare chest showing beneath. No cap today, his shag of chestnutty reddish hair damp from the rain, damp also from the sweatiness of weight-lifting, uncombed, not very clean. He took a swig of his bourbioned beer, then another to finish it, held it up for Jake to see. "Drinkin some brew, man. Brew and Jack. Y'all know what that means? Jack Daniel's?"

"Yeah, and I can smell it," Jake said. "So? Now what? You're getting drunk?"

"Nah, fuck, I ain't drunk!"

"Oh no, not at all. Perfectly sober."

"One more little beer," Jimmy decided, on his way to the kitchen, to the refrigerator, Jake following him, already protesting. "I don't want you drinking my beer and getting into trouble. Getting me into trouble."

"Y'all worry too much."

"Maybe not enough. Hey! I'm serious, Jimmy, I don't want you taking. . ."

“Just this one little teeny-tiny beer,” the boy said, a silver can of Coors already in his hand. Ignoring the man. Popping the top with a fizzy hiss and taking a gulp before Jake could do anything to stop him. “Better and better. Whew! That’s good shit.”

“Jimmy, for Chrissake.”

“Don’t worry. Listen to me. It’s rainy day fun, man.”

“You’re too much,” Jake said. The boy grinned with hard-clenched teeth that tightened his jaw and jutted his chin. A little silver cross was just visible through the tangles of his hair where it dangled, glinting, from his left ear. “I’m too much, just too much,” he mocked in a nasty singsong. A smug and reckless glare in his greenish-brown eyes. “Jimmy is just too fuckin much!” He was making his way back to the living room as he talked and drank, bumping past Jake with a rude shoulder, smell of bourbon and beer on his breath. Two small red pimples on his chin, that strong square chin, one more on the side of his nose right in the oily crease where the nostrils flared. “Hey,” he said, “when your friend gets home. . .”

“Frankie?” “Yeah. Frankie. When he gets home. Does he got any weed?”

“I have no idea, Jimmy.”

“He done said once that he smokes. I know he smokes,” the boy insisted, making another slow and desultory tour of the living room with his hightop laces untied and flopping as he ambled from couch to La-Z-Boy to TV. He paused there to inspect the pile of videos. “So y’all can ask him, man. If he’s got any weed.”

“You can ask him yourself. I’m not getting involved.”

“You ain’t no fun,” Jimmy muttered. “Which one of these here tapes is mine?”

“Still in the machine, I think.”

“Y’all like it? Watch it all the time?”

“I like it, sure. I’ve told you before.”

“That’s funny,” the boy laughed, more of a chuckle, suddenly pulling a crumpled pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket, only three

cigarettes left, taking one for himself and offering one to Jake. The man took it with a grudging scowl. "Thanks, Jimmy, what a pal."

"No problem, Jake," the boy said with another rascally grin and chuckle. He kept his beer gripped in one hand as he fumbled with the cigarettes and then used a red Bic disposable to light them, first his own and then Jake's, man and boy face to face in the quiet living room, a tavern smell of beer and bourbon and tobacco smoke between them. "I'm trying to quit," the man said, wincing at the pungent kick of the stale cigarette.

"Great idea, Jake," the boy told him, his sarcastic emphasis on the name like a lilt of mockery, using intimacy like a blade. "You ain't got much will power, Jake."

"I guess you're right, Jimmy."

"Which part of that there tape was your favorite, Jake?"

"Oh, well, yours," the man said while exhaling another lungful of acrid smoke. "No contest! You're the star, pal."

"What about Dally's stuff?"

"Very entertaining. Of course. But yours was. . . was special. Jimmy."

"That weren't me."

"Sure it was. The last part. That was you."

"I wouldn't never let you see me jackin off," Jimmy said, still face to face with the man, smoking his Marlboro and tossing back gulps of beer and standing with one hip relaxed indolently to the side. Using the back of his cigarette hand to brush messy strands of hair from his eyes. "Y'all must be crazy, man."

"You're lying," Jake laughed. He moved toward the boy, poked his shoulder. "I recognized you, I'm sure."

"How? Ain't possible. You ain't never seen me," Jimmy said, finishing his Coors and then using the empty can for his ashes, also for Jake's, holding it out for both of them to share. "Only my girlfriend gets to see my pecker."

“I’ve seen it. You showed it to me. A couple of times,” Jake said. “One time was after Anita gave you a blowjob. Remember? You came over here and showed me.”

The boy was shaking his head as he took a last deep drag on his cigarette. “I musta been wasted, man.”

“Like now?”

“Hey, fucker, you wish,” Jimmy said. He dropped his cigarette butt into the beer can with a dying sizzle of smoke. Another sizzle as Jake did the same. He took the can from the boy’s hand and tossed it clanking into the wastebasket to his left. Jimmy again was saying, “Only my girlfriend, man. I musta been wasted.” He fished into the pocket of his shirt. Slapped at the pockets of his trousers. “Shit, goddammit, I ain’t got no gum. Y’all got any gum, Jake?”

“Nope.”

“You ain’t got no fuckin gum at all? Be serious,” the boy said. He laid his hands on Jake’s shoulders, peering at him almost eye to eye, shorter than the man, breathing open-mouthed, boozy smell each time he exhaled. “That’s a shame. I’m disappointed in y’all. That’s too bad.”

“Speaking of wasted.”

“I ain’t even.”

“Bourbon and beer? No effect?”

“You’d know,” the boy said, hands still on Jake’s shoulders as if to keep himself steady. Jake took hold of the boy’s arms, took hold of his biceps bare and solid beneath the short sleeves of his bowling shirt. Man and boy like two dancers waiting for the music to begin. Jake had never been so close to Jimmy before this strangely intimate moment. A trace of fuzz above his thin top lip. Those two little acne zits on his chin, that other one on his nose. The faintest sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of his nose and the tops of his cheeks, like speckles of brownish paint scrubbed almost clean, almost gone. Jake asked him, “How would I know?”

“Just would,” the boy mumbled. “Hey, what was the other time?”

“What other time?”

“Y’all said you done seen my pecker more than once,” Jimmy said. He shook Jake by the shoulders as if to jar the answer from him. “So? What was the other fuckin time?”

“You remember,” Jake said, giving the boy a shake in return, the two of them slowly grinning as they stared at each other and shook each other and continued their cautious dance. “You were fooling around and got a boner and showed it to me. Here. On the floor.”

“Nah! You ain’t serious.”

“You know it’s true.”

“Show me.”

“Show you?”

“Fucker,” Jimmy snarled, no anger, still grinning. He let Jake move beside him and turn so that they were standing with an arm around each other’s shoulders, a couple of buddies sharing a few laughs. “Show me what happened and maybe I’ll believe y’all.”

“Well, as I recall,” Jake said, walking Jimmy to the couch, “you were using this thing here.” He picked up one of the pillows, a little round green one, green corduroy, and pushed it against the boy’s crotch. “Like this. Rubbing it. Feel familiar?”

“Y’all is crazy.”

“Look who’s talking. I’m just showing you,” Jake said. This close, beneath the smell of booze, the boy had a peculiar sour-milky odor about him. Maybe his hair, maybe his skin. A sour or stale milkiness that Jake had noticed before, but never so up-close and strong in the nose. Not unpleasant, though. A randy boysmell. He kept rubbing the pillow against the bulge in Jimmy’s pants. “So? Is that enough? What’s happening?”

“It ain’t fair,” the boy said. He let his arm drop from Jake’s shoulders and gave the man a shove, but not hard enough to move him. A mock shove. “I ain’t even got no fuckin underwear on. Y’all know that?”

“I can sort of tell, yeah. No underpants.”

“I was liftin weights. And then I dressed fast.”

“You lift weights naked?”

“Fuckin right.”

“Excellent,” Jake said. He took the pillow away, tossed it back onto the couch, poked with one fingertip at the boy’s bulgy crotch. “You lift weights with this big old thing hangin out? My oh my. Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy.”

“You’d like to watch,” the boy mumbled back, another mock shove to Jake’s chest. “It’d make a good show for y’all. Serious. You’d be trippin, man. Serious.”

“So last time,” Jake went on, “you showed me your boner. At this point. You showed it to me.”

“I done told you, man, I ain’t even wearin underwear!”

“So? So what?”

“It ain’t fair. Takin advantage.”

“Aw, poor defenseless Jimmy.”

“Y’all done give me a boner, you cocksucker! And now you wanna fuckin see it,” the boy said, mumbly and snarly as he gave Jake one more playful shove and then turned away. Still mumbling on his way from the living room. “Must be wasted. Fucker. Where’s your bed? Gonna lay down, at least.” Stalking the dark hallway to Jake’s bedroom. The man right behind him, just following and watching, not saying anything until the boy had dropped onto the bed on his back with a loud squeak and creak of mattress springs. “You OK, Jimmy? Too much bourbon?”

“Don’t even talk so stupid,” the boy said. West wind blowing a spatter of rain against the gray windowpanes. Huckfeldt hounds baying and woof-woofing from across the street, mournful in the drizzly damp. Jimmy unzipped and unbuttoned his camouflage trousers. “Be happy I’m wasted, man. Serious.”

“I thought you weren’t. Weren’t wasted. You said before.”

“Maybe a little,” Jimmy said. Trousers unzipped, unbuttoned. Hands behind his head now, nonchalant, eyes fixed on the man standing in front of him. “It’s ’cause my girlfriend ain’t around.”

“Anita?”

“Bitch ain’t around.”

Jake nodded. He stepped forward so that Jimmy, to give him room, had to spread his knees. The boy mumbled, “If she was around. Listen to me, Jake! But now y’all done give me a boner.”

“That’s for sure,” the man said, staring at it, no underwear to hide it beneath the unzipped and unbuttoned gap in Jimmy’s camouflage pants. He leaned forward and opened the pants wider and then tugged at them, a request and an invitation, Jimmy’s decision to continue now, to lift his hips, yeah, just like that, to let Jake drag the pants down past his knees to his bare ankles, no underwear and no socks, hightop sneakers unlaced, easy to yank them off, easy after that to drag the pants off the rest of the way, Jimmy naked now below the waist, spreading his legs to let Jake kneel and get comfortable, to let Jake get at his achy hard pecker. The man put a hand on each of Jimmy’s muscly thighs and felt up along his hips, up onto his belly beneath the black bowling shirt with the red collar, then paused to unbutton the shirt, top two buttons already undone. Pulling the shirt open. Slipping both hands slowly across Jimmy’s smooth chest, the small nipples, down again across his stomach and the adolescent treasure-trail of fuzz that ran from his belly button to his brown pubic bush. “Definitely the same guy who was in your video, Jimmy. Same big boner. Same big balls. Yep,” Jake said, whispery in the quiet bedroom, rain still spattering the window. “I’d recognize this sexy bod anywhere, anytime.”

“Y’all talk a lot,” Jimmy said in his boozy voice. His eyes were closed, hands still behind his resting head. Jake tried to laugh through his nervousness. Odor of sour milkiness stronger now from the boy’s naked body. A brown mole on his left groin, in the crease between thigh and scrotum, a warty mole that stuck out for Jake to feel curiously with his thumb. Caressing the boy’s thighs with both hands. Jimmy tightening his butt, making his erection jump and bounce, jump and bounce. Thick rod of meat, all three Huckfeldt brothers with that same perfectly straight boner pressed flat to the belly, Jimmy’s badly scarred around the



whole underside of the glans, bumpy and puffy with scar tissue, even the pee slit slightly deformed, gappy between two fleshy lumps. Like a pinkish, knobbly mushroom widely vented. The boy kept tightening his butt, his rectal muscles, twitching his cock for Jake's benefit. Wanting him to look at it, to touch it, to take it. No embarrassment about the unusual scarring. Impatient finally with the man's slow, explorative caresses. He reached between his own legs and started jacking himself off, using his right hand, left hand still behind his uptilted head, eyes open now, watching himself. Big pear-shaped scrotum with heavy balls bouncing, bouncing, bouncing in rhythm with his hand. Balls and boner both oddly pale, none of the hot red flush you might expect, the bouncy scrotum actually cool to Jake's stroking fingers, cool also to his tongue as he leaned closer and licked it. Licking there for just a scant minute, strange Jimmy-smell sour in his nostrils, before running his tongue higher right onto the boy's fingers, dirty-knuckled, the reekiness of cigarette smoke on those gripped fingers sliding up and down against Jake's busy mouth, suddenly a rancid taste as Jimmy slopped onto his own hand, too quick, finished, a ripe gushing of fourteen-year-old cum. Jake held the boy's hand and licked his messy fingers, a funny brand of tart and bleachy ice cream, then covered the gooey cockhead with his mouth and suckled it and cleaned it until Jimmy winced and hissed a "goddamn" and sat upright with a light swat to the man's head still between his legs. Jake drew back and wiped his mouth and saw the rest of the semen on Jimmy's stomach, downward oozing. "Use the sheet," he said. "They're due for the laundry anyway. Go ahead."

"You ain't even professional, man."

"Meaning what?"

"My girlfriend knows how to give head. Knows good. Swallows the whole thing."

"You didn't give me a chance."

"Too fuckin slow," the boy complained, using the sheet, chin tucked against his chest as he finished wiping the semen from his belly. Then the man's spit from his penis. Threw the sheet aside and swung his

leg over Jake's head to get himself free, to stand up, once more saying, "Fuckin knows how to swallow the whole thing, all of it."

"Next time," Jake said.

"Don't even," the boy replied, still wearing his shirt, nothing else, the black shirt unbuttoned and loose on his wide shoulders. He turned to the mirror—like brother JoJo, fond of his own reflection. No post-coital remorse or sheepishness for this kid. No hasty attempt to dress, to cover himself, to distance himself from his just-completed indiscretion. None of that. Jimmy was happy to linger. Comfortable. Admiring himself. His penis still hard enough to be springy, bobbing as he moved himself in front of the bureau mirror. "Now that's a big pecker," he said, conversing with his own reflected image.

"Like I said before," Jake agreed, still on one knee beside the bed. "Where'd those scars come from?"

"When I was a baby."

"How?" "When they cut it. It done got infected," Jimmy said, his concentration still on his own mirrored body. Not satisfied, he removed his last bit of clothing, that black shirt with the red collar, then did a slow turn—flexing, posing—to show the fully nude specimen of himself to the man staring. Paused to display his back, the muscles in his shoulders, tensing his ass (meat-solid cheeks with a tight, shallow crack between), the powerful flare of his thighs, his calves. Then a view from the side, showing off one biceps, then from the front, both biceps together, the strong swell of his pecs, flat stomach, sturdy hips framing that big stiffish dick and those saggy nuts and the curly brown bush of his pubes. He kept glancing at himself in the mirror. "I look pretty good, right?"

"Beautiful," Jake said. "Really beautiful."

"Guys ain't beautiful."

"You sound like Ryan."

"That little piss-ant." "He's not so bad."

"Get him over here," Jimmy nodded, "and he'll be suckin my pecker."

“I doubt it.”

“Y’all wait and find out.” “Seems unlikely.”

“Make hisself useful,” Jimmy said, “like this here.” He gave his hips a few thrusts to demonstrate, then repeated “like this here” and stepped forward and grabbed Jake by the ears, not roughly, and poked his penis against the man’s lips and then actually into the man’s open, willing mouth. Jake closed on it and started to suck, teenaged boys often good for a second cum after a surprisingly brief respite. But not this time. Jimmy made a wincing noise, same as before, then pulled away and protectively clutched the head of his dick still sensitive from its moments-earlier ejaculation and now, once again, shiny with Jake’s saliva. “Fucker, just showin you, that’s all.”

“Oh yeah,” Jake said, “I’m Ryan, I forgot.”

“The little cocksucker.”

“If you say so.” “How ’bout them other friends of yours?”

“What about them?” “They probably give head,” Jimmy said, back in front of the mirror. He studied his biceps from different angles. Suddenly farted, a loud one unmuffled by any clothing. “That Frankie, I bet. He’s that way. I bet he is.”

“Not for me to say, Jimmy.”

“And that Pepper kid,” the boy went on, pausing for another percussive fart, then a satisfied “ah” and a grin at Jake now sitting on the edge of the bed behind him. “Him and Dally was givin each other head that one time. When I come in. I remember.”

“You mean that one time in the living room?”

“I remember what they was doin. I could tell.”

“They were wrestling,” Jake said. “That’s all.” In fact, they’d been getting their dicks sucked, true enough, but by Jake himself, not each other. All three Huckfeldt brothers, Jake suddenly thought. I’ve now sucked on the dicks of all three Huckfeldt brothers. From junior wienie to king-sized frank. “Anyway, you’ve got a girlfriend, so what’s the problem?”

“I ain’t gettin along so good with her.”

“Uh oh.”

“She’s a pain in the ass. Always jealous, man.”

“So now you want me and Pepper and the other boys to give you blowjobs?” Jimmy picked up his pants, finally ready to begin dressing. “Don’t make it sound like somethin queer.”

“Sorry,” Jake laughed. He reached down and plucked the black bowling shirt off the floor near his feet, the sweaty smell of it wafting to him as he held it for the boy. “You’re an unusual guy, Jimmy.”

“Fuck you.”

“It’s not an insult.” “Don’t act like I’m queer.”

“I’ll try to remember,” Jake said, forcing himself not to argue, all the power on Jimmy’s side, one vengeful word enough to get Jake arrested, to ruin his life. The boy himself was grumbling, “Y’all done get me wasted and take advantage, then talk bullshit.” He fastened his pants and looked around, suddenly grinning, teeth clenched. “Just kiddin, man. Forget it. You’re OK. You’re cool.” He took the shirt from Jake and slipped it on but didn’t bother to button it. Checked his hair in the mirror and combed it quickly with his fingers and then gave himself, and the man behind him, another grin. He sat in the living room afterwards and played Nintendo. Jake took refuge in the kitchen and microwaved a Stouffer’s frozen dinner for himself. Jimmy was gone by the time he finished eating.

## CHAPTER NINE

Bing bing bing, those hospital chimes, musical accompaniment as Frankie took his shuffling stroll around the hallways of the fourth floor. Nurses joked with him and smiled as he made his familiar tour, three days now on his feet, everyone in love with this sweet, cheerful boy with the bruised and busted face. His pressure bandages had just come off and his dark blond hair was freshly washed and brushed, long enough to cover his ears and nearly touch his narrow, white-gowned shoulders. Shuffle, shuffle, along he went like some old grandpa crippled and bent with arthritis.

Lunch was waiting on his tray when he returned to his room. Turkey sandwich, fries, carrot sticks, lime Jello salad, milk, vanilla ice cream. No one else in the room. The old man with heart problems had been tested and medicated and sent home, his bed still empty, Frankie glad for the privacy. Jerry Springer was on TV. The boy turned the channel to something less noisy. So many things, since his accident, made him nervous—nervous in a breathless way, like being on the edge of tears. Part of his recovery, the doctors said. A type of post-traumatic stress. Understandable. Normal. An episode of *Arthur* on PBS was quieter and easier to take as Frankie munched his sandwich and fries, small bites, his jaws and cheeks still swollen, still sore. Munching, watching the cartoon, his thoughts wandering again and again to his parents and how they must be taking his announcement, just yesterday, that he was gay.

He hadn't planned it. His announcement. That he was gay. They had made some comments, his parents, especially his mother, after meeting Jake, some comments that seemed friendly but double-edged, suspicious, a way of fishing for information. "Awfully generous to be buying you these things," she'd said, meaning the tapes, the comic

books, the Walkman. "You two must be good friends." Frankie's father listening and nodding, eyes moving from his wife to his son then back again, hands turning and turning the Cardinals cap on his lap. Frankie not saying much, feeling headachy and tense and a little angry as his mother kept talking. "A nice man to spend so much on a young boy. So much money. Time." She was nodding at her own observations. Every day more comments like that, always beginning with the same question: "Did your friend Jake stop by today? Was he here again?" By Thursday Frankie had been feeling strong enough to show some annoyance, an impatient response banging like a gong in his head: I'm gay, OK, I'm gay, so quit bugging me, quit hinting around, quit wondering! Impossible to say these things if he'd been home and healthy and defenseless; but here, here in the hospital, he had a special opportunity to speak the whole unsettling truth from a place of safety. His sickbed. Protected from any retaliatory anger or hysteria in his fortress of sheets and pillows. No yelling at the poor injured boy! No loud upset or stress. No fussing or arguing with someone who'd been nearly killed twelve days ago.

All these thoughts in Frankie's mind yesterday evening as he'd sat in bed and waited, nervously waited for his mother or father to say something about Jake. Inevitable, their comments. Jake had brought several new comics for the boy, also a box of Twinkies, Frankie's favorite junk food, everything plainly displayed on the bedside tray. No brother or sister this day. No Ben or Amy. They'd come along to visit a couple of times, but not this Thursday, just Frankie's mom and dad in the room with him, the other bed empty, Wheel of Fortune on the wall-mounted television, gray drizzle against the window, another rainy evening. Finally his father, this time his father, had asked, "So your friend Jake brought you some stuff? He was here again today?"

"He comes every day," Frankie said. "Like he promised."

"He's very faithful." "What'll he do next week? He'll miss you," Frankie's mother said. "I forget—is he married?" "Come on, Mom, you know he's not." "Do I know?"

“You’ve asked before.”

“I don’t think so, Frankie.” “It seems like you’ve asked everything. About a billion times.” “We’re concerned, that’s all.” “We’re your parents,” the boy’s father said, then shrugged and looked at his wife and shrugged again. Frankie asked, “Concerned about what? What’re you concerned about?” He had a pillow hugged to his chest like a shield, and his eyes, those mournful brown eyes, were suddenly wet with tears. His mother, taking over, said, “Now relax, relax. We’re not accusing anybody.”

“Well, go ahead!”

“You’re getting all worked up.”

“I’m all worked up, that’s right,” the boy said, hugging the pillow more tightly, his overanxious tongue tripping lispily on his braces. “Jake’s been my best friend, and I’m not saying anything about him, I’m not talking about him, but I am saying right now, since you want to know so much, I am telling you that I’m gay! That’s what I’m telling you!”

Silence, like clumsy melodrama, filled the room. Frankie’s mother and father looked at each other from their adjacent chairs beneath the TV, which was providing the only sound, quiz-show noises muffled against the mattress, the remote speaker upside down next to Frankie’s hip. The boy himself kept the pillow clutched to his chest and waited for an uproar that never came. A relief spreading like warmth inside him, easier than he’d expected to break the Awful Truth. Partly because of his injuries still making him weak and woozy and not quite himself, also because of the Tylenol with Codeine No. 4 that he was taking three times each day—like being permanently buzzed on beer or grass—the words had seemed to speak themselves, emotion overcoming caution or common sense. His father finally moved from the chair as if to stretch his restless muscles. “Well. OK, OK, OK,” he murmured to himself, to the room, wispy brown hair in a boyish cowlick at the back of his head. “Let’s not get upset.”

“No one is upset,” his wife said. “We’re just talking.” She looked at Frankie and smiled and nodded. “We’re having a nice discussion.”

“You heard me?” the boy asked. “What I told you?”

“Of course we did.”

“OK,” his father said once more, as if he’d just returned to the room. “Listen. Frankie. You’re only sixteen. Kids go through phases.”

“It’s not a phase!”

“You can’t be sure,” the man said.

“You’re so young,” his wife agreed. They were speaking in quietly urgent voices, making an obvious effort not to stress their bruised and battered son. “Did your friend Jake say something to you?” “Don’t be. . . I mean, no. No! Say something? To me?”

“Does he talk to you about these things?” his father asked.

“Dad, don’t even think for one minute that Jake did something wrong! I’m serious!”

“We’re not accusing anyone,” the boy’s mother insisted for a second time. “But we’re your parents, after all. We’re concerned.” She was repeating herself, circling back to comments made before Frankie’s announcement, as if the announcement itself had been no great shock or revelation, merely confirmation of something already suspected, already silently half-assumed. Frankie’s dreams, that night, had been crowded with arguments and tension, with whispered secrets and accusations and incoherent shouting. Much worse, those frenetic dreams, than the placid reality. Now, Friday afternoon, Frankie was eating his lunch and feeling surprisingly calm, more nervous about telling Jake what he’d done than about seeing his parents again. When Jake did show up, and when Jake did find out, he reacted much like Frankie’s father, pacing uneasily and murmuring, “OK, OK, well, that’s fine, I guess. They weren’t freaked out? Your parents?”

“Dude, no. Not bad. I don’t think they were too surprised.”

“What about me? Should I be worried?”



Frankie pushed his hair behind one ear, then the other. “No, no way, it’s cool. My mom and dad won’t do anything. To you, I mean. They’re worried about me, if anything. Not you.”

“Even so,” Jake said, still on his feet, “I don’t especially want to see them right now. Or anytime soon. I appreciate your optimism, but. . . better this way. Keeping out of sight.”

“Well, I guess.”

And so Jake kissed the boy and told him how good he was looking, how strong, call me if you need anything, better for me not to visit tomorrow or Sunday. But call. Especially if you go home Monday. Call me. Let me know. And call Pepper. I did, Frankie said. A couple times. Oh, Jake said. Good. The little bugger didn’t tell me. But that’s good. That’s good. I love you, he said. I know, Frankie said. I love you too, Jake.

Just about that same time, across town, Pepper himself was packing some things into his gym bag for his weekend visit with Jake. An extra pair of underwear, extra socks, shorts, some art supplies, comic books, his Classic Spells and Enchantments, toothbrush, Gameboy, a new South Park wristwatch (Cartman with extended arms ticking off the minutes, the hours). He paused and looked around his bedroom for anything he might have forgotten. Lots of his stuff already packed away in cardboard boxes for the upcoming move to Joliet. The whole house gradually emptying into a maze of boxes to be loaded, in two weeks, into a Mayflower truck and shipped 150 miles northeast to Pepper’s new hometown. He spotted a half-empty bag of mini Three Musketeers and twisted it closed and stuffed it into the red Nike gym bag between his Gameboy and his underpants. In case he got hungry.

The heart’s-desire talisman was lying unfolded next to the bag. Every random glimpse of it reminded Pepper of Frankie. Their conversation last night on the phone. Frankie coming right out and telling Pepper that he was gay, which Pepper already knew, no surprise, Frankie and Jake both gay, both alike. But Frankie had never announced

it that way before last night, eager to talk about it, to describe how he had told his parents, how glad he was, such a relief, so horrible to have a giant secret like that, dude, you can't imagine! Pepper had listened and listened without saying much, their conversation eventually drifting to other topics—to the new Godzilla movie, to Pepper's move out of town, Frankie saying how sad, such a bummer, you can't leave, you should move in with Jake so you can stay in Sandburg. I'll be back, Pepper had said. I'll visit a lot. Yeah, Frankie had said, but it won't be the same. Pepper, thinking about it now, staring at the talisman, glumly agreed. It wouldn't be the same. Nothing would be the same.

A few blocks away, on Tompkins Street, Ryan Fox was just arriving home from swimming practice. Preparing for the summer season with his Taft Swim Club. His first practice since having his tonsils removed ten days ago. He was downstairs in the family room, checking the VCR, making sure that the four o'clock episode of Power Rangers had recorded properly while he was out. Using the VCR reminded him, again, of the tape that Jake had made at the track meet two weeks earlier, a tape that Ryan wanted to see. Definitely wanted to see. He glanced at the clock, still early enough to ride to Jake's for a quick visit.

Cool drizzle against his face as he pedaled his blue Schwinn Speedster to Whitman Street. Wearing his silver-and-black nylon windbreaker and a black WrestleMania cap backward on his head, the blackness of the cap stark against the golden yellow of his hair. He could see at once that Jake was gone, no car in the driveway, nobody home. The boy stopped on the sidewalk out front, even tried knocking on the door, just in case. It was making him mad, same way every time he came over to visit this past week, Jake always gone somewhere, always busy with other stuff. Ryan pounded at the door, gave it a kick with one of his Air Jordans, then sulked back to his bike.

The street was quiet just then, no traffic, no woof-woofing hounds, quiet enough for Ryan to hear the sounds of some other kid playing

nearby. Playing war. Battle noises. Explosions, bullets, ack-ack guns, muffled cursing and half-shouting, all produced by a little-boy voice coming from behind Jake's house. Or from around the side. Near the dilapidated one-car garage that Jake never used except as a storage shed for his lawn mower, rakes, lawn chairs. Ryan prowled toward the noise—along the gravel driveway overgrown with crabgrass and dandelions, past the full-blooming purple irises that hid the rusty screens of the basement windows. Another few steps and he could see the boy who was creating the sound effects. It was Dally Huckfeldt, sitting cross-legged on a ledge of concrete where a side door led into the garage. He looked up at the gravelly crunch of Ryan's sneakers. Grinned as if spying an old friend. "You're that kid," he said. Not quite sure, but then remembering. "Ryan. You're Ryan."

"You're that Joey kid's little brother," Ryan replied. He'd seen Dally once or twice before at Jake's house, also knew him from Butler Middle School, where a jumble of grade levels had been thrown together because of overcrowding at the other elementary school across town. "You shouldn't be in Jake's yard. He's not home."

"He don't care none."

"He's not even home," Ryan said again.

"I been waitin for him. He goes to the hospital. For Frankie." Ryan nodded, remembering now that Frankie had been hurt, something about crashing his car, Jake mentioning it once while delivering the mail. The gentle drizzle was falling in heavier drops as the boys appraised each other. "Anyway," Ryan tried again, "you shouldn't be messing around in Jake's yard."

"He's my friend. He don't care none."

"He's my better friend, I bet," Ryan said. Dally shrugged and held up the red Power Ranger he'd been using in his noisy battle. "Jake done gimme this here," he said. "For Christmas." Ryan stepped forward scowling, not happy to be one-upped by a Huckfeldt. He mumbled, "That's OK, because Jake gave me Top Gun for Nintendo. For my

birthday. And, anyway, I've got every Power Ranger there is. All of them. From every series."

"That's a lot."

"I've got every one, and I'm not even kidding."

"Y'all oughta bring 'em over," Dally suggested. He was breathing loudly, open-mouthed, his asthma making him wheezy. He held up a dirty and battered GI-Joe to go with his red Power Ranger. "We could have us a fight!"

"You got more stuff?"

"Got some," Dally nodded. He hopped to his feet and swiped at his raindropped face with a bare arm, no jacket or sweatshirt on this drizzly chill day, just a baggy black Seagram's T-shirt probably borrowed from JoJo or Jimmy. "I can show y'all right now!"

"In your house?"

"I live across the street," Dally nodded, as if Ryan didn't know, leading him back now along the driveway to the street where they paused, rain pattering softly, to admire Ryan's bike. Then across, jogging, to Dally's house. They entered through the front, directly into the living room scattered with filled ashtrays, pop cans and beer cans, empty chip bags, glasses, cups, plates, newspapers, toy guns and dinosaurs and Tonka trucks. Ryan, true to habit, crouched just inside the door to remove his shoes. Dally looked back and followed the other boy's example by kicking off his own untied and too-large hightops (again probably JoJo's or Jimmy's) right in the middle of the floor, adding to the clutter. There was a smell in the room, in the whole house, of coffee and cigarettes and fried-chicken grease, of musty carpets, of dirty socks. Dally's mother, a half-smoked Kool in her hand, glanced in from the kitchen to identify the intruders, seemed satisfied, then returned without saying a word to whatever it was she'd been doing. The two boys passed the television blaring Tom Brokaw on the news, the kitchen to their left, a short hallway to their right leading to a bathroom and two bedrooms. "Mine and JoJo's," Dally said as they came to one of the rooms and went in. He looked at Ryan with his funny smile, one eye

squinted and side teeth clenched, funny Popeye smile. My stuff, see, he said, picking up an asthma inhaler, a purple Nerf football, a little pink plastic bottle of Soapy Bubble. Picking up each item, whatever he happened to put his hand on, showing it to Ryan, setting it down again for something else.

He had three Power Rangers, two GI-Joes, one Transformer with a broken head. He showed them all to Ryan, who agreed, when Dally proposed it, that they should build a fort and have a battle. Then Dally noticed Ryan's WrestleMania cap and wanted to try it on, asked if he could keep it, asked again. Ryan said no, no way, then no again. Dally finally gave up, but he was focused now on wrestling instead of action figures and forts, suddenly eager to wrestle with Ryan, someone near his own size and weight and only two years older, a much better opponent than either of his considerably larger, heavier brothers. Ryan was willing, he liked to wrestle, but it was starting to rain harder, blowing spattery against the bedroom window, and he needed to ride home on his bike. And he couldn't afford to be late for dinner. "My dad'll kill me," he told Dally. "I just wanted to see Jake's video. He's got a video. He made it."

"Wiener movies," Dally grinned, parroting his brother JoJo's term for raunchy homemade videos. "We made us a real awesome one with Jake's camera."

"Not like that, stupid."

"It's funny, though," Dally said. "You done seen it or not? The one we made?"

"Not that dumb shit," Ryan scoffed, thinking of some video horseplay in January, maybe February, JoJo mooning the camera and humping the TV screen, JoJo and Dally flashing their dicks, being goofy. He had no idea that Dally was talking about something very different, about Jimmy's recent extravaganza, the X-rated opus resting right now in Jake's VCR across the street. Dally said, "It weren't dumb. Was funny." Ryan shrugged on his way toward the door, ready to leave. Dally kept chatting about the video, still eyeing the other boy's cap as if

tempted to grab it and run. “Ryan, next time? Next time if we make us another movie? Y’all can be in it with us.”

“I hate your brothers,” Ryan said, glad they weren’t around. Dally just said, “That’s OK. Them movies is fun. We can rassle, too.” He was walking backward in front of his new friend, reaching out, poking him on the chest. Ryan poked back. He enjoyed having another kid making a fuss over him. Especially someone younger. Like having a little brother. He stopped at the door to put on his shoes. “Next time,” he said, “I can bring my Power Rangers and stuff. We can fight them outside. In your yard. Or Jake’s yard.”

“Make forts and shit.”

“Use sticks and rocks and stuff.”

“Jimmy and JoJo won’t even bother us none,” Dally promised. Ryan nodded his approval before heading home on his Speedster, arriving wet and late for dinner, his parents clearly upset until they heard about his trip to Whitman Street and some new friend named Dally. Same school, practically the same age, something about playing Power Rangers together. Ryan didn’t make friends easily, not even among his track and swimming teammates, so his parents were happy to hear about this new boy, happy that Ryan was already planning to see him again tomorrow with a full arsenal of action figures and battle toys. “But not if it’s raining again,” his mother warned him. “End up sick as a dog. Forget it, mister.” Ryan grumbled an “OK” as he sat down to dinner.

