THE MONSTER WAVES

by

Elizabeth Allen
A Thesis
Submitted to the
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in Partial Fulfillment of
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of
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Creative Writing

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Master of Arts
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Director: Courtney A. Brkic, Professor
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DEDICATION

For Hal, Maggie and Billy—my sun, my moon and my stars.

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ABSTRACT

THE MONSTER WAVES

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"The Monster Waves" starts with the disappearance of Bud Zombrowski, a 4-year-old boy, on the morning of Christmas Eve, 1940, in Euclid, Ohio. Bud's parents and his 10-year-old brother, David, are devastated by the loss of the child, their pain deepened by the uncertainty about his fate. Was he kidnapped? Did he wander too close to nearby Lake Erie and drown? With no answers, the family suffers. But the passage of time and the impact of some key events—WWII and the birth of a daughter, Josie—eventually allow the Zombrowskis to move on with their lives. David moves on too, but he is still haunted by images of his brother and the guilt that he might have done something to prevent his disappearance. At the same time, he struggles with his sexual identity, frightened by feelings he had for a young man in his past.

After high school, David skips college and lands a grunt job at a Cleveland radio station. He falls in love with broadcasting, eventually landing an announcer gig, and then his own show. When his station turns to the next big thing—television—David takes

advantage of the opportunities offered by this media juggernaut. He becomes a minor TV celebrity, and befriends Adam, a cameraman at the station. The men become close friends, then become lovers. David must come to terms with his homosexuality in a time when that admission could get a person fired, beat up or worse. David's career flourishes through these difficulties, but he must make certain compromises and concessions to keep his boss happy.

Twenty six years after his brother's disappearance, on the night of a big party David is hosts as his TV persona, he meets a woman who has startling information about his brother. He sets off on a search for the truth and to come to terms with what happened that day in 1940. What he returns with forces some hard questions: Can we mend the broken parts of our personal histories? How do we know when to leave the past alone?

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CHAPTER ONE

Bud

We lost my little brother the morning of December 24, 1940. No one knew what happened to him, if he wandered away or was taken by somebody. He had been playing with his toys, there in our house one moment, then not there.

This disappearance, his state of not being there, became the definitive event of my youth. It leveled my parents and me like one of those big, black Acme cartoon anvils dropped from the sky. For a long while, we lay squashed under it, human pancakes, helpless amid our faithless days, immobile through every hellish night. And we could not see an end to it.

But for whatever reason, we did not cede our lives. There still existed within us, I think, at least a memory of light. Over time, we started to move, each at our own pace, each in our own way. We moved the anvil however we could. And we succeeded. We sat up, then stood on wobbly legs. We faced the light. The weight had shifted enough to allow our lives to move forward. But it was never far away. And we would always seem like pancakes to me, beaten, flattened versions of ourselves, some crucial dimension lost forever.

That day in 1940, that last unburdened morning, was Christmas Eve, so I didn't have to go to school. About an hour later than usual, I poked a foot out of covers, just a small gesture before fully committing to verticality.

Already something was off. The room temperature was comfortable, almost too warm. We lived in Euclid, a suburb of Cleveland hard against the shore of Lake Erie. Late in December, you could count on the winter's full conceit, icicles, snow, the kind of cold that bit lips, froze the snot in your nose, sent your genitals deep into exile. Our house, old like all the ones around it, had a basement furnace, boxy and solid as a locomotive. The heat managed to reach the main level pretty well, but the second floor bedrooms were another story. On the worst mornings during the school year, when I had to be up before 7, my breath steamed white like Seabiscuit stamping in the gate at Pimlico.

But that morning, breath unseen, I opened my window to patches of yellow grass in the yard and the baffled discussion of sparrows. Balmy weather? On Christmas Eve? No, no, no. All wrong, all wrong.

I rumbled down the wooden stairs to find Mom and Bud already in the kitchen. They were seated at our red enamel topped table, Mom sipping coffee and staring at a little white card, a recipe from the box full of them that sat on the counter in the kitchen. At 4 years old, Bud was getting way too big for the rickety wooden high chair, but he insisted on using it anyway. Mom had taken off the tray, but she still made him wear a bib if he was eating anything messy, which for Bud, meant pretty much anything at all.

That morning he was shoveling beige lumps of oatmeal into his mouth, air whistling through a perpetually stuffy nose, little Vienna sausage fingers pawing at the blue buttondown underneath the dish towel bib.

"Bud!" my mother warned. "Keep that shirt on!"

"It's too big! And it itches!"

"It is winter and you are not Tarzan and you will keep your shirt on!"

"Did you notice the weather?" I asked. "It's warm."

"It'll be cold again soon enough," Mom said, her eyes never leaving the recipe card. *"Corn starch?* Am I out of corn starch?"

I ate breakfast, helped Mom with the dishes, wiped most of the quickly setting oatmeal concretion off Bud's face.

"I wanna float my boats!" Bud yelled. The kid had no control over the dynamics of his voice. He whispered or he yelled, nothing in between.

"Go on, go play with your boats! Who's stopping you?" I said and shooed him into the living room. I'd been wanting to get to the library book on the desk in my room. It was the kind of story I loved as a 10-year-old, full of dinosaurs and sweaty, nefarious men and long machetes hacking away at dense jungles. Any other day, with weather this nice, I would've been outside with my friends, but they were all off tolerating relatives. I wasn't doing anything that day but waiting out the Christmas plunder—presents, ham and potatoes, candy—so it seemed as good a time as any to wander the Amazon in search of pterodactyls. But not downstairs. Mom was scraping and clattering pans around in the kitchen, trying to get the ham started. Bud was splayed out on the living room carpet,

alternating between wiping a snotty nose on his shirtsleeve and pushing his toy boats around the woolen waters of the living room rug. As they advanced, he made a throaty *chugga-chugga-chugga* noise, slightly different for each of the three vessels. Someone on the Firestone radio near the front window was chirping (*Folks, what about a last-minute gift for that hard-to-please family member? Here's just the ticket*!) I started up the stairs, then hesitated. An extra noise seemed to have joined the clatter and Bud's sniffling and *chuggas* and the voice of the radio announcer. Was Mom saying something to me? Hard to tell. I pretended I didn't hear, because really, I didn't, and continued loping up the steps two at a time.

In my room, I read on my bed for 20 minutes or so; it was a good story, with enough action to hold my interest. A few chapters in, I looked up. The sun was pressing against the window, bright as June. I could go outside. Mom was right. It was sure to turn cold tomorrow, and it might stay that way until mid-spring. It might be fun to read on the porch—that was, as long as I didn't get the book dirty or wet. If I messed it up in any way, my folks would get a call from the Euclid Public Library and they'd make us buy them a new one. It'd take me forever to scare up the cost of book from my quarter-a-week allowance. I'd just decided to chance it and stood up when I heard footsteps on the wood stairs. Mom opened my door and said, "Is Bud with you?"

I put the book down. "No, he's not in here."

We poked around, upstairs and down, in the cellar, calling his name. "I was in the kitchen, getting the ham ready," she explained on the steps, "and when I went back into the living room he wasn't…I didn't see him." We called again, really yelling now.

“Did you check outside?” I asked, already headed to the front door. The door was closed most of the way, but not all the way, not latched. A tiny sliver of sunlight insinuated itself in the gap.

“He knows he’s not supposed to go out by himself,” Mom said. “He’s never—” She stopped. “What were you doing up in your room?”

“Reading.”

“No, I mean…David, I asked you—”

I didn’t wait for the rest, but ran outside, scanned the front yard, then ran around to the back. No Bud.

“Do you think he could have gone over to Jeannie and Carl’s?” my mother called out from the back door, her voice rising.

I sprinted to our neighbor’s baby blue rambler house, and banged on the door. I could see Jeannie approach through the glass pane in the door, wiping her hands on her apron. She opened the door and smiled at me. “Hi, David. Merry Christmas! Do you—”

“Jeannie, did Bud come over here? Have you seen him?”

“No, I can’t say I have.” She stepped halfway out her door and peered over my shoulder into her front yard. “Why? What’s—”

“OK, OK, just let me know if you see him, alright?” I sprinted back to the house. Inside, Mom was shouldering her coat.

“Stay here, in case he comes back. Maybe he just wandered down the block.” She went out the door, but leaned in a second later. “Don’t call your father…not yet. Let me just see…” and she was gone again.

I stood by the sofa in the living room, my stomach starting to turn. At my feet, Bud's boats lay in a pile, the terrible aftermath of some imagined gale; this is the way he always left them after he was done playing. I touched one of the toys with the tip of my shoe, a tugboat, and there was music. The radio near the front window was still on. Emanating from the Firestone, the sound of a children's choir, the voices sweet but not completely in sync, slightly staggered, the way you might sing if you haven't rehearsed much. It was a carol we'd done at St. John's many times, "The Holly and the Ivy."

I just stood there, listening and thinking, *in the next minute, Mom will come in with Bud…or the next…or the next.* Mom did finally return after about ten minutes, alone. So the calls were placed. To Dad, then the police station. And everything happened quickly after that.

Dad came home, the Euclid police arrived, Jeannie, other neighbors ducked in and out, everybody asking questions, speculating, looking around the living room, as if we'd misplaced Bud in a cupboard or under a pillow. Before they headed out the door with the police, Mom and Dad told me to be calm and stay put. A quick urge burned through me, to puff out my chest, demand to go and look too. But I knew what my mom would think—then she'd have two dumb kids to look for. Already she was giving me that look, where her mouth went perfectly straight and her chin moved south but her eyes stayed directly on me, as if to say, *Why, David? Why couldn't you just look after your brother? Don't I have enough to do around here?*

Alone in the house again, I reminded myself that if Bud came back, someone needed to be here, somebody he knew. And so I waited, and wondered. Was this a

passing snag, a hiccup in the day's proceedings, the kind of thing Mom would chatter about later to her sister on the phone— *Let me tell you about Bud; he gave us such a fright on Christmas Eve!* Or was it something much worse?