Also dinnertime, just then, at the Lopez house on Grand Avenue. Jimmy had come to see Anita and decided to stay for chicken and noodles, one of the special dishes made by Anita’s Vietnamese mother. Strange flavors, hot, lemony, like nothing else Jimmy had ever tasted. But good. Seven people at the table. Mother and father, Anita and Jimmy, two little sisters and brother Sammy. All four Lopez children dark and black-haired and pretty, Mexican blood mingling with Vietnamese to produce the distinct and exotic look of them. Jimmy was on a metal stool, not enough chairs for everyone, wedged between Anita

and Sammy at the overcrowded table. He and Sammy had become almost friends in the last few months, seeing each other so often, Jimmy fourteen years old, Sammy thirteen, both of them a little punkish, unruly, a couple of adolescent tough guys who seemed to enjoy each other's crude bragging and posturing.

After dinner, some kind of coconut cake for dessert, the two boys went outside to smoke cigarettes behind the garage, taking advantage of a break in the rain, mosquitoes swarming around them in the evening air.

"So many fuckin bugs," Jimmy complained in a low snarl.

"Lots of 'em. Like early, yo. Not even summer yet."

"Smoke oughta drive 'em away."

"No doubt, man," Sammy agreed. He took a showy drag on his Marlboro and blew out the smoke in a billowy arc, then did it a second time and laughed at himself, saying, "Dizzy, yo. That's fucked."

"You're a wuss, man."

"Fuck you."

"Like this here, pussy," Jimmy said, inhaling smoke with a loud hiss, spewing it out again like a volcanic plume, then coughing despite his best attempt to look cool. "I done it wrong," he told Sammy. The younger boy laughed at Jimmy as he'd laughed at himself. Swatted a mosquito on his bare arm, another on his cheek, his skin like dark honey, like dusky amber. Looking so much like his sister, like Anita, that it made Jimmy feel weird sometimes just being around him, just being close to him. That thick black hair and those slightly slanted black-olive eyes. Those high cheekbones. That full and curvy top lip beneath his pushed-up nose. Like Anita with a fade haircut and more jewelry. A gold stud and gold hoop both in his left ear. Two thin gold chains and a crucifix around his neck. "I wear gold like a fuckin king, yo," he'd bragged to Jimmy more than once while standing around, as now, killing time, smoking, being bored. Jimmy, this evening, staring at him, said, "Your fuckin sister, man. She's always pissed at me for somethin."

"Again?"

"More and more. Don't even know for what. So stupid."

“She’s stupid,” Sammy agreed, nodding, swatting.

“Won’t even come out here.”

“That’s wack, man.”

“At supper? Y’all seen her? She says I ain’t mature. What’s that shit about?”

“Pain in the ass.”

“Wants me to join the fuckin football team next year. Believe that shit, man? Her a cheerleader, me on the fuckin football team?”

“Yo, man, you could make the team,” Sammy said, just being matter-of-fact, Jimmy standing there as solidly muscled as any high-school linebacker. “If you wanted to, I bet.”

“That ain’t the point, asshole.”

“I’m just sayin, is all.”

“Gonna break up with her, I’m serious. Too much bullshit.”

“Damn, yo, that’s harsh.”

“Too much bullshit,” Jimmy muttered again, finished with his cigarette and unwrapping a piece of bubblegum. Silence between the boys as Jimmy worked at the hard gum, chomping at it, trying to soften it. Sammy was using the butt of his cigarette to poke at a spiderweb on the aluminum-sided wall of the garage. As if thinking aloud, he finally said, “If you wanted to make the fuckin team, is what I’m sayin.”

“I could make it, yeah,” Jimmy said. “But I don’t wanna. I ain’t interested, man. You understand?” He eyed the other boy poking at the web, using a match now, trying to ignite it. Something babyish about Sammy Lopez. Baby-faced. Baby-fat. Almost pudgy whenever he took off his shirt or walked around the house in his underwear (guaranteed to annoy his sisters). Not fat. No way. Just baby-fat. Jimmy, still chewing, said, “Man, y’all oughta lift some iron. Pump up.”

“Why you think that?”

“Y’all is soft, man.” “Fuck you, crank,” Sammy grinned, difficult to offend or insult him, even though he always played at being tough, an original gangsta, flexing his T-shirted arm now to show off his hardly-there biceps. “See this? Anyway, we ain’t got no weights.”



“I know that. What I’m sayin is? I’m makin y’all a generous offer, man.”

“Your weights?”

“In my basement,” Jimmy said, pausing to blow a bubble, no good, still too sugary. A chorus of thunder rolled above them in softer then louder then softer rumbles, some drizzle also falling again from the stubborn overcast. “Got me a whole set. Do some serious body-buildin, man.”

“Where you live, Jimmy?” “On Whitman. You serious? Y’all don’t know my house?”

“Why you say that, yo?” “I been goin with your sister, asshole, for like months.”

“Fucker, you been goin with her, not me! How I fuckin know your house, dawg?”

“Hey, whatever,” Jimmy shrugged. “This motherfuckin rain, man. I gotta go.”

“Where on Whitman?” “Seven forty-eight.”

“On Whitman,” Sammy repeated softly to himself. “I can find it.”

“Yeah, asshole, y’all come over sometime. If I’m around? We’ll get busy with them weights and shit.”

Sammy, perhaps misunderstanding, said, “I can get some shit. I can bring it.”

“Good idea, man. I might be gettin some too,” Jimmy said, his plan to ask Frankie still fresh in his mind. “Yeah, fuck, that ain’t a bad idea.”

He left, riding his orange Huffy, with thunder again rumbling its threat overhead. He didn’t even bother going back inside the house. Didn’t even bother saying goodbye to Anita.

At home he found Dally acting excited and happy, eager to talk about Power Rangers and making forts and playing with his new friend Ryan. Jimmy mumbled, “That little piss-ant,” but kept listening and even found himself smiling at his baby brother’s chatter, unusual for Dally to be so talkative about anything. A rerun of The Simpsons was on TV.

Jimmy took off his wet shirt and pants—the cuffs of the pants soaked from riding through puddles—then flopped onto the couch. His mother came into the room with a “five minutes till supper” announcement, scowled when she saw Jimmy in nothing but socks and underpants, called him “you big slob” before heading back to the kitchen, her husband already there at the table, smoking a cigarette, sipping a beer. JoJo at a late Boy Scout meeting. Dally joined his big brother on the couch for their few minutes together before suppertime. Still chattering about making forts in the yard with Ryan next time they were together, having battles just like on TV, tomorrow, maybe tomorrow. “Be fun,” the small boy said, bouncy on the cushion beside his brother. Jimmy chuckled, “Y’all is excited, little mouse.” He put his arm around Dally’s shoulders and pulled the boy against him, Dally glad to snuggle with his big brother, the two of them leaning back against the corner of the couch. Dally sucking his thumb. Jimmy just holding him, comfortable, not quite watching the TV show, not quite listening, his gum making tiny pops as he blew bubbles, one after another, chewing and blowing, chewing and blowing, rain against the window beside them.

## C

## CHAPTER TEN

Pepper went through his gym bag a final time, everything OK, then fished out two of his mini Three Musketeers and gobbled them in four quick bites. He could hear his mother and Jake in the living room looking at all of the boxes, talking about the fateful move to Joliet, only two weeks away, hard to believe you're really going, you've threatened to do it for so many years, now this, the end of an era. Finally Jake was ready to leave and gave a "let's go!" shout that brought Pepper loping from the bedroom, long-legged boy in his red Bulls T-shirt and baggy jungle-striped athletic pants and new black hightops that Jake had never seen before. "Snazzy," the man said. "Those shoes. Very cool." He gave the boy a hug, Pepper accepting it limp-armed as always, holding his red Nike bag as if ready, right now, to move out of town.

Only in the car did Jake notice and wonder about Pepper's missing saxophone. "You didn't bring it this time? No concert? No tunes?"

"It wasn't mine. I couldn't keep it."

"True, that's true, I forgot."

"I had to give it back. After band class ended." "School finishes next week?"

Pepper nodded yes, adding, "Anyway, I got tired of it. My mom says I can maybe get a guitar. In Joliet."

"Electric?"

"Definitely."

"I think you have good fingers for it."

"My fingers are good?"

"For the guitar, or the piano, I think so," Jake said, the short trip from Pepper's house already completed, Whitman Street alive with the drone of lawn mowers on this sunshiny Saturday afternoon. "Long fingers like yours." He parked his Volvo in the driveway and was getting out when he noticed two things that took him by surprise: JoJo in the back yard, just past the garage, and Ryan across the street with Dally.

Odd, confusing, too many people suddenly and strangely out of place. JoJo, it turned out, was mowing the grass, an arrangement he had with Jake, using the Huckfeldts' own Toro and gasoline for the job whenever he had the time, the inclination, the desire for ten bucks, which was what Jake paid him. JoJo's own idea, hyper-energetic boy always looking for something to do, yeah, something to do, whether Scouting or talent shows or little chores for the neighbors—even, a couple of times, vacuuming Jake's carpets just for fun. And now mowing the lawn. Already finished with the front. Yesterday's rain had left the grass damp and clumpy, and JoJo was leaving damp and clumpy trails wherever he cut, a joyfully careless job typical of his approach to everything. Jake lost sight of him behind the house and turned his attention to the other boys across the street.

No need, however. Dally and Ryan had seen Jake's Volvo pull into the driveway and were already racing to greet him. Jake hugged them both and listened to their hasty recap of meeting each other yesterday, going to Dally's house, talking about Power Rangers, getting together again today. "We's havin fun," Dally said. He was hanging onto Jake, both arms around the man's waist, looking up at him and grinning his squinty Popeye grin as if peering into the sun. "Ryan's got hisself so many Power Rangers and GI-Joes and everything and now we's fightin 'em!"

"I'm winning," Ryan contended, big gappy ten-year-old's teeth showing as he smiled, both boys more excited and happy than Jake had ever seen them, so unexpected to find Ryan suddenly buddy-buddy with one of the Huckfeldt brothers. Almost as surprising when Pepper cheerfully joined the other boys and ran off with them back across the street, Dally demanding another hug and kiss before he left, bubbling with good humor and affection (very different from the silent, somber little boy who'd first visited Jake's home on New Year's Day, not so many months ago).

Jake took Pepper's bag inside the house. Opened a few windows to let in the fresh breeze. The mower engine went quiet in the back yard,

JoJo finished with his job, more distant engines still droning from other yards like some Attack of the Giant Hornets up and down the street. The boy quickly showed up at the back door for his money. He was also glad to accept a cold can of root beer and a hug before hurrying off again to find other lawns to mow—bye Jake, see y’all later!—off with his red Toro mower, dragging it one-handed behind him along the sidewalk as he sipped from his can of pop.

Middle of the afternoon, Jake finally called for Pepper, time for them to take a trip to Doc’s house in the country. No special reason, just to get away from Sandburg, to enjoy “a nice change of scenery,” as Jake put it. Dally wanted to come along, as did Ryan—even though he knew his parents wouldn’t allow it—but anyway Jake said no, sorry, not this time. JoJo returned just then, dragging his mower and drippy with sweat, curious to know what was happening, immediately complaining to Jake about not keeping his promises. “Y’all said we could stay overnight last time. When Pepper was here last time. I remember.”

“That’s right,” Dally said, taking Jake’s hand in both of his own. “That’s what you always said.”

“You know what, Jake? It ain’t fair,” JoJo said, “Pepper always stayin and goin places with y’all.”

Jake, nervously self-conscious on the sidewalk with this group of young boys clamoring around him, agreed that he was breaking his promise, terrible thing to do—but Pepper was leaving, he was moving away, that’s why they were spending this last special time together. The other boys seemed grudgingly to understand, although Ryan no longer appeared as happy as before, not happy at all, suddenly pouty, announcing that he still never got to see his video and anyhow he had to get home so he didn’t even care! Jake noticed, of course, this abrupt change of mood, mentioning it to Pepper in the car as they headed out of town a few minutes later. “Ryan gets upset so easily. Did you see him?” “He was upset?”

“You couldn’t tell?”

“I wasn’t watching,” Pepper said, eyes on his Gameboy. “Were Dally and JoJo upset?” “A little bit.”

“They want to stay overnight so bad.”

“I know, but. . .”

“They could stay,” Pepper offered. “I wouldn’t care.” He glanced at Jake and pushed up his big copper-rimmed glasses, which slid right back again to the tip of his flat nose. His hair hadn’t been cut in recent months and was now a bushy riot of curls, spiky curls, messy curls, like dark tendrils grown wild. “Not Jimmy, though. Not him.”

“Well, you know,” Jake said, “this should be our special night together. I’ll let the Huckfeldts stay some other time. Maybe.”

“So it’ll be quieter?”

“Definitely quieter,” Jake smiled. “Those crazy Huckfeldts. Remember a couple of months ago? You and I were in the car just like this? We were talking about them?”

“About the Huckfeldts?”

“Remember? They wanted to sleep over, just like now, and we were going to have a jerk-off contest?”

Pepper looked back down at his Gameboy with a gently startled “oh yeah” laugh. “Now I remember. That was pretty funny.”

“Too bad. Could’ve been very exciting.”

“And now it’s too late,” the boy pretended to whimper, his profile against the bright window beside him—slender neck, lumpy Adam’s apple, cottony curls. Jake reached across and patted the back of his head. “Such a shame, I know. And you even practiced for it. For the contest.”

“What? When?”

“That same weekend. That was our joke. You were practicing. Took a shower and then had a nice little practice.”

“You remember everything?”

“Oh absolutely. Every thrilling detail.”

“You’re just like Frankie,” Pepper said, careful to keep his eyes on his game. “He remembers every thrilling detail of things, too.”

Jake was surprised to laughter, loud laughter, by the boy's comment, which led to further discussion of Frankie's Big News from yesterday, his Big Announcement, also his homecoming on Monday, Pepper finally saying, "Probably I won't get to see him before I leave."

"You might."

"He'll be recovering, and he doesn't even have a car anymore," the boy sensibly observed. He turned his attention, now that they were out of town, to the scenery outside the car's window, countryside that he'd seen only once before, in January, when on his way to Doc's for a day of sledding and skating. Bleakly snow-covered then, now lushly green, or dirt-brown from the plow, hills and fields and wooded groves, wild violets, clover, some late dandelions dotted yellow here, dotted yellow there. "It's hilly," he said after a while, Gameboy on his lap, glasses needing another upward nudge.

"I know," Jake said, the car on its way down another roller-coaster slope. "Sort of unusual terrain. For Illinois."

"I bet it's glacial. From glaciers, I mean."

"I'm pretty sure you're right. Hey. About Frankie?" "Yeah?"

"Maybe we could meet him in Stonerville somehow. Maybe the week before you leave."

"When there's no school?" "Exactly. Frankie'll be home anyway, you'll be out of school, maybe we can arrange to meet him somewhere."

"At his house?" "Or at a nearby park. Someplace. You've been there. Is there a good place?" Pepper gazed out the window and considered. "There's a big swimming pool. It's by his house pretty close."

"Like a municipal pool?" "That's what it is."

"It might not be open yet."

"There's a field outside the fence where people play baseball," Pepper said, sunlight catching his lenses as he looked at Jake. "They have benches and stuff."

"Sounds perfect."

"So we'll have a secret meeting?"

“That’s the plan,” Jake said, pleased by Pepper’s immediate complicity, the boy never questioning this need for secrecy and elaborate precaution. It just seemed wiser to see Frankie this way, not the best time right now for chancing an encounter with his parents. Even if they were gone, who knows, too risky, better to avoid the Patallero home altogether and meet Frankie somewhere else. Pepper understood all this, no explanation necessary. “Anyway,” Jake concluded, “we’ll decide in a few days. We’ll call Frankie. Figure it out.”

A new group called Hanson was singing MMMBop on the radio. Pepper pointed at the speaker in front of him, at the music. “That one kid has Frankie’s hair, sort of.”

“Who’s that? Hanson?”

“That one kid singing.”

“Taylor, I think.”

“His hair is like Frankie’s.”

“It is. Very similar. Frankie would be pleased by the comparison.”

“Why would he be pleased?”

“Because, well, you know, I’m sure he likes those Hanson brothers.”

“There’s three of them,” Pepper said, a sudden thought making him smile. “Just like the Huckfeldts.”

“Oh lord. You’re right. The Hansons’ evil twins.”

They turned off the rural highway onto a gravel road that snaked through miles of freshly furrowed fields, some planted with corn already showing stalks, the gravel on the road still dampened from yesterday’s showers so not too dusty, possible to leave the windows open without choking. Now and then they passed an old farmhouse, a barn, windmills, silos. Another mile or two and Jake turned left at a lonely house with an Uncle Sam mailbox, down into a gully and up the other side along a road more dirt than gravel, still a little muddy from yesterday, easy to understand why Doc had always driven a pickup with four-wheel drive. Eventually the road ended in a weedy cul-de-sac that seemed nothing but



old-growth trees beyond, only someone diligently observant likely to notice Doc's green box of a house nestled there among the dense stand of firs and hickories and oaks. Doc's pickup, of course—the blue Ford—was still parked where he'd left it in March, obvious for anyone to see. "It's in good shape," Jake said, he and Pepper out of the car now and beside the truck, eyeing it like prospective buyers. "I might start driving it. I've been thinking about it."

"That's a good idea."

"You think so?"

"Yeah," Pepper said, nodding, serious. "Will you live here? In this house?"

"Very interesting question. I'm not sure. It's something else I've been thinking about."

"What about your job?" Jake smiled and put an arm around the boy. "I swear, you're reading my mind."

"Do I have psychic powers?" "To go along with your voodoo curses and magic spells? Maybe so."

"Our last spell didn't work. The talismans."

"They worked for Frankie."

"That's right," Pepper said, his hand on the Ford's tailgate. "Sometimes you can't control how things work."

"Mysteries of the cosmos."

Some leaves came skittering on the warm breeze to settle in the bed of the truck, the bed already leafy and twiggy from two months of neglect. No clouds today, blue china sky, a chirpy cacophony of birdsong from the trees all around. Jake and Pepper decided on a hike to the pond north of Doc's house, a ten-minute walk, fifteen if you sidetracked and ambled. The dirt path was muddy from the rain, Jake leading the boy along it, slipping a few times, both of them, as they stepped over rocks and tree roots and downed limbs. Pushing aside branches still droopy-leaved from the wet, getting wet themselves in the process. Finally they emerged from the woods onto the grassy edge of

the pond, its surface like the shattered face of a mirror, splinters brilliant in the afternoon sun, flashing. Pepper swept the scenery with his eyes. "It looks a lot different now. This whole place."

"That's exactly what Frankie said when he was here."

"Frankie comes here?"

"After Doc died, is when I mean," Jake said. He found a flat stone and sent it skipping across the pond's surface. "We came here to scatter his ashes. I think I told you."

"I remember."

"And Frankie said the same thing. That it looks so different from January."

"There was so much snow that weekend," Pepper recalled. He found a stone of his own and tried imitating Jake's fancy toss, but the stone hit with a dead plunk and sank straight off. Jake demonstrated once more—how to hold the stone, how to flick it with your wrist, a sidearm technique. Two more attempts and Pepper was throwing like a veteran countryboy, one of his stones doing four rapid skips nearly to the center of the pond. He laughed at his own unlikely prowess. "D'you think this scares the fish?"

"They probably don't mind," Jake said. "Unless we hit one of them on the head."

Pepper laughed again, a gurgly, suppressed giggle, his eyes mostly hidden behind the sun-glare on his glasses. He tossed another stone, a three-skipper this time, then asked about Doc's ashes. "Where did you put them?"

"Right here," Jake said. "Right in front of us."

"Is that what he wanted?" "He wanted his ashes scattered, yeah. This pond seemed like a good place for it." "So he'd be happy, probably?" Jake nodded, touched by the boy's curiosity and concern for someone he'd hardly known. "As happy as Doc ever got, I guess. Sort of happy."

"Did you and Doc go fishing here?" "Lots of times. For bullheads, sunfish, bass. You can swim here, too."

“In here?”

“Don’t look so surprised.”

“There’s no beach or anything.”

“It’s primitive.”

“Pagan,” the boy said. A word he’d learned from Jake months ago, in Holy Cross Cemetery, the two of them there to bury candles for a curse. Made Jake laugh to hear it now, so unexpected but so appropriate. “Pagan is right,” he said. “Celebrating the forces of nature. Worshipping the water, the trees, the sky. The body.”

“Like Peter Pan.”

“You remember everything,” Jake said, kidding Pepper, echoing the boy’s own remark from earlier in the car. “Just like Peter Pan and the Lost Boys, exactly. Swimming naked in the pond.”

“That’s the stuff they didn’t. . .”

“...show in the movie,” Jake chorused with the boy. They laughed at themselves, good friends able to complete each other’s sentences, to share thoughts, memories. “This is the best time of year for it. In the spring. The water’s still nice and clean.”

“It’s clean?”

“Sure, right now it is. Later, by July or August, it’ll get all loaded with algae. Green scum everywhere. It’s even hard to fish through it. Swimming can be pretty disgusting.”

“You and Doc swam here?”

“To be honest,” Jake smiled, “not very often. Doc didn’t care for swimming. But some friends of ours, some boys, swam here a lot. Especially one summer, long time ago, before you were even born. Lots of skinny-dippin that summer.”

“Skinny-dippin,” Pepper repeated, funny word, some windblown seedy fluff catching in his hair. Jake stepped closer and reached out and picked off the fluff between two fingers. Another cottony bit, then another, came drifting on the breeze to replace the first, to settle and catch in the boy’s dark curls. Jake kept picking them out. “Swimming naked, it means.”

“I know.” “Are you interested?” Pepper greeted the invitation with a leery glance at the water and a scrunch of his nose. “Really, I don’t swim very good at all. I’d probably drown.”

Jake had to laugh again. “That would be unfortunate. But you’re right. Pond swimming isn’t like being in a pool, or at Lake Swanson. With its beach. Ponds can be treacherous.” No more fluff to pick from Pepper’s hair, but Jake kept his hand there anyway, holding the boy, petting him. “That’s all right. Maybe some other day.”

“I won’t be living here anymore.” “Next year, five years, any time you visit, doesn’t matter.”

“If I learn to swim better.”

“Then we’ll do some skinny-dippin together. Guaranteed. In fact, hey, that gives me an idea,” Jake said. He and the boy were wandering back to the path, away from the pond, sun settling to their right just above the treetops. “We should make this a genuine pagan utopia. A pagan paradise. Never-Never Land. No clothing allowed in the summertime, you know, when the weather is warm. Everybody goes nude!”

“That’s your rule from now on?” “Just occurred to me.” “What about mosquitoes and stuff?”

“Well, I don’t know, but this place is so special, really, when you think about it,” the man said, behind Pepper on the muddy path, wet leaves against their arms and legs as they pushed through the jungly growth. “No one else around, totally private, like being on your own island. You can do anything here, anything at all, and nobody else will ever know or see. So why bother with clothes? Just imagine. It would be so. . .”

“Bizarre?”

“I was thinking more like liberating, fun, wild, exciting,” Jake laughed. “Have you ever been naked outside?”

Pepper said “no” with a slow shake of his head and a look over his shoulder as if someone slightly loony might be following him. “Have you?” “Once or twice, long time ago, with those other kids I mentioned.

It's a strange feeling," Jake said. A branch slapped him wetly across the face and spattered his sunglasses. He slowed to remove the glasses and wipe them on his shirt, then had to quickstep to regain his position behind Pepper. He raised his voice as he hurried forward. "A strange feeling. For someone like me, like you, how we're brought up, sort of modest, bashful, you know, to take off all our clothes and walk around naked outside, it's amazing. Right? It's such a bad, naughty, illegal thing to do. If your mom saw you walking around like that! Naked in the back yard! Or walking naked down the sidewalk, on your way to school!"

Pepper laughed from up ahead, slipping just then on the mud and almost falling before catching his balance, arms precariously outspread. Jake caught up to him and held him by the hips. Pepper said he was OK. The end of the path, like a leafy tunnel opening to daylight, was just ahead of them as they continued forward, more slowly now, baby-stepping along the slippery ground. Jake said, "So what's the verdict? Should this place become a playground for happy, naked pagans?"

The boy's shoulders lifted in a slow, noncommittal shrug. "I won't even be around," he pointed out once more.

"You'll visit."

"Would the Huckfeldts love it?"

"Oh sure."

"Frankie, too?"

"Definitely Frankie."

"Who else?"

"Who else is there? Ryan? I'm not sure about Ryan," Jake said, suddenly in bright sunshine as he and Pepper returned to the clearing—Doc's house to their left, the pickup and the cars to their right in a lengthening dance of treetop shadows. "Ryan is tough to figure."

"Everybody could build bonfires and have ceremonies and do stuff like that," Pepper suggested. More of the white seedy fluff, still adrift on the breeze, was catching in his hair, like specks of cotton among the thick brown curls. Jake stepped face to face with him and resumed his grooming, picking away the fluff, saying, "Now that's the perfect idea."

Bonfires and dancing. Moonlight rituals. Sorcery. But we'll be missing our chief wizard."

"Who's that?" "You, of course! Nobody else like you," the man smiled. He finished picking and cleaning, took Pepper in both arms, noticed as always how the boy had grown since their first days together in October, puberty stretching him out, stretching him up, arms and legs lankier, shoulders bigger and bonier, even his voice starting to roughen at the edges. They stayed like that for long silent moments, the boy in Jake's loose embrace, Jake rocking him and kissing his hair. "Well," the man finally said, just that one mumbly word, stepping backward and giving his hands a cheery clap. He glanced down and, for the first time, saw the mess that Pepper's shoes, and his own, had become, grassy cakes of mud on the bottoms, grassy clumps on the sides. "My god, your beautiful new shoes," he said, pointing. "It's my fault."

The boy looked down at his encrusted black hightops and made a gaspy laughing noise, startled. "Oh man, that's. . . wow. All that mud."

"Should wash off. Over here," Jake said. There was a spigot around the side of the house, on the wall outside the kitchen and bathroom, exactly what they needed for the job. No lawn anywhere around the house, no yard, just weeds and tall grass where trees used to stand, an occasional walk-around with the scythe enough to keep the weedy growth under control. The stumps of giant old oaks and box elders were scattered about, some uprooted and overturned on their sides, some still solidly rooted and earthbound, their flat tops ideal for cleaning fish, for resting tools or cans of beer, for providing a place to sit. Jake and Pepper were using one now for just that, sitting on a stump near the spigot to remove their shoes, then their socks, better to walk around barefoot when outside. They used a garden hose attached to the rusty-handled spigot to wash the mud from their shoes. "Coming off pretty well," Jake said, doing his own Reeboks first. The boy nodded, watchful, intent, then broke his silence to ask for a drink. "From the hose would be OK," he said.

“There’s pop inside,” the man told him. Pepper nodded but said again that the hose would be OK, Jake obliging, holding it out, Pepper ducking to get his mouth into the splashy stream of water, gulping at it, pausing for a noisy breath, gulping again. “Good,” he finally gasped, that big bottom lip of his still dribbling. All this time swatting at pesty little flies around his head. Mosquitoes not so bad right now (much worse later, in the evening), but those tiny flies were fearless, unstoppable. “It’s our sweat,” Jake said, finished with his own shoes, washing Pepper’s.

“Can they smell us?”

“They like the saltiness.”

“It’s hot,” was the boy’s simple observation, and he was right, the day had grown hotter and more humid on a southwest breeze. Even the birds seemed quieter now. Jake, seated on the stump as he worked, nodded agreement, a little distracted, then looked up and smiled and told Pepper, standing beside him, to remove his glasses. “I’ll rinse your head. Your face. Bend down.” The boy liked the idea and put his glasses on the stump, then ducked forward as he’d done before, letting the water pour over his hair and face and neck, twisting his head at different angles to expose his cheeks and the hidden smoothness of his throat. The water soaked the top of his red Bulls T-shirt and streamed down his arms, the ground getting splashed and puddly around his bare feet. Jake, still holding one unfinished shoe, suddenly set it aside and turned the hose on himself, his sunglasses next to Pepper’s copper-rimmed specs on the stump, the man on his feet now alongside the boy as he doused himself. Pepper stood with drippy hair and sodden shirt, arms slightly lifted as water dribbled from his fingertips, nearsighted eyes blinking and blinking against the late afternoon sun. “This is driving the flies away,” he said. “I think it’s working. Really.”

“Seems to be,” Jake agreed. He took a drink from the hose between dousings, then gave the boy’s head another soak. “You know, I’m thinking. I’m just thinking that this might be a good time to get pagan.”

“Now?” “Sure, right now. Well, OK, at least our shirts to start with,” the man said. “They’re totally soaked.” The boy couldn’t argue with that, his T-shirt drenched, another of the stumps once again proving useful as both Jake and Pepper stripped to the waist and put their shirts on it to dry. Jake then spent another few minutes finishing Pepper’s shoe, rinsing and rinsing it until every trace of mud was gone. He set all four shoes on the stump where Pepper’s glasses and his own sunglasses were still resting. He turned and looked at Pepper, who had seized the black garden hose and was splashing not only his head now but also his chest and shoulders and arms, keeping the nippy flies and mosquitoes at bay, his black-and-white Zuba pants, zebra-striped, getting just as wet as his shirt had been. They were baggy, those pants, the water soaking their elasticized waist and making them heavy, saggy. Down far enough on Pepper’s hips to show the top half of his underpants, Fruit of the Loom, twin blue pinstripes on the waistband. Jake barefooted toward him. “Shoes drying. Shirts drying. Pants come next,” the man said. “Look at you. Having fun?”

“Keeping the evil bugs away,” Pepper replied, drenched-poodle hair sparkling, eyes squinted, not quite focused. “This works.”

“As long as you stay under the hose,” Jake laughed. “It’s a very wet solution. How about those pants?” He was already taking off his own blue jeans. His striped boxers. Quickly naked. He used a third tree stump, an overturned one with skeletal roots, to drape his pants and underwear for drying (his own stuff more damp than drenched, to be honest). Pepper was watching through the rainbow mist from the hose. Holding that hose with both hands above his head—like someone wrestling a long black snake—letting it pour over his whole body, water cascading, no attempt to keep his pants dry, almost a joke now to see how thoroughly he could soak them. Jake stood anxiously grinning, fish-belly white everywhere but his sun-reddened arms and face, like a farmer stripped for his bath. A butterfly came flitting through the rainbow over Pepper’s head. The boy was following it with his eyes when Jake finally approached him and proceeded to drag down his



sopping pants, so wet they were difficult to remove, had to tug and twist them down each leg, underpants and all, to get them off. “These’ll take forever to dry,” the man said. Pepper hopped on one foot and touched Jake’s shoulder for balance as the pants came entirely free, the other hand still keeping the hose aimed above his head. “I’ll have to stay like this?”

“For a while. Nicer this way. Enjoy it.”

“Is this your pagan paradise?”

“That’s right, Peter Pan. Paradise,” Jake called over his shoulder, draping the boy’s clothes next to his own. Maybe another hour of strong afternoon sun before it sank past the treetops, long enough, Jake figured, to do a tolerable job of drying the pants, the shirts, the shoes. He recrossed the weedy clearing. Pepper hadn’t moved, sun behind him over his left shoulder as he held that hose two-handed above himself, naked boy showering. Skinny twelve-year-old with xylophone ribs and sharp-boned hips. Knobby knees. Big feet. A shadowy growth of pubic fuzz above snaky soft dick and lopsided balls. No movement from him (like a piece of garden statuary), no glasses on, staring vaguely, as if by keeping still and silent he could ignore the stark reality of his own nakedness. Nothing unusual, no no no, nothing strange or embarrassing about standing here bare-assed outside Doc’s house, sun hot on his backside, breeze and sunlit warmth between his legs where clothing had always kept him covered and private until now, until this moment on this afternoon, outdoor light and air and warmth directly on his bare penis, on his bare scrotum, on every bare and intimate bit of his exposed body.

Jake stepped in front of him. “See what I mean? See how nice this is?”

“It’s OK,” Pepper said, voice louder than necessary, as if losing control of the words as they escaped.

“How about those evil bugs?”

“They hate the water,” the boy announced in that same tensely declarative voice. Looking past Jake, not at him. Jake was openly eyeing him, admiring him. “This was such an excellent idea we had.”

“It’s OK.”

“You just keep getting more and more handsome every time I see you.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Very handsome boy.”

“No, no way,” Pepper said, whimpery but grinning, suddenly lowering the hose so that he was clutching it, still two-handed, in front of his crotch. Stiff-armed and stiff-legged, covering himself like that, a rigidly protective stance. But grinning, at the same time grinning. A playful defensiveness. A bashful pantomime. Jake moved forward against him, saying, “We can share. Just like this. Like this.” He took the hose from Pepper’s hands and held it high and let it splash over the two of them, his other arm around the boy, his erection pressed between them. Tight against Pepper’s slippery tummy. He could look down over the boy’s shoulder. He could see the shiny wet curve of Pepper’s buttocks and the water sheeting over them and running along the crack between them, siphoning down the butt crack and the backs of Pepper’s skinny brown legs to puddle on the ground turning muddy around their feet. Jake, as he watched this, was kissing the boy’s hair, the boy’s ear and cheek, like making love in a downpour, water in his mouth as he kissed and kissed, now even on the boy’s lips. Taboo, doing this, Jake always respecting Pepper’s aversion to romantic smooching, the most timid boy he’d ever known for hugging and kissing and showing affection. But Pepper’s nights with Frankie had taught him a few things. He knew what Jake wanted. The man hungry against him. The boy’s mouth relaxed, opened, Jake suddenly tasting him, startled, something so unexpected, this sweetly compliant gift, kissing Pepper this way for the first time, a sloppy lover’s kiss, the boy allowing it, not exactly reciprocating or kissing back (as Frankie eagerly would have, or little Dally), but quietly allowing it, leaving his mouth open for Jake to savor, no cringing or pulling back, a happy and comfortable surrender.

Jake forced himself to pause. He let the hose drop so that it burbled upward near their feet like the gush of an artesian well. “My Pepper,” he

murmured, both hands free now to touch, to explore. “My sweetheart. My lovely boy.” Pepper nodded, nothing to say. The man’s hand between his legs. Jake said, “No boner yet?” The boy glanced around as if someone might be spying from the trees or watching from the road, he and Jake visible from the road if anyone should come driving up, this pale-skinned man playing feely-feely all over the young brown boy in front of him, both of them naked and drippy as they stood face to face in their sunny patch of weeds. But who would come? No one for over a mile in any direction. A red squirrel nearby. Two robins and a sparrow hopping from weedtop to stump to weedtop. Heat-hushed birdsong from the woods beyond. No one else. No one to see them.

Pepper shook his head. No. No boner yet. Jake said, “It’s all right, we’re alone,” easy to read the boy’s cautious expression, his wary glance. “Perfectly safe here. Just the birds. Just you. Just me.” His hands roaming. Pepper gradually responding, pleasure taking over throughout his body, something about being outside, about standing there naked outside. So ridiculously exposed. Just like Jake had said earlier. Something so forbidden about it. So against the rules. Impossible to resist the excitement of it. The man was still murmuring, Pepper no longer listening, Jake’s hand on his behind, Jake’s other hand in front fondling him stiff, that snaky dick leftward curving as it stood and swelled and blushed a rosier shade of brown. Jake kneeled. He fingertipped the boy’s pubic hair—more fuzzy now than whiskery, softening as it grew and curled longer month by month—then fingertipped the wrinkled velvet of the boy’s ballsac, the testicles alive inside, tightening as if to shy from his touch. He leaned forward and licked, mineral taste of well water and perspiration under Pepper’s balls, on Pepper’s thighs, on Pepper’s fiercely hardened penis. The boy was lost, eyes blearily fixed downward at the man licking him, that tongue doing crazy things, teasing him, making him shivery. And then Jake was sucking him for real, greedy and determined sucking as he grabbed with both hands at Pepper’s cheeky ass and squeezed it and pinched it and felt inside the wet crack. Breeze, sunshine, tranquil birdsong. A stray cloud’s

shadow passing across the clearing as man and boy rutted and sweated, flies once again on their shoulders and legs and hair, Jake not noticing, Pepper not noticing, the slurpy sounds of man sucking boy, long noisy blowjob, Jake's hands on Pepper's ass holding him steady minute after minute after minute, then taking over in front while Jake paused to breathe and swallow—left hand ball-fondling, right hand dick-fondling—not long, a few seconds, the man glancing up at the boy, curly hair dark against the blue backdrop of sky, a quick smile between them, then back to the ravenous sucking of twelve-year-old cock.

Mud beneath them as the hose kept splashing, Jake kneeling in it, Pepper standing in it. Bare knees, bare feet. Jake tonguing the glans, tonguing the pee-slit, then sucking the whole length of cockmeat up and down with quickening head-bobs, the boy finally responding, helplessly responding with a counter-thrust of hips and ass. Fucking Jake's mouth. His hands on Jake's shoulders now, a sudden need for support, more and more shivery along his legs, a tightening of his belly and butt cheeks, the man able to feel it, head-bobbing even faster right on the tender knob as Pepper humped in frantic rhythm. Then the man pulled back, eager to witness, and told the boy—urgently, urgently—to go ahead and finish, finish now so I can see, good boy, that's right, that's right, watching as Pepper fucked his own fist, knees bent, thighs sinewed taut and trembly, balls up like two small rocks. Jake staring, waiting, amazed that this could be Pepper in front of him. Modest Pepper. Bashful, easily embarrassed Pepper. The boy who always closed the bathroom door. Who, back in October, blushed at even showing his underwear. Innocent Pepper, virgin pup, no chance of ever fooling around with him—now posing shamelessly on this sunny afternoon, barefoot in the mud, jerking off, two flies on his left wrist as he did a deeper knee-bend and squeezed from the nuts and suddenly had kiddie-cum on his thumb and forefinger, cockhead angry red, oozing. "Good boy," Jake crooned again. "You did perfect." He took Pepper's hand in both of his own and put it to his mouth and licked the thumb clean, then licked the forefinger clean, taste of fresh-squeezed boyjuice only mildly spermy, then tongue-cleaned the

slippery knob of the boy's penis, doing it quickly and delicately, not wanting to hurt that very tender, very reddened morsel of meat. Pepper gazed down, watching, mouth open, stupefied. The man stayed kneeling against him, not yet finished, one hand still wandering over the front of the boy's body, worshipful, the other pumping his own dick, less than a minute to bring himself to ejaculation directly against Pepper's leg, pressed against that knobby brown knee for extra friction as he gushed and gushed, semen running like spilled yogurt down the boy's shin.

Exhausted moments of silence, man on knees in front of boy, suppliant and angel, Jake's arms around Pepper's waist and ass in a languid hug as he rested his face against the boy's warm stomach, lazily kissing the nippy belly button. "I could eat you like a hot-fudge sundae," he mumbled. "Every bit of you. Delicious."

"OK," Pepper mumbled back, still a little breathless. Jake finally backed away, got to his feet, wearily grinned. "Well, my god, that was incredible. Now I can relax."

"Was something wrong?"

"No, no, I mean. . . relax. You know. This," he pointed, first between his own legs, then Pepper's. "I was so... so horny. But now...."

"It's better?"

"Much better," Jake said, an even bigger grin as he fished the hose from the weeds and washed away the mess from his own hands, from Pepper's leg, from both of their crotches, finally a general dousing to rinse off the sweat and flies and more of the cottony fluff from Pepper's hair. The boy shook water from his hair and his face and walked to the stump where his glasses and Jake's sunglasses and all four shoes were laid out like some enigmatic postmodernist exhibit. He put on his own glasses and checked his black hightops, still wet of course, only twenty minutes or so since Jake had finished with them. Although it seemed longer. To the boy. Strangely, much longer. Jake, behind him, shut off the spigot and dropped the hose in a loose coil next to the wall of the house. "It'll take a while," he said to Pepper. "No clothes for now." The

boy, checking his pants and shirt anyway, just to be sure, made his comical boo-hoo face—furrowed brow, pouty bottom lip. “For how long, d’you think? A few more minutes?” “Hey, come on, I wasn’t kidding before! About no clothes allowed. This is the beginning of a new era.”

“A nudist era,” Pepper quipped, actually surprised by his own little pun, unable to hide a smile. Jake laughed and joined him near the overturned stump where their pants and shirts and underwear were draped in the sun’s drying heat. “That’s right. But I’m serious, you know? There’s something very beneficial about nudist camps. Nude beaches. It’s good to go natural.” The man couldn’t stop grinning, like some blissful never-ending dream being here with Pepper, first their ruttish outdoor blowjob and now this, impossibly, the two of them still naked as they stood and chatted, the boy right there for Jake to look at, that whole young body uncovered for Jake to look at and keep looking at. No pants where pants should be. Just sunlight and breeze. The man blatantly staring, grinning, this wet dream come true, Tarzan and Boy, no clothes, jungle-bare, this suddenly come-to-life fantasy. This startling nakedness of Pepper. Standing there in nothing but his big copper-rimmed glasses. Standing there with hands nervously fidgeting. Standing there with penis sucked red, balls crudely hanging. And with Jake staring, raptly staring. “Sorry,” the man finally said, once again taking the boy in his arms. “I can’t stop looking at you.”

“I know.”

“It’s like every Christmas morning in one cute package. It’s amazing. Try to be patient with me.”

“OK.”

“I just have to touch you. As much as possible,” Jake kept explaining, mumbling into the boy’s wet hair. “In case this never happens again. Us here like this. Just like this.” Pressing against the front of Pepper’s body. Feeling with both hands up and down the back of him. Daring once more to kiss him boldly on the mouth, a lover’s kiss even more lingering than their first. Pepper’s eyes open, wondering. Jake

unable to stop, to take his mouth away. Slowly chewing and chewing against those big moist lips. Licking and tasting Pepper's breath, Pepper's spit. But the man knew he had to stop. Had to stop. He lifted his head and paused for composure. Held the boy at arm's length and looked down between them. His own erection back up as hard as ever, Pepper's dick still soft. The boy said, "Are we doing this again?" "No, no, sorry. You see, like I said, I'm a little crazy right now."

"I forgive you," Pepper gently teased, a sudden lightness to his voice, possibly relief. Jake laughed and kept one hand on the boy's shoulder, telling him, "I'll try to relax, I promise. What should we do? Go inside? Take a walk to the hill?"

"Which hill?" "The one where you and Frankie went sledding. Just over there," Jake said, turning himself and the boy so they were both facing east. "You can find fossils there. And arrowheads."

"You never told me before."

"You sound excited."

"It would be awesome to find fossils and arrowheads," Pepper said. "Can we get pop first? Is there root beer?"

"You guys and your root beer."

"Who else?" "Ryan and the Huckfeldts all like root beer. Though Ryan also likes Frankie's Cherry Coke."

"Yeah, that's what I'll have! Is there some here?"

"Doc has a lot of it," Jake nodded. "Are you placing an order?"

"Are you going to get it?" "Sure. Anything else?" "I need to pee," the boy admitted. Jake couldn't help himself, couldn't resist giving Pepper a tweak, a pinch on the penis, dangly young wiener just itching to piss. "Go anywhere. Pee anywhere, Pepper. I'll get our sodas," the man said. He quickly retrieved his own sunglasses and then left the boy and hurried inside, the house like a dark and quiet cave after his long afternoon in the sunny outdoors. His dick still stubbornly half erect. Nothing to do but ignore it. Still, so strange, so endlessly strange to be naked as he went to the refrigerator for two cans of pop, then as he walked back outside and felt the heat and light on his skin, everywhere

on his skin—oops, I forgot my clothes! Oops, I forgot my shirt and pants and underwear and I'm out here naked! Exhilarating. Outrageous.

Just a short stroll east through a screen of trees, that hillside where Pepper and Frankie had gone sledding in January, Jake being careful as he walked, so many ways to get scratched and cut and poked and scraped when you're not wearing clothes. Rocks and twigs and thistles underfoot. Branches and nettles and thorns higher up. Wincing and ouching, the man arrived to find Pepper already busily hunting for relics, for treasures, sun behind them now, behind the trees, long shadows covering the hilltop where the boy was crouched. His back to Jake. Crouched in happy scrutiny of some curious tidbit, then up, then crouched again, then up and bent at the waist with his ass roundly mooned in Jake's direction. Soon wandering again, eyes riveted to the earth, then down once more to pick with his fingers, hunkering low, lanky and limber boy, naked young aboriginal, butt nearly on the ground as he squatted, knees up beside his chin.

Jake lingered silently, observing, enjoying. Finally he came forward and joined the boy, Pepper so involved in his searching, so gleefully preoccupied, he seemed hardly to notice any longer his own shocking bareness. A full and final victory over his lifelong habit of modesty, of bashful inhibition—a battle nearly won, partially won, that morning back in March, Pepper naked from his shower as he masturbated, then as he wrestled with Dally—even, to his chagrin, as Jimmy and JoJo came barging in to raise hell. But that had been inside, safely inside Jake's own house for maybe two hours, probably a little less, clothing readily at hand. This, today, was something remarkably different, an ongoing marathon of nudity in the wide-open outdoors. Getting sucked. Kissing. Standing and chatting. Fossil-hunting. Exposed and on display the whole time. Jake's eyes (and hands, and mouth) on him the whole time. Not even their discarded clothing now anywhere in sight, all left behind and out of reach, an absolute surrender to nature. Civilization somewhere miles away, shed here, forgotten here.



Pepper looked up from his squat and gave his glasses a nudge. “I haven’t found anything yet,” he said to Jake, his long toes curling and gripping against the dirt as he lightly rocked on his feet. The man handed him one of the cans of Cherry Coke. “The bottom of the hill is where to search. To find anything.”

“Because stuff gets washed down,” the boy quickly understood. He nodded and stood up and then took a moment to guzzle from his can of pop, other hand absently on his belly, Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. Facing Jake while he drank. No attempt to turn discreetly away or cover himself or hastily move on. In no hurry at all to remove himself from Jake’s persistent gaze. It was Jake, finally, who led the way when they headed downhill, tricky without shoes, easy to slip and stumble on the loose, pebbly slope and end up painfully on your bare backside. But, descending carefully, they arrived unscathed at the bottom, where the boy immediately resumed his diligent hunting and wandering—now crouching, now bending, no thought to his ass showing from behind, crack open, smooth balls dangling. Jake alternately watched him and watched the ground, poking with a long stick at anything that appeared unusual. “Thought I saw a bone,” he said once, over his shoulder to Pepper.

“A dinosaur?”

“Probably a deer or something more like that. Deer bones. Squirrel skulls. Rabbit skulls. But this was just a rock, I guess.” “Deer bones and what?” “Rabbit skulls. Squirrel skulls. Anything that dies or gets killed. The bones wash down the hill.”

Pepper nodded as before, interested in every detail, then kept searching in the dirt, which was thick and reddish with clay, strangely orange in spots, still damp, holding the moisture from yesterday’s rain. But, thirty minutes later, still no luck and the mosquitoes starting to swarm, he and Jake decided to quit and headed back to the house. Up the hill on all fours, scrabbling and sliding, trying clumsily to hold their empty Coke cans, then back through the trees dimming in twilit shadow,

back to the weedy clearing where their shoes and clothes were still drying. “Too bad we couldn’t find anything,” Jake said to the boy.

“Not one bone,” Pepper lamented. “And no arrowheads.”

“Doc used to find a lot of them over there. Around that area. There’s a big boxful in his bedroom. I’ll show you,” Jake said. He was moving from stump to stump, checking their shirts, pants, underwear. His own clothes were dry enough to put on (if he’d wanted), but Pepper’s still felt wet to the touch. The man glanced overhead. Maybe two more hours before total sunset and darkness. “Enough time, I think. Your stuff should be dry by then. Dry enough, anyway.” Pepper was standing where he’d gotten his blowjob earlier in the afternoon. Suddenly, back here with nothing to keep himself busy, he seemed self-conscious again, more uncomfortably aware of his own bare body. Jake used the hose to give them both another quick washing, to clean the clay-sticky dirt from their hands and feet, their legs, even from Pepper’s butt. The mosquitoes kept swarming. Impossible to stay outside naked any longer. They finished washing and hurried into the house, time anyway to have some dinner.

While Jake fixed hamburgers, the boy sat in Doc’s old chair and looked through the box of arrowheads, the pieces of flint chinking as he dug through them and handled them one after another. Testing their glassy smooth edges against his thumb or the skin of his bare thigh. “You could kill something,” he murmured to himself, the little black-and-white TV in front of him showing a snowy and sepia-tinted rerun of Cheers, burgers sizzling from the kitchen area behind him. Those flint edges leaving faintly white tracks across his thigh where he kept testing the sharpness of them, tracks of powdered skin like smudges of talc on the perfect brownness of his flesh. Jake finished frying the burgers. He sat on the couch while he ate. Pepper stayed in Doc’s overstuffed yellow chair, legs crossed, plate on his lap, Jake staring and staring from four feet away. They agreed that the boy should keep the arrowheads. Pepper wondered if they might have any special “pagan power.” Jake said,

“Don’t know. Like what?” “Invoking spirits?” “I doubt it,” the man said. “But they’ll make good souvenirs. A good way to remember being here today.”

Pepper, holding his burger, used his right thumb knuckle to give his glasses an upward push. “You’ve cleaned it a lot. Inside here.”

“It’s a start. Lots more to do. Really, this place needs all new furniture, appliances, carpets. Everything.”

“A satellite dish for the TV?”

“That too,” Jake laughed, aware gradually of the creeping all-over sting of sunburn—on his back and shoulders, on his thighs, his ass, tender areas never before exposed to the sun. Careless for a redhead. “If I’m ever going to live here. Definitely a satellite dish. Maybe a computer.”

“Can you afford everything?”

“Oh yeah. That’s the least of my problems.”

“Are you rich now?”

“Pretty damn close,” Jake laughed again. He’d been saving his own mailman’s salary for almost twenty years, some of it occasionally lavished on boys, most of it never touched (thanks to his spartan lifestyle) and steadily earning interest at the bank. That nest egg now had been more than doubled by the recent windfall from Doc, money Jake had never known about, never suspected. Amazed that his old friend had managed to accumulate such hefty assets. “I don’t have to worry about finances for a while, let’s just say.” “Why didn’t Doc buy lots of stuff?”

“He never wanted anything.” “He used to call me Khalid,” the boy said, recalling his couple of encounters with the old man.

“And he called me Jacob. He didn’t care for nicknames.”

Pepper had finished his burger and chips but still kept the plate on his lap. He pointed at Jake. “You’re turning really, really red.”

“Yeah, I can tell just by the pain,” Jake said. “It was a hot sun.” He sat forward and took the boy’s plate to stack on his own. Pepper’s café-au-lait skin had also been noticeably ruddied by their sunny escapade. “You’re a little burned, too. Not like me. Albino man. But a little. Look

at my butt,” he said to Pepper as he stood and headed for the kitchen. The boy put one hand to his mouth to muffle his giggly response. Jake asked, “Is it as red as it feels?”

“It looks like fire,” Pepper managed to answer, still stifling his throaty gurgle of laughter. From behind him at the kitchen sink, Jake good-naturedly returned his teasing, saying, “So how’s your little fanny? Stand up, kiddo, let’s have a look.”

The boy protested, “No, not mine!” even as he was getting to his feet to comply. His butt cheeks, finely imprinted with the grain of the chair’s coarse upholstery, had been roasted a warm mahogany, reddest where each cheek roundly protruded, as if he’d just gotten a smart spanking. Jake stepped from kitchen to living room (all one large space, really, just different areas), cast-iron skillet in hand. “Turn around, let’s see,” he told the boy, then imitated Pepper’s own giggly laugh to tease him. “Wow, those are some nice toasty buns you’ve got there!” Pepper reached behind himself and palmed each cheek as if, that way, he could feel the reddened color of them, trying at the same time a futile backward glance over his own shoulder. “Am I burnt to a crisp?” “Not quite that bad. Does it hurt?”

“A little,” the boy said, hands lightly patty-caking his own behind. Jake returned to the kitchen to finish cleaning the skillet, no soap and water, just paper towels to wipe away the grease. “Pagans get sunburned, I guess. Lucky we started late in the day.” Pepper, in the living room, nodded to no one and stooped at the television to search for other channels, no remote for doing the job, necessary to turn the old-fashioned dial by hand, channel after channel clicking past in a noisy hiss of snow. A barely discernible Wheel of Fortune. The audio of This Old House with no recognizable picture. Then more hissing snow, Pepper finally settling for the Cheers rerun where he’d started.

Jake finished washing the dishes. Cleaning the grease-spattered stove. The same thought always with him: Incredible to be here with Pepper, both of us so casually naked, all the rules broken, so many

months of timid courtship bringing us to this day, this afternoon, this idyllic moment. Just one glance now at Pepper sitting there in Doc's chair with every coppery-brown bit of himself exposed was enough to quicken Jake's breath and stiffen his dick all over again. He needed more—before they left here and returned to Sandburg to catch a movie at the multiplex, before they ended the night back home, maybe some Nintendo, a game of checkers, Pepper drawing a picture or two, finally off to bed for some legitimate and much-needed sleep—before all that, Jake had to experience one last taste of this day's rare, delirious freedom.

Pepper stayed in the house while the man ventured back outside, mosquitoes swarming, to retrieve their clothes. The boy was once again examining the arrowheads, now his very own collection, fascinated by the smoothly intricate contours of their surfaces, the clinky sound of them shaken together, the glassy sharpness of their flaked edges, hardly even noticing when Jake returned with the clothes and shoes and something else. Something from the trunk of the Volvo, brought along special by Jake but neglected until now in the afternoon's excitement. It was the camcorder, tripod already attached, a cassette loaded and ready to record. So many tapes piling up at home, seemed a little messy and risky and out of control, but this one was necessary, just this one more, no way Jake could let this day end without a video souvenir.

He was already positioning the camcorder when Pepper glanced around and realized what was about to happen. Daylight had faded outside the many windows of Doc's house, the south and east walls constructed almost entirely of glass—big windows, big sliding doors—easy to watch the slow seepage of light and color from the world beyond. All those glass windows and doors now becoming brightly reflective from inside, like mirrored walls in which Jake and Pepper could see themselves and see each other as evening deepened. The boy set aside his box of arrowheads. He kept scratching at mosquito bites on his arms and his legs, also a couple on his back that had him reaching

again and again over his left shoulder like some itchy contortionist. Still in Doc's chair, he pushed up his glasses and pointed to the clothes and shoes piled where Jake had left them near the door. "Is everything dry?"

"Pretty much," the man said, camcorder pointed and turned on and already recording from a few feet away, framing a space between the chair and the TV where Pepper soon would be standing. "But let's not get dressed yet."

"OK."

"You don't mind?"

"Is this for your Pepper collection?" the boy asked, their traditional term for all of Jake's many Polaroids and videos. The man was smiling as he moved forward now and took Pepper by the arms and gently brought him to his feet. "Yeah," he said, "this is for my Pepper collection. Maybe the end of it."

"OK."

"It's all right? For sure? If we do some more?"

The boy nodded his final consent. He gave the camcorder to his right a quick look, as if it were a third person with them in the room, an uninvited guest rudely watching. Already Jake was feeling and petting him. Sunburn forcing every touch to be a slow, delicate caress. At first. But soon the boy was eagerly cockhard and mindless of anything but the pleasure. The sex. Once again the feverish rut of man and boy. Both of them once again pressed together in Jake's arms. Pepper allowing himself to be fondled, to be kissed open-mouthed, Jake's hands all over his back, his ass. And then the man was licking him, licking him everywhere, wet tongue on every part of Pepper's sun-coppery body as the boy stood there seeing himself in the reflective windows behind the television, seeing himself being licked and then slowly rotated by Jake's hands to show his backside to the camcorder. The man's tongue still busy. On Pepper's ass. Like a hot-fudge sundae.

A hasty pause as Jake told the boy to "amuse yourself for just a second" and rushed to the camcorder to check through the viewfinder. Pepper fingered his own boner to keep it up, his back still turned as Jake

had left him. The man readjusted the camcorder downward on its tripod, perfect now for shooting the action as he hurried back into frame and urged Pepper onto his knees and then forward onto his elbows, ass up, sphincter showing. Jake began to tongue it, hot-fudge sundae, ice-cream cone, Pepper's forehead against the filthy carpet, Jake working his tonguetip into the slick hole, eating into it, really letting the saliva flow, tasting and smelling that twelve-year-old asshole until it was drippy. Tasting and smelling inside Pepper's rear end. Then he put his finger where his tongue had just been. A slow, slow insertion, the boy's rectal muscles gripping it as it entered. Jake rolled the boy onto his back and told him to spread his legs, there, just like that, finger still inside, balls and hard-on now fully displayed as the man leaned into position and started sucking. Pausing every minute or so to kiss the boy with deep, sloppy tongue. To lick his nipples. To lick his balls. The camera recording every detail, every moment for Jake to watch again and again in the weeks and months and years ahead. The kissing. The ball-licking. Pepper on video being cocksucked, Jake's finger up his ass. Glasses still on, eyes looking from ceiling to windows to the back of Jake's head. The camera seeing it all, recording and saving it all. Ten minutes. Twenty. Thirty. Now Pepper again on his knees with his ass cheeks spread, with Jake licking and tasting inside. Then a squishy fingerfuck that made Pepper's thighs tremble and his back arch, the boy banging his forehead slowly against the floor like someone lost in a rapturous fit. Then on his back once more with his knees raised and open and his testicles showing as Jake sucked him and sucked him, a blowjob like nothing Pepper had ever felt before, on and on and on, making him ache, filling his eyes with tears behind his big glasses, tightening his balls like two cherry bombs ready to pop. Then finally, after forty-five minutes, his spasmy and unmistakable orgasm. His sweet-sticky ejaculation. Jake removing his mouth after one grateful taste to let the boycock show, twitchy reddish thing glistening with spit and leaky jizz. Khalid "Pepper" Robinson as porn star, finishing his sex scene, cumming for the camera.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

A week and a half since Frankie's release from the hospital, cloudy day in June, the boy still showing bruises on his face as he sat on a park bench and waited for Jake and Pepper. His mind was more at ease now than it had been just a few days ago, all of his make-up exams successfully completed, his junior-year requirements at Stonerville High now satisfied. A major relief. Nothing to do for the next two and a half months but enjoy his summer vacation.

Twice he mistook a small white car for Jake's Volvo. Finally the real thing appeared and parked near the chain-link fence that separated the nearby municipal pool from the street, the same fence right-angling to separate pool from baseball field. Frankie was on a bench that afforded a view of both. Then on his feet as Jake and Pepper joined him. Hugging the man, hugging the other boy, doing it quickly, discreetly, people around them, a big crowd at the pool on this cloudy, humid afternoon. Still only Wednesday, but school was out and kids were everywhere. Pepper was seeing Frankie for the first time since the accident. "It's not so bad. Your face," he said. "It looks pretty normal." "You should've seen it," Frankie said. "Right, Jake? Dude, I was totally a mess."

"It was scary. Like a busted-up eggplant. And a big bandage around his head," Jake described for Pepper's benefit. In fact, Frankie was wearing a bandanna today right where that bandage had been. Red paisley worn pirate-style over the top of his head, dark blondish hair falling in back to the collar of his tie-dyed hippie T-shirt. They talked, all three of them on the bench, about Frankie's accident, about Pepper's out-of-town move in three days, about the repercussions from Frankie's Big Gay Announcement. Jake asked him, "Any hassles from your parents? Now that you're back home?" "They think I'm going through a phase." "Still?" "Yeah. It's almost funny. But they're OK."

"That's it? No other problems."



“Dude,” the boy shrugged, eyes squinted nearly shut and cheeks dimpled in a big, uneasy grin. “It’s hard to say. They don’t exactly want me to see you anymore.”

“They said that?” “My mom mostly. They think you’re trying to, like, recruit me or something. You know? Like you’ve got me brainwashed or something.”

“I was afraid of that.”

“I mean, though, it’s not like they’re going to call the cops or anything totally insane.”

“Should you even be here? Now? Is this safe?”

“They’re not home,” Frankie said. “They’re working. And Ben and Amy are next door. With their friends.”

Nothing more was said for a moment as everyone sat there watching the crowded action at the pool. Jake remembering Doc’s frequent tirades about boys and their baggy clothes, hard to disagree now when every boy at the pool was wearing the same clownishly oversized trunks, an odd sight, all those dark and heavy short pants worn for swimming. “I saw an article in the paper,” Jake said after a while. “About boys and competitive swimming. Not many of them will compete anymore because of the tiny suits. So companies are making longer trunks for them to wear. Sort of like bicycle shorts. Hard to believe.”

“Ryan swims,” Pepper observed. “Isn’t he embarrassed?”

“He’s one of the brave few who’s not, apparently.”

“Baggy shit,” Frankie said, grumpily eyeing the boys at the pool. He was at one end of the bench, Jake at the other, Pepper huddled between them. He had his arm behind Pepper on the back of the bench and now lifted his hand and touched the curls on Pepper’s neck. “Bro, your hair is getting long,” he said, really just an excuse to touch the other boy. Pepper agreed that it was long, that he needed a haircut pretty soon. Jake could see a piece of string around Frankie’s neck. He knew what it was, that string. The amulet containing Pepper’s hair. A charm of lust, desire, infatuation. Exerting its powerful spell as spring became

summer, the heat of subliminal magic spreading in a fever from Frankie to Pepper to Jake and 'round again. Nighttime sixty-nining at Frankie's house. Saturday's naked rut at Doc's. Bashful Pepper becoming pornstar Pepper. Voodoo. Magic. Some kind of magic.

Finally the two boys decided to take a walk back to Frankie's house, only a few blocks away. Frankie's idea. Pepper agreeing. Jake saying sure, go ahead, I'll wait here. Frankie was on his feet when he turned back and said, "You could come too, Jake. All three of us. Could be excellent." Pepper stood nearby and pushed up his glasses and watched, no expression on his face as Jake replied no, no, too dangerous, not at your house, not now, but you guys go and have fun. He stayed on the bench and followed the boys with his eyes down the street, Frankie talking and talking and gesturing excitedly and elbowing Pepper as they disappeared around the corner onto Levitt Avenue.

Just about an hour later Pepper returned by himself and told Jake that "Frankie says bye and he'll call you tonight." Jake said OK, a little surprised, waiting until he was in the car to ask, "Is everything all right? Any problems?" The boy said no, everything was OK. No problems. Wind tousling his curly hair as they drove back to Sandburg. He seemed fine. Not very talkative, but Jake soon had him laughing at a dumb ad on the radio about Mountain Dew. Imitating the announcer's hyper-energetic voice. Cracking jokes. It was their last ride together, back to Sandburg to say goodbye, Jake trying to cheer himself as much as Pepper. They stopped at McDonald's for an early supper of Big Macs and fries and chocolate shakes before ending back at Pepper's house. Jake didn't linger. He didn't want to start crying along with Holly. He gave a goodbye embrace and kiss to his old friend, then turned to Pepper and took the boy in his arms. And then Pepper hugged him back. For the first time. Pepper actually hugged him back. Jake promised to visit them soon, very soon, then felt his voice choking and kissed the boy and hurried out. Afterwards, Pepper stayed in the living room to feed his fish. He just shook his head no when his mom asked if he wanted

something for supper. Just shook his head and watched his fish as they ate.

Back home, Jake didn't have to wait long for Frankie's phone call. The boy was a chattering dervish, so much to tell he could hardly untie his tongue to begin. "Did Pepper tell you what we did?" he asked, a bad connection for some reason, his overexcited voice not only lispy but staticky. Jake said, "No, he never tells me stuff like that. He gets embarrassed."

"Dude, it was unbelievable. I should've had your camcorder."

"It's still at Doc's." "At your pagan paradise," Frankie said, well aware of Jake's recent idyllic Saturday with Pepper, every salacious detail of it. "I totally need to see that tape you made."

"Pepper gave his permission, he said you could. So whenever. If you had a car. . ."

"Don't taunt me."

"Sorry."

"I'm so screwed without a car. You're right. I can't go anywhere."

"And I can't come and get you."

"Maybe you could."

"Maybe. Later. Sometime later. Not now."

"Only good thing about this summer is getting my braces off."

"How much longer?"

"Just three weeks. Dude, I'm counting the days."

"So, Frankie, what happened?" the man asked. At the kitchen table. Sipping a beer. "Today with Pepper. You started to tell me."

"Oh god, I'm so stupid, yeah, of course," Frankie laughed. "Well, anyway, you know we went to my house. And we got naked. Right in the living room. First time we've ever done that. You know? Always in bed before, when we spent the night together."

"Kind of risky. In your living room like that."

"Of course. That's what made it so exciting!"

"If your brother or sister had come in. Or your parents."

“Oh shit, yeah, no doubt! It was so amazingly kinky!”

“OK,” Jake said between sips of his beer, already feeling jealous, even after everything he and Pepper had done together (never enough, never enough). “So you guys were naked?”

“Yeah, that was easy. He gets naked now, like, right away. It’s funny how much he digs it, how much he’s changed.”

“Your amulet, maybe.”

“Dude, Jake, I was thinking the same thing! Pepper even saw it this time, saw it around my neck and asked me about it, so I told him what it was.”

“And?” “He took it very seriously. You know? I told him, bro, right out, what it was, and he remembered from his book. I said to him, I told him, dude, this amulet makes us lovers. Real lovers.”

“You said that to Pepper?”

“Yeah! Those exact words. And he didn’t laugh or anything.”

“He believes in these magical spells,” Jake affirmed. “Like you said. He takes them very seriously.”

“So we were already making out, you know, kissing and shit, and sort of jerking off. On the floor. It was great. He’s so awesomely cute! And he really likes to jerk off now and get his cock sucked.”

“I know.”

“And he’ll suck, too. He doesn’t mind. He gets into it.” “You lucky dog.”

“But today I kept telling him, dude, Pepper, you and me are total lovers now. Forever, bro. We have to fuck like total lovers before you go away.”

“My god.”

“That’s what I told him,” Frankie said, his sibilants and plosives hissy with static. “And, dude, I’m telling you, he didn’t argue. We did it. Right in the living room.” “I’m too jealous to hear this,” Jake mumbled, trying to keep a smile in his voice. But he wasn’t joking. “So, I mean, you actually fucked Pepper?”

“Jake, dude, yes! We used Mazola. From the kitchen. Just like you and me at Doc’s house that time. It works great.”

“Yeah, it works.”

“We fucked each other!”

“Each other?”

“I let him go first.”

“Wow.”

“So unbelievably awesome.”

“Did you use rubbers?”

“No, dude, of course not! Not with Pepper. He’s clean. And I’m clean. Just our cocks, bro. All natural.”

“So? What happened?”

“Well, you know, he fucked me for a few minutes, but he didn’t cum.”

“In the living room this was happening?”

“Right in the living room, Jake! Totally. In broad daylight.”

“OK, so. . . he didn’t cum?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Frankie continued, “so we traded places. You know? Oh, Jake, I can’t even tell you what it was like! I’m so serious! To get my cock inside Pepper like that. I can’t even explain it. To fuck him like that!”

“You’re killing me, man.”

“Sorry, Jake.”

“It’s OK. It’s OK. Go ahead. Finish the story.”

“Well, you know, I was fucking him. . .”

“What position? Sorry to keep interrupting, but suddenly I’m wondering.”

“Oh yeah. It was, like, doggy style. You know? On his knees. I was behind him. So I could hold his cock at the same time. When I reached around. And I kept fucking him, and I was jerking him off, and suddenly he came, it was a surprise when I felt it, you know, on my fingers, and I kept fucking him, and I thought he was going to cry, dude, you know, when he came and he was getting fucked at the same time it was like he

couldn't stand it, like he was choking or something, and I kept fucking him but, dude, I ended up cumming in a hurry, I was so ready. You can't believe how perfect it felt! Totally inside him! You know? I totally came inside him. I just left my cock in and filled him up, bro. Every drop."

"Was he OK?" "Oh, Jake, he dug it!"

"You're sure?"

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"No, no, I don't think so. It's just that Pepper seemed a little quiet on our way back home."

"He seemed OK here. After we got done. He seemed, like, normal. Just, you know, worn out. But normal."

"I'm sure you're right," Jake said, finished with his beer, eager for another. "Just depressed about moving, probably. Me and him both. It's OK. I'm glad you had fun." "We did."

"What about when you came inside him? Did it freak him out at all?" "He didn't say anything." "It can feel strange. Like an enema. So I was wondering." "He was cool about it," Frankie insisted. Then he paused, remembering some extra details that made him chuckle into the phone. "When I was done, dude, I cleaned him with my tongue. Anything that sort of leaked from his butt? You know? From his asshole? I cleaned it with my tongue. And then, after he left?"

"Yeah?"

"I noticed a spot on the carpet. About the size of a dime maybe? Or even a quarter? It's where Pepper was kneeling so I figured it was his cum. A nice crusty spot, bro, right on the stupid carpet! My mom even noticed it."

"You're kidding."

"I told her that I must've dripped some Coke. So she cleaned it up."

"Your mom cleaned up Pepper's cum?"

"It's too hilarious, right?"

"Incredible," Jake said. Fighting those pangs of jealousy. Like an unpleasant shortness of breath. "Well, Pepper was a very busy boy these last couple of weeks."

“The amulet, no doubt.”

“Yeah, I know, but. . . also us. You and me. Teaching him. Showing him. Our persistence. Determination. Crazy horniness.”

“He learned a lot before he left town,” Frankie said, something strange about his voice, an unusual tightness. Silence for a moment, as if he’d abandoned the phone, then he was back. “Whoa, sorry. I’ve been jerking off while we were talking. I just busted like a demon. Dude, sorry.”

“No problem. I should’ve figured.”