It seems weird now, but when I was a kid, it was hard to imagine anything bad happening at Christmas. Those days at the end of the calendar, when the old year was sputtering out, were safe spots, time-outs before everybody suited up and headed into the new year. I knew bad things, spectacularly sad things, could happen on other days, even if they were special. There was a boy in my neighborhood who died on his birthday. He'd been sick a long time—leukemia—and just happened to go on that day. His mom had already made a cake and everything. My grandma died on Easter when I was five, despite the baskets and the eggs and all that talk about the promise of spring. Just keeled over onto her kitchen floor. Heart attack.

But Christmas was the King Kong of holidays, a time out of pace with the rest of the year, when groups of people breaking into song on street corners and lugging home pine trees and other bits of landscaping to stick in their living rooms were perfectly normal things to do. For a few days, everyone was happy, or as happy as you can be yammering on about peace on earth and good will toward men. Nothing bad happened, I believed, because God set those days aside, for the birthday of his beloved, only-begotten son. Take a knee, everybody. Take two. Say your prayers, eat your candy, open those presents. See you in January.

I was starting to get nervous, just waiting, just standing there while everyone else acted. And then, without much thought at all, I commenced my little ritual, a sort of

cataloging I undertook when I was worried about something, when there wasn't much I could do. It was just a thing I figured out on my own, to find something around me, some sort of complex, complicated object—if possible, something completely unrelated to the source of my worry—and break it down, closely examine it, look at every detail. That day, I chose the Christmas tree. I touched each of the ornaments, one by one. It helped me, to consider each one, to think of its size, its shape and color, to try to remember where it came from and how long we'd had it. And when I had finished, when I felt calmer, I tried to figure out where Bud might have gone.

My gaze fell to Bud's boats, an ocean liner and a Noah's Ark. The tug was gone. He had said he wanted to float his boats. Then I thought of the lake.

From our house on East 224th Street, it was just a short walk north and a right turn on Edgecliff Drive, and the cold, vast expanse of Lake Erie was right in front of you. Bud loved the lake—we all did—but would he have left the house on his own and walked all the way down to the water? He hadn't ever done anything like that before. And it was hard to get down to the water from the road. He would have seen it, of course, but getting close enough to put a toy boat in was another matter.

Besides, it was Christmas Eve. Once Mom had wrapped the presents (the non-Santa ones) and placed them under the tree, we'd had to nearly drag Bud from the living room. I couldn't picture him leaving all that loot behind so close to the big moment. Except…*except* to see Santa. Maybe.

I pushed past the front door onto the porch. There was a cop standing in our front yard, a tall guy outfitted head-to-toe in navy blue, facing the street. When he heard the

door open, he turned around and gave me a little wave and a smile, as if nothing was wrong, as if this was just an especially pleasant place to pass the day, greet passersby, enjoy the weather. I raised my right hand slowly, returned the greeting, then moved to the left side of the porch.

There sat a lawn chair and on it, a stuffed Santa Claus. Two years before, my dad had made a man-sized dummy out of old clothes filled with straw. It had started just as a goofy autumn decoration, a plump scarecrow we had dressed in overalls and an old hat, the kind of homemade doodad I'd seen on plenty of other people's porches. Then it became kind of a seasonal thing with him. He dressed it up each holiday, as a leprechaun for St. Patrick's Day, as an Easter bunny, Uncle Sam for Independence Day, something spooky each Halloween—a vampire, then a witch. It was an angel last Christmas, but this year it was Santa Claus.

I don't know what I was looking for…clues maybe, something that showed Bud had been out here. He'd stayed right at Mom's side when she made the Santa suit, red felt with white trim, and he had helped Dad glue cotton balls together to form the beard. Could he have wandered out, still holding one of his boats, to take a closer look at the finished product? Maybe he kept going, down the steps, out into the front yard. Maybe somebody was driving or walking by and saw him. Maybe they took him.

I couldn't see anything that looked any different than usual. No tracks, no torn fabric, no sign Bud struggled with anyone. The cop, a little less pleasant now, kept looking at me over his shoulder like I shouldn't be out there, so I snagged the afternoon newspaper from the porch—*of course, that's why I'd come out here*—and went back in. I

thought about telling him about the Bud and his boats, to make sure the cops checked near the lake, but I stopped. Of course, they'd check by the water. They were grown-ups. Did I really think something would've occurred to me and not to them?

I spread the newspaper on the kitchen table, paging through it with no intention of reading. I ripped little strips off the edges of the newspaper and rolled them between my fingers with a little saliva thrown in, orphan spitballs that would never find a target, piled up on the edge of the table. Then I found myself doing my little cataloging ritual again, this time with the funny pages, breaking down every comic strip into words and pictures, noting every line, every bit of shading, Mutt and Jeff, Barney Google, Superman, the Man of Steel.

Over the course of the afternoon, people drifted back to our home base. Neighbors, friends, mostly in pairs, checked in with drawn faces and hushed apologies, begged me to let them know if there was any news of Bud. And then they headed back to their own places. I didn't question this. I know they felt bad, but we all accepted the sanctity of Christmas Eve. Most of them probably had presents to wrap, food to prepare, family coming to visit.

When it got dark, around 5, Mom and Dad came back, finally bowing to the police's request that they stay with me at the house.

"Did they look by the lake?" I blurted out as soon as my mother took off her coat.

"They're looking everywhere," Dad answered.

Mom sat on the couch, not crying but staring wide, at nothing, her body pitched forward, as if she would rise from her seat at any second. She held the glass of sherry

Dad thought would help, just held it and stared. Dad sat on the floor at her feet, an open brown bottle of Schlitz beer at his side, hugging Bud's ark, crying, dragging fingers through his sandy hair, a throaty gasp coming every half-minute or so. A couple of times, one of the small wooden animals fell out of the ark's windows, a tiger, an ostrich, a bear, and land in my father's lap.

No one said much. Just one thing from Mom, choked more than spoken. "They asked me…the police…they asked me if I hurt Bud. If I did something to him…" Just one thing from Dad, whispered. "They asked me too."

I sat in the armchair opposite my parents, very still and listening, sure I would hear Bud knocking at the back door or trundling up the steps. Bad as it was, I was grateful it wasn't snowing. I couldn't bear to think of Bud wandering out there—if he was wandering—lost in all the white, obliterated. But the mild day had given way to a clear, crisp night. I figured that would make it easier for the police to find Bud and bring him home.

Nobody had touched the radio, and the quiet music played on. "In the dark street shineth, the everlasting light," a man sang, sotto voce. I pictured Bud, standing alone on a dark street, a single lamp post illuminating the space around him. Just beyond the light, eyes goggled, then narrowed with menace. Arms reached out, beckoning him into the dark.

We sat.

"The hopes and fears of all the years…"

A thump. We jumped. Then realizing, sat again. It was next door, somebody closing a car door. Some family gathering, about to begin.

The longer we stayed put, the harder it was to move. It seemed wrong to do anything but wait for word and think of Bud—wrong to do anything that smacked of normalcy, get a drink of water, eat something, read a book or the newspaper. I couldn't bring myself to get up and turn off the music, and I wasn't even sure Mom and Dad were aware of it. So, I thought, leave it. Maybe they'll say something about Bud.

But as I sat there and the night wore on, I understood. It was Christmas Eve and my little brother was gone. Here, on this children's night of nights, God had allowed a terrible thing to happen to a child. To our child.

"Once in royal David's city, stood a lowly cattle shed..."

Whatever plateau I had spent the day on—*they will find him any minute, he just wandered off, Mom and Dad will go nuts when the police walk through the door holding his hand, no coat, face smeared with tears, cops grinning with relief, "You won't believe where we found him," just a few minutes more*—whatever suspended state that was, dissipated as we sat. There were three of us now, not four, gathered, but diminished. We might be three for a very long time. We might be three forever.

The Firestone played on.

"We shall see Him; but in heaven,
set at God's right hand on high;
where like stars His children crowned,
all in white shall wait around."

We didn't find Bud. The police—first just the Euclid city cops, but soon joined by the Cleveland PD, State Police and the Coast Guard from Marblehead Station—scoured the shoreline and immediate waters of Lake Erie near the house, searched surrounding neighborhoods and put out bulletins throughout Ohio and the bordering states. We became a big news story for a few weeks, everyone wrapped up in the plight of the Zombrowski family and their son, Bradley, whom everyone called Bud. It seemed that every day the *Plain-Dealer* ran the same picture of the cute kid with baby chick tufts of hair and big eyes, waving at the camera. It was the photo Dad took of him when we were on vacation at Mackinac Island last summer. Reporters made sure everyone knew about the chicken pox scar on the left side of Bud's nose. Articles took care to note that the little boy liked toys and animals and ice cream, as if knowing those things would help anyone find him, as if all sentient children don't like toys and animals and ice cream.

Bud started as front-page news, the "Family Ordeal in Euclid," and was mentioned prominently in the WWBA news broadcasts. But as the days, then weeks, grinded past, his photo got moved further back into the other sections, the updates on the radio less and less frequent. On New Year's Day, everyone was asking, "Where is Bud?" By late February, the bits of conversation I caught from neighbors, from my friends' parents, from teachers at school, were laden with grimness and finality. Somewhere in all of this, the "Family Ordeal in Euclid" became the "Tragedy on Lake Erie's Shore," and everyone wondered how Bud's family would go on after such a loss. I just didn't buy it.

Looking back now, as an adult weary in the world, I would've agreed, readily, with the prevailing sentiment. But my 10-year-old self would not believe. If Bud had

drowned or been hit by a car, I was sure the cops would've found something. If somebody killed him—well, that just didn't wash. I saw the way my parents cherished him, doted on him, and I was convinced somebody else just wanted to take him away to dote on him too. So instead of being sad, I was angry. *Just give him back,* I seethed to the unseen perpetrators, *just give him back to us, you sons of bitches. He doesn't belong to you.*

But my parents were sure Bud was dead. At a particularly bad moment, I came out of my room, and glimpsed my mom and dad through a slightly open door. They were sitting on their bed and she was shaking and murmuring to him, "Just wait, oh my god, just wait. This spring, my baby's going to wash up on the lakeshore. Oh Jesus, Joe, right in front of all those picnickers and boaters. My little boy." She covered her eyes with her hands, as if that would dispel the awful image her mind had conjured. "I won't survive that."