“Just talking about Pepper, you know, he drives me crazy.”

“You said last year, when you met him, that you’d make him your boyfriend. You told me. Remember? That you’d have sex with him?”

“Of course I remember! Did you believe me?”

“Not really. Pepper seemed. . . untouchable. So shy and aloof. No, honestly, I didn’t believe you.”

“See, you gotta have faith, Jake! I knew that Pepper was my loverboy from the start. You know? It was destiny.”

“For all three of us, apparently. I can’t complain either. I had some great times with Pepper myself.”

“I have to see that tape!”

“You’ll see it.”

“What happens now that he’s gone?” Frankie wondered quietly from his bedroom in Stonerville. “I mean. . . Pepper’s gone, and I don’t have a car, and I’m stuck here all summer. Damn. I won’t even get to see you, Jake.”

“It’ll work out.”

“I’m having a nasty mood swing.” “I can tell.”

“Maybe Pepper’ll get pregnant and have my baby,” the boy sulked, a joke to make himself laugh. Jake laughed with him and told him again that things would work out, don’t get down, it’ll be OK. Frankie made a dubious “hmmm” sound, then said, “At least you’ve got the Huckfeldts around. And Ryan. Dude, he’s so choice! You’re lucky.” “So far. Knock on wood.”

“Nobody here in Stonerville except my buds from school. And they’re all straight. Nobody else. Except my brother.”

“Ben?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve never met him,” Jake said, now working on his second beer. “Does he look like you?”

“I don’t think so. Maybe a little. But dude, to be honest, he’s cute. Hell, he’s ten. Like Ryan. That’s old enough to start fucking.”

“Oh, come on.”

“If I get horny enough.”

“You don’t seem like the incestuous type, Frankie.” “The Huckfeldts mess around, don’t they?”

“The Huckfeldts are clinically insane. Not exactly your typical American family.”

“I thought brothers were supposed to mess around. They do it in books and stories all the time. Like in Doc’s stories.”

“It happens, sure,” Jake said. “But you’re not serious, are you? With Ben?”

“I guess not.”

“Does he ever seem. .. interested? Curious?”

“No, dude, never. Not really. I was just kidding,” Frankie sighed. “Nothing’s going to happen.” They said goodbye after that, Jake telling the boy once more to cheer up, things will get better, call me tomorrow. He took his beer with him into the living room where the louvered screen door was open to the humid breeze, to the street noise, Huckfeldt hounds baying, kids yelling. Jake wasn’t surprised when he looked outside and saw Dally across the street with Ryan, the two of them often together in these past couple of weeks, busy with their action figures and toy weapons, busy wrestling, busy enjoying the freedom of summer. Jake, for a change, was home with nothing to do and nowhere to go, willing to accept visitors when the two boys came to see him a few minutes later.



Ryan, first thing, insisted on watching his track-meet video from May, nothing he liked better than savoring one of his own victorious performances on tape. Or reading about himself in the paper. Being the star performer. He sat cross-legged on the floor in front of Jake's TV and told Dally to shut up whenever the younger boy tried to talk. Jake helped keep the peace by taking Dally to the couch and cuddling with him, always the best way to calm him when he became overheated or wheezy or, like now, impatient to go back outside and play. Sunset and darkness approaching. Didn't Ryan have to go home? No, Dally quietly answered, he's gonna stay overnight at my house. Ryan half turned when he heard this and nodded slightly and then finished watching his video. "That was OK," he decided at the end. On his feet now, shoes off, peering at Jake. "I bet you don't even know that I swam last Saturday and won. For my swim club."

"It was in the newspaper. Congratulations," Jake said. He hadn't said anything until now about Ryan's hair, all that golden hair shockingly and suddenly gone, the boy now sporting a bristly crewcut identical to Dally's. "I thought you were growing your hair out," the man remarked. "What happened?"

"This is better," Ryan said, standing there in yellow tanktop and baggy denim shorts, his skin sun-browned wherever it happened to be exposed. Those reddened ears of his even more prominent now with hair so short. Reddened ears and moist red-rimmed eyes, intensely blue, long blond lashes blinking. Dally had hopped from the couch and was posing beside him. "See, Jake, we's twins almost, me and Ryan!" Twins almost, true enough, the two of them side by side, Dally excited and grabby with the other boy. Putting an arm around him. Patting his back. Pounding his shoulder. Ryan didn't seem to mind. Twins almost. Golden blond crewcut and freckles. Rusty blond crewcut and even more freckles. Ryan maybe an inch taller, maybe two, a few pounds heavier. More muscly around the shoulders from all of his swimming, easy to see in his tanktop, arms completely bare, lean young athlete. Dally harder to appraise in the oversized black T-shirt he was wearing. The long blue

jeans. Pint-sized ragamuffin. He was holding Ryan by the arm, telling him, “Y’all oughta see our wiener movie! The one we done made? Y’all oughta watch it!”

Ryan scrunched his face and told Dally he was being dumb, but Dally ignored him and kept insisting until Jake agreed to fetch the tape from the storage box in his bedroom. “Dally and his brothers produced this, not me,” the man made a point of explaining to Ryan. Not me. Not my tape. Cautiously distancing himself from what Ryan was about to see: Dally getting fucked with a greasy dildo; JoJo naked as he performed his magic routine; Jimmy on his bed—headless, faceless—beating off. In fact, the man decided to leave the house entirely while the two boys stayed inside to watch the homemade porn. He sat on the front porch, Jake did, drinking his beer and puffing a cigarette. (Another failed attempt to stop smoking.) Safer, somehow, to be outside while Ryan absorbed the hard-core shocks within. If the boy reacted badly, if he was upset or disgusted, Jake wanted to be out of sight and free of blame when it happened. All Dally’s idea. Those crazy Huckfeldts. All their fault.

Jake had finished his beer and was smoking his third Camel when the boys appeared behind him on the porch. Ryan announced simply that the “movie” was the dumbest thing he’d ever seen. Dally smacked him on the arm and said no way, that ain’t true, our movie is the best one ever! End of discussion. Precious playtime awasting. The boys started down the steps, bypassing Jake one on either side. He said to them, “So hey, Ryan, you’re staying overnight with Dally? That sounds fun.” “He’s my guest,” Dally cut in, jumping from the middle step to the sidewalk, then looking back with his squinty Popeye grin. “Ain’t that right, Ryan? Y’all is my first sleepover guest.”

“I brought my sleeping bag,” Ryan said. “Me and Dally get to use the living room.”

“We can watch TV until real late,” Dally said. Jake asked, “What about Jimmy and JoJo?” Ryan shrugged and dismissed them as “idiots”

not worth thinking about. Dally, impatient, once again grabbed his new pal by the arm to drag him away. Then he stopped and came rushing back to get a kiss—almost forgot!—from Jake. Ryan saw this and came back himself, not to be left out, leaning across the steps for a kiss from the man as soon as Dally had moved aside. A quick peck on the lips. Smell of artificial grape on his breath. Maybe gum from earlier. Or soda. Or grape candy. A lollipop. His nervous blue eyes watching Jake as they touched lips, man and boy, then parted—bye, see ya!—for the night. Jake wondered, as those evening hours passed, if the boys might return for another visit. Some kind of sneaky and sexy afterdark escapade, perhaps even JoJo and Jimmy somehow involved. But true night came, and bedtime, and no boys showed up.

In the solitude before sleep, Jake watched the X-rated video still in his VCR, imagining what fussy ten-year-old Ryan must have thought when he saw it earlier, wide-eyed, amazed. Afterwards, in bed, the man allowed himself to think about Pepper. That image of him fucking another boy. Jake's own little sweetheart, shy young Pepper. Fucking another boy. Then on his knees, getting fucked. Pepper. Another boy's dick up his ass. Pepper. Letting another boy fuck him. Impossible. Impossible.

And now, like his final and most remarkable act of magic, he was gone. Pepper was really gone. Jake kept saying those words over and over to himself: Pepper's gone, Pepper's gone. Suddenly, staring at the ceiling of his bedroom, the man found himself crying, unable to stop.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Independence Day came with its blast of fireworks and giddy patriotism and then was gone, forgotten in July's swelter and sun, long hot days, dry, no rain for over two weeks. Kurt Randall's trial and sentencing had dominated the summer's news until then, a frenzy of coverage disguised as public service. A ritual cleansing. The "sexual predator" had been given twenty-five years in a penitentiary downstate, Sandburg's children now a little safer on the streets and the playgrounds, this "monster removed from society." Jake had followed the story on TV, on radio, in the papers. A strange mingling of relief and dread now that it was over. Relief to be free of the media hysteria; dread that the freedom was temporary, that the media and the cops and the entire social apparatus were forever insatiable and hungrily awaiting their next taste of sacrificial blood.

Frankie, in Stonerville, had also been watching and listening, disgusted by the freak show. Somehow, it made his life at home seem even more confining, more claustrophobic. No question what his parents were thinking each time Kurt Randall's name was mentioned. Thinking about Jake, that's what. No, they never came right out and said it, but Frankie could tell. He could feel it in the air. Bad vibes. He tried, as much as possible, to spend time with his friends away from home, away from his family, away from the tension.

In Joliet, Pepper knew nothing of the Kurt Randall story, nothing of Sandburg's news beyond what he heard from Jake or Frankie or his friend Marcus whenever he spoke to them on the phone. He had a new life now. Sandburg was no longer his home. Besides, only a boy like Frankie—a little older, more self-aware, proudly queer—would care about Kurt Randall's fate. Not Pepper. Not the Huckfeldts or Ryan or Sammy Lopez. None of them cared about Kurt Randall or the brave

efforts to protect them from child molesters, sexual predators, pedophiles. And no one cared less than Jimmy Huckfeldt. He was in his basement on this hot mid-July afternoon, his usual refuge from the merciless heat. He could hear, just barely, some yelling and laughing from outside, one ground-level window above the washing machine letting in this faint rumor of noise and an equally faint seepage of sunlight. JoJo, Dally, Ryan outside making the noise, playing, happily preoccupied while Jimmy decided on a tape to go with his weightlifting. The right music. On one knee beside the box looking through Nine Inch Nails, Rob Zombie, Morphyx. Powerful industrial rock. Important to have the right music for when he and Sammy did their workout together. He finally chose a Rob Zombie tape and loaded it into his boombox and let it blast away the silence. Any trace of outside noise buried beneath the sonic avalanche. Sammy had been over four or five times to lift weights, once with marijuana, maybe not the best idea, arduous exercise and weed not exactly compatible. Jimmy still hoping to buy some weed of his own if he could ever manage to run into that Frankie guy.

Time for Sammy to show up. He knew enough to let himself in when the house was empty upstairs. JoJo and Dally outside playing. Dad at work. Mom out looking for a part-time job of her own. Jimmy waited for the other boy until three songs had finished on the tape, then started impatiently up the steps to call him on the phone. At the top, on the back-door landing that also led to the kitchen, Jimmy almost collided with them coming through the door into the house. Them. Sammy and Anita both. Anita still Jimmy's girlfriend. He'd thought about breaking up with her but had changed his mind, no reason to waste good pussy just because she complained and got on his nerves. All girls did that. It was a guy's job to put up with their shit. Anita had been out driving on her learner's permit, practicing for her test in a few weeks, brother Sammy along for the ride. "Fuckers, y'all is late," Jimmy greeted them. They went downstairs together, all three of them, their shoes thumping

on the wooden steps as the loud music engulfed them. Anita said, "Jimmy, god, can you turn down the stupid music?"

"Always bustin my ass."

"It's too loud!"

"Sounds good to me, yo," Sammy yelled to anyone interested.

"So we can talk, at least," Anita said. She was wearing a pink halter top and tight denim short-shorts, brown legs naked almost to the hip. Sammy in a long red T-shirt and denim shorts that were actually short baggy pants, only a few scant inches of bare leg between the denim and his hightop sneakers. Strange, the two of them standing together so alike, their faces, their hair, so alike yet so different in their clothing, freakishly different, Sammy like Anita's reflection in a funhouse mirror, buffoonish, droopy, distorted. Jimmy turned down the music for the girl's sake, allowing all of them to talk while he and Sammy went through their workout. Anita on the washing machine, perched there with knees demurely together and hands clutching the edge as if she might fall. Sammy had some weed again and the boys shared it while they lifted. Anita didn't smoke and soon was bored and making sarcastic jokes about the boys being weak, being stupid, wasting their time. Sammy told her to shut up. Jimmy said damn, girl, you just wait, you just fuckin wait.

Both boys had their shirts off. Muscular Jimmy and not-so-muscular Sammy. Without Anita watching, they would have worked out in their underwear, more cool and comfortable that way. By himself, of course, Jimmy would have worked out naked. But not with Sammy. Not yet, at least. Jimmy ended his reps today sooner than he normally would have. He had an idea for Anita, maybe a way to earn some extra bucks from Jake. The man, just last week, had bought a new camcorder and given his old one to Jimmy for "any movies you might feel like making." Jimmy had said, "OK, fucker, if you pay me for 'em!" Jake had laughed and said, "Well, that seems pretty sleazy, but. . . sure, you make some exciting movies, I'll pay you for them."

Some exciting movies. No problem. Jimmy finished with the hundred-pound barbell and set it onto the floor and wiped his sweaty face and arms and chest with a towel and then told Anita to move her ass, come on, I wanna show y'all somethin in my room. The girl followed him to his curtained lair, Sammy left behind, not very happy about it, consoling himself with his pot pipe and the remainder of the weed. The music was loud enough to cover any noise from his sister and Jimmy, but he assumed they were fucking, doing shit, that bitch Anita always getting in the way, always ruining stuff. After ten or fifteen minutes by himself, Sammy left the basement, still barefoot and shirtless, and wandered outside to the front porch. Dally and JoJo and Ryan were already there, sprawled on the steps like heat-stroke victims, scarlet-faced and sweat-soaked every one of them. Taking a break from whatever game they'd been playing. Resting in the shade of the front-porch overhang. They wanted to know where Jimmy was. Sammy told them, said he was probably fucking Anita, and JoJo said, "He's makin more wiener movies, that's what. With Jake's camera. You know what, Sammy? Know what? I bet I's right!"

Dally said, "He's always selfish. He don't share."

Ryan, on the bottom step with his bare legs in the sunshine, said, "Your stupid movies, man. Jimmy and his dumb camera." He'd already been around one night, sleeping over, when the three brothers had taped a "show" for Jake, fairly tame, just a silly and ungraceful striptease before bedtime, JoJo and Dally giving themselves boners, briefly playing with themselves, hopping and dancing to be funny, nothing else. Ryan, despite Dally's encouragement, had not participated beyond simply stripping to his underwear and briefly flashing the camera. The rest, he'd said, as always, was stupid, just stupid. Now, energy returning to all of them, JoJo decided they should go down to the basement and spy on Jimmy and his girlfriend. "We could watch 'em fuck. Y'all ever seen 'em, Fox? Seen people fuckin for real?" Even now, after so many weeks of having Ryan around, JoJo still called him "Fox" or just "hey!" Not quite enemies but still not friends. Ryan said it was a "retarded

question” and made a flustered face with flared nostrils and downturned mouth. JoJo ignored him and stood up and farted and headed inside. A Little League player this summer, JoJo was wearing the jersey from his uniform, yellow with green short sleeves and a green collar and the word MUSTANGS in green letters across the chest, number 16 on the back. Always doing something, JoJo was. Boy Scouts, mowing lawns, Little League. Always busy.

Sammy went with him into the house. Dally and Ryan were slower to react, the heat still making them sluggish. Dally was on the step above the other boy, always clingy and grabby with his good pal Ryan, one arm around him now, Ryan putting up with it, with the chumminess, with Dally hanging onto him and even holding his hand sometimes, affectionate touching that usually led to wrestling or boxing or just plain shoving. That’s what happened now, Dally above Ryan and leaning over him, hanging across him with his right arm, going on and on about which Power Ranger was the best, which was the strongest. Almost chattery these days, little Dally Huckfeldt—quiet and pensive originally because of his new hometown, his new school, everything strange, everything unknown, but now comfortable and relaxed and with plenty to say. Ryan, getting annoyed with him, gave him an elbow to the ribs, gently, just his way of disengaging from the sweaty boy leaning against him. That led to their customary bout of punching and pushing, both boys on their feet now and working their way like a couple of stumblebum fighters into the house.

They were in the living room when Sammy and JoJo came rushing and cackling toward them from the opposite direction. “Don’t go that way,” Sammy advised. “Serious, yo! He’s pissed!” JoJo, laughing even harder, improvised a song as he often did, more of a chant this time, going, “He’s pissed, Jimmy’s pissed, Jimmy’s pissed pissed pissed. . .” Doing a clumsy dance while he singsonged and scrambled with Sammy out the door. No sooner gone, the two of them, than Jimmy himself appeared from the basement and skidded barefoot through the kitchen



and into the living room where he encountered Ryan and Dally. “Was you two fuckers down there too?”

“Down where?” Dally asked. Jimmy repeated his little brother’s “down where?” in a mocking whine and gave him a punitive knuckle shot to the arm. Dally grabbed the sore spot and stuck out his bottom lip in a huffy pout. “Ow, Jimmy, cocksucker, I didn’t even!”

“Cocksucker,” Ryan repeated in support of his friend.

“I’ll bust you up too, fuckface,” Jimmy said, fist raised. All this time in just his white briefs, the front of them rigidly distended by his boner. “Little asshole.”

“It was your brother and that Sammy kid,” Ryan said, saggy purple tanktop, those baggy denim shorts. “Go beat them up, you stupid moron!”

“Big tough guy.”

“Eat me!”

“Eat this,” Jimmy grinned, a humorless grin, one thumb yanking down the front of his briefs to show the randy thing inside. “This here’ll shut y’all up. Keep your big fuckin mouth busy.”

Ryan just backed away with a disgusted wave of his hand, as if fending off a foul smell. Jimmy followed him a step. “Little piss-ant, y’all suck on this here and get happy. Hear me? Y’all would get happy on this, I promise!” Then he stopped and released his underpants and turned to Dally with a look suddenly softer, friendlier. “Hey, mouse, y’all is mad at me?”

“Hit me too hard,” Dally whimpered, still holding his arm, the biceps, where Jimmy had punched him.

“I just popped y’all a little one.”

“Too hard, dummy.”

“Aw, sorry,” Jimmy said, funny baby-talk voice, taking his brother’s arm and giving it a kiss. “Iddy-biddy mouse. That better?”

Dally nodded and brightened, squinting one-eyed, three or four teeth missing, happy jack-o’-lantern grin. He forgot about his sore arm and grabbed Ryan by the hand and led him to the kitchen, Jimmy ahead

of them, finished with them, on his way back downstairs. The kitchen was hot. Oven hot. Sauna hot. Doors open, windows open, fans going and still no relief. Ryan said, "God, man, what happened to your air conditioner?"

"It done broke."

"So fix it."

"My daddy says it's a goner."

"So buy a new one."

"Might be awful expensive," Dally said, his back to the other boy as he rummaged through the cabinets, banging doors, overturning cups and boxes, finally deciding on a can of Campbell's chicken noodle soup as his lunch, a late lunch, almost two o'clock. He opened the can, some broth sloshing over the edge onto the countertop, onto his fingers. He licked his fingers clean and then started eating the soup cold from the can with a big tablespoon, broth dribbling and noodles dangling onto his chin as he slurped. Standing near the sink. Black T-shirt and gray corduroy pants cut off below the knees, skinny legs spotted with mosquito bites, too-large hightops untied and floppy around his bare ankles. He slurped his cold soup and talked, mouth full, about maybe joining the Cub Scouts. "It'll be fun. And y'all could be a Cub Scout with me," he suddenly proposed.

"I'm too busy," Ryan said. He was eating an apple at the kitchen table, blue formica top still cluttered with cups and dishes from breakfast, stray Cheerios, bits of crust, banana peels going black. Dally asked, "Busy how? With what?"

"I swim for my Y team, if you didn't know."

"Y'all could be a Cub Scout at the same time."

"Maybe."

"JoJo he's a Boy Scout? And he plays Little League too? So y'all can do both," Dally said between slurps of soup. "We could be in the same den. Since you and me is best friends? It'd be fun!"

"Maybe," Ryan said again, apple in his mouth, juice on his lips. He ran one hand across the yellow bristles of his crewcut as if still getting

familiar with the feel of it, the shortness of it. Just yesterday at the barbershop for a fresh cut, sort of a flat-top, spiky in front. “What’s your brother do with those movies he makes?”

“With them what?”

“Those movies he makes!”

“Gives ’em to Jake. Y’all want some soup?”

“Jake’s hardly around anymore.”

“He’s at his other house a lot.”

“Never takes us there.”

“He done said he’ll take us sometime. Y’all don’t want no soup?”

“He always did stuff with that Pepper kid. Remember? Now he’s not even here.”

“He’s at work.”

“No, idiot,” Ryan said, dangling his apple core by its stem. “Never mind.”

Typical day for Ryan and Dally. Long hours in the summer sun spent wrestling, playing with action figures and toy soldiers, building forts with rocks and sticks and boxes and other miscellaneous debris, throwing the football, throwing the Frisbee, riding bikes. Feeding and watering the dogs. Scavenging inside the house for lunch, for snacks, for sodas. Visiting Jake whenever the man was home. Always lots of kissing and hugging and touching at Jake’s house. Dirty movies. Dally often getting his boner pulled, a few times even helping Jake himself to jack off, to cum, once or twice even using his mouth to do it. But not when Ryan was around. Jake made sure they were alone for that part. With Ryan there was touching, there was petting between the legs, hey buddy you’ve got yourself a boner again, one occasion just recently when Ryan’s shorts came all the way down and he found himself actually being masturbated, the whole full deal, just like that time in Chicago, at the Holiday Inn, Dally a few feet away playing Nintendo, glancing back once to see, to smile.

JoJo also was around sometimes with the younger boys, more often by himself after mowing Jake's lawn or cutting Jake's bushes, sweaty and grimy, three or four times accepting the man's invitation to use his big new shower. Jake in the bathroom with him, in the shower with him, sort of a surprise that first time, jacking off, JoJo playing along, happily agreeable, even OK when they ended up in Jake's bedroom, on the bed, the man sucking him as he'd done once before on that Easter Sunday with Frankie. Same result this time, every time, JoJo quickly getting bored and losing interest. Big dick for an eleven-year-old, big balls, but no orgasms or semen, the boy always growing restless and impatient and pulling away before the sucking or the jacking off could produce any climax.

Jimmy, during these same summer weeks, had returned for another boozy blowjob from Jake, unloading right into Jake's mouth this time, a helluva good cum. That same day, just about a week ago, Jake had used his new camcorder for the first time (to record the blowjob, of course), then had given the old one to Jimmy. Now, today, Jimmy was busy with it, putting on a good show with Anita ("Don't worry, nobody ain't gonna see this but us!"), certain that Jake would enjoy the finished product, good for fifteen bucks, maybe even twenty.

Ryan and Dally, meanwhile, had wandered from the kitchen to the living room, almost time for their afternoon lineup of Power Rangers, Beetleborgs, a Dungeons & Dragons rerun, then more Power Rangers, an idyllic two hours for both of them. No matter that they'd seen the episodes before, many times before—seeing them again and again only sweetened the pleasure. Just as hot in the living room as in the kitchen, another oscillating fan whirring futilely against the muggy heat, Ryan and Dally both with shirts off now, using them as rags to mop their sweaty faces. "Tomorrow," Ryan mumbled, "you come to my house. This sucks."

"Your house?"

“Too hot here.”

“Our air conditioner done broke.”

“Yeah, you told me,” Ryan said. He was on the floor to be as close as possible to the fan. Dally realized what he’d just said, sort of stupid, duh, repeating himself. Made him laugh, a giggly laugh at his own expense. He wiped the sweat from his eyes and flopped, as if exhausted, onto his back, his head on Ryan’s lap, turned just far enough to see the TV. Not unusual for him to lounge this way while watching his favorite shows. “But Ryan? Ry? Remember? We’s goin to the beach tomorrow.”

“After the beach.”

“Oh yeah,” Dally grinned. The fan blowing against them. A voice (JoJo’s? Sammy’s?) whooping from outside. On TV, the Power Rangers were morphing for battle, the boys quiet now, raptly attentive. Dally stuck a hand into his own pants and started playing with himself, then reached back with his other hand and found Ryan’s crotch behind his head and started squeezing lazily at the denim, feeling at the thing inside, making it hard. Ryan just kept watching the television, watching the show, saying nothing.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Wednesday at the beach. Sharon Huckfeldt was chaperoning five boys and one girl on this outing to Lake Swanson, her own three sons plus Ryan and Sammy and Anita, all of them in the Chevy minivan with their towels, blankets, Frisbees, a canvas bag with suntan lotion and snacks and a couple of People magazines, something for Sharon herself to read while the kids were busy in the water. Another hot day with sun-lacquered skies as the noisy group assaulted the beach with their supplies. They descended the grassy hill past the huge two-story brick pavilion that housed the snack bar, the changing rooms and showers, even a dance hall and a big covered patio for dancing and dining, seldom used now, a relic from the Big Band Forties and the Sock Hop Fifties. Music was in the air above the beach, loud and echoey from the PA system, eight bullhorn speakers blaring songs by Hanson, Backstreet Boys, Alanis Morissette, Janet Jackson, Coolio. WBRG radio, known promotionally as “the Burg” around town, pumping out top forty hits into the sweltering heat of this July afternoon, out across the crowded sand and the bright water and the swimmers and paddle boats and the teenagers sunning themselves on the wooden raft nearly halfway across the lake.

It was to this raft, this special haven of strong swimmers, that Jimmy and Anita headed as soon as they arrived. The younger boys all raced to the water slide, past some beachside picnic tables and the paddle boats, sand kicking up behind them as they sprinted. Long baggy trunks on every one of them flapping comically about their skinny suntanned legs, Sammy’s legs brownest of all, brown-skinned lad from head to toe, Sammy Lopez, darkly honey-colored and black-haired and almond-eyed like some beachboy from the shores of Tahiti. He was the first one down the slide, Sammy was, two corkscrew turns and then a straight slippery shot into the lake. Ryan next, then Dally and JoJo, then

Sammy once more, still wearing a gold earring and a gold chain around his neck even now as he ran and climbed and splashed and risked losing them in the water or the sand. Dally and Ryan soon began taking their turns together down the slide, one of them in back hugging the other against his chest like two riders on a sled as they swooshed feet-first into the water.

Sharon Huckfeldt was farther up the beach reading her magazines. Jimmy and Anita were on the raft, the girl in her teeny-tiniest bikini, the boy in typical male garb, sloppily oversized boxers that hung to his shins. Malevolent sun above them in the heat-stricken sky. The lake water being warmed and cooked like a soup, dark green and unsavory, spotted here and there with blooms of algae, floating scum, the whole brew smelling faintly of the outhouse, something stagnant, unclean. A joint was being passed. Who'd brought it to the raft? And how? How had they kept it dry? Jimmy didn't care. He helped to smoke it and sat joking with Anita and the other kids, dangling his feet contentedly in the tepid water.

The other boys, back on the beach, were finally tiring of the water slide. JoJo and Sammy decided on one last trip down together, using the same bobsled technique as Dally and Ryan, more fun that way. A bigger, wilder splash at the bottom. JoJo in back, two years younger than Sammy but virtually the same size, holding him around the waist with both arms as they corkscrewed twice and hit the slippery runway for takeoff. Just then, just as they launched from the end of the slide, JoJo pulled down Sammy's trunks. A whoop, a holler, a flash of Sammy's bare haunches as he flew into the water. Dally and Ryan laughed from the beach, then laughed louder when they saw Sammy's red trunks come floating free to the water's surface several feet from Sammy himself. "They done come off," Dally said, still laughing, high-fiving Ryan, other kids nearby also laughing as they became aware of the prank. JoJo was the first to reach Sammy's trunks. He grabbed them and held them up

like some enemy's captured flag, then started with them toward the beach. Sammy, maybe ten feet away, let out a furious yelp and came splashing in pursuit, the water shallow enough to force him into an embarrassed crouch as he chased the other boy, JoJo slipping once and losing his balance, giggling out of control, spitting dirty water, slipping again in his clumsiness and haste. Sammy had managed to catch up by now, panic fueling his pursuit, water only knee-high at this point, the boy crouching to hide his nudity, one hand over his genitals, the other free to wrest his trunks from the floundering JoJo. He grabbed the sopping red things and fell backward with them into the shallows, the swimmers behind him enjoying a view of his bare butt this whole time, a flurry of applause now that he'd managed to recover his trunks and his dignity.

On the beach JoJo was greeted with more high-fiving by Dally and Ryan—yes, even by Ryan—but their little celebration was quickly interrupted by Sammy himself storming from the water and kicking sand at them, swearing at them. “Chumps, that be fucked up! Serious, yo! Hear me, motherfuckers?”

JoJo stared at him poker-faced with those strange unblinking eyes, then broke into a squirmy, rib-tickly spasm of giggles. “It were an accident, probably. Somebody else. Not me. You know what, Sammy? Maybe a ghost done it.” “A ghost done it,” Dally agreed, hopping in his excitement, laughing.

“That was hilarious,” Ryan said. Big yellow trunks lemony bright against the smooth brownness of his skin, water beaded on his cheeks, on his reddened ears, sparkly on the matted bristles of his crewcut. Sammy's expression changed from scowl to slow grin as the other boys kidded him and laughed, no harm done, just guys goofing around. “Fuckers, oughta kick your asses. You owe me, chump. JoJo. Fuckwad.”

“I'll buy y'all a new car,” JoJo said, a grave nod of his head, poker-faced again, mousy brown hair plastered to his forehead in front, cowlicked into funny little spikes in back.



“We’ll buy y’all a big new truck,” Dally embellished. Sammy pointed a stern finger at the other boys. His wet hair shiny and deepest black, bluest black, brushy on top and shaved close above the ears, a gangsta fade haircut. “For real, yo, buy me some shit at the snack bar. Serious, man.”

“Y’all ain’t got no money?”

“Coño, man, you owe me!”

“You know what, Sammy? My mom? She done got all the money.”

“So ask her! Damn, you stupid? I want some nachos and ice cream and shit,” Sammy instructed, a full grin suddenly, left front tooth chipped diagonally in half, both cheeks deeply dimpled. Roguish grin. Roughneck grin. “Can’t wait another minute, yo.”

JoJo shrugged and led the group across the beach to his mother, who took a break from reading her magazines and smoking her cigarettes to provide money for snacks—nothing specifically for Sammy, so JoJo and Dally ended up treating him out of their own ten dollars. Ryan had brought his own money and ended up, in turn, sharing with Dally. Nachos, hot dogs, ice-cream sandwiches, Cokes. All four boys inside the snack bar. Noisy, hot. Customers jammed elbow to elbow in the tight space, only one way in and out, everyone trying to get their food and leave as swiftly as possible. Just outside the door, their hands filled with food and drinks, the boys came suddenly face to face with Frankie Patallero. Dally saw him and recognized him first and gleefully yelled his name. Frankie smiled, happy chipmunk face, pirate bandanna of red paisley covering his head, tie-dyed T-shirt, knee-length denim cut-offs almost snug. “You guys,” he said, looking from one boy to the next to the next. “This is so cool, dudes, such a surprise!”

“We thought y’all was dead,” Dally told him. Frankie just shook his head and said, “Little dude! You’re too funny!”

“We knew you weren’t dead,” Ryan said. Frankie stepped closer to him, to Ryan, so they could shake hands, a three-part handshake ending with their knuckles going tap. “Ryan, bro, I’ve missed you. How’s your swimming?” “I win almost all the time.”

“That’s what Jake tells me, yeah. Awesome, dude. But damn, bro, your hair is so short!”

“He done got a crewcut like mine,” Dally said. Frankie smiled at the little boys and rubbed their bristly heads. JoJo, holding ice-cream sandwiches that were already getting soft, abruptly said, “See ya, Frankie,” and headed for a nearby picnic table. Sammy went with him. Frankie asked, “Who’s that new kid? I’ve never seen him before.”

“That’s just Sammy,” Dally said.

“He’s mostly Jimmy’s friend,” Ryan added. “He’s OK.”

“Sammy Lopez,” Frankie nodded. “Dude, I know about him. Wow. Definitely. Jake talks about him.”

“When y’all see Jake?”

“We talk on the phone, like, every day,” Frankie said. Dally grabbed him by the arm and said, “Hey, Frankie, know what? Before, when Sammy came down the slide? He done lost his pants! It was so funny.”

“Hilarious,” Ryan agreed.

“Oh wow,” Frankie said, “we could see something was going on before, you know, we could see from a distance. That was you guys?”

“But y’all couldn’t see his wiener,” Dally added, as if disappointed. Frankie smiled in his special way, squinty eyes crinkled almost shut with eyebrows raised, those squinted eyes and raised brows giving him a look of surprised amusement, joyful amazement. “You couldn’t see it? Too bad, little bro.”

“Why y’all here, Frankie?”

“Hey, you know what? It’s my birthday! Well, yesterday really. But I’m here today with my buds. We’re celebrating.”

“Your buds?” “My friends. Over there,” Frankie said, pointing to three high-school boys sprawled on the grassy hill that led to the beach. Like Frankie, they were dressed in T-shirts and shorts more appropriate for cruising and hanging out than swimming. “In fact, dudes, I’m supposed to be buying some munchies right now. They’re waiting for me.”

“Frankie, how old are y’all?”

“I’m seventeen, Dally.”

“Jimmy he’s almost fifteen. Y’all know Jimmy? He’s my brother?”

“Of course I know him!”

“Big asshole,” Ryan said. Frankie laughed with another of his joyfully amazed smiles, dark brows raised and arched above slitted eyes. He touched Ryan’s bare shoulder, his gaze on the blond boy nearly this whole time, now letting his hand slip downward along Ryan’s smoothly tanned biceps. “Is Jimmy an asshole for real?”

“As far as I’m concerned he is,” Ryan said with an emphatic nod, blue eyes flashing, nostrils flared.

“Is he here?”

“Yeah, with his bitchy girlfriend.”

“With Anita,” Dally confirmed. “They went swimmin somewheres.”

“Well, listen, I gotta buy this stuff. I’ll come sit with you guys in a few minutes. Is that OK?” “Yeah, that’s the best idea,” Dally almost shouted. He hopped in place like a springy little toy, then grabbed Frankie in a hug that Frankie cheerfully returned. Two habitual and enthusiastic huggers, Dally and Frankie. Two boys impossible to repress or embarrass, impossible not to love.

Just as he’d promised, Frankie was soon back from the snack bar—after a quick detour to his friends and a word of explanation—joining Ryan and Sammy and the two Huckfeldts at a picnic table partially shaded by a young maple tree. The boys were eating their ice cream first, before it could melt, JoJo on the ground in the shade of the table itself, Sammy on one end of the tabletop with feet dangling. Ryan also sitting on the tabletop, on the side, his feet on the bench, Dally seated between his legs and facing out the same way. His elbows on Ryan’s knees. His back against Ryan’s crotch. He smiled at Frankie and called for the older boy to sit beside him. “Absolutely,” Frankie agreed. “I’ll sit right here with you and Ryan.”

“Frankie, did y’all know that Ryan is my boyfriend? No, dang, I mean my best friend,” Dally hastily corrected himself, shaking his head, grinning sheepishly at his own mistake. Too late, however. Sammy and JoJo instantly were roused to attention by Dally’s slip of the tongue. “Coño, man, that’s wack! Serious, yo. Can’t believe you said that, man.”

“You know what, Dally? Know what? That sounded so gay,” JoJo was laughing, on his feet now with blades of grass stuck to the seat of his damp gray trunks. Laughing so hard, red-faced, that he fell forward onto the tabletop and banged it with his fist. “Oh my god, Dally, my god, y’all done revealed your secret! Pretty soon y’all is gettin married!”

“Dudes, come on,” Frankie said, his mouth full of nachos that he’d brought with him to the table, “don’t be so bogus. Leave Dally alone.” Ryan, silent until now, swatted the back of Dally’s head, then swatted it again, saying, “God, man, don’t be so stupid all the time. You’re such a dork.”

“I meant best friend,” Dally insisted, his eyes bashfully downcast as he licked ice cream from his fingers. “That’s what I meant.”

“Forget it, come on, look at all these nachos,” Frankie said, his own batch only one of three on the table, round chips and gooey yellow cheese heaped in shallow paper trays. He was already chewing a mouthful when he bared his teeth to show the other boys. “Hey, check it out, my braces are off! Cool, right?”

“Y’all had braces?” Dally asked. JoJo, still sprawled against the table as he helped himself to nachos, said, “Sure he did. Don’t y’all remember?”

“I didn’t never notice.”

“But JoJo noticed,” Frankie said, chewing and grinning, his turn now to do a little teasing. “Isn’t that right, JoJo? You remember?” Teasing JoJo about that Easter Sunday at Jake’s house. In Jake’s bedroom. JoJo getting sucked by Jake himself, then by Frankie, able to feel Frankie’s braces on his dick, mentioning it as he stood there naked. But now, if he remembered, he wasn’t confessing. “Y’all had braces, that’s the only thing I know,” is what he said, suddenly deadpan.

“Next year, probably next year, I’ll be getting braces,” Ryan announced. “Because my teeth have gaps.”

“Mine too,” Dally said.

“Yours are just missing, dummy.”

“Oh yeah.”

“God, Dally, jeez!”

“Well, dang, I just forgot, is all.”

“He just forgot,” Sammy laughed. He was still on the end of the table, facing away from the other boys, munching on a hot dog slathered with ketchup. “Dally, man, you crack me up.” His shoulders were slumped lazily forward, vertebrae showing bumpy beneath the skin. His hair had dried into a Mohawkish brush on top of his head. He was wearing sunglasses now, black lenses with black plastic frames. Hip-hop assassin. Gold earring, gold chain, sunglasses. Frankie was staring at his back. “Sammy, dude, we don’t know each other. I’m Frankie. Patallero.”

“Hey,” Sammy said, turning just enough to shake hands—full clasp, then fingertips, then knuckles. “What up, dawg?”

“Dawg,” Frankie repeated, slitty-eyed smile, not much chin, round cheeks dimpled. “I like that. Dawg. No doubt.”

“Say what?”

“The way you said it. Dawg. Very cool.”

Sammy nodded in vague agreement, ketchup on his bottom lip giving him the look of a bloodied fist-fighter. From the other end of the table JoJo suddenly started talking about snowmen, building snowmen, snowmen with boners. “Remember, Frankie? Y’all remember our awesome masterpiece? That fuckin snowman we made?”

“Dude, first time I met you guys. Yeah. Or maybe the second. We made this big freaky snowman,” Frankie explained for the benefit of Sammy, the newcomer. “Totally wild.”

“And Sammy? Know what? It had a giant boner,” JoJo said, still sprawled against the table, bent over and resting on his elbows with his butt thrust out and wagging as he talked. “That snowman? He was very proud of himself.”

“A giant boner,” Dally repeated gleefully, lopsided grin, one eye asquint. Sammy chuckled, “You fuckers is wack, man.” JoJo seemed to agree with a convulsive outburst of laughter, his whole body rocking excitedly, something vulgar about it, that rawboned and gangly body of his practically humping the tabletop. “One snowman one time? He done asked me to eat his boner? So I ate it? But not that same snowman, I don’t think.”

“Serious, yo, you guys is all wack.”

“Too funny, dawg, too funny,” Frankie laughed, using his favorite new word. That loud music from the PA speakers echoey and spectral in the air all around them. Guitars twanging, drums rattling, Smashing Pumpkins, Billy Corgan’s voice like the plaint of some lost soul. Sammy smiled at Frankie and tapped knuckles with him and mumbled that one word—“dawg”—like a secret oath between them. Then, from the beach, Jimmy and Anita came strolling by, probably on their way to the snack bar, Jimmy stopping abruptly when he spotted Frankie. “Fuck, man, where y’all been for so long? Shit!” He ignored his girlfriend and strutted to the table with a big clenched grin, like a dog baring its teeth. His baggy trunks—dark blue, almost black, a white stripe down the outside of each leg—were worn carelessly low, way down on his hips, abdominal muscles bare to the groin, treasure trail of fuzz leading from his navel down past the waistband that sagged nearly to his pubic hair. He put one hand on Frankie’s shoulders and leaned in close. “Listen, man, you got any shit with y’all? Anything to sell maybe?”

“Dude, no, not right now. I’m being, like, closely supervised this summer. Since my accident. And other stuff.”

“Nothin at all?”

“No, I’m totally serious,” Frankie said. His voice had deepened slightly over the summer, a more mannish flint to it, also not quite so lispy now that his braces had been removed. Still some lispiness, though—not truly effeminate, just a clumsiness to his tongue that always thickened his sibilants. “But see that guy over there? In the white cap?”

He's one of my good buds. His name is Gonzo. Anyway, that's what we call him."

"He's got some shit?"

"He'll get you some, dude, no problem," Frankie said quietly, Jimmy still leaning next to him, hand on his shoulder. Sammy had taken an immediate and keen interest in this discussion, nodding along as if Frankie were speaking directly to him. Together, the two of them, Sammy and Jimmy, headed rapidly for the guy called Gonzo. Descending on him where he rested with his friends. Pointing back to Frankie. Nodding. Getting down to business.

Finished eating, Frankie and the other boys decided to do some swimming. But then JoJo stayed behind to wait for Sammy, to use the paddle boats with him. So Frankie ended up in the water with Dally and Ryan, that dirty bath water, that stagnant swamp water. Frankie in just his denim cut-offs to swim. Ryan was eager to show off for the older boy, demonstrating his speed by torpedoing to the distant barrier of buoys and back, anyone in his way forced to move aside as he came thrashing past. Frankie praised him, dude, you're awesome, so incredibly fast, exactly what Ryan wanted to hear, smiling at each compliment, nodding, agreeing. "I could be even faster," he said, "if I was wearing my regular Speedos."

"Oh yeah, definitely," Frankie said, "I've seen your pictures from the newspaper. Yeah, wow, those Speedos, bro, those Speedos."

Dally, impatient by now for some rougher and wilder waterplay, threw himself without warning onto Frankie's back. Frankie laughed and almost gulped a mouthful of filthy water before recovering and wrestling free of the little boy. The game was quickly established, an aquatic battle between Frankie and the two younger boys, a frenzy of splashing and grappling and shouting, Ryan attacking Frankie, Dally attacking Frankie, other swimmers driven back by the tumult. After a while the furious conflict subsided into a tamer routine of water acrobatics, the younger

boys using Frankie as their platform for every variety of dive and spin and flip. Frankie not a large or strong boy, but large enough and strong enough to launch the smaller kids with his clasped hands or to let them leap awkwardly from his shoulders. Each of the younger boys taking turns, each trying to outdo the other, to leap higher, to make a more spectacular splash. Dally's turn again, but this time he just held onto Frankie's shoulders, the two of them face to face with Dally bobbing there and grinning and blinking hard against the water in his eyes. Finally he pulled himself even closer to Frankie and spoke quietly, like telling secrets, into the older boy's ear. "Hey, Frankie? I gotta pee."

"Yeah? Well, OK."

"I gotta pee," Dally said again, as if Frankie hadn't heard.

"That's cool. I mean, you can go ahead."

"Do like Jimmy does."

"Like Jimmy?"

"He helps out," Dally said, still grinning, still blinking hard against that dirty water in his eyes. Ryan, even more blinky and red-eyed than his friend, was bobbing next to him, trying to listen, Dally speaking almost in a murmur. "Y'all put your hand down there and help out."

"Me?" Frankie asked. Dally nodded, yeah, that's what Jimmy does, it's funny—so Frankie reached beneath the water and found the front of Dally's trunks and stretched them down and felt Dally's penis against his fingers and then the sudden warmth of Dally's pee, the warm concentrated stream of it directly against his hand, then directly against his palm as he cupped his hand to catch it. "That's weird, Dally," he laughed. "You were right, it feels funny." Ryan, afraid he might be missing something, paddled as close as he could and put a hand on Frankie's shoulder to give himself support. "What feels funny? What's happening? Tell me!" Frankie, without bothering to explain, took Ryan's free hand and placed it between Dally's legs just in time for him to feel the last of Dally's pee. "Oh god," Ryan half laughed, yanking his hand away. "What a pig!" Dally leaned closer to his friend, the water here shallow enough for all of them, even little Dally, to tiptoe the bottom.



He cupped a hand to his mouth against Ryan's ear, more naughty secrets to share. "But Ry? Guess what? Y'all should do it."

"Why?"

"It feels funny in the water."

"Pretty dumb," Ryan said, voice also lowered, making a grown-up exasperated face. Dally ignored him and grinned at Frankie as if to signal the OK, the go-ahead, Frankie glancing around to see if anyone might be witnessing this little piss-party of theirs. But no one was watching, the only nearby swimmers busy with their own splashing and horseplay. So he did again what he'd just done with Dally, only this time with Ryan, not even waiting for Ryan himself to say OK or nod approval, just doing it, stretching down the front of Ryan's trunks, finding Ryan's penis, nodding at the younger boy, go ahead, go ahead. Nothing at first, no response, then Ryan seemed to make a decision, to relax and play along, OK, OK, his urine suddenly streaming against Frankie's hand, creating its own extra-warm little current. Frankie kept nodding encouragement. He closed his fingers like a claw directly onto Ryan's dick, holding it and massaging it lightly with his fingertips as if to coax the pee, letting the healthy flow hit point-blank against his palm. But then he could feel something else happening, Ryan's penis stiffening, definitely stiffening right there between his fingers, gradually no more pee at all, Frankie left holding and massaging Ryan's full boner. "Whoa, dawg," he said, trying out that new word again, his free hand on Ryan's arm helping to support him and keep him steady, "that's a nice one. Really. That's a totally nice one. Wow."

Ryan was blinking at him and blinking at him, nostrils flared, sunlight creating dew-drop sparkles all through his short blond hair. "It just happened for no reason," he said, his own hand still on Frankie's shoulder. Dally, hanging onto Frankie's other shoulder, the three of them facing one another in a tight circle, used his submerged hand to find out what was happening under the water. He nudged Frankie's hand aside and touched Ryan's exposed hard-on. "Oh yeah, that," he said, a happy

nod and smile, taking a good long feel of the thing between his buddy's legs. "Sometimes, sometimes, you guys, the same thing happens to me!"

"Sure, no doubt," Frankie said, his hand bumping Dally's as they played together with Ryan's hardened wiener, both of them fingering it at the same time, sharing it. "Fact is, dudes, I got one myself right now." No further invitation necessary, first Dally and then Ryan himself quickly reached with curious hands to feel the front of Frankie's cut-offs, pressing and pinching at the crotch to find the lump inside. Frankie took another wary glance around and then hastily unbuttoned and unzipped his shorts, his erection suddenly bared to the water and to the fidgety hands of the younger boys, their fingers all over it, squeezing at it, tugging it. All this under the water, all hidden, Ryan eagerly participating now, both of his own hands busy, one with Frankie, one inside Dally's baggy trunks, each of the boys fondling the other two in this clumsy circle-jerk that must have looked like some kind of strangely intense, huddled conversation to anyone watching.

Ryan finally ended the fun by pulling away and paddling himself backward. "There's your brother," he said to Dally, his gaze fixed on the beach where, true enough, Jimmy was walking with Anita, kicking at the sand, eating from a bag of french fries. The other boys turned in the water to look. The spell now broken. Time to pull up those baggy trunks and zip up those shorts and think of other ways to amuse themselves. Frankie, in fact, announced that he had to leave, sorry, but he really needed to go. "You guys, this was totally excellent. Call me or something, OK? Dudes, I'm serious. Ryan, you too. Call me. Get my number from Jake."

OK, OK, both of the younger boys eagerly agreeing to call him, to see him again, reluctant to say goodbye. Frankie waded back to the beach and spoke briefly with Jimmy, then rejoined his Stonerville friends up near the pavilion. Dally and Ryan spent only a few more minutes in half-hearted waterplay, not much fun now without Frankie, the two boys quickly deciding to head for the beach themselves, to get something to drink, to dry off, to clean the dirty water from their sore

eyes. When they emerged from the lake, Mrs. Huckfeldt told them to stay out of the water from now on, stay dry, we'll be leavin in about half an hour, y'all hear me? She smeared more sunblock on the faces and shoulders of both boys, treating Ryan as nonchalantly as one of her own sons, bossy and no-nonsense without any discrimination. Dally also was handed his asthma inhaler and ordered to use it, two pumps worth, his lungs wheezy and tight after so much activity in the water. "Now you two don't go far," she warned the boys once again, dismissing them. "Half an hour."

Wearing their shoes, those big hightops loose and clunky around their skinny bare ankles, Dally and Ryan wandered up the beach and then up the grassy hill to the old brick pavilion that sat there like some abandoned castle, only one end of its first story used for the snack bar and the changing rooms, the rest of it empty and locked. Except, of course, for the large covered patio at its west end, a sprawling concrete deck open to the lake and the woods and the manicured parklands on all three of its exposed sides. The boys scrambled to this deck by its one outside stairway and quickly improvised another game for themselves, using the ledges like daredevil stuntmen to climb, to jump, to see which of them could land on the ground six feet below and then roll and somersault with the greater flair and skill. Then this game, too, had to end, time for the boys to return to the beach, to head home. "And then Ryan? Ry?" Dewey asked. "Then we's goin to your house, ain't we?"

"Yeah, no doubt. My house is a million times cooler," Ryan said. The boys were circling the pavilion on the side nearest the parking lot, taking the longest and most indirect route back to the beach, in and out of the trees and shrubs that screened the building. Easy to hide among them. Dally crouching like a wood sprite in the shadows as Ryan stalked him from behind the nearby trees. Suddenly distracted by something in the parking lot. A white car. A white Volvo. Jake's car. Dally saw it first, then Ryan, both of them scurrying together now behind the same evergreen to get a better look, just in time for another surprise as Frankie

rushed across the lot to the waiting car. Frankie once again in tie-dyed shirt and pirate bandanna, none of his friends with him, a solitary fugitive racing to the car, smiling, scrambling inside. Ryan and Dally crept to another tree that gave them a closer and better angle of Jake's car, the Volvo parked by itself in this remote and empty area of the gravel lot. "They's havin theirselves a secret meeting," Dally said. He put his arm around Ryan's shoulders as they crouched there spying on their two friends. Ryan didn't answer, too busy watching, silently fascinated now because, through the front windshield of the Volvo, he could see Jake and Frankie kissing and hugging, really kissing and hugging like a guy and a girl would do, all over each other, no one around to see them. Except Ryan. Except Dally. "It's like in a movie, them guys," Dally said, whisery, as if someone might overhear.

"Guys don't do that in movies." "Maybe on HBO. Or Showtime."

"Maybe," Ryan conceded, shrugging beneath Dally's arm. Across the parking lot, Jake and Frankie had completed their passionate greeting—their hugging, their kissing—and were now leaving together, the car moving away, turning toward the road, accelerating. The two boys stayed crouching where they were as the Volvo disappeared. Then little Dally laughed as if a funny show had just ended. "Like this here," he said, excited, "like this here. See, Ryan? Look!" He puckered his lips and made kissy noises and put both arms around the other boy. Maybe it was their earlier mischief with Frankie, or maybe it was seeing Frankie and Jake just now in the car, but Ryan also was feeling frisky and excited and didn't even discourage Dally's silliness, not even when Dally kept getting more and more crazy and started kissing him right on the mouth. Just a game, after all. Just another of Dally's stupid games. Ryan laughed through his nose and hugged Dally and kissed him back just as Frankie had been kissing Jake, just as Jake had been kissing Frankie, making exaggerated "mmm-mmm" noises the way people did on TV. But neither of them knew enough to open his mouth or use his tongue. Just a lot of hugging and lip-grinding and "mmm-mmm" sound effects as they performed their make-believe love scene. Then both of

them drew back and laughed and wiped their mouths with backhanded swipes. Dally laughed again and patted the other boy's knee. "Ryan? Ry? From now on? Y'all can be the boyfriend and I can be the girlfriend."

"You're not a girl, moron."

"Then, OK, then you and me can both be the boyfriends!"

"Not that boyfriend stuff again."

"It's a good idea, you'll see. 'Cause y'all is my best friend already? Like I done told Frankie before? But I done made a mistake and said y'all was my boyfriend only now it ain't a mistake no more maybe."

"God, Dally, shut up," Ryan told him, lightly punching his shoulder, almost grinning. "Anyway, we gotta hurry or your mom'll kill us. Come on."

They ran back to the beach where everyone else was already waiting for them, Sharon Huckfeldt greeting them with a scowl, the whole crew then traveling back to town in the crowded and hot minivan, windows open, four o'clock sun still fiercely ablaze. At home again on Whitman Street, Dally reminded his mother that he was going to Ryan's house, eating supper there. "Y'all stayin overnight?" she asked. Dally looked at Ryan and Ryan shrugged, then nodded, yeah, might as well, my mom and dad won't care. So off they went, the two of them on Ryan's Schwinn Speedster, Dally perched on the back with his hands on Ryan's shoulders (noticing as they left that Jake was back home, his car in the driveway, Frankie probably with him in the house, man and boy continuing their sneaky afternoon get-together). Dally had already been to the Fox home two or three times, but each new time seemed to make him dizzy with excitement and anticipation all over again. So many toys, so many video games and computer games, so much space for playing and wrestling and running! So much to see and do and explore! And all so clean, all so cool and comfortable, the whole house centrally air-conditioned, including the basement, which wasn't really a basement at all but a big family room, as Ryan called it, with La-Z-Boy chairs and pinball machines and a pool table and the biggest TV Dally had ever

seen in his life mounted on the wall like an actual movie screen! A wondrous funhouse.

The boys spent their evening hustling among all of these many diversions, Dally especially fond of the pinball machines downstairs, able to bang and bang against them while creating that cacophony of funny sounds, all those dings and buzzes and bongs as the silver ball bounced and rattled from flipper to flipper. Later in the night, finally worn out, the boys made popcorn in the microwave and watched the last half of Beetlejuice on Showtime, Ryan seeing it for the fourth time, Dally for the first, laughing with his mouth open and popcorn showing on his tongue and in his teeth each time he let out one of his giggly cackles. He was still wearing his swimming trunks as shorts, red trunks with white anchors and sailboats all over them. Also a black T-shirt. Barefoot, of course, shoes never worn inside the Fox residence, always removed and left at the door. Ryan beside him in orange Butler Middle School running shorts and nothing else. The two of them sharing one of the La-Z-Boy recliners, scrunched together elbow to elbow in the big brown corduroy chair, crewcut twins joined at the hip as they munched from their bag of popcorn and laughed at their film.

As soon as the popcorn was finished and his hands were free, Dally quickly fell into old habits, heedless and babyish habits, that right thumb in his mouth and that left hand in his pants—on this particular night, just his baggy swimming trunks, no underwear to get in the way. Ryan ignored him at first, no one else in the room, but finally nudged him and told him to stop. “Not in my house, you can’t do that. Don’t you know that?” “Do what?”

“That! With your hand,” Ryan said. Too many people in the house, even if not the same room. His parents, his older sister Melissa, his older brother Chad around for the summer. Too many people. “Don’t be a dork.”

“We done it before.”

“So? It doesn’t matter. And another thing is, you shouldn’t suck your thumb. You’re too old.”

Dally shrugged and left the thumb in his mouth, not impressed by Ryan’s reprimand. But he did compromise, removing the hand from his pants and putting it, instead, on Ryan’s knee. Ryan gave him a feeble nudge of protest, then returned his attention to the movie just ending.

Ten o’clock, time for bed, no real argument from the exhausted boys as they were sent upstairs by Ryan’s mother and father, Dally climbing the steps, as he often did, on all fours, pretending to be Mongo, the favorite of his family’s dogs. Ryan’s room was as tidy and clean as the rest of the house, all of his games and toys and action figures neatly shelved, neatly arranged, even his Power Rangers bedspread smoothly and perfectly in place. Dally had loved and coveted this bedspread at first sight, his fantasy that Ryan might somehow give it to him as a gift, maybe for his ninth birthday in November. He threw himself across it face-down and spread-eagled, the very smell and feel of it enough to thrill him and make him smile. “Ryan,” he asked, “y’all know what my favorite thing is?”

“Yeah, Dally, I know, I know.”

“My favorite thing is the red Power Ranger that Jake done give me for Christmas? But if I had this blanket, you know what?”

“It’s a bedspread.”

“But you know what? This might be my new favorite thing right here.”

“Don’t you think I know by now?”

“In case y’all forgot.”

“You can’t have it,” Ryan said. “Now move, come on, it’s time for bed. My mother and father said so.”

“Right now?”

“You heard them. It’s our schedule. Ten o’clock.”

“Our schedule,” Dally repeated, toying with the concept, finally moving off the bed so that Ryan could turn down the spread, the blanket, the sheet. Comfortably air-conditioned in the room, not too warm, not too cool, ideal for sleeping. Dally, who always slept naked, was quickly out of his T-shirt and droopy trunks. Always happiest without clothing, like a puppy set free from its collar and leash. Always, at this point, singsonging the words, “Wiener movie, wiener, movie, wiener move. . .” while doing a jiggy little dance and slapping at his own bare behind. Originally JoJo’s song and dance, now Dally carrying on the tradition, performing the “wiener movie” dance on his own, hopping, slapping at his butt, then jumping knees-first onto the bed. Only a twin bed, but that was OK, an eight-year-old and a ten-year-old didn’t need much room. “Wiener movie, Ry,” he concluded, grinning his cockeyed grin. “Wiener movie!”

“You get more like your retarded brother every day.”

“Which brother?”

“Your retarded brother Joey.”

“Y’all mean JoJo?”

“Everybody calls him Joey at school.”

“JoJo,” Dally nodded, both boys seeming to forget their original point. Ryan briefly left the room to brush his teeth, he and Dally already clean from a shower earlier in the evening, always necessary to wash and shampoo away the stinky residue of Lake Swanson. Ryan brushed his teeth, flossed, peed—his nightly routine—then spent a minute examining his own throat in the mirror, something he’d been doing since his tonsillectomy two months ago, as if the troublesome things might somehow grow back. Returning to the bedroom, he found Dally at the toy shelves rummaging and inspecting, a naked little busybody with eager eyes and hands. “Leave my stuff alone,” Ryan told him. “You’re getting everything all messed up!”

“OK,” Dally shrugged, quickly back to the bed where he jumped once again knees-first onto the bouncy mattress. “Come on, Ry, come on, time for sleep, time for sleep!”



“Don’t shout so loud,” Ryan said. He turned out the lights and climbed into bed and flopped onto his back. “Do you want the sheet up or down?”

“Want it up,” Dally said in an urgent whisper, as if the darkness now required secrecy and stealth. He and Ryan pulled the sheet over themselves and nestled into cozy positions against each other on the narrow mattress, Ryan still in his orange track shorts. Ordinarily, by himself, he would have been wearing pajamas. Too much trouble, though, with Dally around. His shorts good enough, just as comfortable. Dally, by now, had rolled against him and snuggled tight and was whispering secrets into his ear. “Ry? Know what? I’m glad y’all is my boyfriend.”

“Guys aren’t boyfriends,” Ryan protested one more time.

“But we can pretend. Like when Jimmy makes his movies? And like at Jake’s house when we do stuff? It’s like that.”

“I doubt it.”

“I think it’s funny,” Dally said, then barely held back a giggle and kissed Ryan on the cheek. Ryan gently elbowed him. Unfazed, Dally let out another half-giggle and put an arm and a leg across Ryan so that he could press his pecker against Ryan’s hip and rub it there and make it tickly and hard. His knee rubbing between Ryan’s legs, against the nylon shorts. Ryan had been through this before at the Huckfeldt house, Dally always squirmy and rambunctious at bedtime, playing with his own dick, playing with Ryan’s, kissing. Ryan sometimes going along with him, at other times shoving him away, Dally occasionally sneaking off on nights like that to spend some time with Jimmy or JoJo, just up and leaving Ryan in favor of the sexier, naughtier tangling he could enjoy with his brothers. But here, tonight, something felt different. For Ryan. A weird day altogether, starting with Frankie at the lake, everybody goofing around and getting boners. Then Jake and Frankie together in the car. Then Dally’s kissing game. A weird day. Ryan didn’t feel like shoving Dally away this time. Not tonight. He did say, “Knock it off,” just once in a sort of quiet and automatic way, just mumbling the words,

but his dick was already hard from Dally's knee rubbing against it and he didn't feel like stopping. A weird day. Suddenly it seemed like a good idea to take off his shorts. More fun to be naked with Dally beneath the sheet and to hug him and have Dally whisper about bein married, just like bein married, y'all is my boyfriend and we can get married. Boners rubbing and rubbing together, that strange feeling, that funny feeling. Now Dally using his hand. Now the sheet being pushed down about halfway so that Dally could get at Ryan with his mouth. Ryan on his back. Legs spread. Yeah. So weird. Crazy. Dally using his mouth. Then somehow Dally crawling backward and on top of Ryan at the same time and putting his own hard penis into Ryan's mouth. Ryan allowing it now. Ryan enjoying it now. Both boys contentedly sucking and sucking there in the silent, moonlit bedroom.

A weird day. For everyone. Jake and Frankie had spent their late afternoon together in bed, in each other's arms, fucking themselves exhausted, then resting and talking and kissing and then fucking again until Frankie's buds had picked him up at six o'clock on their way back to Stonerville, never suspecting that Frankie and Jake were anything more than good friends, just good friends spending some time together for Frankie's birthday. Nothing strange about it.

Jimmy had seen them leave. After supper. Standing at the front screen door to get some air, some relief from the heat. Earlier, just home from the beach, Anita had asked him about the tape from yesterday, a bad idea in her opinion, sorry she'd participated, wanted him to erase it, destroy it, get rid of it. But Jimmy didn't have it. He'd gotten twenty dollars for it from Jake, more than he'd really expected, money he'd used just today to buy a small baggie of weed from Gonzo, not much, but enough for a couple of good joints. No way he could explain to Anita what had happened to that tape of theirs. So he faked an attitude and told her no, forget it, y'all ain't gettin it, bitch! Major fight, Anita furious, that's it, you a piece of shit, Jimmy, we're through, we're

through! Really the end this time. No more Anita. Sammy couldn't stop laughing when he heard them fighting and when Anita stormed out. Glad she's gone, yo, serious! Gets in the way when we's tryin to lift weights and shit. Big pain in the ass, man. Jimmy shrugged, whatever, already wondering about another movie for Jake, maybe something with Sammy in it, such a fuckin easy way to make some fast bucks.

JoJo watching all this, not saying much for a change, also a weird day for him. Out on the lake with Sammy in their paddle boat, both of them watching for chicks, for babes, pointing out the ones in the tiniest bikinis, the ones with the biggest tits. Sammy leering from behind those pimp sunglasses of his, just normal at first, regular guy shit, then a little stranger as Sammy kept going on and on about pussy and cum, pussy and cum, asking JoJo question after question about fucking and other shit: How many pussies you fuck, man? You fuck lots of them pussies, man? You like to fuck 'em, man? You cum lots, man? When you fuck, yo, you make much cum? Yo, man, serious, you like to jerk off? You think about pussies and jerk off a lot? How much cum you make when you jerk off, dawg? Serious, yo, how much? JoJo fibbing and fibbing with his answers, poker-faced, playing along. Now, at the end of this day, alone in his room at bedtime, he was thinking again about Sammy's questions as he masturbated, looking at his own fingers when he'd finished, nothing to see, just a tacky moisture on his fingertips as if he'd been handling a juicy orange or plum. A little moisture, a little fruit-juicy stickiness, nothing more. Not enough to impress someone like Sammy, that's for sure.

Dally and Ryan, back over on Tompkins Street, were finished now at the end of this eventful summer day, two little bunnies finally satisfied and ready for sleep, a naked snuggle of boybodies still atop the tangled sheet. Ryan making no effort to disengage, to move away, to find his shorts. More fun this way. His penis against Dally's warm thigh. Nicer this way. Dally's hand on his butt. Better this way. Much better.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Thunderstorms came crashing through Sandburg on the last day of July, then christened August with another blast of wind and lightning and torrential rain. All day Saturday the storms came and passed and came again. By Sunday the heavy clouds had shredded to reveal traces of blue, the ground had begun to dry, and Jake was outside cleaning the windblown debris from his yard. Twigs, larger branches, papers and wrappers and cartons from other people's trash. JoJo was with him, always helpful and enterprising JoJo, happy to assist in the cleanup for a few extra bucks. "Hey, Jake! Hey, Jake!" he yelled from across the back yard. "Did y'all lose your power last night? Did your lights and TV and shit go off?"

"Oh yeah, the whole neighborhood was out."

"Was y'all scared by yourself?" "No," Jake laughed, "not scared. Just extremely hot. Without my air conditioner."

"We ain't got no air conditioner. Since ours broke."

"I know. You poor guys." "Hey, Jake! Y'all think the power was out where Dally is?" "Where's Dally?" "At Fox's house."

"He's with Ryan again?"

"Y'all think it's sickening?"

"No, no, no. That's a silly thing to say. They're good friends."

"Think their power went off?"

"Don't know, pal," Jake called from his side of the yard, humidity and mosquitoes making the cleanup job a misery. "Anyway, I think we've done enough here. Let's cool off inside."

"Yes sir, yes sir," JoJo said, clapping his hands, a cheerful hippity-hop and then off he rushed with the man into the comfortably air-conditioned house. Inside Jake gave him ten dollars and a can of root beer for his help. The boy had been sniffing and sneezing all morning, a victim of hay fever, his eyes watery and his pocket full of Kleenex for wiping and blowing his runny nose. A problem for him every spring and

summer, unpredictable, some days good and some bad. Today very bad. He sneezed, took a gulp of root beer, sneezed again. Jake gave him a kiss on the side of his head, tasting sweat, smelling dirty hair. "Are you hungry? Want some lunch?"

"Know what, Jake? I'll fix it," JoJo said, his back already turned as he opened the refrigerator and grabbed the package of Oscar Mayer bologna. He told Jake, between noisy sniffs, to wait in the living room, I'll make y'all a special surprise. He spent the next several minutes banging around the kitchen, working with his customary graceless exuberance to create his surprise for Jake: slices of pan-fried bologna heavily sprinkled with cumin and cayenne and black pepper and splashed, just as liberally, with Tabasco sauce. He brought a plateful of this concoction to Jake in the living room. "This here is my favorite," he said, on his knees beside the La-Z-Boy where Jake was sitting.

"You've made this before?"

"Are you kiddin? I make this all the time! It's my special recipe."

"Very, very. . . spicy," Jake said, nibbling one of the slices, red-hot on his tongue. "Tasty."

"Honest?" "You're a good cook."

"Is that enough?"

"Actually," Jake said, "it's probably more than I can eat by myself."

"Y'all hate it, I can tell," the boy responded, sitting back on his heels, dejected. "Man, Jake, that's cruel."

"Oh, come on, I don't hate it."

"Y'all hate it, don't lie."

"Look," Jake said, "I'm eating it. See? It's good. But. Maybe we can share it."

"OK, that's a good idea," JoJo agreed, up again on his knees to snatch one of the peppered and sauced slices from the man's plate and cram it greedily into his own mouth. "Hey, Jake, know what? This here is grubbish! It ain't hot at all."

“Not hot?” “Don’t bother me at all. Not even a little tiny bit. I think y’all might be a wuss, Jake.” “Oh nice, thanks a lot.”

“The truth is hard to take,” JoJo said, no hint of a smile on his face, that gaunt face, all bony angles and sun-darkened freckles and inscrutable grayish-greenish eyes. Jug-handle ears. Brown hair in sweaty disarray. He was leaning against the arm of the La-Z-Boy and chewing open-mouthed, noisily, grease and Tabasco on his lips, a delicate crust of snot around each nostril. “I’ll eat every fuckin piece, Jake.”

“Really? OK, if you insist,” the man smiled, holding the plate for JoJo and watching him wolf down the bologna, slice after slice of it, a one-boy eating contest. “But seriously now, don’t make yourself sick. Hear me?” The boy responded by eating even faster, folding each slice of bologna in half and stuffing it into his mouth, finally emptying the grease-puddled plate with a climactic belch and another fit of sneezing. He flopped onto his back after that with his arms spread and his eyes shut like someone knocked senseless. “Know what?” he mumbled. “This here day is a bad day. This here day really sucks.”

“Don’t feel good?”

“Makes me tired, this hay fever shit. Wish it would stop.” “How’s your stomach?” “My stomach?”

“From all the baloney you just ate.” “That weren’t nothin. It’s my head,” the boy kept mumbling, almost moaning, both hands pressed against his face, pressed against his burning eyes and his itchy, runny nose. Jake got down onto the floor beside him and started to rub his stomach. “Poor JoJo. I’ve never seen you so miserable. Wish I could help.” He slipped his hand beneath the Little League jersey that JoJo was wearing, that yellow jersey with the green short sleeves and green collar and MUSTANGS in green letters across the chest. The boy’s stomach was sweaty, a little clammy. He was wearing shorts of lightweight gray fleece raggedly cut off at the knees, his knees bent so that the gray fleece had slipped back and away to expose his whitely naked thighs. His thin legs suntanned below the knees, starkly pale above. Jake used his other hand to pet those bare, two-toned legs. “You guys and your stupid baggy

shorts,” he said. “Look at these nice thighs. Never seen the sun. Always covered. Always hidden. Such a shame.”

“Don’t tickle me.”

“I’m not tickling.” “Hey, Jake?”