Dad was sure, like me, that someone had taken Bud, but he was just as certain as Mom that Bud was no longer alive. "When I find the piece of shit bastard who did this," he seethed, behind doors and in front of them, "I'm going slice his throat and burn his house down!"

On New Year's Day, Dad realized the tree was still standing vigil in our living room and a wreath with a red ribbon and "Merry Christmas" written in gold glitter was still attached to the front door. Without a word, he grabbed the tree—without removing the ornaments or the drippy icicle tinsel—and the wreath, and dragged the whole mess to the curb in front of our house. The next day, the garbage men hauled it all away, taking

the last vestige of Christmas with them. Well, almost the last. We hadn't opened any of the presents that had sat under the tree. Mom transported them, carefully, box by box, up to the attic, still wrapped. Nobody got presents if Bud didn't.

We limped into 1941. The police called several times a week, to assure us they were still on the case, but looking back now, I know they were just humoring us. At first, Dad would bellow into the receiver. (*What were they doing? Where were they looking? What kind of a town is this where some maniac can just come and snatch away someone's child on Christmas Eve?)* When this failed to bring any results or even any seemingly deeper effort on the part of the cops, Dad and I took to the streets. We got in the Chevrolet a few Saturdays and drove around, down back streets and alleys, through the big park by the lake, looking for Bud. Of course, it came to nothing. We'd come home to Mom in her apron, eyes pink at the edges, who'd tell us to warm up the chicken in the icebox. Then she'd go upstairs to her room, shutting the door gently behind her.

Other days, friends, Dad's co-workers or members of the Rosary Society would come to the house and stand uncertainly in the living room, filling the awkward silences by asking me about school, or telling my mother how nice the house looked. Bud's name was never mentioned—no, it was always, "How you holding up, Joe?" or "Is there anything we can do, Nell?" And always, always, the same goodbye: *We will pray for you.* Any sentiment of this kind had long stopped serving as a comfort to my parents, especially to my mother. She never attended mass again after Bud disappeared.

There were crying jags and more bad moments—we all had them, Mom, Dad and me—but mainly we just walked through the days, cold rote for each of us, Dad's job,

Mom's housework, my classes. February came on with its customary cruelty. So close to the lake, the house bore the brunt, fending off the beast, the fangs of ice biting roof edges, its keen of scouring wind rattling the brittle tree branches, frost fingers groping across window panes, searching for vulnerable spots, a way inside.

One day, two full months after Bud had disappeared, after Ordeal had mutated to Tragedy, I noticed my library book, forgotten, long overdue, pushed off to the edge of the table beside my bed. I brushed off a thin layer of dust and ran my fingers along the deeply embossed title on the dark blue cover. *The Lost World*, it said.

CHAPTER TWO

To Be Happy

(1941-1945)

What choices do you have when the anvil of fate falls? Just two: crawl out from under, or give up. In the few years following Bud's disappearance, three things happened that helped us crawl out. The first was leaving 224th Street.

The memories of my little brother dug deep into every wall of that house, seeping into the rugs, clinging to every window of our home. It wasn't just the reliving of Christmas Eve. That was bad enough. It was the everyday stuff that tortured us. Remembering the way Bud used to tear downstairs every morning to eat breakfast. Bud bouncing on the couch cushions by the front window, waiting for my dad to come home from work at night, knocking on the glass and yelling when he saw him come up the walk. Or the times when he followed me around the house dragging the newspaper on the floor behind him, mewling like a kitten, begging me to read him the funnies before I started my homework.

He'd only been gone a week or so when I began to sense Bud around the house during the day. It was that milk and oatmeal smell behind me on the steps, a crescent of blond hair just beyond peripheral sight. I felt him, an occupation of space, beside me as I laid on my bed and read. He was there, heading around a corner in the living room, just in front of me. It was like that thing amputee soldiers get, a phantom limb, a constant, palpable sense of him. Unseen, but undeniably right there. I almost passed him a piece of bread at the table once, because, for a merciful instant, I forgot. His high chair was still pulled up to the red enamel table, and I wasn't looking straight at it. I couldn't see it was empty, so it felt like it wasn't, that he was right there with us and I just had to reach out with that slice of bread, put my hand out to the left, and he would take it.

Then I started to hear him. At night, as I lay in bed, trying to sleep, there it was, the steady buzz of his breathing in his room, the little snores escaping through the stuffy nose. Once, very late, I heard footsteps, tiny thumps on the wooden floor, Bud heading to the bathroom.

His room was the worst. I remember my mom assuring Bud that it was a good place to sleep because it never got completely dark, not even at night. It had a sort of built-in nightlight—a streetlamp just outside that threw off a strange glow, a gray-gold light that crept in around the edges of the thick paper window shade. The first couple of nights after he went missing, Mom stayed in that room, in the realm of the eerie gray-gold that looked and smelled and felt like Bud. She slept in his bed and pulled the sheets and blankets around her, crying and breathing in the little boy scent of him. Bud's slippers sat on the floor just as he'd left them. None of us touched anything in the room,

so all of it—toys, books, clothes—stayed pretty much as it had been that last day. The police poked around a bit, for anything that might resemble a clue, but Mom made them put everything back the way it was when they were finished.

She lasted just a few nights in the gray-gold, weeping. Eventually, she let Dad lead her back to their own bed. He shut the door to the little bedroom, and it sat, still, sullen as a crypt. Outside, the winter animal had gone motionless in its den of snow, not dead but sleeping deeply.

It was not until late March, not until the first bit of green started to peek out on the forsythias in the front yard, that my mother's older sister, Patricia, visited us with her husband Bob. They lived in St. Louis, and it had taken awhile to arrange a trip east. The sisters were close, and they looked a lot alike, tall, each about five-nine or so, and both with gold-brown hair that curled under just above their shoulders.

But while Mom tended to contain her grief and vent it privately, Pat was a gusher. They'd talked on the phone, of course, but apparently the sight of my mother made it feel like she'd just heard the news. Pat descended upon her with a giant bosomy hug and copious tears. "Oh god, Nellie! How can you bear it? That sweet little boy!"

Mom, pale and puff-eyed, drew her sister back to arm's length. "Come in the kitchen, all right? Let me get you some coffee."

Uncle Bob and Dad retrieved two bottles of Schlitz from the garage; despite the early spring chill, they went to sit on the front porch. Both lawn chairs there had been freed up—Dad long ago removed the straw man and stuffed him in a far corner of the porch, where he sat now, naked and forgotten.

Fully clothed but likewise neglected, I took a seat on the couch. Pat and Bob had no children, and thus, no cousins to offer any sort of distraction or at least say 'sorry' or something. I picked up a LIFE magazine from the coffee table and leafed through it. I couldn't make out the men's conversation coming from the porch, the words reduced to a rolling, dull rumble. It didn't matter—I wouldn't learn much from those two. It would be the coming baseball season, and Dad's car and whatever else they could talk about that would save them from discussing the Tragedy.

No, what I really wanted to hear was the women's conversation. If the past was any indicator, Aunt Pat would get right to the point. The sisters would speak of nothing else but the Tragedy.

"You look thin, Nell. Are you eating?"

"I eat. I just…I don't seem to have much appetite."

"Dear, is there anything more the police can do? I mean, what are they doing now?"

"I don't know, they sent out those fliers. They've notified police all over. They keep their eyes out." I heard the clatter of porcelain and a gasp. "Jesus, Pat! Why do they keep pretending, why do they keep doing things, when they all know, they *all* know he's…"

"Don't say that, Nellie. You don't know that for sure."

My mom's voice became shrill. "You don't think he's dead? Then where is he? Who has him? Why hasn't anyone asked for a ransom, or…I don't know…something?

"I don't know."

“Well, I do. It’s because he’s not anywhere. He’s gone, and he’s not coming back.” Mom’s voice wavered. “And if he does, it won’t be Bud. It’ll…it’ll just be his body. We have to accept that.”

A heavy silence fell. More clinking of porcelain, Pat taking a sip of her coffee, probably. I stared at a page near the back of the LIFE magazine, an ad for Lucky Strikes cigarettes. There was an auburn-haired cheerleader in a yellow sweater leaping like an idiot, limbs splayed, her dark blue skirt flipping halfway up one thigh. “Be Happy—Go Lucky!” the bold red type screamed.

“I don’t know what to say, Nellie,” Pat said.

“There isn’t anything else to say. But, if I have to live with this, if we all do, well…we’ve got to make a change.”

“What?”

My heart started to hammer and I felt sick. My god, I thought, they would send me away. To military school, or worse, to some far-off Catholic school, where you speak nothing but Latin and kiss rings and get beaten for being left-handed. They would send me away and start over, a new family with new children.

My mother cleared her throat. “I think we need to move.”

“Nell, that might be a good idea. Oh please, you should consider St. Louis. I’d adore having you close by. And I think it would help you so much.”

“St. Louis? No, no, Pat, I didn’t mean we’d leave Ohio.”

“What then, Cincinnati? Columbus?

"No, I didn't mean leaving Cleveland, or even Euclid…I just meant…a different house. I feel…Pat, I'm going to die if I stay here." I heard the scrape of a chair leg against the linoleum and a rustle, and I knew Pat was hugging my mother. "I thought I could stay, that we must stay here, where Bud's things are," Mom sobbed. "I thought I could take it, but I can't. Our hearts are already broken, but if we stay here…Joe and David and me? We're just going to shrivel up and die."

"Have you talked to Joe about this?"

"No, not yet."

"Do you think he'll agree to move?"

My mother cleared her throat. "He will…or I may do something…bad."

"Nell…"

"He'll agree."

A couple of months later we moved further south, away from the lake and closer to the center of town, to Tracy Avenue. It was a nice house, I guess, a little bigger than our old one, white with green shutters, and three bedrooms. It didn't matter that it wasn't close to St. John's Catholic. We didn't go to mass anymore. But I had to go to a different school, a public school. Funny, nobody, Mom or Dad, had asked me if I cared that I had to switch, but I wasn't going to say anything.

In fact, conversation of any kind with my parents was pretty spotty. Afraid of salting wounds that had not even begun to heal, I avoided any mention of Bud or anything that might make my parents think of Bud. But there was something more, a darker thought, one I'd pushed out of my mind again and again, one that kept surging

back and was sure to come up if I discussed that Christmas Eve with my parents for any length of time. On the fringe of my thoughts, always the question: Was this my fault? I knew my mother was busy that morning, but was I supposed to be watching him? Maybe she asked me—she'd said something, but she never revisited that with me and I never had the heart to ask what she'd said. Whatever it was, I'd ignored her, which of course, I'd done plenty of times before. An older voice, the voice of intellect inside me said *no, this wasn't your doing, you mustn't blame yourself.*

But another speaker, smaller but infinitely more insistent, one who had gone to church and knew that all sinned and all were not worthy to receive, one who felt, like all Catholic children, lapsed or not, some terrible culpability for the entire world's ills—that voice disagreed.

The second thing that moved us onward came on December 7. The radio had kept us posted, dark tidings from Europe, trouble boiling in the waters of the Pacific. We were aware as much as anybody, which meant not a lot until that Sunday morning punch in the head. Pearl Harbor—was there ever a softer, more comforting name? The war had a way of changing everybody's lives and pretty quickly. Dad got a lot busier. He was too old and had a bum knee, so it wasn't like he had to ship out and go toe-to-toe with the Nazis, or anything. But the tool and die company where he worked as a manager started running round the clock, and he was gone a lot. Mom helped out at the Red Cross and like every other kid at school, I spent my free time with paper drives and iron drives and rubber drives and any other kind of drive anybody could think of. Wars, my dad said, the

big ones, meant that everybody pitched in, one way or another. Wars meant you put your personal troubles and concerns aside, which for us, I guess, was a mercy.

I wondered how it'd have been if I was older. How it would feel to go off to war. I'd have gone. I would've had to. But I would have been scared, really scared. Crap-your-pants scared. And yet, guys all around me were doing just that. And they were anxious to go. Walking to school, I saw the service flags with the stars placed in the windows of houses, and I knew what the different colors meant, blue stars for active servicemen, a gold star for the dead. A gold star, like in school, when you did something as well as you could.

In those war years, I knew about a dozen kids at school who lost brothers or dads or uncles in Europe or somewhere in the Pacific. We all knew loss in one way or another. Sure, it was different from what we went through a year earlier, but it was clear there was plenty of suffering to go around. By the end of the war, I knew a whole lot of families who, like ours, sat and stared at empty places around the dinner table.

I remember wishing too for a while that Bud had been older, that if I had to lose my brother it would have been in the war, with him as a soldier or a sailor, or some kind of cocky flyboy who took out a whole German munitions factory before he bought it in the smoke-gray skies over Berlin. Then we'd get a gold star, then he would have done as well as he could and people would remember him kindly, as a hero, forever.

But Bud was just a kid, just a dumb 4-year-old kid. He never got to dream about being a hero. He never got a chance to do anything except eat and sleep and play with his

damn boats. We were the only ones who really knew him, and after a while, we'd be the only ones who remembered him. As well as we could.

In late May of 1944, just a week or so before our boys crawled over the beaches at Normandy, Mom gave birth to a little girl. This was the third thing, and as far as its effect on the family, it was the biggest. Mom named her Josephine, after her mother (the one who died on Easter). We would call her Josie.

The day after the birth, Mom cradled the baby in her hospital bed, cooing and cupping the tiny pink head in her palm. I marveled at the person my mom had just expelled from her body, but even more at my mother. The dark veil withdrawn, her face eased into something that looked like happiness—not peace, not at all, but a wary joy. *A good thing at last, but let's not tempt Fate, who we know can take this all away on a whim.* As we sat in the hospital room, Dad was smiling and talking and looking at the baby, but he was also looking at me. A lot. More, maybe, than he had in the last four years. He looked away only when one of the nurses came in.

"You fellows mind waiting out in the hall while I check Mrs. Zombrowski?"

Dad cocked his head at me, and we went out and found a bench in the hallway. He looked at me again and cleared his throat. "David, I want you to make me a promise."

"Sure, Dad. I mean, what is it?"

"You know I can't always be around, and you know your mom, she gets busy…and she gets, well, tired a lot now."

"Yeah, I know."

“So I want you to promise me that, when you’re around, you’ll take your share of responsibility for your sister.” Here I felt my stomach drop and turn to stone. He continued: “I want to know that you’ll help us watch over her. Promise me you’ll do your best.”

“Dad?”

“What?”

“Do you…” I swallowed hard, not knowing how to put into words the feeling that had lingered at the edge of my mind for years. Now, when my parents were happier than I’d seen them in a very long time, seemed a good time to ask. I forced myself to speak. “Are you…or mom…are you mad at me for what happened to Bud? Do you blame me for not watching him that morning?”

“Oh, no, son. No—”

“Because I didn’t…” The tears took over, and I batted at them furiously.

“Of course not, Davey. Of course you didn’t…nobody thought that could happen. That he’d be playing one minute, with your mom in the other room, and then just be gone.”

“I miss him, Dad. So much.”

Dad drew me to him and hugged me. “Me too, Davey. But it wasn’t your fault. It just… happened.” He tightened his grip on me. “But we’re going to keep Josie safe. And we’re going to make her happy.”

I nodded, tears still coming.

"We're all still hurting, son. And that will probably never go away. But now….now we have to move on. I don't know what else to do. We've got to get on with our lives." He let go and smiled at me, and now he was crying too. "So, let's try, OK? To be happy?"

"OK, Dad."

Three days later we took Josie home. As we altered our daily rhythms to the song of a new baby, we could at last see the end of the war on the horizon. In the months that followed, we left the radio on all day, most of the night, to hear the news of dogged progress across Europe, terrible choices in Japan, victory, surrender, the ruins and horrors left by the war, grand plans to remake the world. Time seemed to have come to another Great Divide, a sort of B.C./A.D. of the war. Everybody was eager, as my mother and father were, to forget the awful days, to live in better ones.

I came to feel that my life, too, was divided into two parts, an Old World and a New. The Old World, that lost one with Bud and our home on East 224th Street, sepia-toned, worn at the corners, on some days dreaded, on others missed, but rarely mentioned to my Mom and Dad.

The New World, the one with Josie and the house on Tracy Avenue, was bright and clear-eyed. One of precious little trust or faith, but much hope. My parents had planted a flag there and claimed it for themselves and for their baby and, I wanted to believe, for me too. I didn't know if the New World would be any kinder, but it didn't really matter. There was no choice but to move onward and try to leave the past alone.

CHAPTER THREE

The Bull and the Bear

(1948)

In June, I graduated from high school and stood on the brink of something. Adulthood? Maybe. Hard to think that when my bedroom shelves were still stuffed with the cheap detritus of childhood—metal spinning tops and bags of agate marbles, comic books, dog-eared copies of Treasure Island and Gulliver's Travels, baseball cards, Bazooka bubblegum, a thousand worthless doodads piled in old cigar boxes. I didn't know too many adults who spent afternoons baking invisible cakes for their little sisters' tea parties and playing tag around the backyard. At home, childhood still stretched before me like a checkered picnic blanket, all the messy ground underneath covered neatly, all the dishes arranged on top, looking at least presentable.

On graduation day, after the ceremony's modest pomp and endless circumstance, Dad, Mom, Josie and I returned home for the customary small party with relatives and

friends. Most guys might have been annoyed with this sort of thing, but I kind of liked the idea of everybody coming together just for me. That certainly hadn't happened before. None of the guests was there yet, so I went upstairs to my room, took off my tweed suit jacket, loosened the rough tie's grip around my throat.

The door swung open. "Mom says leave your suit on," Josie announced.

"The woman is drunk with power." Just loosening the tie didn't help much. I untied it completely but left it hanging limp around my neck. "And she's got you looking like a little birthday cake, doesn't she?" Mom liked to dress up Josie and my, but she'd gone for broke today—an aggressively pink lace dress and bonnet, fussy little gloves with white pearl buttons at the wrist, gloss-white patent leather Shirley Temple shoes.

"I look pretty."

"You surely do, Miss Josephine." I squinted, doing my best Clark Gable as Rhett Butler. "You surely do." I sat down on my slat-back wooden chair, stretched my legs over the top of my small desk and tilted my head back to look at the ceiling.

"Davey, what's cawlitch?"

"Hmm? Cawlitch? I don't…"

"Daddy says Davey should go to cawlitch and Mommy says nuh-uh, he doesn't have to."

My head snapped back upright. "You mean, college. That's how you say it. Col-lege."

"What's that?"

"Just more school. For older kids. But you usually go away from home for a long time to go to college."

"But I thought…you were done today. Mom said."

"Yep."

"So…you still gotta go to more school?"

"Well, depends on what field I'd want to go into. But, technically, no, I don't."

"I don't want you to go away, Davey. Stay here with me."

"Don't worry, kid. We'll get it figured out. I'm not going anywhere right now."

"Good! Wait a minute." Josie ran out of the room and returned with a big picture book. The Three Billy Goats Gruff. "I want you to read me this."

"See here, Miss Josephine, we've been through this one at least a hundred times. You can pretty near read it all by yourself."

"Not all." She took a seat on the bed and pushed the book toward me. "I wanna hear you say, *'Who's that trip-trapping over my bridge?'* I like it when you're the troll. You make a good troll."

"This is why I don't date much, Miss Josephine."

"What?"

"Never mind."

We were just a couple of pages in when Mom called from downstairs. "David! Josie! Come down! Aunt Pat and Uncle Bob sent a telegram from St. Louis!"