“Yeah?”

“Why do peckers get hard?”

“Whose pecker? Yours?”

“Just any pecker. Does it got a bone in it? That’s what Jimmy done told us.”

“No,” Jake said, “it doesn’t have a bone in it.” He put his hand into the leg of JoJo’s shorts and then into the crotch of the underpants farther up, finding the almost-hard penis inside. Getting his fingers around it. Holding it as it swelled to a full, throbby erection. “It’s like a sponge. It fills with blood and gets big and hard. Like this one here. A nice big boner.”

“It’s a boner but it ain’t got no bone?”

“That’s right.”

“Feels like a bone,” JoJo said, still skeptical, his face so strangely blank at times, like now, that he appeared almost stunned, almost dazed. His unwashed and uncombed hair perfectly complementary to that blank expression, like a boy just roused from bed, pillowhair forever matted and mussed. “Maybe y’all don’t got your facts straight, Jake.”

“Believe me,” the man said, “this is one thing I definitely know about.” He was already taking off the boy’s gray shorts. The boy’s sweaty underpants. Some generic brand of white briefs stained pissy yellow at the crotch and streaky brown at the seat. JoJo, sneezing again, retrieved his shorts from the floor and fished into their one pocket for a damp, wadded Kleenex to wipe his drippy nose. He was still on his back with his knees raised and spread, balls plumply displayed, the reddened knob of his hard-on pressed back against the hem of his yellow MUSTANGS jersey. He sneezed again and blew his nose as Jake began licking him between the legs, licking each of his smooth pigeon-egg testicles, licking up and down the erect length of his dick. The man

wondered how long this boy had gone without a bath or a shower. Such a stinky odor between his legs, like the inside of an old tuna can, yet somehow not off-putting, not repulsive. Somehow the boyish dirtiness of him crudely exciting, a nasty turn-on. The smell of him. The filth of him. His stiffly aroused penis now in Jake's mouth, being sucked, the man greedily determined to bring JoJo all the way to orgasm this time, finally this time to make those eleven-year-old balls of his (twelve in just a couple more months) squeeze out whatever juice they might contain. JoJo, for a change, seemed ready to cooperate, one hand holding the Kleenex, the other covering his eyes, that wicked hay fever making him sluggish, compliant, devoid of his usual impatient energy. Content, this afternoon, to stay on his back while Jake slurped and sucked his pecker and coaxed him closer and closer to that tightness in his nuts, that sweet bellyache of pleasure, that final agony and shiver. Like jackin off, only a million times better.

But big brother Jimmy, along with Sammy Lopez, was already on his way into the house to start a little party of his own. Jake heard the unlocked back door bang open and then shut, an unexpected and startling noise that brought him scrambling to his feet, heart drumming a panicky beat. JoJo uncovered his eyes to see what was happening, but otherwise he hardly stirred, still on his back when Jimmy and Sammy came shoving each other and laughing into the living room. "Look at this, look at this, look at this," Jimmy shouted when he saw his younger brother half naked on the floor, boner exposed. "I shoulda known you fuckers was busy!"

"Can't prove a thing," Jake said, pulse returning to normal, no immediate danger from these two boys—although Sammy Lopez was not quite a friend and possibly even a risk, possibly a source of trouble, such an unfortunate moment to have him walk in. What would he think? How would he react to seeing another boy, JoJo Huckfeldt, laid out for sex on the floor of Jake's living room? The man might as well have been wearing a "Call the cops, I'm a big bad pedophile!" sign around his



neck. And what if, what if. . . what if these intruders had been a neighbor or a parent or some other meddling adult? Implausible, maybe, but. . . what if? Disaster. Nightmare. The catastrophic end to everything.

Jimmy and Sammy were still circling and laughing, shoving and yelling, something manic about their behavior that must have been fueled by booze or pot, their voices too loud, their movements exaggerated and sloppy, like a couple of drunks just home from the tavern. JoJo scooted on his back, vaguely crablike, to a place on the floor between the couch and a pile of boxes (Jake's old albums) where he was less likely to be stepped on by the other boys. But he stayed brazenly half-naked and, now that Jake was busy elsewhere, even began to masturbate with his own free left hand, right hand still dabbing at his nose with the soggy Kleenex. Jake was standing in the middle of the room, in the middle of this sudden bedlam, frustrated that his tryst with JoJo had been interrupted, nervously uncertain what kind of mischief Jimmy and Sammy might have in mind. They seemed wired with a crazed energy, unable to calm themselves or settle in any one spot, noisy as a pair of wild-eyed berserkers. "What shit have you guys been drinking? Or smoking?"

"Jake, my man, y'all ain't got no clue," Jimmy shouted, playing air guitar with his restless hands. He looked at Sammy bouncing beside him, actually bouncing on his toes like a boxer awaiting the bell. They made eye contact and broke into a fresh uproar of inebriated laughter. Sammy pointed at JoJo on the floor and laughed even harder. "Ain't possible, dawg, ain't no way possible."

"Fucker, what y'all goin on about?" "That guy. Your brother. There!"

"Jackin off, oughta be ashamed," Jimmy said, his attention only briefly diverted before quickly flitting back to Jake still standing nearby and watching. "I'm tellin ya, man, y'all ain't got no motherfuckin clue!"

"So fill me in."

"This is serious shit!"

“Serious shit, yo,” Sammy loudly reiterated, beachboy Sammy in voluminous shin-length denim shorts and an orange T-shirt worn like a turban on his head, short sleeves tied in back and dangling against his neck. “Cute,” Jake told him, pointing. Sammy didn’t seem to hear or understand. “Serious shit, yo,” he repeated in the same wildly declamatory voice. Jimmy laughed as if hearing him for the first time. “Cocksucker can’t handle it. Look at this fool. Don’t embarrass me in front of my good friend Jake here.”

“Can’t handle what?” the man asked.

“Y’all wanna know for real?” “Sure,” Jake said, difficult to ignore JoJo lazily masturbating just a few feet away, difficult but necessary as the other two loud-mouthed boys kept yelling and laughing like sweaty lunatics. Jimmy came forward and grabbed Jake by the shoulders. “Acid, my man! Y’all know what that is, Jakey?”

“Acid? What kind?” “LSD.”

“Yeah, I know that, but. . .”

“Incredible fuckin goddamn shit, Jakey oh Jakey my Jakey.”

“Wow, kid, you’re flying. Pupils dilated, cheeks flushed, oh yeah,” Jake smiled, face to face with the boy, inhaling his reeky fragrance of cigarettes, marijuana, beer. All overpowered by the sweaty BO pungency of him wafting from beneath his purple-flowered Hawaiian shirt (another of his father’s hand-me-downs). The shirt was unbuttoned and opened to show off his muscly chest. Khaki multi-pocketed cargo shorts sagging low and beltless on his hips. “Acid and weed and beer all together, right? Am I right, Jimmy boy?”

“Damn, fucker, y’all is a genius,” Jimmy shouted right into the man’s face. His hair was longer than Jake had ever seen it, a true heavy-metal shag completely covering his ears and his neck in a thick spill of dirty, sweaty tangles. His eyes had a feverish brightness to them. His lean jaw muscles kept flexing as he clenched and unclenched his teeth. That wolfish grin. That hungry grin. “Come on, cocksucker,” he suddenly said, but not to Jake, to Sammy, swiftly across the room to grab the other boy and drag him back toward the kitchen. Not to leave.

No, not time to leave. Time for beer, something to wet their parched mouths and keep their buzz in high gear on this deranged Sunday afternoon. Jake, while they were gone, sat on the floor beside JoJo to watch the boy play with himself. "Sorry we got interrupted. How's it goin over here?" "Them guys is wasted," JoJo said with a snuffle and another sneeze. The Kleenex in his hand was nothing by now but a used-up little ball, so Jake took a clean handkerchief from his own pocket and gave it to the boy and then, what the hell, pushed JoJo's other hand aside and resumed his earlier blowjob. Not much of a risk, he figured. If Jimmy were the only other boy in the house, no problem at all, Jake would happily have ended up giving blowjobs to both of the brothers. But the presence of Sammy Lopez demanded at least a bit of caution, no telling what his reaction might be, no way really of trusting him. A sensible bit of caution. Just in case. OK for right now, though, nobody else in the room. JoJo seemed surprised by the man's mouth abruptly back on his pecker. His hips slowly raised and squirmed to greet this unexpected pleasure, his penis especially sensitive now that he'd been tugging and rubbing it for a while on his own. Jake could tell by the tenseness of the boy's hips—those meatless, bony hips—and by the overswollen heat and hardness of his dick that he was close to orgasm. Balls tightening. Toes curling and curling. Desperately close to a serious orgasm.

But again, and this time no surprise, the elusive climax was postponed by the noisy return of Jimmy and Sammy. Heavy hightops stampeding down the hallway from the kitchen. Jake muttered a few curses and sat up, leaving JoJo's erection to twitch untended like something wounded, unfairly neglected boner spit-glisteny and blood-scarlet against the boy's white tummy. JoJo himself not willing to wait, his own hand impatiently returning to continue the job. Jimmy and Sammy, each with a can of Coors, guffawed when they saw him, totally funny shit, like seeing him for the first time, acid-induced amnesia turning every moment into newborn amazement and hilarity. Jimmy came swaggering, a little unsteadily, across the room to his brother. JoJo

eyed him with watery eyes and sneezed and then rolled away onto his side toward Jake, a tiny concession to modesty, turning his rear end to the rest of the room. Jimmy laughed at this sudden bashfulness, more funny to him than the jacking-off, a wussy thing to do, stupid shit. He called his little brother a pussy idiot and kicked him lightly in the ass, JoJo ignoring him, Jimmy laughing again and swigging his beer and then snatching JoJo's underpants from the floor. He set aside his beer and put the white briefs on his head like some sort of exotic hat, the elastic band across his forehead, leg holes open on top. Sammy let out a whooping cackle that sprayed a mouthful of beer halfway across the room and sent the foamy residue dribbling down his chin and onto his bare chest. Honey-brown chest with nipples that appeared ripely swollen, baby-fat boy, a soft pudginess to his torso, to his arms, even to the deeply dimpled cheeks of his dark Viet-Mex face. Chipped tooth showing as he kept laughing. Gold earring and gold chain. Pimp sunglasses reflecting twin living rooms in their black lenses. "This be some wack shit," he announced in his out-of-control voice.

"Y'all is a mess," Jimmy told him, swiping the underpants from his own head and tossing them to Sammy. "Here, cocksucker, have some panties!"

"Panties," Sammy chuckled, the word tickling him.

"No shit, Lopez, them is real panties. Some fuckin Baywatch cunt had 'em on. Y'all think I'm kiddin?"

"Panties," Sammy kept chuckling, turning the things in his hands, beer can temporarily put aside and forgotten. "Ain't even possible, ain't even possible."

"Go ahead, Lopez, sniff them fuckin panties!"

"These is your brother's," Sammy decided, but then proceeded to sniff them anyway. As if knowing they belonged to JoJo Huckfeldt yet not knowing, reality suddenly precarious, fragile, this scrap of clothing in his hands possibly a girl's panties, possibly a boy's underpants, no clear distinction in his acid-fizzing brain. Not sure what he was doing from moment to frazzled moment. Everything bizarre, everything

hilarious, everything and nothing making sense. Girl's panties. Boy's underpants. Was there any real difference? He pressed the dirty briefs to his face for another lusty sniff, Jimmy still urging him on, that's it, fuckin all right, go crazy, man, them things is wicked sexy! Sammy laughed and nodded, yeah, no doubt, wicked sexy, everything and nothing making sense, those underpants in his hands, JoJo's filthy underpants. The nasty smell of them. Pussy smell? Cock smell? The stinky fabric against his nose, against his mouth, Sammy now making a guttural laughing noise as he started licking the pissy crotch, exaggerated slow-motion licking with his tongue way out and his nose scrunched against the smell, against the taste, some part of his brain aware of what was happening but powerless, overwhelmed. Too funny to stop. Laughing, always laughing, so funny to be licking the crotch of JoJo's underpants, such an impossible joke, even more hilarious and somehow more satisfying to turn those undies inside out and get his tongue directly against the yellowish piss stains, Jimmy still gleefully encouraging him, yeah, that's a brilliant fuckin idea right there—to lick those pissy stains and then even the brown streaks at the seat, at the bottom, tongue fully extended like someone licking a lollipop, JoJo himself watching over his shoulder, Jake also watching, astounded, this crazy boy Sammy licking those crap stains, actually more than licking, putting the underpants right into his mouth to suck at them, to suck and taste the rank nastiness of them, the full crotch-and-crack flavor of them.

Jake, this whole time, had been using one hand to fondle JoJo's balls while the boy himself continued masturbating, JoJo on his right side, facing him, fist pumping and pumping. But now the man could see no further reason for stealth. Jimmy and Sammy—especially Sammy—were beyond caring what anyone else might be doing. Everything now, to them, just one big incoherent farce. No reason not to finish JoJo's blowjob. OK now to roll him onto his back, to spread his legs, good boy, doing it, sucking him, first time Jake had ever done this, sucking one boy to orgasm while two other boys stood by watching and laughing at the spectacle of it, crazy shit, everything and nothing making sense.

Even JoJo suddenly laughing, almost out of breath but laughing anyway at the forbidden pleasure of being sucked off this way, the star of this goofy carnival, his eyes darting from Jake's head to the other boys then back again to Jake's head between his legs, greedy slurping sounds, Jimmy watching, Sammy watching, soiled boypanties still in Sammy's hand, the dirtiest part of them still in his mouth, like a baby gumming and chewing his favorite blankie. Only two or three minutes of vigorous sucking needed now to trigger JoJo's long-delayed orgasm. Not as fiercely shivery and shaky as some other boys (especially Frankie, or even—on a couple of rare and wonderful occasions—young Ryan), but a good toe-curling, ball-clenching, hip-thrusting climax nonetheless. Strong penile spasms in Jake's mouth. Unmistakable taste of kiddie-sperm on the back of Jake's tongue. It could just as easily have been Pepper's dick squeezing out those precious couple of drops. Same mildly nutty, mildly organic flavor fresh from pubescent testicles. Jake held the thing in his mouth until the boy had fully relaxed, then lifted his head and smiled. "Well, my god, that was a long time coming. So to speak."

"Took some hard work," JoJo deadpanned, his penis softening like some red rubber wiener slowly deflating.

"Worth every minute, though. Feel good?"

"Almost too good," the boy cryptically replied. Jimmy and Sammy were still hovering, all jittery muscles and feverish energy, laughter constantly simmering like low growls in their throats. Jimmy abruptly grabbed the underpants from Sammy and replaced them on his own head. "My good luck hat," he announced. Sammy nodded, yeah, good luck, hilarious, good luck. Then looking back at JoJo on the floor. "That fucker, yo, that motherfucker he got his cock sucked, yo, seriously sucked, your motherfuckin brother, yo. . ."

"Old Jakey, old Jakey."

"Can't believe that shit!"

"That's a good fuckin show, man."

"Your brother, yo!"

“Shut up, Lopez. Fuckin panty-eater, anyway,” Jimmy said, another uproarious joke that had both boys once again cackling and choking and wiping their tears. JoJo, losing all interest in this drug-addled nonsense, found his shorts and pulled them on (letting his brother keep the underpants) and then headed to the kitchen with the greasy bologna plate, time to clean up and do the dishes. “My housekeeper,” Jake said, watching him go. Jimmy and Sammy also stared after him, his departure seeming to surprise or confuse them in some way, as if the hired entertainment had unexpectedly packed up and left. Sammy turned back toward Jake, who was still sitting on the floor between the couch and the box of albums. “Yo, man, yo! That kid? That JoJo kid? He bust a nut in your mouth?”

“Well, yeah,” Jake said, no sense in lying. “That was the whole point, after all.”

“He bust in your fuckin mouth?”

“Yeah, Sammy, he did.”

“How much he bust, man?”

“How much?”

“Yeah, that’s right, that’s right,” Sammy kept yelling. Orange T-shirt turban, sunglasses, gold jewelry—like some princeling from India or Malaysia, Burma or Nepal. “How much cum he make in your mouth when he bust?”

“Damn, fucker,” Jimmy interrupted, “why don’t y’all suck him yourself and find out!” He dropped to his knees beside Jake, then jumped back up to fetch his beer, then knelt again at the man’s side, his brother’s underpants still on his head. “You havin a good time, Jakey?”

“Oh sure. It’s always exciting. With you boys,” Jake grinned. “You naughty boys.”

“We ain’t naughty. Y’all is the naughty one. How ’bout a cigarette?”

The man shrugged—OK, you’re in luck, I’m smoking again—already taking the Camels from his shirt pocket and handing them to Jimmy. The boy looked at the pack in his hand and laughed as if he’d

never seen anything so comical. He held it up to show Sammy. Must have been the picture of the camel on the pack, the camel and the pyramid, that had both boys crying with laughter all over again. Sammy, to better wipe his eyes, removed his sunglasses and set them on the little table where his beer had been resting. “Who put this fuckin thing here?” he called over his shoulder.

“What thing, shithead?”

“Coño, man, this fuckin beer! Whose fuckin beer is this, bitch?”

“That’s yours, fool!”

“No way!”

“It’s yours, Sammy,” Jake confirmed, his word finally enough to convince the boy, who quickly grabbed the can and guzzled from it with a ferocious thirst. Jimmy, meanwhile, was fondling the pack of Camels like something rare, something precious. Little blue dagger tattooed on his right hand, on the meaty span between his thumb and forefinger. Pungent sour-milk odor of his sweaty body. Peculiar adolescent musk. He looked up from the cigarettes, bright-eyed, a grinning demon. “I’ll trade y’all for this pack, Jake.”

“Trade?”

“For the whole pack, the whole fuckin pack.”

“Trade with what?”

“Y’all can kiss me. For this whole fuckin pack. One kiss.”

“Just a kiss?” “Jakey, Jakey, y’all is evil!”

“You haven’t been chewing that gross tobacco, have you?”

“Naw, man, not today,” the boy said, then opened his mouth—like saying “ahhh” for the doctor—to prove himself. “So, so, so?”

“You don’t seem like the kissing type.”

“I ain’t. That’s why y’all oughta be honored. Oughta be honored, man. Oughta be totally honored,” Jimmy kept chattering. Jake said OK, OK, then leaned forward and put one hand behind the boy’s head and his lips against the boy’s lips, slightly dry lips, surprised when Jimmy took him by the head and kissed back with a suddenly aggressive vehemence, really overdoing it, like Bugs Bunny planting a huge smack on Elmer



Fudd. Jake could smell the beer strong on his breath. "There ya go, man," the boy finally said. "My cigarettes now, my cigarettes, don't even try to back out, asshole!"

"They're yours, no problem," Jake said. He hoisted himself off the floor and onto the couch. Sammy Lopez was abruptly in front of him, dark eyes staring. The boy had decided to remove his T-shirt turban, black hair matted with sweat, and now without warning or explanation was in front of Jake and bending forward and kissing him firmly on the mouth. He'd seen Jimmy doing it and that seemed reason enough. Sammy see, Sammy do. Everything and nothing making sense. Reality precarious, fragile. Watching some other kid beat off. Licking dirty underpants. Or were they panties? Kissing this guy named Jake. All seemed normal and sensible in the bizarre manner of a dream, the topsy-turvy logic of a dream. He surprised Jake with that fervent kiss and then almost stumbled backward and noticed the box of old albums and started looking through them. The man was speechless for a few flustered moments. "Well, my god," he finally said, "that was. . . nice." Jimmy, facing away from Jake, still on the floor, still on his knees, was laughing and trying to light a cigarette with a wavery hand. Jake took him by the shoulders and began a slow massage through his flimsy purple-flowered Hawaiian shirt. The boy rolled his head, first one way, then the other, saying, "Goddamn, that feels OK. Fuck. Fuck. That ain't even fair." "It's all right, just relax." "Fuckin Camels. Oughta buy Marlboros, man. Shit."

"Bitch and moan," Jake said, massaging with both hands, the boy leaning back against him, against his legs. "Honest to god, Jimmy, you've got big shoulders. A real muscleboy."

Jimmy agreed by showing off, flexing his biceps and making a snarly tough-guy face with teeth tightly overbitten against his bottom lip. Sammy, next to him, had chosen a Santana album from one of Jake's boxes and was holding it up. "This thing fuckin play?" "It's a record, yeah," Jake told him. Sammy kept holding it, showing it. "But yo, but

yo! You can fuckin play it? This music? You got some fuckin machine or shit like that?”

“Sure, a little music for the party,” Jake said, no sooner up to put on the record than Jimmy also was on his feet and telling Sammy to come on, follow me, need more beer, hey, y’all ever seen Jake’s poodles? In the bathroom? Fuckin poodles, man, funniest damn shit! The two boys raced to the bathroom as the music was starting, Santana’s guitar loud but not loud enough to cover the noise of their cackling when they saw the Fifties poodle wallpaper: top-hatted and bonneted poodles strolling paw in paw, pushing puppy carriages, picking flowers in the park. Funniest damn shit! Poodles, yo, motherfuckin poodles! Didn’t take long for the boys to share a piss and grab two more Coors from the fridge in the kitchen and then come stomping back to the living room. Jimmy, white undies still on his head, said, “That fuckin JoJo done took off, man.”

“JoJo? He left?”

“Your boyfriend, man.”

“Not exactly.”

“Fuckin boyfriend, Jakey, don’t lie.”

“Where’d he go?”

“The fuck do I know? Maybe Little League shit,” Jimmy said, and he was probably right. Probably an afternoon Little League game, the season almost over. Just like JoJo to dash from one activity to another without any warning or goodbye, to vanish and reappear and then vanish again according to his own inscrutable timetable. Jake went to the kitchen to have a look for himself. The boy had washed a few dishes and pushed in the chairs at the table—helpful in his own sweetly rambunctious way—before slipping out the back door. The man shook his head, disgusted with himself, that goddamn back door still unlocked, an unforgivable lack of security given the earlier indiscretion with JoJo and now, good lord, this debauch with Jimmy and Sammy still in progress. He scolded himself for being an idiot and threw the dead bolt on the door, locking out whatever enemies might be lurking. A beer for

himself now in hand, Jake returned to the living room and found each of the boys doing his own little dance to the Latin rock—Jimmy simply shuffling in slow circles and bobbing his underwared head, Sammy actually performing a real dance, cha-cha-cha, some kind of salsa routine with fancy footwork and shoulders swiveling. Both of them were drinking and smoking as they danced, beer in one hand and cigarette in the other. Paying no attention to Jake as he settled into the La-Z-Boy to enjoy this afternoon matinee.

Alcohol and acid were really doing their work now, Jimmy and Sammy flying higher and higher on a blast of psychedelic energy that had them ricocheting from one activity to another for the next hour—dancing; trying to play Nintendo; dancing again to a Deep Purple album; trying and failing once more to make sense of a game on Nintendo; using Jake's new camcorder to tape each other chugging beer, making faces, muscle-posing, most of the tape nothing but them laughing at themselves and at each other. Then more dancing and off-key singing to old albums, Jimmy's idea suddenly to start using the vinyl discs like Frisbees while Jake was briefly out of the room, one of the discs—Volunteers by Jefferson Airplane—ending up broken against the wall, in pieces on the floor when Jake returned. Of course the man was momentarily furious, but he knew there was no point in yelling at the boys or making a fuss. They were a wreck, both of them—beyond reasoning or common sense, eyes glazed, skin sweaty even in the air-conditioned house, brains like fried circuit boards. Jake picked up his shattered record and gazed at the pieces as if paying last respects. Another record, Deep Purple again, was thundering from the speakers, shaking the walls. The TV was also on, a golf tournament, Tiger Woods striding down the fairway, volume turned way up for no reason. Jake, wincing, found the remote and muted the sound, the boys not even noticing. How much longer, he wondered, could they possibly stay? How much longer could they burn energy before burning out? Before getting bored, moving on—or passing out? Jake hadn't even enjoyed a

free moment to sit and savor the blowjob he'd given JoJo earlier in the afternoon, the first successful blowjob between them, seemed like it might never happen, as challenging as coaxing Pepper to orgasm for the first time. Not to mention doing it in front of Jimmy and Sammy, an added thrill that had Jake hard again just remembering it.

No time to think about it, though, not with those same two boys wilding through the house in an acid frenzy. Sammy doing his salsa dance around and around the room to the thudding proto-metal beat of Deep Purple, then to the funkier rhythms of Jimi Hendrix, suddenly surprising Jake for the second time that day, first with his copycat kiss and now by plopping himself onto the man's lap like some long-time boyfriend, a strangely intimate and inappropriate gesture. No idea, probably, what he was doing. No coherent notion that he was sitting on the lap of some man he hardly knew. Just resting, so hot, so out of breath, needing some place to sit for just a minute, just one minute, Jake's lap as good a place as any. The man could feel the heat of him, the animal heat of his ass and his back and the warm mustiness of his hair. An oily sheen of perspiration on his skin. Jake touched his back, put a hand on the rough denim over his thigh. Those oafishly huge shorts. The boy just sat there staring at the golfers on TV, his mouth open and his breath raspy from the acid and alcohol and cigarettes. Then a chuckle from him that overflowed into a fit of crazy giggling as he saw Jimmy returning from another trip to the bathroom. Too much beer making both of them piss like ponies. Not clear why Sammy was giggling so hard. Jimmy paused as if confused by the sound, suddenly the only sound in the room, the record on the turntable finished and the television muted. He was holding the pair of JoJo's briefs that he'd been wearing as a hat all this time. "These fuckin things is mine," he finally said. "See these? I'm tellin y'all."

"Those are JoJo's underwear," Jake told him.

"No way, no way, no way!"

"He left them here. Over an hour ago. Remember?"

“These fuckers is mine, asshole! Goddamn, why don’t y’all turn up the fuckin air conditioner?” “It’s up all the way.”

“Fuckin burnin up in here.”

“Yo, man,” Sammy agreed in a sloppy mumble. He leaned back against Jake in the big La-Z-Boy and raised one arm behind his own head, nearly hitting Jake in the face, using his other hand to scratch his exposed armpit and play with his frizzy black underarm hair, not much of it but enough to fascinate him. Fascinated by his own armpit, petting that frizzy hair and then sniffing his own fingers and giggling, then reaching back to do more curious petting and pawing of his own smelly underarm. Jimmy watched him as if equally fascinated, the room weirdly silent until Sammy started giggling again and Jimmy resumed his rant about the underwear in his hand. “Motherfucker stole my shit, man! These things is mine, they’re mine!”

“Oh, now I understand,” Jake said. “Now I get it. JoJo stole your underpants?”

“I’m tryin to tell y’all!”

“So? No big deal.”

“See, these ain’t even his size,” Jimmy persisted, in front of Jake to show him the tag. “See? Mine! Like I done told ya already.”

“I believe you.”

“Same as these here,” the boy said, fumbling to unfasten his saggy cargo shorts, his Hawaiian shirt getting in the way, the underwear in his hand also getting in the way—so frustrating finally that he threw down the undies and yanked off the shirt, then finished unfastening his shorts to show his own white briefs to Jake. “There, fucker, now y’all believe me?”

“I already said. . .”

“These here is exactly the same!”

“Fuckin panties,” Sammy loudly interjected, that out-of-control voice of his sometimes a mumble and sometimes a shout. He was rocking with laughter on Jake’s lap, this whole discussion of underwear rekindling his earlier giddiness, something about it so funny, so

incredibly funny. Fuckin panties, yo, fuckin panties on the floor and on Jimmy, so hilarious, Jimmy wearing girl's panties. Or was that all wrong? Jimmy wearing panties or underpants? Made no sense, no sense, no sense. Jimmy standing there and holding his unfastened shorts low and loosely agape on his hips, opened to exhibit the briefs beneath, just standing there with no other motive or intent, eyes bloodshot, hair madly tousled, the reddish chestnut tint of it especially obvious now in the sunlight streaming through the surrounding windows. No other motive or intent, soon forgetting his point entirely as he stood there in the center of the room, just nodding vaguely at something he could no longer pinpoint or recall. Finally he let the unfastened shorts drop to the floor, sturdy boy in nothing but gym shoes and underpants, sudden inspiration to cross the room to the air conditioner and plant himself directly in front of its frigid draft. "Now this here is genius," he yelled over his shoulder. "Fuckin relief!"

Sammy slid off Jake's lap onto the floor and grabbed the dirty briefs crumpled there, JoJo's dirty briefs, those same ones he'd been smelling and licking earlier, this fetish of his for underwear, this delirious fetish. Sniffing them once more as if to identify them, struggling and struggling this whole afternoon to bring the world into some sort of rational focus, fascinated by the crazy assault of his own senses—by the smell and feel of his own underarm hair, by the taste of a cigarette or a cold beer, most especially by the randy odor of these underpants, enthralled by them, still holding them to his face, sampling them again with his curious tongue. He glanced up and saw Jimmy in front of the air conditioner and suddenly understood what the other boy was doing. Air conditioner. Cold air. Standing in front of it. Sammy handed the underpants to Jake for safekeeping, perfectly logical thing to do, those precious underpants, trusting the man to protect them while he was busy elsewhere. Up and on his feet to join his friend. Taking a place beside him. Rush of cold air stirring the hair of both boys like a strong north wind as they stood side by side in front of the full-blast air conditioner. Jimmy fanning the front of his white briefs in and out to

cool his sweaty crotch. Some laughter between the two of them, the hoarse and low-pitched laughter of exhausted junkies, brains gone torpid and mushy. Sammy opened his mouth wide as if to drink the refrigerated air. “Feels dope,” he finally gulped. “Cold motherfucker, man, no doubt.” Almost like talking to himself. A glance at Jimmy beside him, then another tired croak of laughter, good idea to be wearing nothing but underpants, even cooler that way, fuckin excellent idea, Sammy pushing at his own shorts to remove them—but with no success, goddamn things still fastened, wouldn’t come off, an impossible puzzle. Jimmy willing to help. He nudged the other boy’s shoulder to turn him, to get at the front of those baggy denim shorts, to unzip them and unbutton them and watch them fall in a heavy blue heap around Sammy’s shoes. A moment or two before Sammy thought to step out of them, treading with his feet to untangle himself, to kick free. Both boys now in just their underwear and floppily unlaced hightops—white briefs on Jimmy, green briefs on Sammy, a bright lime green with white elastic at the waist and legs and crotch. Jimmy solidly muscled, buttocks hard beneath the stretchy fabric, wide shoulders brownly freckled from the hot summer sun. Sammy even darker than his friend, browned by sun and by nature, the baby-fat pudginess of him now more fully evident with his clothing mostly off, those lime-green underpants wedged snugly between soft cheeks, between soft round ass cheeks.

They stayed in front of the air conditioner to smoke another cigarette, Jimmy’s pack of Camels finally empty. Still no other sound in the room, in the house, abnormally silent as the boys stood together and puffed their cigarettes and gazed spellbound at the smoke curling and shredding in the powerful draft. Jake watched from his chair with JoJo’s underpants against his nose, wonderfully smelly things damp with Sammy’s saliva. He’d had an erection for most of the last few hours and wanted desperately to jerk off, even considered doing it now right here in the living room with the boys. Why not? They’d think it was funny. Jimmy, at least. But what would Sammy do? And who might he tell?

Jimmy finished his cigarette and used an empty Coors can to dispose of it. Then noticed, as if roused from trance, the strange silence around him. He looked at Sammy and then behind him at Jake for some clue, some explanation. “Them cocksuckers turned the power off,” he accused in a tired snarl. “This shit ought not happen, man!”

“What’s wrong, Jimmy?”

“Cocksuckers done went and turned the power off,” the boy insisted more loudly.

“The power’s on, it’s OK,” Jake told him, then proved it by unmuting the TV, golf commentary suddenly blaring. The noise gave both boys a jolt, all their senses raw and on edge and treacherous—every noise an unsettling surprise, every smell and taste and touch a nutty astonishment. Jimmy yelled hey, turn that shit off, man, that shit, no way in hell, some music, some music, put on some fuckin music! Sammy nodded along, big dopey grin, one hand playing with the tiny crucifix on the gold chain around his neck. Air conditioner blowing against the back of him and against the back of Jimmy beside him, both of them staring at Jake across the room. The man flipped channels to MTV, but no luck, they were showing an episode of Real World, so he got up and restarted that same Jimi Hendrix album still on the turntable. Room smoky, littered with empty beer cans and cigarette butts, Sunday afternoon bacchanal. A fresh surge of manic energy once again inspiring both boys to dance around the room, heavy gym shoes clomping and clomping, shoes that looked comically large and ungainly around their bare ankles. Jake had his camcorder running now, adding to the tape already started by the boys themselves, this underwear dance definitely worth recording and keeping. Jimmy had his Bic disposable in his hand, flame lit, and was waving it as he shuffled around and rocked his head, mesmerized by that tiny flicker of fire, by the patterns it was making on his haywire optic nerves. He spotted Jake with the camcorder and stuck out his tongue. Then gave him the finger. “Makin your own fuckin movies! Jakey-wakey! Ain’t fair!” he kept yelling above the whining guitars. “Y’all is a cheater, man!”



“Yeah, right, whatever you say.”

“Don’t expect nothin for free, cheater, fuckin cheater!”

“Oh well. Too bad.”

“Y’all ain’t even listenin to me,” the boy shouted as he danced and shuffled past Jake and swiped one of the man’s own cigarettes right from his pocket. Shameless thief. Lighting it and using it like a conductor’s baton, waving it, engrossed by its psychedelic trails of hot orange light. Sammy still doing his fancy salsa dance, also staring at the cigarette now and its trippy trails visible only to the two of them. Then back to the air conditioner for another respite, hyper-stimulated metabolisms keeping both of them overheated and sweaty, in constant need of relief. Jimmy and Sammy again side by side like worshippers at an altar, Jimmy letting the dead butt of his cigarette fall to the carpet, hands now free to do that thing once more with his underpants, fanning them in and out, in and out, to draw the cold air between his legs. Sammy, at first, didn’t notice what his friend was doing, then glanced at him and started chuckling that wasted druggie chuckle, every moment a giddy bewilderment, every sight and sound freakishly distorted, nonsensical—all somehow right and wrong at the same time, somehow perfectly and logically normal yet bizarre. Chuckling and nodding, chuckling and nodding, fuckin panties, yo, fuckin panties, can’t believe you wear them things, man, can’t believe it! Jimmy just looking at him bleary-eyed, teeth bared in a fixed canine grin, face glistening with oily perspiration, a couple of reddish pimples on his chin, on his forehead. “Wack motherfucker, Lopez, wack motherfucker, wack motherfucker,” he mumbled like some voodoo incantation. That bleary-eyed stare. That fierce canine grin. Here, man, some panties right here, right here, motherfucker, cocksucker, some choice panties for y’all. Peeling off his own white briefs in one impetuous flourish. Some choice panties right here. He wiped between his legs with them, wiped his behind with them, stinking them up with his own testicle sweat and ass sweat before pushing them against Sammy’s face.