Over the next hour or so, the living room filled with people, fortified with a variety of cocktails and beer and engaged in loud and animated conversation while the

radio kept up a nice basso continuo of Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey and Benny Goodman. Jeannie and Carl came from the old neighborhood, and from the new, one block over, Ellen and Greg Sims with their young daughter, Muriel, a friend of Josie's. My dad's brother, Champ, and Aunt Sylvia had driven east from Toledo. Some of my dad's friends from work came with their wives, along with the three old bats my mother joined for a weekly game of bridge. Father Mike from the parish, still a family friend even after we stopped attending mass, visited along with Millie, his housekeeper. Father Mike did not drive. Millie was a terrible driver, but nearly always available, so she became his kind-of chauffeur and managed to hold on to both jobs by not killing him, either with her wickedly pungent bleach and lye household cleaners or some gory automobile accident.

A few of the Rosary Society ladies came, too, including Mrs. Hines and her son, Jeffrey, who also attended Ely High. My friends were all seniors and currently navigating their own post-graduation family parties, but lucky me, the year-younger Jeffrey had accompanied his mother to mine.

I feel confident in saying that everybody who has ever went to school has known a Jeffrey. Treasured, nearly idolized by his parents and by a faculty sadly lacking in imagination, a studious boy, a carrier of other people's lunch trays, a homework collector, a grinning obliterator of chalk-scrawled blackboards, an eraser clapper, a swell test-taker. He was a bullish kind of kid, bullish on the value of higher learning, bullish on possibilities (especially the kind higher learning can provide), bullish on every word out of the mouth of every one of his teachers, bullish on life! Never would the specters of

misbehavior or subversive thought disturb what was under that little patch of bronze curls on his cherished pate. Jeffrey was every mother's dream, every father's pride, a born Honor's student, trusted and trusting, a pillar of community just waiting to be erected.

And really, it wasn't his intelligence or eagerness to please that I resented. Not really. Rather, I marveled at the absolute inevitability of his life. The way he could see, at his tender age, the curtain already up, the play already started, his future in motion. Jeffrey would go to college, Jeffrey would go to medical school, Jeffrey would be a podiatrist, like his father before him. Jeffrey would look at feet all day, every day, for the rest of his life. He would marry a pretty girl, sire a slew of swell test-takers, buy a big house in Shaker Heights, vacation in Mexico and Cuba. It was the life of a foot-looker and just compensation for endless afternoons doing battle with bunions, corns, plantar warts and whatever furry Hell festered between his patients' toes.

But still I hated him. It had been suggested by a few of my friends that I was jealous of Jeffrey, and yes, there was probably some truth lurking there. I didn't care much about being a straight-A student or to taking up the foot as a life cause. But I envied him the attention, the guaranteed audience he had for all his achievements, large and small. I guess I hadn't really distinguished myself in high school. I won no awards during the senior banquet, wouldn't have gone at all except that my best friend Mitch was on the decorating committee and had talked me into helping. Our reward for hours of crepe hanging and table set-up was to sit and watch the other seniors accept their accolades, and clap, clap, clap as each achiever's name was called.

The only real attention I had received in high school was early on, when the kids at Ely realized I was *that* David, David Zombrowski of the tragic Zombrowski clan. But that kind of fame by association had not lasted long, not among a sea of teenage football players, track runners, cheerleaders, scholars, debaters, French, Latin and Spanish speakers, actors, musicians, singers, artists, pretty girls, handsome boys—all looking to distinguish themselves with that which they deemed their greatest gift. Soon I was just David, or Dave, an undistinguished student in a nondescript school, bottom of the alphabet, back of the class, last to be called.

"Hello there, David," Jeffrey said with a smile. "Congratulations on your graduation. Gosh, I can hardly wait until I'm a senior next year. It's going to be swell!"

"Hi, Jeffrey," I said. *Keep moving. Keep moving. Don't get bogged down in conversation that is bound to aggravate and annoy.* I kept a beeline in to the kitchen in search of a glass of lemonade. And bingo, good ol' Mom had made a titanic pitcher. I filled a glass and took a sip. Before it was all the way down, there came a weighty *whomp,* a giant paw placed on my right shoulder.

"Davey." I turned to see my bear-like uncle, Champ. I say bear-like not just because he was quite large, six-two or so, 300 pounds easy. I say this because he was one of the hairiest human beings I'd ever encountered. A nice headful, of course, but also bushy eyebrows, shockingly hirsute arms and legs. Scary curls on his fingers, over his knuckles. We'd gone to Euclid Beach Park with him and Aunt Sylvia once when I was 13 and he'd frightened small children off the sand. His back, *my god,* his back. Aunt Sylvia had to yell at him to put his shirt back on. I thought somebody might call the cops.

“Davey,” Champ said again.

“Uncle Champ,” I said. “Thanks for coming all the way from Toledo. You and Aunt Sylvia. I really appreciate it.”

“Aw, we wouldn’t miss it, son. Wouldn’t miss it.” He moved a bit closer and I was hit with the sour tang of brown liquor on his breath. “Look, Davey, your dad tells me…he tells me that you aren’t going go to college. That right?”

“Yeah, well, I know my dad was really counting on it. And my mom too, I guess. They wanted to try to get me in at Notre Dame, but my grades aren’t that good.”

“You try applying to State?”

No. See, I’m not really planning on it…at this point, anyway.”

“Don’t you want to make something of yourself, boy?”

“Well, sure I do. But I don’t know. I’m really not sure what I’d study. College costs money, you know, and I’d hate to waste my folks’.”

“Do you need money, son? ‘Cause I can pitch in.”

“Oh no. No, it’s nothing like that. Pop’s doing great at the shop. Goes to Chamber meetings and everything. I just…I don’t know what I want to do.”

“This isn’t about…Bud, is it?”

Here we go. The Tragedy. To anyone outside the family, the true reason I did anything, my sole motivation. “What are you talking about?” I barked, my tone even a little sharper than I intended. “How could it have to do with Bud?”

“Well, maybe you feel like you should stick around the house?”

"It's got nothing to do with that! I just…I just want a goddamn job, OK? I just want to get busy doing something, *anything* other than sitting in some stupid classroom listening to some sap drone on about math or grammar or Latin. I'm sick of that stuff!"

Champ held up both hands, palms out in a gesture of conciliation. "All right, all right! It's fine! There's not a thing in the world wrong with that!"

My heart was thumping away pretty good in my chest and dots of sweat had sprouted on my upper lip. "Sorry, Uncle Champ. Didn't mean to get worked up."

"It's fine, son. It's an emotional day…a big day. And I see you've given this a bit of thought. So, do you have a job lined up?"

"Well, not exactly. But…well, summer's nearly here. I figure I'll find something..."

"Maybe I could be of assistance. I know people in Cleveland. I got to know a lot of people downtown when I lived here."

"Really? I mean, do you think you could get me in somewhere? I mean, at least put in a good word for me?"

"I think probably…yes. Like I said, when I was in the printing trade here, I did a lot of work for all kinds of places…restaurants, bars, WWBA, the folks up at Euclid Beach Park…oh, and the city administrative offices…"

"WWBA? The radio station?"

"Sure. I still keep in touch with Happy Clark there, he's the station manager. That Hap, he's a heckuva nice guy."

"WWBA," I said again. "And you…you think you could get me in there?"

“Well, probably…” Champ’s speech was slowing and he massaged his chin, now stubbly though it must have seen a razor just hours before. “It wouldn’t be an announcer job, or anything. I mean, you’ve got a nice voice, Davey, for a young kid. Surprisingly deep. But I’m pretty sure they’ve got plenty of announcers. Those jobs are harder to get, especially with no experience. But I could see if he needs any help at the station.”

“That sounds pretty good. Would you? Could you ask him—Mr. Clark—about it?”

“You got it, kid.”

“Thanks. I really would appreciate it.”

“Least I can do,” Uncle Champ said expansively. “Now go enjoy your party. And go give your Aunt Sylvia a kiss.”

Radio. Now that had possibilities. I held my chin up. I’d entered the kitchen a nothing, a refugee from the smug and odious orbit of Planet Jeffrey. And I was leaving now as a man with a plan. The tiniest, most tenuous, just tossed together plan, but by god, a plan nonetheless. It was the best moment of the day.

I headed back toward the living room, back to the modest crowd of people who had come that day, just for me. Among them, just for a moment, darted a small boy with baby chick hair and a blue buttondown. He looked at me, just a small acknowledgement. Then he slipped between Father Mike and Millie and was gone.

CHAPTER FOUR

Labor and Love

(1948)

Uncle Champ was a man of his word, and he must have had some sort of pull with Happy Clark because two weeks later I was working at WWBA, though it was job only in the loosest sense of the word. Mr. Clark offered me 40 cents an hour, 20 hours a week to help out the janitor, pick up after some of the announcers and technicians—several of them were real slobs—and run errands for various people around the station.

Real job or not, I felt like I was part of the day-to-day workings of the station, on my way to exciting prospects. There was something very adult about leaving the house and heading into the city for work each day. I loved riding the bus into Cleveland, there amidst the men in gray suits and hats, the women with brown leather handbags, the folded newspapers, the smell of shaving tonic, the tickle of perfume melding with the engine exhaust smell of downtown. I was one of them, just another adult walking among the tall buildings that hugged Ninth Street. I'd take the elevator up to the 7th floor of the

Monitor Building and make a beeline for Mr. Clark's office—nobody called him Happy except the "talent"—to see what needed doing each morning. I sorted mail, picked up coffee and doughnuts, retrieved dry cleaning, brought in lunch, bought flowers for wives' birthdays and anniversaries, padded up and down the block grasping a leash with a gangly Dalmatian attached to the other end. I pushed a broom, pulled a mop and freshened the bathroom when it needed it (especially after the morning guy took his break).

And each day, I saw many of the faces that went with the voices I'd been listening to for years: the news guys, Ed Sherman and John Cantwell; Wayne DeWitt, the Morning Music Man; Margo Thompson, aka Miss Kidgloves, the owner of the Dalmatian, who delivered a genteel noontime report on the happenings in Cleveland society. They were all very nice, and it was great to be around them, but something was still lacking. I didn't work evenings or weekends, so I didn't get to see Morey Smith or Johnny Ray Hoffman, the cut-ups who played music from 7 to 10 p.m. and afternoons on Saturdays and Sundays, trading little quips and amusing banter in between. They were my favorites. I wanted to do what they did, music, funny stuff, the whole bit.

Nobody was offering me any airtime, not yet, so the grunt job would have to do. But it didn't completely fill the bill. I wanted a little more to occupy my time, and I knew I wasn't going to get very far on eight bucks a week. I sought out another job, this time a little closer to home, at Euclid Beach Park.

The park was an easy walk from my house, and it was chockablock with the sort of rickety rides and bad food that drew people from all over the state. It was Ohio's answer to Coney Island when that wonderland opened way back before the turn of the century, the kind of old-timey place you'd see in those flickery nickelodeon films, with short strips of sand and long piers. And it had one of those great big wooden bath houses where people in big hats and straw boaters used to strip down and put on those ridiculous knee-length woolen swimsuits.

Over the years, an amusement park grew around the beachfront, and a bunch of rides and attractions were gradually added: a roller rink and a dance pavilion big enough for a thousand couples to foxtrot, shooting galleries and SkeeBall, Ferris wheels and a merry-go-round, kiddie trains, spinning rides like the Bubble Bounce, and the Surprise House with its moving floors and staircases, a bunch of roller coasters, and a trio of flying rides, the Flying Scooters, the Flying Turns and the Flying Ponies, a merry-go-round mutation that tilted its riders 10 degrees from horizontal on swinging horses suspended from its roof,

Operation of the big rides was mostly left to the experienced carnies, a scary bunch, gristly, dentally handicapped guys, skin the color of riding saddles, spindle-edged homemade tattoos snaking up their forearms. But there were plenty of smaller jobs to fill, mostly by kids headed off to college in the fall, but also by those of us staying put. There were tickets to sell and jobs in the arcade and in the roller rink. There were drink stands and food stands everywhere. I settled for a seat behind the Frozen Whip counter on the

midway. Doling out ice cream to hot, tired fairgoers was about as innocuous as it got, but Mom wasn't too sure about this second job.

"I don't like that crowd over at the park," she said with the straight mouth look. "There's a bad element there."

"What do you mean? It's just people, mostly kids. It's not like they have the freak shows anymore. At least, not on purpose."

"What about that bad business with the Negroes? The riots?"

"That was ages ago!" During the summer of '46, two civil rights groups had made a push for integration at the park by organizing interracial outings. "It was just a group of people standing up for something they believe in. What's wrong with that?"

"A man was shot."

"Two years ago, mom. You know, some of us around here think the races should mix. Have you thought about how crazy it is to let Negroes into the park on certain days, but forbid them to have anything to do with any of the whites?"

"I don't disagree necessarily," my mother answered. "I don't have anything against the Negroes personally. I don't like marching. I don't like demonstrations. They lead to trouble."

"Sometimes trouble is the only damn way things get done," I mumbled, mostly to myself.

"What was that?"

"I said, 'There won't be any trouble. Just ice cream, hon.'"

"David, don't call me hon."

Josie was all in on the Euclid Beach gig, begging me nightly to bring home some of the chocolate in one of the big sugar cones. The stuff always melted before I could get it home, but a couple times a week, I tried to make up for it by bringing her a popcorn ball or some candy kisses from the stand across the midway.

It was a loud and sticky business, but most of the customers were nice and it was easy work, which meant I didn't have to burn any brain cells to do it. A few evening hours of extruding soft ice cream into a stainless steel bowl and spooning it into a cone was nearly all I could manage on top of the job at the station. I worked until 10 p.m. four nights a week, including weekends. I wanted to make hay while I could, seeing that Euclid Beach Park would close with the end of summer.

After almost every shift, I walked near the lake on my way back home. I never tired of the view. How the light at different times of day made the water look like blue milk or aqua glass, gray as a battleship or nearly black. How the white caps that cropped up with the wind made you aware of all the little machinations on the surface and how they hid an entire cold world, unknown and unknowable, beneath. I loved the sound of water slapping onto the shore and the look of the sky and clouds, high, flimsy cirrus on a spring morning, a steely brood of thunderheads on hot afternoons, autumn pink layers at sunset. I looked for the comings and goings of big ships and small crafts, carrying who knows what to who knows where. The lake was different every day, different by the hour. Water was change. Change was possibility.

Sometimes, when I looked out over lake, I thought of Bud. Not because I had come to believe he'd drowned. I had no concrete reason for this belief, nothing that I

could explain to anyone that would be convincing. It was just something I felt. I couldn't picture it…Bud walking into that frigid water, or even falling into it. Somehow I knew he wasn't under there somewhere, waiting for someone to find him, his bones resting like abandoned clam shells on the lake bed. He might be dead—I'd allow for that now—but he had not drowned, that awful day or night, or any of the ones that had followed it. If he'd gone into the water, we'd have found him.

Instead, I thought of Bud just as I thought of the lake, of the vast "out there" of distance and future and fate. It was just as possible—wasn't it?—that Bud was in the world somewhere living a life we couldn't know about, wouldn't know about until he popped fully formed back into our field of vision. Bud X, millionaire inventor. Bud Y, the latest Hollywood sensation. Bud Z, president of the United States. Or, yes, it could be Bud the bank robber, the derelict, the murderer. So many possibilities.

"Good morning, folks! It's Wayne DeWitt, your WWBA Morning Music Man. Rise and shine, we're feeling fine! 'Cause…it's…a…brand…new…day!"

Wayne DeWitt started every weekday morning off the same. Perky. Predictable. Regular as your a.m. paper and cup of joe. He'd make some comment about the weather in downtown Cleveland, then segue into some pleasant wakeup music, not too raucous, not too sluggish. Some Andrews Sisters, maybe, a little "Toolie Oolie Doolie" (Clevelanders, skewing heavily Polish, loved their bouncy polka tunes) or Art Mooney's "I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover." From there, all the hits, "Buttons and Bows,"

“Woody Woodpecker,” “On a Slowboat to China,” and another local favorite, the “Too Fat Polka.”

Throughout the morning, there were hourly news updates, courtesy of Ed Sherman, and at noon, Margo’s gossip report. I started taking notes about all this stuff, the kind of patter everybody used on the air, how long they spoke, which songs played and when, how many times on rotation each day. I kept a notebook and wrote in it during my spare minutes at work, but mostly at home. I wasn’t going out much, my friends busy with full time jobs and vacations, so I found myself often in front of the radio in our living room. We’d replaced the workhorse Firestone the year before with a real beauty, a Philco floor model with a turntable and burled walnut cabinet. These days the dial was nearly always turned to WWBA.

One evening in late August, I was communing with my notebook, the fourth in a series now, writing furiously. It was Cal Jennings’ call-in current events show. They were talking about Communists and the situation in East Germany, and the conversation was moving quickly from two guest experts to several agitated callers. There really wasn’t much reason for such a rigorous breakdown. Sometimes, my writing was just a habit, a way to look busy and productive. And maybe some great revelation would eventually pop up on the ruled paper.

I was lying on the living room rug, propped on one elbow, and had just shifted my position up to sitting when I saw him. He stood in a shadowy nook between the front window curtains and piece of wall that jutted out, still in the blue-button down, this time

one of his boats in his hands, the tug. From his nose, snuffling. From his throat, a watery *chugga*—

"Davey?"

"Whaaa?" I jerked around, and my notebook and pen went flying.

"Whoa, there!" It was my father. "Take it easy!"

"You scared the crap out of me!"

"Lang-uage!" my mother sang from the dining room.

"It's dinnertime," my father said, looking at me as if he'd caught me yanking the kielbasa in my bedroom. I hadn't even heard him come home from work. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I was, you know, concentrating."

"I should say so. Put that away and come to the table. Turn off the radio, too, please."

I did as I was told, washed my hands and sat down with Mom, Dad and Josie.

"So what exactly were you concentrating so hard on over there?" Dad asked.

"I'm taking notes, trying to, you know, learn how the business works. I want to be the guy on the radio someday."

"You want to host a news program?"

"No! Comedy…or music. Something fun. I want to have my own show, like Smith and Hoffman. A few tunes, some gags, you know, stuff like that. But I figure it'd be good to learn a little bit about everything."

“I admire that conscientious attitude, Davey, I really do,” Dad said. “But you’re working two jobs. You ever get to see your friends?”

“Not much lately.”

“How is Mitch?” my mother asked.

“OK. I think he’s going to bring his girl to the park this weekend. I told them to come and see me for a Whip.”

“See? That’s nice,” Dad said, a little too pleasantly. “Mitch and his girl out to the park for a turn on the merry-go-round and a little ice cream.”

“I guess.” What it really meant was to get away from their folks and Mitch’s three nosy sisters and engage in some heavy petting behind the dance pavilion.

“Is there any girl you’d like to ask to the park?” my mother ventured, passing the potatoes to Josie but training her eyes on me. Here it was, folks. Mom and Dad were in cahoots, starting to worry in earnest that I was not, shall we say, one for the ladies.

“Not really,” I said. “And anyway, mother, I thought you didn’t like the park. Something about a bad element?”

“Well, you’ve been working there a while now. It seems alright.”

“It *is* alright. There just isn’t anybody…” I didn’t want to take this any further.

“What’s wrong, Davey?” Josie piped up.

“Nothing, Josie,” I said. “I’m getting picked on a little.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, nobody’s picking on you, David.” Mom pushed a dish of green beans toward me.

“We just don’t want you to work too hard, son,” my father interjected. “Take some time for yourself. That’s all.”

There was plenty of time. Too much. September was approaching, and the park would close soon. Not every graduate from Ely High was going to college, but Mitch was enrolled at Miami of Ohio, and most of the other guys I knew were heading off. I wondered if I could get away with hanging around the station a little more. And I found myself walking along the lake a lot more in my spare time. It calmed me, helped me think.

My parents’ comments lingered. Maybe some people out there, I figured, just weren’t meant for romance. There were pretty girls at my school, sure, but I’d never felt much for any of them. There was a girl named Thelma who used to sit behind me in biology class. We were friendly and I think she was expecting me to ask her to the spring dance, but I didn’t. I ended up babysitting Josie so my folks could have a night out, which they didn’t do often.