Jake sat forward in his chair to get a better angle with the camcorder, zooming in for a moment on Jimmy's suddenly bare genitals, that meaty Huckfedlt pizzle, that thick hillbilly wang always hanging half stiff and eager for sex. Naked Jimmy. Naked muscleboy. Mostly sleek and smooth-skinned except for some teenaged hairiness along his calves and shins, also that trail of fuzzy hair that led from his belly button down to his brown pubic bush. Some panties for y'all, he kept muttering, some choice panties. Sammy, still nodding and chuckling, happily accepted the underpants shoved against his face and held them there and smelled them without any question, without any clear thought or analysis. Eyes shut as he sniffed them. What kind of fantasies in his head? What kind of chaotic visions? First JoJo's dirty underpants and now Jimmy's, sniffing them and, yes again, licking them, rooting and snuffling his way through the entire Huckfeldt brood one stinky pair of undies at a time. Jimmy also nodding, laughing, fuckin Lopez, crazy asshole, too much, man, too much!

Hendrix ripping and wailing through All Along The Watchtower, hard to hear any voices above that music, hard to talk, Jimmy surrendering to it and moving his feet, moving around the room, penis jiggling as he shuffled and circled and slowly gyrated his hips. Jake tracked him with the camcorder. Jimmy again stuck out his tongue and flipped a fuck-you finger at the man, at the camera, insolent dancing boy taunting and teasing and showing off. Eyes feverish and unfocused. Mouth open as he labored for oxygen. Wild boy, uncultured and uncouth, feral mane of chestnut hair with silver earring almost hidden. Dirty fingernails and dirty knuckles. Those sun-baked, freckly shoulders. Such a vulgarly naked young buck, impossible to look away from him. Sammy hadn't moved from his spot by the air conditioner. He seemed, just now, to be noticing that his friend was nude, the reality of it hitting him and making him shake with laughter, this day tripping out of all control and all comprehension. Maybe not even actually happening, any of this, just some insane movie playing around him, Sammy maybe inside this movie being made by that guy with the camera, that guy

named Jake across the room. Colors and sounds all wrong, cold air like water against his skin. Drinking the coldness, drinking it. This piece of clothing in his hands that smelled so funny, so strange, these special panties or underpants or whatever, whatever, no way to know, some kind of movie or dream or baffling game that had no rules and no end.

Acid burning, acid burning. Both boys overwhelmed by this kaleidoscope of color and light and noise. Jimmy shuffle-danced his way back toward Sammy and whispered into his friend's ear. More laughter between them. Jimmy took back his own underpants and flung them, without warning or explanation, at Jake and the camcorder. Again he turned and said some words into the other boy's ear. Sammy nodded. Jimmy kept talking and grinning while also scratching inside the crack of his own rear end, scratching with his right-hand fingers and then wiping those same fingers against Sammy's nose and lips, then scratching again and wiping again, Sammy dopily cooperative, oblivious, even licking once at Jimmy's fingers when they touched his mouth, ridiculously addle-brained. Jimmy had a few more conspiratorial words with him, something that made both of them cackle once more with laughter. Finally he stepped away. Sammy, watching him and nodding, some sort of murky agreement between them, fumbled with the waistband of his own lime-green underpants and then stripped them off, almost losing his balance as he disentangled his gym-shoed feet. Then he just stood there in the air conditioner's relentless draft. Naked thirteen-year-old with those slightly pudgy, slightly baby-fat legs, baby-fat tummy, baby-fat butt. Naked for the first time in front of Jimmy, sometimes in underwear to lift their weights together but never naked like this, cocks and asses showing, all exposed for everybody to see, to look at, so fuckin strange to be completely naked this way in some guy's living room, some guy watching with a camera, that creepy camera like another eye staring, all of this maybe just a movie or a TV show anyway, not quite real this whole hectic fever-dream of a day.

Then the record ended and Jimmy moved a little clumsily to turn it over, bent forward mooning the room as he flipped the platter and

replaced the needle. Tightly rounded buttocks with anus showing. Some dark peach-fuzziness around that rudely opened hole, Jake getting a close-up of it, right into the boy's crack. Then zooming back out to find Sammy still standing transfixed at the air conditioner, still holding those green underpants and staring across the room at his friend. Another close-up, this time between Sammy's legs, same sparse and frizzy black hair as the hair beneath his arms, a late-blooming boy barely into adolescence. Uncircumcised dick just beginning to mature, no larger than the kid's own thumb, soft nipple of foreskin, smallish puppy-dog nuts underneath. Jimmy had the music blaring again. He crossed the room to the camcorder and pressed his penis briefly against the lens, fuckin cheater, makin movies for free, sneaky bastard! Then he veered back to the air conditioner, sudden mischievous grin as he remembered Sammy, holy shit, fuckin Lopez, little Tweety Bird pecker! He grabbed those green underpants and threw them at Jake, the man now in possession of all three pairs. Sammy started forward as if to retrieve them, only a couple of steps before losing his focus, awkwardly vulnerable boy lost and confused without his clothes in this unfamiliar house, all of his hip-hop gangsta brashness gone now, stripped away, just a naked young teddy bear with that plump butt and childish wiener. Jimmy grabbed him from the side and turned him and started dancing with him, rowdy dancing that Jake had seen once before, months ago, when Jimmy had performed the same routine with Frankie. Here in the same room. Also while being videotaped. Wrestling the other boy—Sammy this time—around and around the room, shoving against him, bumping and grinding roughly against him. Both boys still wearing their unlaced hightops as they circled half staggering across the floor, those shoes making them look especially naked, absurdly naked, just those big clodhopper shoes with no other clothes. Sammy went along with this manhandling by the older and larger boy, even laughing at the wildness of it, disoriented, dizzy. Some final loss of control on this lunatic Sunday afternoon. Jimmy dancing and grappling with Sammy Lopez. Or maybe with Anita. Did that make sense? With Anita? Wearing that gold earring

and a gold chain around her neck. Or his neck. Jimmy also dizzy, mouth so dry, funny taste, the lights in the room strobing around him. Hilarious, hilarious, hilarious. A glance to the left and he could see Jake with his pants open, Jake sitting and watching and jackin off, oh man, crazy shit, everything fucked up!

Then Jimmy suddenly steered himself and his friend out of the living room and down the hallway. To the bathroom, most likely. Maybe also to the kitchen for something to drink. Jake stopped the camcorder and stood up to remove his loosened pants, then decided to remove everything, to join the boys' naked romp and enjoy whatever might develop next. At the very least, he'd be able to finish masturbating in greater comfort, no clothing to interfere with his pleasure. Alone in the room, killing time, he turned down the volume on the stereo to a more tolerable level, then turned off the annoying television altogether. Looked at the clock. Almost four, afternoon slipping into evening. Back in his chair, Jake could hear the refrigerator being opened and then closed, some voices and laughter, the thumping of gym shoes. A brief silence. Then again the heavy thumping of those gym shoes down the hallway and the sound of a door—Jake's own bedroom door—being slammed shut. The man waited for some other noise, for the door to reopen, something. Waited for five minutes before heading to the bedroom itself with his camcorder in hand and his erection leading the way. Paused to listen outside the door. Not what he'd expected from these two kids. From Frankie and Pepper, yeah. From Dally and just about anyone, sure. But Jimmy Huckfeldt and Sammy Lopez had never seemed like the kind of cuddly loverboys to steal away for some secret moments of romance, passion, whatever. Tough guys, not loverboys. Macho punks, not sweethearts. Still, plenty of booze and LSD could do funny things, all inhibitions shattered, reality turned upside down. Jake couldn't hear anything unusual, so he gave the door a perfunctory knock and let himself in. The boys were in bed together, covered by the sheet and resting with their heads and shoulders against the pillows behind them, propped against the headboard, each with another can of beer that

they were sipping and sipping intently when the man entered. “You guys,” he said, “you guys, what’s happening here?”

“Our bedroom, fucker,” Jimmy grumbled. “Bustin in like that.”

“My bedroom, kid, not yours.”

“Can’t just bust in.”

“Hey, I even knocked.”

“Look at y’all. With that fuckin hard-on. Jakey-wakey.”

“No way, dawg, no way,” Sammy chuckled, old guy with a hard-on standing there, Jake, Jake aiming that movie camera again, Jake making a movie, this movie that never stopped and kept changing in freaky ways and seemed to have something to do now with this bedroom and this bed, in bed with somebody, with somebody else in this movie, with Jimmy, Jimmy Huckfeldt, something to do with this bed and no clothes, no clothes, the man saying something about shoes, where are your shoes, you still have your shoes on? Another big joke. Both boys in bed with their dirty gym shoes beneath the sheet, couple of slobs, even Jimmy had to laugh, OK, OK, as he reached under the sheet and tugged them off and tossed each one with a thud and another thud onto the floor. Sammy merely swung his legs halfway out from his side of the sheet and kicked off his hightops with another thud-thud and then swung back beneath the sheet and continued sipping his beer.

Nice little honeymoon, Jake was saying, wandering around the bed with the camcorder, no pretense now, good Christ almighty, no pretense possible with these two wacked-out boys naked in his bed, Jake himself just as naked, less than two hours ago that he’d been giving a blowjob to JoJo while these same kids watched and witnessed, the time for common sense and discretion long gone. Nice little honeymoon, husband and wife, you guys going to make out or what? No response from the boys except some woozy laughter as they followed the camcorder with glassy eyes and drank their beer. Bare-chested, both of them, above the sheet. Jake still teasing them, not a very good honeymoon, pretty boring, this movie won’t be very exciting. The word “movie” made both of them

nod as if in sluggish agreement. Jimmy mumbled a few words about movies not bein free, motherfucker, I mean it, listen to me, I'm tryin to tell y'all the truth! Jake paused at his dresser and opened the drawer where he kept his extra cash, brought out twenty dollars, showed it to Jimmy and said oh well, I gave your brother JoJo some money for helping me in the yard, I guess you deserve a few bucks too. Right? Hear me? Jimmy? You still OK? The boy mumbled yeah, fuck, shut up, grinning just a little and then sticking out his tongue for a third time at the camcorder once again aimed at him and at Sammy. Makin a movie, a fuckin movie, put on a show for Jake, put on a show with Anita and let Jake see it, get some easy money. Put on a show with Anita. Or, fuck it, that's right, damn, not Anita, not Anita, her stupid brother. Stupid brother Sammy. That's right. Sammy.

Jimmy finished his own beer and loudly belched as he grabbed the other can from the boy beside him. Maybe half full. He held it in front of Sammy's face, like holding a toy in front of a dog to catch its attention, then tipped it and sent beer pouring toward Sammy's open mouth, most of it missing and splashing against Sammy's chin. Oops, too bad, Jimmy now treating himself to a drink of his own. A big drink. Swallowing only half before leaning to his right and spouting the rest of it once again at Sammy's mouth. Sammy, dumbly compliant, opened wider to catch as much as he could. Jimmy took another mouthful and aimed more carefully, leaning much closer this time, an almost point-blank spurt of lukewarm beer from his mouth directly into his friend's. A good game, a fun game, hard to keep from laughing and choking on the beer. One more swig left in the can. Jimmy filled his mouth with it and tossed aside the can and then climbed on top of Sammy, who exhaled a sudden little gasp at the unexpected weight and pressure of this other boy's naked body. Jimmy waited like Mama Bird until Baby Sammy opened his mouth, then let the beer squirt from between his own lips in a perfect stream that Sammy caught and gulped, caught and gulped, almost choking again as he tried not to laugh. Jimmy's rear end was moving the

sheet up and down, slowly up and down, rhythmically up and down, the sheet low on his suntanned back. No more beer, so he improvised by working up a juicy mouthful of saliva and then feeding that to Sammy instead, the whole sloppy gob of it right into Sammy's mouth. Sammy took it and swallowed, no dismay or disgust on his face, unable to distinguish beer from spit by this time, his mouth still thirstily open as he stared up at Jimmy and waited. Jimmy working up another gob of saliva for him, grinning now as he released it and watched Sammy accept it again and swallow, then again and again the same intimate exchange, Jimmy drooling wad after wad of warm and foamy spit into his friend's mouth and Sammy swallowing every drop of it. Jimmy's backside still working up and down, up and down, up and down beneath the sheet as he contentedly fed spittle to the boy beneath him. Jake still beside the bed, a silent and grateful witness recording every moment, now zooming in on the mouths of the two boys only inches apart, their lips briefly touching in something like a kiss as Jimmy drooled and Sammy drank. Then again the camcorder pulling back, impatient for every detail large and small, boybutt humping and humping beneath the sheet, a steady creaking of bedsprings, the start of actual sex being performed now as the man watched through the viewfinder.

Then Jimmy rolled off the other boy. Was he finished so soon? Was the show over? No, not at all. The sheet was bulged indecently above Jimmy's midsection. The boy stared at it like something alien, intriguing. Used both hands to press down and tighten the sheet, to mummy-wrap his own boner in the white muslin, funny shit, Jimmy now flexing it and making it bounce. Sammy was watching with a befuddled half-smile. He kept mumbling words that no one else could quite hear or decipher. He imitated Jimmy's trick with the sheet, stretching it tightly over his own crotch with both hands, voilà, the shape and hardness of the thing underneath suddenly made apparent. Nowhere near as large as Jimmy's. Sammy flexing it in that same way, making the sheet bounce between his own legs while Jimmy's bigger thing bounced alongside. Amusing for a while, but then Jimmy made an impatient growling noise



and kicked at the sheet until he had the whole thing crumpled down at the foot of the bed. Nothing now to cover that big boner of his flat against his belly. Puffy scar tissue around the knob. Those fat balls beneath. Sammy beside him just as starkly and suddenly exposed now with his prick up, maybe four inches of hard meat with the head pushed reddish and raw-looking above the foreskin. Then Jimmy rolled back quickly and aggressively on top of him, bare ass humping. Sammy still with that befuddled half-smile and incoherent mumble, one hand on his own forehead and the other on Jimmy's shoulder. Jimmy getting goofy, tossing back his head and barking and yipping as he humped, howling like a coyote at the bedroom ceiling. Bedsprings creaking along in frantic harmony. Sammy's up-staring eyes fixed on Jimmy's face with infantile fascination.

Jake, without lowering the camcorder, grabbed a jar of Vaseline from the dresser and offered it to Jimmy, who took it without comment or reaction, just another part of the movie. The Hendrix record had ended by now and the house was once again weirdly quiet, even the bedsprings gone abruptly silent as Jimmy rose to his knees to smear the Vaseline onto his own pecker, using only one finger to do the job, pecker springing stiffly up and down each time he touched it. Then he used that same greasy finger on the other boy, no care or preparation, just right into Sammy's butt where he felt around and found the hole and kept going until his finger was fully inserted, working in and around, getting everything good and slippery. Sammy himself with both hands pressed to his forehead as if fighting a migraine. His eyes still blearily on Jimmy's face. Trying to comprehend what was happening to him. Impossible, impossible, something up his ass, Jimmy's finger, his friend's finger up his ass, inside of him. Not just naked now, not just naked in this house, in this bed, but naked with a hard-on that he couldn't hide, suddenly very aware of his own hard cock being seen by other people for the first time, by Jimmy, by that Jake guy, by the camera and somehow by hundreds or maybe thousands or maybe millions of other strangers watching this movie right now, staring at him,

staring at his cock straight up hard and staring at his ass, his culo, and at Jimmy's finger inside of it, Jimmy's greasy finger way up inside.

Jimmy dropped the jar of Vaseline onto the mattress and then lifted Sammy's legs and pinned them knees-bent against Sammy's chest so that the boy's ass was upturned and spread and showing its hairless, jelly-glistening hole. Jimmy had pinned a naked Pepper, many months earlier, in just this same way, a convincing pantomime of intercourse, uh uh uh, big joke, just kidding. But never for real, never with another boy. Lots of jacking off and cocksucking with his brothers and with Jake. One time putting that dildo up Dally's butt. But never genuine fucking, never actually putting his own pecker into another guy's ass. Crazy shit. Jimmy grinning down at the boy beneath him, sliding his penis against that upturned butt and its greasy crack, Sammy staring back, not grinning, nothing but dark confusion and amazement in those eyes. More confusion, more amazement in Sammy's bloodshot eyes when he felt the older boy's cock nudging and pushing into his culo, into the hole itself, the addled realization that he was about to get fucked, that his friend Jimmy was trying right now to fuck him like a girl—yet no energy or compulsion or even desire to resist. No desire to resist. His ass upturned and knees against his chest and that gold chain and crucifix fallen back against his chin, Sammy fingering the crucifix and then putting it into his own mouth, something else to chew and taste, cold metallic tang on his teeth. The craving for something in his mouth. Smelly underpants. Beer. Cigarettes. Jimmy's spit. Now this little gold crucifix, Sammy chewing it and sucking at the metallic flavor, Jimmy heavy on top of him, Jimmy's unclean breath against his face. No sound but the squeaking of springs and the two boys breathing and making occasional noises like the low grunting and humphing of tired animals. Jimmy had his dick partially in, the first couple of inches, when it slipped back out. He reared up with his hips to find the hole once more, pushed the head of his dick back in, then had it slip out again onto Sammy's nuts. Hard for him to coordinate, one more try, using his hand now to hold the goddamn thing as he shoved it in, so simple this time, no

problem, the whole Vaseline shaft suddenly sinking with a slick suction into Sammy's asshole, mucousy rectal muscles stretching to accept it and then tightening, gripping, Sammy himself wincing at the unbearable fullness of it inside him, both hands pushing at Jimmy's shoulders but not to push him away, not to push him away, unbearable, excruciating, that big dick of Jimmy's sliding in and out, in and out, each stroke a delicious agony in Sammy's belly and balls. Crucifix in his mouth. Watching Jimmy's wild, blood-flushed face. The just-a-dream insanity of lying here on this squeaky bed with his best friend on top of him, fucking him. Not really happening, not possibly happening. Just a dream, Jimmy's cock inside of him. Just a movie, having sex with another guy. Not real, not possible.

Jake rested the camcorder on the mattress behind Jimmy, between Jimmy's legs, perfectly positioned for a close-up of greasy boycock squelching back and forth in greasy boyhole, that heavy ballsac of Jimmy's bouncing and smacking against the baby-smooth cheeks of Sammy's ass. Perfectly positioned also to see that greasy cock suddenly slip its groove and pop out, goddammit, fuckin shit, Jimmy reaching down to guide it back in, another few thrusts and out it slipped again, Sammy's butt getting squirmy as Jimmy found the slick hole once more and sank his boner back into it, same result, clumsy thrusting by Jimmy that soon brought his overeager pecker sproinging back out. Too much for Jimmy, too frustrating, up now abruptly on his knees to straddle Sammy's chest and shove his penis still messy with Vaseline against Sammy's face, against Sammy's lips, goddamn, come on and suck this shit, come on! Sammy opened his mouth wider to let the big thing in. No grinning or giggling anymore from this stunned and bewildered boy. No talking. No sound. No expression on his face. Eyes staring straight ahead at Jimmy's pubic hair, earlier in this same day that he'd seen his first blowjob, amazed to stand and watch it happen right there on the floor of the living room, now even more amazed by another boy's hard cock in his own mouth, petroleum taste of Vaseline and the strange sour-milk

odor of Jimmy's body, Jimmy's ballsweat. A subdued squeaking now of those old bedsprings each time Jimmy shifted his weight or moved his hips, no patience for a real blowjob, no patience, too slow, just using the younger boy's mouth as a convenient orifice to fuck, humping roughly enough to shake the headboard, swollen balls slapping and slapping against Sammy's chin. Still too slow, no patience, too slow, better to use his own hand for more friction, no patience, Jimmy yanking at his own dick and rubbing it against the other boy's face, fist and dick both against the other boy's face as he jacked himself off, buttocks flexing and clenching, flexing and clenching, that muscular white ass and brown back of Jimmy's going hunched and trembly, the knob of his penis now pushing at Sammy's lips, rubbing at Sammy's lips as Jimmy himself got ready to cum, Sammy once again opening his mouth to accommodate, opening his mouth, just a dream, just a movie, opening his mouth and waiting for something unthinkable, Jimmy's cockhead resting on his lower lip and his slightly extended tongue, mouth open and waiting, open and waiting, Jimmy's fist pumping against Sammy's chin, mouth open and waiting, Jimmy's hips stiffly poised, that dirty-knuckled fist pumping and pumping and keeping the cockhead aimed as it swelled and reddened and then released itself gushing into Sammy's mouth, two spurts right onto his tongue and down his throat, Jimmy pulling back with cum still shooting and one long gooey strand still attached to Sammy's lip, another then landing in Sammy's brushy black hair, a last yogurty squirt slopping onto Sammy's cheek just below the left eye. Jimmy pressed the head of his spent pecker to Sammy's lips and rubbed it from side to side and then rubbed it higher onto Sammy's face to smear the cum around his cheeks and his nose and his eyes now tightly shut, big slippery boner all over Sammy's face, semen all over his face, that boner rubbing lower and lower until it was back against his lips, Sammy once again compliantly opening to accept the nasty thing, using his lips and his tongue on the slimy knob to clean it, his own idea now to suck it and lick it clean, so much of that spermy stuff already on his lips and in his mouth and some already even swallowed, the taste and smell

of it everywhere, strong, overpowering, Sammy dazed by the reality of it so pungent in his mouth, in his own mouth, Jimmy's cum, no reason to stop now, this dream, this movie, being fucked by another guy, sucking another guy, all impossible yet somehow real, so real, this cock in his mouth and the taste of its cum, so real, so impossible, licking and swallowing, licking and swallowing, some kind of mad compulsion now to clean Jimmy's cock for him, to lick the whole thing clean for him, sucking at the pee-slit to retrieve any last oozy drop hidden inside, finally even licking down the shaft to Jimmy's balls, eagerly licking at Jimmy's smelly balls for no reason that Sammy Lopez could ever articulate or explain, this need right now to use his tongue on another boy, to lick, to swallow, to taste.

Jimmy was finished. He climbed from the bed and nearly lost his balance and then grabbed his twenty dollars and looked around as if suddenly confused or disoriented, fuckin crazy shit don't make no sense, my clothes, somebody done took my fuckin goddamn clothes, stooping to pick up his shoes, shaking his head, more muttering and cursing before he wandered from the room. Jake was left alone with Sammy—this boy who'd started the day as a virgin now wearing Jimmy's cum in his hair like a forgotten dollop of shampoo with even more of it still smeared on his face. Licking at the taste of what remained on his lips like a good boy savoring his ice cream. Hands loosely fisted on the pillow on either side of his head. Legs carelessly spread with knees raised and his penis gone half limp like the stubby end of a hot dog. Jake set the camcorder, still taping, onto the dresser and aimed it at the bed. Sammy was staring at him with those spellbound, bloodshot eyes. They hardly knew each other, this man and this boy. A few meetings between them, a few words, but no affection or intimacy or trust, nothing like a real friendship. Nothing now to keep them in this room together except sex. No reason now for Jake to sit on the bed next to this kid except sex. No trust or affection necessary by this time on this helter-skelter Sunday

afternoon, now Sunday evening, instinct and hormones in command, naked bodies, testicles, hard-ons, a reckless and primal lust.

Jake put a hand on the boy and started gently to explore his body. That cuddly teddy-bear body with the plump little nipples and baby-fat tummy and black pubic frizz, Sammy's penis growing back stiff as Jake petted and caressed all up and down the naked smoothness of him. Pudgy brown thighs. Tight young nuts. Sammy staring and staring, taking shallow breaths, licking his lips. The man was talking to him, it's OK, it's OK, this'll be fun, handsome boy. Sammy's black hair against the white pillow like the brushy crest of some tropical fighting bird. Jake stretched out beside him on the mattress. Beer was smelly on the sheets and pillows where Jimmy had spilled it and spit it. Sammy's fisted hands were opening and closing on either side of his head, opening and closing, fingers futilely grasping at nothing but air as Jake leaned over him and commenced to clean him with his tongue just as greedily as Sammy himself had cleaned Jimmy. Licking at Sammy's cheeks and lips and nose, his forehead, even at his hair to get that stray wad of Huckfeldt cum, an efficient Mommy Cat tongue-bathing her messy little kitty. When Jake worked his way back down once more to lick Sammy on the chin and on the lips, Sammy started licking back. Not such a big surprise after his earlier performance, this acid-crazed boy who would chew on dirty underpants and drink spittle and take a cock up his ass. Not surprising but encouraging, obvious now to Jake that he meant to play along, this kid, their tongues meeting in mutual invitation, in mutual and horny consent.

Jimmy, just then, reappeared in the doorway. He took a long moment to appraise the sight of Sammy and Jake together on the bed, the spectacle of their overheated foreplay, then shook his head as if disapproving of such shenanigans and walked away. Never saying a word or making a noise to disturb or interrupt the man and the boy as foreplay became sex, as Jake rolled onto his back and guided Sammy to sit on top of him, backward on his chest, that's good, staring at the boy's

bare back and holding him by the hips, excellent, now scoot back a little and lean forward, just like that, beautiful, perfect, such a nice ass, such a really cute ass you've got. Sammy was leaning forward now with the man's veiny red dick in his face, just one more thing to put into his mouth and suck, no hesitation, no coaxing necessary, leaning all the way down and taking it, engulfing it. His gold chain and crucifix dangling against Jake's belly as he went avidly to work, head bobbing and twisting, small grunts and snorts coming from him like the noises of some piggish little animal feeding. His ass against Jake's face, the man tasting and smelling inside of it, feasting on that unclean crack and those puppyish thirteen-year-old balls farther underneath, kissing them and tonguing them before returning to the tasty delicacy of Sammy's just-fucked anus still slippery with Vaseline. Reaching around with his hand on Sammy's cock this whole time, rubbing it and pulling back the foreskin and fingering the tender glans and then rubbing some more, diligently masturbating the boy while continuing to eat and eat inside his ass, the boy shoving back harder against Jake's mouth, spreading his own legs wider to open his butcrack and his butthole as deeply as possible to the man's tongue.

Jimmy, as if wandering lost, appeared nude for a second time in the doorway and stood gazing at his friend Sammy and his friend Jake having sex. Sammy's eyes lifted, just his eyes lifting and fixing on Jimmy and staying there almost defiantly while he himself kept sucking dick and impatiently squirming his ass for more tongue, more tongue. Jimmy shook his head again, fuckin faggots, look at you guys, shit, y'all is disgraceful. Jake, his face full of ass, let out a muffled laugh but otherwise ignored the boy in the doorway. Good, let him watch, this whole day just one long joyride of exhibitionism for all of them, Jake beginning with JoJo and ending with Sammy, licking now where Jimmy's prick had already been, Sammy hunkering as low as he could to spread his legs even wider and his crack even wider, to open himself totally to that busy tongue. The dark, earthy taste and odor of him. Jake licking in and in and in so deeply that he could actually feel the

contractions of the boy's rectal muscles fluttery around the tip of his tongue. Then Jake himself was going clenched and orgasmic and spilling into Sammy's mouth, expecting at any moment for the boy to pull away, the inevitable reaction, nauseated by the taste. But Sammy kept sucking and gulping with those same piggish little noises, hungry little snorting and grunting noises as he fed on the man's semen. Maybe not even tasting it, no clear concept of what he was swallowing, doing something that not even Frankie had ever done, welcoming that whole slimy gush of grown-up sperm right into his mouth and down his throat. No flinching or gagging. First Jimmy's slop and now Jake's. This kid who'd never even seen another guy's boner before today. This kid who'd never even seen another guy's cum now with a bellyful of it, giving blowjobs to everyone in the house. Jimmy still in the doorway, unable to turn away, these two guys having queer sex on the bed in front of him. Sammy's turn now to bust a nut, finally time for Sammy himself to enjoy a well-earned orgasm, not quite ready but getting close as the man lifted him by the hips and slid farther beneath him to give the boy a wet and willing mouth to fuck, Sammy directly on Jake's face now, frantically humping, never anything like this before, never a feeling like this, Sammy still holding the man's dick in his own mouth like a meaty pacifier, his eyes staying all this time on Jimmy across the room, the performer watching his own audience, this movie, this dreamlike movie, Sammy's butt being fondled by Jake's hands as it thrust and thrust with a rabbit quickness, Sammy himself crazily inspired as he approached climax to give an extra-special show, somehow important, somehow urgent that he show off for that movie camera and for his friend in the doorway, watch this, look at this, kissing and licking down Jake's penis and onto his balls, kissing Jake's balls, licking them, making sure that Jimmy was watching, somehow necessary, Sammy's eyes never leaving Jimmy as he kissed and licked all over those hairy testicles and then suddenly himself went rigid and roundly arched his back and made a sound like quiet sobbing or choking, exquisite torture, eyes filled with tears, a pleasure like dying, like exploding, like being ripped open and



ripped apart, the boy squeezing every drop of himself into Jake's mouth, feeding the man generously with boymilk, warm little squirts of boymilk—more strongly flavored than JoJo's , the ripe sperminess of early adolescence, delicious.

Finished now, remarkable, this entire day, astonishing, the closest thing to an orgy that Jake had ever experienced. Jimmy had vanished again from the doorway, but Sammy had no desire to follow him, no desire to be anywhere but right here in Jake's bed, the two of them side by side now after sucking each other off, Jake holding the boy and petting him, petting his hair, his cheek, the satiny brown length of his arm, the smell and the feel of him so new, so excitingly unfamiliar. Like making love to a stranger, to a young hustler just off the street. It was Sammy himself, this hot-wired boy, who started kissing, his mouth suddenly and boldly against Jake's. Still not satisfied, something driving him to do more, always more, as if the acid and beer and sex had switched on some motor inside of him that nothing could turn off. Kissing Jake in a rabid and lustful way that no one, except Frankie, had ever kissed before. Yeah, Frankie, many times, but never anyone else—never this kind of aggressively open-mouthed kissing that had both Jake and Sammy out of breath and swallowing spit and chewing lips, the man feeling with his tongue against the boy's sharply chipped front tooth. Ridiculous, outrageous, Sammy stiffly aroused once more against Jake's leg. Out of his mind, out of control. Jake disengaged just enough to talk to him even as their lips stayed touching, each word like a soft little kiss as he murmured the boy's name, Sammy Sammy Sammy, you're incredible, such a sweetie, feeling slowly down the boy's back and onto his plumpish butt, you must really love this, I mean totally, extremely, talking and talking into the boy's warmly open mouth, Sammy just listening and nodding, listening and nodding, mute and mesmerized haremboy in his lover's embrace, tongue suddenly extending to lick across Jake's lips as the man kept murmuring, murmuring, you can come over whenever you want, we'll do this again, you and me. Naked boy,

naked man, the bedroom aflame with evening light from the west-facing window. Yes, the boy nodding yes to everything, yes to anything, today and tomorrow and every day from now on, yes, both of them once again kissing in a frenzy, Sammy getting more and more sweaty and wild-eyed, his whole body damp with sweat as he humped against Jake and threw his top leg across the man's hip to press himself closer and tighter and to position his ass right over Jake's dick, ready for it, deliriously horny, ready for that dick up his ass right now, right now, actually trying to push himself down onto it as he kept humping and making tiny moaning noises, desperate to get that hard thing inside of himself, still trying to straddle it and shove it into himself and start the movie all over again with more cock up his culo and more cock in his mouth, sucking at Jake's tongue in the meantime, hungry, so hungry, Jimmy's body still vividly in his head, still able to see it and smell it, that taste, Jimmy's body and JoJo's body and JoJo's dick getting sucked all one big dream that smelled and tasted like boyjizz still so strong in his nose and in his mouth, that taste, that taste.

Jake couldn't believe this boy's appetite. Startling enough, everything that Sammy had done already on this bed with Jimmy and then with Jake himself. But even more startling now, this appetite, after all of those other exhausting activities. Still, OK, Jake was willing to continue for as long as the boy, let's get busy, reaching behind himself now for that jar of Vaseline tossed aside earlier by Jimmy. Only half mindful of some noisy firecrackers suddenly popping from outside the house. Must be the Huckfeldts, his initial thought, his concentration split between the sound of those firecrackers and the overwhelming reality of this wild, bare-assed boy against him. Then more popping of firecrackers and the sound of some boy whooping. Jimmy's voice. Definitely Jimmy's loud, raucous voice somehow both inside and outside the house at the same time, Jake finally roused from his sexual trance by this relentless distraction. He mumbled a few words of reassurance to Sammy and forced himself off the bed. But where was Jimmy? What the hell was he doing? Jake hurried first to the living

room, wrong way, nobody there, just the mess of everyone's discarded clothing on the floor, the man pausing to grab his own trousers and put them on before heading back toward the kitchen. Another pop-pop-pop of firecrackers going off. The back door was open. Jake rushed forward and found the noisy young troublemaker himself, Jimmy Huckfeldt, holy shit, standing there naked on the back porch. Tossing firecrackers, shooting bottle rockets, whooping and laughing like some joyfully deranged terrorist. Pecker about half erect for all the neighbors to see. Jake grabbed him by the arm and yanked him inside just as he shot another bottle rocket that hissed and whooshed errantly toward the house next door, landing right on the porch. Jimmy laughing and laughing, his best joke yet, using up these cheap fireworks left over from the Fourth of July. Jake shoved him farther into the house away from the door, then stuck his own head back out to look around for any damage, any trouble, hard to believe what had just happened. No one around that Jake could see. No obvious witnesses. A peaceful Sunday evening. He closed the door and turned to confront Jimmy, that's it, that's enough, get dressed now and go home. But the boy had already wandered down the hall and was on his way back into Jake's bedroom, Sammy Lopez still in there, still on the bed, waiting for a partner, any partner. The bedroom door banged shut. Jake almost opened it to end this little orgy and shoo both boys out, then decided to give them a few minutes alone while he gathered their clothes and cleaned up the litter of cigarette butts and beer cans. The Hendrix album was still resting on the turntable. Jake took it off and put it away in the box. No more music, no more party, no more.

He was just closing the box when someone started knocking at the front door. That dreadful sound, always a moment of fear before Jake could calm himself and realize that it was only Ryan or Dally or whoever. But then he saw a flash of blue on the porch. A blue uniform. Jake froze. A flood of terror like nausea, a sudden cold sickness, this darkest of nightmare images come alive and knocking at the door. A cop. Jake tried to breathe and tried to think, no choice but to open that

door and face the enemy and play the scene to its end. The cop smiled. Young guy, blondish hair beneath his blue cap, Officer Courson. Jake could already feel the threat easing, just this one young uniformed cop on the porch—no FBI, no state police, none of the plainclothes thugs typically involved in vice raids. Just this one guy, smiling, telling Jake that someone had called in a complaint, disturbing the peace, firecrackers, too much noise. Jake smiling back, nodding, oh yeah, one of the neighbor kids, sorry. Be friendly, be polite, everything OK as long as this cop stayed outside. Jimmy and Sammy together in the bedroom just a few feet away. Their discarded shirts and shorts and underwear in plain sight also a risk, but not so much, just stray items of male clothing that might have belonged to anyone, even to Jake himself. But those two boys, those two drunk and tripping and very naked boys—disastrous if one or both of them should suddenly appear. More than disastrous. Life-destroying. Fatal.