I remembered a book I had read about a guy who didn’t like women, at least not to date or for sex. He wasn’t queer or anything, he just wasn’t interested in love in that way. He liked books and helping people, so he became a doctor and worked at a clinic over in Africa somewhere. Another time, Mitch had shown me one of his sister’s *True Confessions* magazines about a guy in Houston who liked to wear women’s clothes. He would traipse around his apartment in a skirt and blouse—even put on a bra, panties, a girdle and silk stockings. Said he wanted to be a woman, but he knew society wouldn’t

accept him. He got that right. No matter where he lived, he wouldn't make it down his block without getting his teeth knocked in, but Texas? Those cowpokes would probably shoot him.

Some days I thought I might be like the doctor guy, maybe the whole business of romantic love, of sex and marriage and making babies was just not going to happen for me. It seemed like it would be easier somehow, just cut out the whole lovey thing altogether, have friends, concentrate on work. But there were feelings I'd get. Just a kind of knowing that I wanted someone to love me. But when I tried to think of who it would be, when I tried to picture a face, it was never a girl. It was just a person—OK, a man. I thought of my friends. I thought about how much fun it would be to live with somebody like Mitch, to travel with him, to share our days. And I thought of an incident my junior year. I tried not to think of it too much, just as I tried not to think about Bud. But it kept coming back. A year—more really—since it happened, and it kept coming back. Bobby DeCarlo. Good ol' Bobby the Hawk.

Mitch, who had a knack for talking me into things, had persuaded me to help backstage at our school's spring talent show, moving little bits of scenery around, cardboard trees and whatnot, making sure the acts were ready on time, opening and closing the curtain, no big deal. We had a couple of rehearsals for everybody to practice, and those went fine. Another friend of ours was helping, too. Bobby DeCarlo was new to Euclid, one of a great big Italian family that lived in one of the rambling stone houses over on Lakeshore Boulevard.

Bobby was the best looking kid any of us knew personally, a smooth-lined boy with a bird-like, sharp-edged nose, thick black hair, shiny onyx eyes, round and bright as marbles. He had these milk-white teeth he bared at every opportunity, smiling like he was taking a bite out of something crunchy and satisfying. And it wasn't just his face. He was a well-built kid, with muscular arms and legs. He played baseball and basketball, not a standout talent, but he cut a heroic figure in his uniforms all the same. The girls at school were crazy for him, but he told them his mother wouldn't let him date on account of them being Catholic and her wanting him to go to seminary and become a priest. We had third period geometry together, so we'd usually eat lunch, along with Mitch and our friend, Brian Patterson, who would join us a little later. The girls would always come over, staring and saying hi to Bobby, tittering like idiots and ignoring the rest of us. Mitch and Brian resented him a little, I think, but I didn't care. I liked Bobby. He was really a smart kid, and we had lots of good conversations, usually before Mitch and Brian—and the girls—showed up.

The night of the show, things went off pretty much without a hitch. Oh, there was some rotten singing, a few forgotten lyrics and one of the kids broke a string on his violin, but no real disasters. Around 9:30, we were nearing the end and that meant Gordon Vance. The show's director, our music teacher Miss Meyer, always liked to save the best act for last, and since I'd been going to Ely High, that was Gordo. He was nothing to look at, the anti-Bobby if you will—a chubby, potato-faced kid from a family just north of poor. But when he opened up and sang, he was a star. Everyone said he

sounded just like Bing Crosby, and I couldn't argue the point. This year, he was singing "Peg O' My Heart," a real crowd-pleaser.

With the show nearly over, backstage was pretty much empty, just Bobby and me in a cramped, dark space near the curtain cords. I was standing and listening, paying close attention to Gordo, who was really delivering, with the closed eyes, and the head tilted up and the big, dramatic arm gestures, sweating like an ironworker under the broiling stage lights.

I was pretty wrapped up in the song when I felt a touch, Bobby's hand, on my back. I turned to look at him. He started to rub my back, then like a raptor, nipped in for the kill, moved his face close to mine and kissed me. Just a brush of his lips against mine, but it was definitely a kiss. His lips were soft, and his breath smelled like Beemans gum, clean and sweet.

I was stunned for a moment, as if he'd punched me square in the nose. Then I jerked my head around, frantic to see who else might have noticed this crazy Italian kid kissing me. Nobody, thank god. At least, not that I could see. My head started to buzz, and I felt very warm. I guess I swayed a little.

Bobby took my elbow and tried to pull me toward a folding chair nearby. "Davey, you OK? Maybe you should sit down," he said, just like that. Nothing about the kiss, nothing about why he chose that time and that place to do such a thing.

"No, I'm…I'm alright. I'm fine." I pulled back my elbow, replanted my feet and steadied myself. Old Gordo had stopped singing by now, and the applause had started up.

There we were backstage, staring at each other, while the audience clapped and hooted, Bobby smiling, me somewhere between anaphylactic shock and unadulterated terror.

I stood there blinking stupidly for a couple moments, then a small hissing sound brought me back. I looked to the stage, where Gordo was edging off to one side, toward Bobby and me. Miss Meyer had changed some of the stage directions just before the show, and being last, Gordo was confused. “Psssst! Davey? Davey, where do I go now?” he whispered. “Should I go back and have a seat or what?”

I shook my head and motioned for him to come backstage with Bobby and me. “C’mere! Just c’mere! Jesus, Gordo, you know you’re going to win anyway.”

I was grateful for the large, perspiring distraction at this baffling moment. I placed him beside me, then peeked over his shoulder to look at Bobby, who kept his perch and had not stopped smiling, biting down on the moment.

After the judges announced the ribbon winners (Gordo, as predicted, with first place), the auditorium cleared quickly, the way it always did when people were freed after sitting captive for three drinkless, foodless hours. I still must have looked pretty shell-shocked because the Hawk gave me a curt “Gotta go,” and flew the coop. I’m guessing you won’t be shocked that I didn’t say anything about the incident to Mitch on the walk home, and I certainly didn’t mention it to my parents over the rest of the weekend.

But by Monday, I had already worked through the conversation I would have with Bobby. As we sat at the lunch table in the cafeteria, before Mitch and Brian got there, I kept my voice low, even. “So, why’d you do it?”

"What?" He chomped his bologna sandwich thoughtfully.

"What do you mean, *what*?" I'd gone up a few octaves, but still took care to keep the volume down. "What you did. At the talent show Saturday. What the hell was that?"

"I don't know, Davey. I kinda…I don't know…I just kinda felt like doing it."

"Do you…are you…" Voice very, very low now. "Are you a queer, Bobby?"

"I don't know," he said, and his face flushed a bit. "Maybe."

"Well, I'm not. I'm not that way."

"I'm sorry. I thought maybe you were."

"Why would you think that?"

"I don't know. We just…seemed to get along real well. It was just something I felt. I can't really explain it."

"Well I'm not. OK?"

"Sure, sure. No problem." He folded the rest of sandwich in its paper wrapper and looked at me. "You're not going to tell anybody, are you?"

"Holy cripes, are you out of your mind? I don't need that kind of talk following me around anymore than you do! You want to get us beat up?"

"Good. Then we'll just drop it, OK?"

"OK."

For what remained of the school year, we still ate lunch together most days, awkward and quiet until the other guys showed up. Senior year, our schedules didn't mesh, so I didn't see much of Bobby. This was probably for the best.

But what Bobby had said continued to dog me. *I thought maybe you were.* Why? Was there anything to it, that 'something' he felt? What the hell did that mean? Did I swing my hips when I walked? Did I seem girly in some way? Surely not. I was tall. I was deep voiced. So what in the name of Jesus flaming Christ had he felt? Maybe I had touched his arm a few times when we talked. Maybe my eyes, my face showed too much excitement when I was around him.

The thought that I might be queer like Bobby terrified me. I knew how bad it would be. There were other stories in those *True Confessions* magazines, stories about guys named Larry and Craig and Pete (surely they didn't use their real names, but these were common and adequately manly). They were homosexuals who couldn't help themselves. These men led lives of hiding and shame. Their days were filled with furtive stares and things that lingered out of reach, of sordid rendezvous in the backs of dim, smoked filled taverns with leering, gimlet-eyed bartenders, or filthy roadside restrooms in the middle of bumfuck nowhere. They were haunted with constant questions and suspicion and the always-present fear of being found out, of the love that dare not speak its name and if it did open its big, fat mouth, got the ever-loving snot beat out of it. They teetered on the knife-edge of ruination. Such a life was certain exile. Parents, siblings, friends never understanding, never accepting.

No. It was a war I didn't want to fight for the rest of my life, a war utterly devoid of gold stars. I couldn't be queer.

That last year of high school, I redoubled my efforts to consider girls, to talk to them and about them with the other guys. I went out on a few dates, shared a few kisses.

It never went further than that. The delicious pressure, the longing, was a familiar enough visitor in the night and a morning institution. But it scared me, the way it stole in as I thought of Bobby, each time I thought of him, the black eyes, the white teeth, the kiss that tasted like Beemans.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Talent

(1948-1950)

Fall came and I started hanging around the station even more. Mr. Clark said I could come in on weekends, and having no social life to speak of, I took him up on it. He let me help answer phones on weekends with Laura, the weekend girl, usually requests for songs. Laura would write these down on slips of paper and hand them to the tech guy, Louie, who worked with Morey Smith and Johnny Ray Hoffman.

One Saturday, I showed up around noon to help. Laura was sitting at her desk, looking like she was going to throw up.

"You're looking a little green around the gills. Something wrong?"

"I feel lousy, Davey. I think I got hold of a bug. Can you cover the phones?"

I don't know what was up that day, but after Laura left, we got a ton of requests. I was writing them down two at a time and slipping the papers to Louie. About 10 minutes

after I'd handed in the first ones, there was a commotion from the studio and the door smashed open. Johnny Ray Hoffman burst into the lobby, red as a boiled lobster. He was big guy, six two or so, and intimidating as hell. "Where's the little shit that's been writing this stuff?" he bellowed, then saw me and stalked over. "You! Are you the little shit that's been writing these little slips of paper?"

"Y-Yes, sir."