The young cop kept asking questions: You own this house? Did you know about the bottle rockets on your neighbor's porch? Do you understand that any kids over here become your responsibility? Jake kept nodding and apologizing, convinced by now that no one had seen Jimmy on the porch without his clothes, another bullet narrowly dodged. The cop was looking past Jake into the house, not able to come in, no warrant, no probable cause for entry—but still looking and looking, some unspoken suspicion keeping him on the porch, congenial interrogator asking that same question, scolding really, you realize that you're responsible for any kids visiting your house, no matter if they're related or not, you're the responsible party, Mister Brahms. Jake groveled through another apology, you're absolutely right, sir, these kids come around and get so wild and I'm probably too careless about watching them, but there won't be any more trouble from now on, that's for sure. All the while praying to himself and to any gods listening, please please please don't let those crazy boys make any noise or walk out here in the next few moments, please keep them quiet, please keep them safely out of sight. The cop finally seemed satisfied, just a final

warning about responsibility and disgruntled neighbors before turning to leave. Then he hesitated, one more question, asking Jake if he knew someone by the name of Joshua Randolph. Does that ring a bell? No? Are you sure? Have you ever used that name yourself, Mister Brahms? No? Well, sir, have a good evening. He turned again and this time kept going, his patrol car waiting in the driveway.

Jake shut the door and leaned against the wall and stayed there until he could stop his legs from shaking. Who the fuck was Joshua Randolph? Why was the cop asking about him? No matter, no matter, Jake realizing with abrupt and shocking clarity that his life on Whitman Street was over. He'd come within inches and moments just now of being arrested, everyone in the neighborhood able to see the police car in his driveway, horrible, naked boys in the other room, kiddie porn everywhere, this whole situation now beyond his control, danger mounting upon danger. A feeling of strange exhilaration replacing the terror, all senses heightened by fight-or-flight adrenaline now filling Jake with the giddy realization that he'd survived, he was OK, he had a priceless second chance to escape this self-made quagmire before, very soon, escape became impossible.

He crossed to the bedroom and opened the door. The boys were having sex. Squeak, squeak, squeak of bedsprings. Jimmy was on his back with legs obscenely spread, Sammy sitting on top of him with that big hillbilly pecker up his ass—riding it, happily riding it, Jimmy thrusting it in and thrusting it in, the camcorder still taping from the bedside dresser as Jake himself stood and watched, both boys ignoring him, veteran performers now entirely comfortable in front of any audience, any camera, no embarrassment, come in, watch us fuck, who cares. Jake stepped closer. Were they kissing? Sammy was bent forward with ass cheeks widely splayed and stretched and that hard cock of Jimmy's squish-squishing between them, Sammy bent forward with his face against Jimmy's, yes, kissing him, kissing his friend as he'd been kissing Jake, Jimmy actually kissing back probably the biggest surprise,

hard to believe Jimmy Huckfeldt kissing another guy like that, both of them open-mouthed and tonguing sloppily, boyfriends making love, Jimmy using his hand to jerk off Sammy while fucking him and kissing him, bedsprings squeaking louder, Jimmy using his right hand to jerk off his pal, cock still squish-squishing between those plump brown cheeks as these two teenaged boys now lovers continued to fuck and kiss, fuck and kiss.

Jake kept watching every moment of this show on his bed. Like Pepper and Frankie, he found himself thinking. Just like Pepper and Frankie. Waiting now for the orgasms, the cum, the gooey boymess. Waiting for the end of this performance, for the finale of this last and most remarkable performance.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The front steps were still damp from a morning rain shower. Jimmy could feel the seeping wetness through the seat of his shorts as he sat and stared indifferently at Dally and Ryan chasing each other around the yard. Another Sunday, August almost gone, school beginning in just one more week. A white car turned the corner onto Whitman Street and caught Dally's eye. Red-cheeked boy, out of breath, pointing. "Look, Ry! Look, y'all! That might be Jake. There! See?"

"It's not Jake," Ryan told him. "Don't be retarded."

"Could be Jake."

"Just because it's a white car."

"And it's small." "See, it's not him."

"Dang, it ain't Jake," Dally admitted as the car passed. He made a pouty face and threw down a twig he'd been carrying. "It's been over a week for sure."

"Fucker," Jimmy muttered from the steps. He glanced across the street at the big "For Sale or Rent" sign in Jake's front yard, the uncut grass already growing long around it. No place to go anymore for cigarettes or beer. No way to earn some easy cash for dirty movies or screwing around. Just about two weeks since the man had loaded a U-Haul with his most important possessions and moved himself out to his other house in the country. He'd been back a few times to say hi and give hugs and to reassure everyone that he'd continue to see them and be their friend, don't worry, I'm only about twenty minutes away, no big deal. Still, to the boys, his absence felt like some sort of betrayal or desertion.

Ryan and Dally, now that their game of chase had been interrupted, ran inside for something to drink, brushing against Jimmy one after another as they rushed past. Jimmy himself stayed on the porch, no desire to move, not much spirit or energy in these waning days of

summer vacation. He swiped the shaggy hair away from his forehead and then looked around at the hiss of bicycle tires on the pavement in front of the house. It was Sammy Lopez. He was skidding to a stop across the street in front of Jake's house, apparently surprised to see the "For Sale or Rent" sign, not sure about his next move until he glanced to his right and discovered Jimmy watching him. First time they'd seen each other in the three weeks since their party at Jake's. Sammy stepped from his bike and walked it across the street. Gold earring, gold chain and crucifix, sunglasses, his black hair freshly cut and buzzed around the sides and shaped into its brushy topcrest. He dropped his bike in the yard and looked up half grinning at the other boy. "What up, dawg?"

"Fuckin Lopez. Asshole. Where y'all been for so long?"

"Just hangin." "Thought y'all was dead or some shit. Worthless fucker."

"Just been busy, yo," Sammy shrugged, leaning against the porch railing with one hand, other hand on his hip, usual outfit of long T-shirt and baggy denim shorts. "Busy with shit." He looked back toward Jake's house. "What the fuck happened?"

"He done moved his shit out, man."

"You ain't serious."

"Y'all can read the fuckin sign."

"When he move?"

"Couple weeks," Jimmy said. "He comes back for shit sometimes."

"Moved to where?"

"Some other house. Fuck, I ain't never seen it. Y'all got a cigarette?"

"Naw, man, ain't got nothin."

"Worthless," Jimmy decided again, big wad of Bazooka in his mouth, blowing a pink bubble and then another as he sat there on the porch and stared at the other boy. "So, motherfucker, what's up?"

"Just came by, yo."

"To see Jake?"

"Or whatever." "Sneaky weasel."



“Whatever.” “That day at his house, man. That day we done took the fuckin acid? That fuckin acid from Gonzo? Damn, that was some crazy shit. Some really crazy shit.”

“Some wack shit,” Sammy quickly agreed, another half-hearted grin. “Too fuckin wasted, yo. I don’t remember nothin that happened.”

“Me neither,” Jimmy said. “That whole fuckin day is like, shit, like a blank. I don’t remember a motherfuckin thing, man, I’m serious.”

Sammy smiled more easily, chipped tooth showing. “Word, yo! That acid was some evil shit. Made me sick. You know? Made me feel sick for a few days. Like a dog.”

“Pussy.” “Yo, man, whatever.”

“So where’s your sister?”

“Anita?” “What she been doin lately?”

“Same old shit,” Sammy said. “Stupid bitch.”

“She home now?” “Coño, man, how the fuck I know?”

“Y’all just left there, dickhead!”

“She’s there, I guess. Maybe.”

“Been thinkin about her,” Jimmy said. He blew another big bubble that popped against his lips and nose like a mess of candy-pink scar tissue. He peeled it off and stuffed it back into his mouth and kept chewing, staring at Sammy, finally getting to his feet to leave, suddenly restless, the other boy’s arrival just what he’d needed to get himself moving. “Let’s go to your house,” he said. “Find Anita.”

“Yo, man, no way!”

“Fucker, come on!”

“I just got here, Jimmy, coño!”

“Asshole.”

“Go yourself.” “Be better with both of us,” Jimmy said, another of his Hawaiian shirts, green with yellow pineapples, unbuttoned to show his suntanned chest. “When I see her again for the first time? I can’t just, can’t just, shit, go over there.”

Sammy shook his head and took the other boy’s place on the steps. “I just be waitin here, man, go ahead.”

“Fucker.”

“Anita don’t even like you no more.”

“I can fix that shit. No problem. I have secret powers, Lopez.”  
“Then go.”

“I done told y’all,” Jimmy said. “Be better if we both went. Don’t be such a dick.”

Sammy again refused with a shake of his head. He was gazing at the “For Sale or Rent” sign across the street. “Yo, man, can’t believe that Jake guy really left. Don’t seem right. I’m surprised.”

“So y’all ain’t comin with me?”

“Not right now.”

“OK,” Jimmy shrugged, “be a dick, then. I guess I’ll wait.”

“You ain’t goin?”

“No, man, I’ll wait.”

“Good. We can pump some iron,” Sammy proposed. “Since I’m here anyway.”

“You wanna?”

“Yeah, man, I been missin that shit. It was cool. No doubt.”

“We’ll do it, we’ll do it,” Jimmy nodded. “But not right now. I done worked out already. Just before.”

“Damn.”

“But we’ll do it,” Jimmy said again, still staring at the other boy, watching him. “Tomorrow, man. Y’all come back tomorrow. We’ll do shit.”

“In the basement?”

“Fucker, where else? Shut up. Don’t be stupid.”

“OK,” Sammy slowly nodded, staring back at Jimmy. “Tomorrow. That’ll be cool, dawg. Tomorrow. I’ll be here for sure.”

“So, asshole, what about now? What y’all feel like doin?”

“We can watch the game,” Sammy suddenly smiled, big smile now, on his feet and heading into the house. The television was already on, the living room noisy and crowded with Ryan and Dally, with Jim and Sharon Huckfeldt, everyone gathered to watch this late-season Cubs

game, amazing theatrics, the Cubs actually contending for the playoffs on the strength of Sammy Sosa's homerun rampage. The summer of the homerun. Sammy Sosa versus Mark McGuire. Who was better? Who was stronger? Loyalties were divided. The Huckfeldts, of course, were Cardinals fans, less than a year removed from their original hometown of Cassville in Missouri. Ryan and Sammy, both of them born in Sandburg, were fans of the Cubs. Sammy, especially, a true fanatic. "Them Cubs be goin to the World Series, yo," he loudly insisted, wedged between two Huckfeldts on the couch, Jimmy on one side, Dally on the other. It'll never happen, everyone laughed—everyone except Ryan. Sammy also laughed and then repeated his cocky prediction, ain't no joke, definitely this year, dawg, no way we can lose with my man Sammy Sosa! His hero, his namesake, always eager to brag about Sammy Sosa, Latino idol, no way we can lose with Slammin' Sammy!

The good-natured arguing continued, Sammy and Ryan finding themselves united as unlikely allies in support of the Cubs, Dally seated between them with his thumb in his mouth. Sammy kept reaching across to high-five Ryan whenever their team scored a run or made a big out, finally even usurping Dally's spot on the couch when the little boy got up to use the bathroom. Sammy and Ryan shoulder to shoulder as they watched the game, chattering, laughing, high-fiving, the two of them suddenly discovering each other as rabid baseball fans. And not just baseball. Also football, basketball, boxing, of course wrestling, both the professional show-biz variety and genuine freestyle. A cautious friendship beginning this Sunday between Sammy Lopez and Ryan Fox.

When the game ended, late afternoon, Jimmy was more impatient than ever to visit Anita. He and the other boys wandered back outside where a cool northwest breeze had dispelled the heat and humidity, freshening the air. OK, Sammy finally agreed, I gotta go anyway. He glanced at Ryan and Dally farther up the sidewalk. "Where you guys goin to?" "We's goin to Ryan's house," Dally called back. Jimmy said, "Why don't y'all just move in there with him? Fuckin lovebirds." Dally

ignored him and called once more to Sammy from up the sidewalk. “Y’all can come with us! Be fun!”

“Yeah,” Ryan quickly invited, “you should come! I got a million trading cards you can look at!”

“You got a Sammy Sosa rookie?”

“Of course! I got a Topps and a Donruss both!”

“Lopez, fucker, you done promised,” Jimmy interrupted, already on his orange Huffy and waiting to go. Sammy nodded OK, OK, getting onto his own bike. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” he yelled to the other boys. “No doubt tomorrow, yo! I’ll be here!”

“Can you sleep over?”

“Where?”

“At my house,” Ryan yelled. Sammy shrugged, not sure, maybe, I’ll ask, I’ll find out. Tomorrow. He stood on the pedals of his bike and started after Jimmy along Whitman Street, sun on his back, legs pumping. Ryan and Dally headed in the other direction—Ryan on his Schwinn Speedster, Dally on a thirty-year-old BMX once used by his own father. “Jimmy wants his girlfriend back,” the little boy said, pedaling easily with the breeze in his face.

“He’s stupid,” Ryan said from alongside, bicycle tires humming softly against the pavement.

“He wants to fuck her, I bet.”

“Good, because you know why? He’ll be gone more.”

“Sammy ain’t got no girlfriend.”

“I guess not.” “Ry? If he stays overnight? Your bed is too small.”

“So?” “I was just thinkin.”

“We got sleeping bags and stuff.”

“But who gets the bed?”

“What’s the difference?” “I was just thinkin,” Dally said again, crewcut hair like bristling copper in the five o’clock sunlight. “Just ’cause probably our bed is too small. Your bed.”

“I guess so,” Ryan agreed once more, his own crewcut like burnished gold in that bright evening sun.

“But Ry? What if Sammy don’t sleep nekkid?” “Dally, come on, shut up!”

“I was just thinkin.”

“Then stop.”

“Don’t get mad,” Dally said, bikes now coasting thumpa thumpa thumpa across the old red-brick pavement of Tompkins Street, Ryan’s house three blocks farther on. “OK? Don’t get mad.”

“I’m not mad.”

“Be fun, though, just wait,” Dally grinned. Tires gliding thumpa thumpa thumpa. Cool breeze. Sunday evening. Dally and his best friend Ryan. His boyfriend Ryan.

Back on Whitman Street, everyone else gone, JoJo had just finished mowing Jake’s lawn. None of the other boys, leaving earlier, had even noticed all of JoJo’s hard work, that long grass around the “For Sale or Rent” sign now cut short. Five lawns mowed today, pocketful of cash, busy boy, JoJo resting on Jake’s back porch in the shade of the house. His gray raggedy-kneed shorts mottled with sweat. Another bad day for his hay fever. Using a handkerchief to wipe his runny nose. That same handkerchief given to him by Jake three weeks ago. His mother had been washing it for him every couple of days and he kept it with him now whenever he went out working, better than Kleenex, easier to use, much better.

That day three weeks ago. JoJo couldn’t stop thinking about it. His first real blowjob. He’d been fooling around with his own brothers for as long as he could remember, and he’d been jacking off for a while—but now he understood, now he really understood why Jimmy was always so horny and so eager to get his pecker sucked. Now he understood. First time, three weeks ago, that JoJo had ever gotten sucked all the way and spermed in somebody’s mouth. The addictive thrill of it. The craving for more. Getting cocksucked that way with his big brother watching and with Sammy Lopez watching. Sperming in Jake’s mouth with both of

them watching. Thinking about it and thinking about it. Sammy Lopez watching. Why was that so special? So important? Sammy at Jake's house—but also Sammy at the beach in July, on the paddle boat, asking JoJo about sex, about fucking and jerking off, how much cum you make when you jerk off, dawg, serious, how much? JoJo wondering, more and more, the same thing about Sammy. How much? And what about Ryan Fox? And that Pepper kid who moved to Joliet? What about him? How much? Strange, confusing—fantasies and dreams and images in his mind of girls, of guys, of pussies and boners, everything scrambled together and messy and impossible to untangle. Having sex with girls. Anita Lopez in her short-shorts. Sammy Lopez watching at Jake's house. How much, dawg, serious, how much cum? Blowjobs. Hard wieners. Sammy's. Ryan's. Pepper's. How big? How big did their hard wieners get? Always wondering, always wondering, JoJo's own pecker like a permanent sore bone in his pants.

Now he was resting on Jake's back porch, comfortably shady here, too sunny in front. Hoping for Jake to show up. The man had been back a few times, but always in a hurry and soon gone again with more boxes of his books or dishes or whatever. JoJo hoping for a longer visit. Easy to hear Jake's car from this spot if it parked in the driveway. JoJo waiting, listening, hoping maybe that Jake could stay for a while, that they could go inside, no need to say anything, Jake would know what to do. JoJo thinking about it. Always thinking about it. Pecker up hard and achy inside his gray shorts.

Other side of the house, out front on Whitman Street, a white car was slowly passing. Jake's Volvo. He'd come into town to do some grocery shopping and now, finished with that, was doing a slow drive-by to check on his house, also to see if any of the boys might be out playing, a good chance to stop briefly and say hello. Surprised now to find that his grass had been cut. JoJo, of course. Sweet, goofy kid. Not the first time he'd cut the grass without Jake being home—no problem, willing to wait for his money until Jake eventually showed up,

whenever, not important, he enjoyed being useful and helping out. Now Jake slowed his car even more to take a better look, creeping almost to a stop on the deserted street. Huckfeldt hounds woofing from their backyard kennel. No other sounds in the summer twilight. And no boys. No sign of JoJo anywhere along the quiet street, the sidewalks, the neighbors' yards. Jake reluctantly kept going, speeding up now, disappointed not to have found any of his young friends.

Around the corner of the house, just out of sight, JoJo finally decided to end his vigil. He wiped his nose with Jake's handkerchief and got to his feet—time for supper, time to go, another Sunday nearly finished. He plucked at that pesky lump in his shorts as he headed for the street, no one now but himself to take care of it, same thing every day, jacking off in the bathroom or the bedroom, Dally sometimes with him, sometimes Jimmy, more fun with another person. Best of all with Jake. Thinking about it and thinking about it. That day three weeks ago. That addictive thrill. That hunger for more.

JoJo glanced up and down the street as he crossed. Only one car, distant now, heading east in the deepening shadows, driving away.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Saturday afternoon in early October, a chill in the air, a trace of frost overnight, Jake's first chance to try the newly installed heating system at his house in the country. Doc's old house. Now Jake's. A state-of-the-art heating (and cooling) system to supplant the old pot-bellied stove used by Doc for so many years. Just one of many changes and improvements made to the house in these past two months. Kitchen appliances, carpets in the bedroom and living room, furniture, TV, toilet and shower and tub. Decades of neglect and decrepitude swept away, replaced, modernized. Jake checked one of the new floor vents, warm air against his hand, everything working just right. He glanced at the VCR clock. A little after two. Time to call Pepper in Joliet for a chat, always a good excuse for Jake to use his new cordless phone. He fetched himself a beer from the refrigerator and settled comfortably onto the couch, the phone ringing against his ear three times, four times, then Pepper's voice suddenly at the other end. A voice that seemed to be roughening more deeply into puberty each time Jake heard it. "You surprised me," the man said. "Your mom usually answers."

"She's at the nursery today," the boy told him. "My aunt is sick."

"So you're home all by yourself?"

"Yep."

"Have you made any friends at your new school?"

"Some."

"Any good Nintendo partners?"

"Not really." "Any exciting news since we talked last time?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, hey, your birthday is only two days away. That's exciting."

"It is?" "Of course," Jake laughed. "You're going to be thirteen! A genuine teenager! That's a major event."

"You sound like my mom."

"We can celebrate on Halloween."



“Are you still coming for sure?”

“Definitely. Just like we planned. I’ll be there for the whole weekend.”

“You will?” Jake laughed again into the phone. “Silly kid. You know I will be. We’ll celebrate your birthday. And you know what else?”

“There’s more?”

“It’ll be our anniversary.”

“Of what?”

“Our anniversary! It was last October, last year, that you stayed at my house for the first time.”

“That long ago?”

“A full year.”

“What about my present?”

“Your present?”

“My birthday present,” Pepper said, suddenly sounding very much like a sulky and impatient adolescent.

“Don’t worry, I’ll bring it,” Jake told him, a whole package of new Nintendo games already wrapped and prepared for him. “Hey, remember JoJo?”

“Crazy JoJo?”

“His birthday is next week, too. The day after yours. Lots of birthdays lately.”

“Who else?”

“Jimmy. His was in August.”

“I hate that guy.”

“I know, I know,” Jake said, pausing for a sip of beer. “And Sammy Lopez. Also in August. But you don’t know Sammy.”

“Frankie talks about him sometimes.”

“That’s right. They see each other now and then.”

“And Frankie’s birthday was in July,” Pepper recalled. “He wanted a car.”

“But his parents waited until September. When school started. He’s got one now.”

“I know.”

“An Acura. Used. Five years old.”

“I know. He called me.”

“What else did you guys talk about?”

“Your shower,” Pepper said. “From your old house.”

“My shower? What about it?”

“That it was so expensive. You spent so much money on it. And now it’s gone.”

“Oh well, that’s OK, I’ve got a nice new shower and tub here, too.”

“The same kind?”

“Pretty much. You’ll have to visit and find out. I fixed up the entire house.”

“Is it still a pagan paradise?” the boy asked, a smile in his voice.

“Maybe next summer it will be,” Jake said, a little surprised by Pepper’s question. “I haven’t had any visitors since moving in. Except Frankie.” “Why not?” “Well, I’ve been busy.”

“Nobody at all?”

“No, really, nobody.”

“Not even Ryan? Or Dally?” “No, believe me, no visitors at all.”

“So it’s not a pagan paradise anymore at all?” “Not at the moment,” Jake said, the boy’s persistent questions making him laugh once more. “Maybe when the weather gets warmer, and you’re here to visit, we can get Ryan and Dally to come out. Or JoJo. And Frankie, of course. Whoever wants to come.”

“All of them?” “We’ll see.”

“We could have a bonfire and stuff.”

“A bonfire, swimming, everybody naked.”

“Is that what’ll happen?”

“I hope so.”

“No clothing allowed?” “That’s right. Gotta be naked in paradise.”

“Probably,” Pepper said, that smile still in his voice.

“So let’s plan on it,” Jake told him. “I’m getting excited just thinking about it.”

“Will it be fun?” “I think so. What about you?” “Probably.”

“I think definitely.” “Probably definitely,” the boy said, both of them laughing again, Jake wondering if this fantasy of theirs could ever become reality, such craziness to be thinking so far ahead, especially now, just a couple of months after his escape from Sandburg, from danger, from the boys themselves. Such reckless speculation.

He and Pepper talked for another few minutes, Jake ending with a promise to see him soon, very soon, Halloween weekend, I love you, I miss you, take care. Only afterwards, getting himself another beer, did Jake remember to wonder about the boy’s magic. Voodoo sorcerer. Caster of spells. Maybe nothing but coincidence and overactive imagination, no such thing as magic, not really—but still, hard to dismiss, something odd in the weave of event and happenstance that always left Jake feeling bemused, almost willing to share Pepper’s belief in those talismans and curses and spells. He’d ask the boy when they saw each other at Halloween: Buy any new magic books lately? Create any new talismans or charms? Just the thing to discuss on All Hallow Eve.

Still early in the afternoon, no other urgent business, Jake returned to what he’d been doing before the phone call, looking through all of the videos he and the boys had recorded in the last year. So many of them. Hours and hours: Huckfeldt brothers goofing around, making one of their “wiener movies” with Ryan watching from the La-Z-Boy, scowling at them; Dally on Jake’s couch, boner showing; Frankie and Pepper taking a shower, then drying, then tangled naked on the hide-a-bed; Frankie and the Huckfeldts gang-peeing in the bathroom, Dally on the toilet, then all of them dancing and being silly in the living room with their pants half down, Jimmy doing his rowdy bump-and-grind with Frankie, falling with him onto the La-Z-Boy, humping “uh, uh, uh!”; Dally with the dildo up his butt; JoJo performing his magic act in the

buff; Jimmy, headless, masturbating on his own bed; Ryan, at the Huckfeldt house, impatiently flashing his limp dick—but nothing more from him, frustrating. Remarkable to see how much the boys had grown and changed in just these past several months. All of them a bit taller now, a few pounds heavier, hair longer on some and shorter on others, puberty making especially dramatic changes in Pepper and JoJo, little boys becoming big boys right there on tape.

The best videos, the real X-rated spectacles, Jake saved for last. Too much, in fact, to watch right now. Almost time for supper. Later he would allow himself to savor both of them. Priceless souvenirs: Pepper out here at Doc's house in May, right here on the floor, that final shot of him on his back with legs spread and juicy boner showing. So much of that day just a memory, thank god for those last thirty minutes on tape, a precious memento of the boy as he looked on that idyllic Saturday, the lean twelve-year-old perfection of him, the startling nakedness of him, beautiful Pepper. And then, of course, those two full hours of Jimmy and Sammy from that Sunday in August, that orgiastic free-for-all, every moment of it from their muscle-posing to their underwear-dancing to their final frenzy of sex—all of it preserved by the camcorder. A treasure. Jake's treasure.

Footsteps on the wooden landing out front. Loud footsteps. Cops? FBI? No. Through the glass in the door, like a friendly apparition, Frankie was suddenly visible, his heavy combat boots thunking against the boards. He was just starting to knock when Jake opened the door to let him in. "Hey, my Frankie boy! I wasn't expecting to see you."

"Is it OK?"

"Sure. Always."

"I thought maybe I'd get to use my new key," the boy said, holding it up, a recent gift from Jake. "Thought maybe you'd be at work today." "My Saturday off. But why? You came out here to be alone?" "Just till you got back. Dude, to wait for you."

They paused, just then, to hug and to kiss, the smell of Frankie always a pleasant flashback for Jake, that hippie fragrance of incense and marijuana like a whiff of the Sixties. When they finally stepped apart, the boy dimpled into a big sheepish grin and pulled off the stocking cap he'd been wearing. His hair, always long and parted in the middle, naturally dark blond verging on brown, had been cut short and spiky and was now a punkish white-blond, a shocking transformation. "Well? Am I totally hideous?"

"Wow," Jake said, "what happened? You look so different!"

"Is it horrible?"

"No, no! I mean, it's sort of cute, honest, you're always adorable. But your long hair was so nice."

"I know."

"It seemed to fit your personality so well."

"Dude," Frankie nodded, "you're probably right. I liked it better long. I just, I don't know, I just felt like making a change. Some kind of change."

"Let me see that cute head," Jake smiled, his hand out to get a feel, the boy stepping closer, also smiling, letting the man pet his spiky hair. "You're my adorable boy, long hair or short hair or bald, doesn't matter."

"Thanks."

"The other boys would love it. Cool. Awesome. Slammin."

"You think?" "Sammy, for sure. And Ryan. They love anything stylish."

"What about Pepper?"

"Oh sure. He'd approve. I just talked to him," Jake said. He and Frankie moved into the living room. "We have plans for a wild, naked summer out here. Everyone's invited."

"He said that?" "Yeah, I'm serious. He sounded ready and willing."

"Excellent!"

"I'm not sure how realistic it is."

“We’ll make it happen,” Frankie said, his jacket already off, his boots, his shirt. He stooped above one of the vents to feel the warm air. “This is nice.”

“Might be difficult to get the other boys out here,” Jake said. Frankie finished his inspection and turned around, unfastening his jeans, grinning again, all sweetness and dimples beneath that punky new hair. “Dude, no worries! I’m your super spy and assistant. I’ll pick up the guys in my car and bring them here. All of them. Sammy and Ryan and everybody.”

“You think so?”

“They’ll just be coming to my house, is all. Or wherever. Right? Dude, it won’t matter. I’m a harmless kid, just pickin up my buds for some fun. That’s how it’ll happen.”

“You’re a cunning young spy and assistant,” Jake laughed. “Really, not a bad plan, I have to admit.”

“And sometimes we’ll stop here and see our good friend Jake.”

“Thoughtful of you all.”

“And then, dude, we’ll all get naked and jerk off and whatever.”

“Which we won’t mention to their parents.”

“Not that part,” Frankie laughed, out of his underwear now, white socks still on. He had a simple chain around his neck with a brass locket dangling from it against his pale, bony chest. Jake, standing nearby and sipping from his can of Coors, pointed and came closer and touched the locket with his fingertip. “Is this what I think it is?” “My new amulet,” the boy nodded. He opened it carefully to show the dark curl of Pepper’s hair inside. “So he’ll stay madly in love with me. Till we see each other again.”

“Nice.”

“You think I’m being silly?” “No. Pepper is worth any and all desperate measures. Nothing too silly for him.”

“He sounds different on the phone.”

“I know. Older. His birthday is Monday.”

“Dude, yeah, I sent him a card.”

“He’s getting a teenager’s voice, you’re right.”

“Damn,” Frankie said, grinning again, no braces now to mar that puckish smile of his, “I bet he’s cuter now than ever. I really, really miss him.”

“I really, really do too.” “Look at me. I can’t believe how totally hard I am!”

“We’ll have to attend to that,” Jake said, hugging the boy with his free arm and kissing him. “I have something that’ll be perfect. To watch.”

“Tell me.”

Jake went to the VCR and held up a cassette. “Something special.”

“The Pepper tape? Dude, I definitely want to see that again! It’s so dope!”

“No, actually, you’ve never seen this one before. I’ve been saving it.”

“You fucker!”

“This is Jimmy Huckfeldt and Sammy Lopez. . .”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Together.”

“Jake, dude, please don’t mess with me. Don’t tease me.”

“This is something like you’ve never seen before. Jimmy and Sammy together. Drunk and tripping and out of control.”

“You mean they actually get naked and shit? Jimmy and Sammy? No way,” Frankie said, slouched on the couch now and waiting with legs spread, white socks still on, the rest of him starkly bare and pale, smooth-skinned, a seventeen-year-old who looked tenderly pubescent, like a young kid just off the school playground—except for that surprisingly big thing between his legs and its bush of pubic hair. Jake, watching him, said, “Oh, they get naked all right! You can’t even believe what they do.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Frankie chuckled softly, shaking his head, baby-faced punkboy with bleached platinum hair, eyebrows handsomely and incongruously dark, chipmunkish dimples as he grinned, no way, you

must be messing with me, dude, not Jimmy and Sammy. Not those two guys. No way! Jake just kept smiling as he put in the video and crossed to the couch with the remote in one hand, beer in the other. "You'll see, you'll see. Comfortable? Cozy?"

"Very."

"Look at you, so beautiful, my boy," Jake said, putting aside the beer to free his hand for petting. "What would I do without you?"

"You're not getting tired of me?"

"Tired of you? Jesus Christ, no! You're everything to me, Frankie. My best friend, my lover, everything." "Dude, you're going to make me cry."

"You need to know, that's all, how much I love you."

"You really love me, Jake?" "I love you like crazy, kid." "I love you too, so much," the boy said, his eyes wet, lifting his head for a kiss, a long kiss that left him with a strangely timid half-grin, something on his mind, something important. "That's why I came here today," he finally confessed. "I thought maybe I could stay here. You know, live here."

"Live here?"

"Don't get upset."

"I'm not. I'm not upset. Really. Just a little surprised, I guess. And confused."

"Not right now, but. . . well, later. Sometime. Maybe I could live here with you."

"OK, maybe, OK," Jake said quietly, staring at the boy. "So you're talking about the future? Not now? I mean, you're only seventeen, it would be illegal for us to. . ."

"I wish it could be now. Right now. But I know. You're right."

"After you graduate."

"Could I get a court order or something sooner?" "Why? Is it so bad at home? What's wrong?"



“Just everything,” the boy shrugged, tears on his cheeks, actually crying. “It’s like everybody hates me and they’re always watching me and I just, dude, I just want to be here with you. I really love you.”

“My baby,” Jake soothed. “Baby boy. Don’t be so sad. I mean, after all, your parents just bought you a nice little car last month. They must trust you. Things can’t be so bad.”

“It’s just everything,” Frankie said again, backhanding the tears from his face. “I can’t explain it.”

“After you graduate,” Jake told him once more. “When you’re eighteen. Then we can decide. Then you could actually come here. If you still want to.”

“That’s almost a whole year.”

“It’ll go fast, you’ll see.”

“I guess. I’m sorry. I’m ruining everything. “Not true. In fact, it’s nice, it’s flattering that you want to live here. I’m honored. I’m touched. It makes me love you even more.”

“Thanks, Jake. I think maybe I feel better.”

“My baby,” the man said once more to soothe him, running his hand across that spiky platinum hair. “Now. Should we watch the tape? Are you still in the mood after all of this exhausting drama?”

“Damn, I actually lost my boner,” Frankie smiled, face still reddened from crying, a smear of teary moisture on each cheek. “That’s a first for me, no lie. But honestly? Can we wait till after supper?”

“Of course.”

“I’m so totally starving.”

“I’ve got hamburgers I could fry. That would be the quickest, probably.”

Frankie cheerfully agreed, sounds great, we can eat fast and then watch that video, I can’t wait, Sammy and Jimmy, dude, I still can’t believe those guys actually did stuff for the camera. You can’t imagine the stuff they did, Jake once again guaranteed, on his way to the kitchen,

smiling. Frankie got to his feet and patted one hand, slap slap, against his own bare belly. "I can eat two," he called. "With cheese!"

"I know, I remember."

"Should I get dressed?"

"No way! No clothes allowed! That's what Pepper and I decided."

"What about you? Your clothes?"

"As soon as I'm finished frying," Jake yelled from the kitchen. "I don't want hot grease all over my beautiful bod!"

Frankie laughed, yeah, no doubt, that might be a bad idea. He wandered to the sliding glass doors across the room, at the back of the house. A moment of hesitation. Such an unlikely thing to be doing. Opening those doors. Then stepping naked onto the broad wooden deck outside. Chill air against his skin, giving him goosebumps. He hugged himself and gazed out across the woods, out toward that hill so good for sledding somewhere beyond all of those hickories and oaks and wild cherries now beginning to drop their leaves. A scent of rich autumn decay already on the breeze. Frankie laughed. Now he knew how Pepper must have felt that day last spring. Such a wicked pleasure to be standing here outside with no clothes! He wished somehow that everyone could see him like this. His parents, his teachers, his friends from school. Naked like this. The freedom of it. The defiant joy of it. Frankie laughed again with tears in his eyes. Sun warmly lighting the treetops. Geese farther up, high and unreachable in the dim blue, a ragged V-formation flying south. The boy watched them and wiped his eyes and smiled as they passed.

END





