"What the fuck, kid? I can't read this chicken scratch. What the hell's wrong with you, you flunk out of penmanship class, or something?"

"Sorry, Mr. Hoffman. I guess it is kind of messy."

"Where's Laura anyway? She's supposed to be doing this, not you."

"Well, she wasn't feeling well. She had to leave early. Mr. Clark, he told me I could handle the request line when Laura wasn't here." It wasn't exactly true, but I'm sure he would've said yes if I'd asked him. Probably.

"Then *handle* it," Hoffman growled. "Or I'll tell Mr. Clark that you're a wet behind the ears little numbnuts who can't do the job. You got it?"

"Yes, sir." I couldn't hand him the two new slips I'd just written. I'd have to try again. I wrote slowly, printing the song names out this time. Hoffman didn't come out again, but it didn't matter. I'd already pissed him off.

Late in the afternoon, the two men finished up. Hoffman came out and left through the front door without a word. I was sitting with my head down, staring at the ink blotter on Laura's desk, so if he even glanced my way I wouldn't have known it. Somehow I doubt he did. A few minutes later, I heard a rustle near my desk. I looked up.

Morey Smith, all 5 feet, 5 inches of him, had taken a seat near me. He smoothed a hand over his head, pavement-black hair slicked flat with Vitalis, what my dad called goose grease.

"Kid?" he said.

"Yes, Mr. Smith?"

"What's your name?"

"Davey…er, David Zombrowski, sir."

"That's a mouthful. You been here a while, have you?"

"Since noon, sir."

"No, I mean at the station. In the job."

"Oh. Since June, sir."

"Haven't seen you around much."

"I mostly work during the week, sir—"

"Christ, kid, call me Morey. You sound like an undertaker."

That made me smile, but only for a moment. "Morey. You see, I've been here since June, helping out Mr. Clark. Just grunt work, you know, running errands, helping clean up. But I like being at the station, and I…well, I want to get into radio, you know, as an announcer…well, not really an announcer, I…actually want to have my own show…or something. Anything, you know, I just want to be here…" Oh, shut up. This was Morey fucking Smith, and I was just babbling on like some sap.

"You got a nice voice, Davey. It's a good radio voice. It's got a nice, whatdyacallit, *resonance*."

“Gee…thanks, Morey.”

“You ‘re welcome. But you write like an arthritic chimpanzee. So maybe you let Laura keep that job.”

“Or maybe use a typewriter?”

“Hey! Now you’re thinking!”

The glow from the voice comment was wearing off a little. “I guess I made Mr. Hoffman pretty mad, huh?”

“Ah, *Mr. Hoffman* will get his knickers in a twist about nearly everything these days. Don’t worry about that. He’ll go home, drink his whiskey, shtup his honey a couple of times, or his wife if his honey’s not around. Tomorrow he won’t remember any of it. You’ll see.”

“I appreciate your help, Morey.”

“You bet. You want one more little piece of advice?”

“Sure.”

“Think about changing your name. David’s good, Dave might be even better. But Zombo…Zombie…”

“Zombrowski.”

“It’s too long, kid. You get a radio gig, you’re gonna need a better name, punchy, easy to spell, easy for people to remember, easier to say on the air over and over and over.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Take it from Mordechai Smushkevich, simpler is better.”

A week before Thanksgiving I got a summons from Happy Clark. His secretary, Julie, opened his office door, the light wood kind that whined on its hinges, and pointed toward a chair in front of a desk. “Mr. Clark will be here in a minute, David. Have a seat.”

My stomach curdled. This was not a good thing. I hung around the station all the time, but a good deal of the time I wasn’t busy. I tried to look busy. I took notes. But I wasn’t sure I was earning my keep. Besides, I was sure Johnny Ray had talked some trash about me to Mr. Clark.

Instantly, I fell back on my old ritual, cataloging the items around me. I chose Mr. Clark’s desk this time. There was a cordovan leather blotter with the baroque curlicues etched in gold around the edge. A square chunk of green marble with white veins that held a black enamel pen set. Two photographs in chrome frames, one of a slender, older woman with cats-eye glasses, a flowered party dress, and a giant orchid corsage pinned to the upper left side. The other showed two dark-haired girls, had to be twins—daughters?— outfitted in identical short rompers and standing on a wooden dock by some water somewhere. To the right side of the desk, a gray metal inbox with layers of papers and envelopes, mail opened, letters tucked into the flap of their envelopes. Beside the inbox, a silver letter opener made to resemble a Spanish sword.

The door complained again, and Happy Clark rustled in. I figured he’d sit down on the other side of the desk, but he stood in front of me for a moment, then planted his butt on the edge and folded his arms. He was a slight man and unassuming, with a cap of

thinning black hair, little wire-rim glasses and a penchant for puny bowties and gray suits. He looked like a bank teller or an insurance guy, not like somebody who brought information and entertainment into the homes of thousands, certainly not a man who held sway over the likes of Morey Smith and Johnny Ray Hoffman. He smiled at me, and it seemed sincere.

"You like it here, Davey?"

"Sure, Mr. Clark. I love it here."

"You know, your Uncle Champ is a good friend of mine. Good friend. We go back…oh, many years."

"Yes, I know. He said."

"Now, I don't like to let anyone down, but I'm not so sure I can keep you on. You've been a big help, Davey, but I run a pretty tight ship here. Not a lot of money for extras."

"No, sir."

"I mean, I'd like to keep you on, you know, to putter around until you decide to go to college, but I really need folks who want a career."

"Decide to go to college? What do you mean, sir?"

"Well, I know I'm talking out of school, but your uncle, I guess he was hoping you'd get bored and sick of the menial tasks, then decide that college really was the right place for you."

“No, sir, I love it here! I love radio.” Goddamn Champ. Got me a job just to teach me a lesson, the bastard. “I’m not just fooling around, Mr. Clark. I want to make a career out of this. I want to be an announcer. I want to have my own show someday.”

“Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. But I like you, Davey. You certainly are a hard worker. And there’s value, real value, in being as enthusiastic as you are. Also,” and here he leaned toward me and placed a hand on my shoulder, “I know about the personal tragedy you suffered when you were younger—what your family went through. I believe you deserve a break.”

I wasn’t going to argue with any of this. “I mean what I say, Mr. Clark. I’ll do any job you want, any day, any time. Anything to break into the business.”

“Good to hear. Your uncle described you as…well, somewhat less than motivated. But I’ve been impressed.”

Geez, Champ really had it in for me. What the hell had I ever done to the Yeti from Toledo? Probably thought he was so clever doing an end-run around me and—

“Davey?”

“Er, what now?”

“Did you hear me? I’m willing to let you do a few voice-overs, if you like. A few product plugs. Just half-minute spots. Think you can do that?”

“I’m your man, Mr. Clark.”

And sometimes, that’s just how things happen. You show up. You do whatever the people in charge tell you to do. You don’t bitch, you don’t make waves. You take

whatever money you can get. You make yourself indispensable, Johnny on the spot. And good things come.

I didn't get paid any more, mind you, but I got to do the minute spots and from there, other things. Taking Morey's advice, I decided to change my name to something simpler. The announcement came at dinner one evening. I would be Dave Brown.

"Why can't you just use your own name?" Dad asked. "It's a good name. A good Polish Cleveland name."

"It might be better that he doesn't," my mother said. "It kind of helps us keep our privacy." She poked at a green bean with her fork. "But why Brown?"

I smiled. "It's easy to say and spell. It has a little bit of my surname in it."

"How's that?" Dad asked.

"The brow. Brow in Zombrowski, brow in Brown."

"Oh."

"And it's simple and honest and…well, friendly, somehow. You'd buy a car from Dave Brown, you'd invite him over for a beer and tell him your troubles, if he gave you advice, you'd follow it. Honest Brown, like homemade bread, or meat and potatoes, or…"

"Chocolate," Mom added.

Josie giggled. "Or poop!"

"Honest poop, Miss Josephine," I corrected. "Honest Dave Poop, that's me."

I decided my new broadcast intro would be "Dave Brown, The Toast of the Town" (but we'd leave out the part about me still living with my parents and sitting in on tea parties with my little sister—hardly toast material.). Still, it was like a miracle. My folks, their friends, my friends, utter strangers could turn on the radio and hear my voice coming out. And I guess I did OK because when Joe Hawkins, who hosted the 3 p.m. music show, went on to greener airwaves in St. Louis (where Aunt Pat and Uncle Bob might enjoy his *"Haw-haw-hawkins!"* braying at his own corny jokes), I was tapped to take over his show. "Melody Lane with Joe Hawkins" became "Afternoon Music Box."

It was April 1950, and I'd only been on the voice job for three months when the word came down. WWBA was making the leap to television. Mr. Clark—that was Happy to me and all the other talent—said I was in for the move.

CHAPTER SIX

Adam

(1952-1953)

According to Ed Sherman, the old radio news guy, a booth announcer job was the dullest way to be in television and still be considered talent. I didn't care. I was in TV, and as far as I was concerned, I was the Christ Almighty Great and Powerful Oz, beaming out to living rooms all over our vast metropolis. No big green head, no mysterious flames, sorry to say—just a small, plain booth with a sound lock, a console with a little yellow light and a window that overlooked the TV studio. I had to keep an eye on the light, because when a program broke, it would flash, and that would be my cue to start in with station identification and promos until the show came back. My shift ran 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., which included the morning kiddie shows, the afternoon programs all the housewives loved, then the afterschool stuff. It was peachy set-up, but it wasn't like it

was just them doing me a favor. I was valuable because I was young and did whatever Happy told me, because I worked for meager pay and came to work on time and sober.

Not everybody I'd been working with made the jump from radio to TV. Ed Sherman stayed on, covering the evening booth announcer slot, then turning back into a news guy to read the day's events off the UPI wire at 11. His old partner, John Cantwell, rotund and large-schnozzed, figured he'd stay with radio. Miss Kidgloves jettisoned the nickname and reverted to Margo Thompson to host Afternoon Chat, a ladies' talk show, each day at 1. But after 15 years of crowing to Cleveland about *brand…new…days*, morning guy Wayne DeWitt retired and moved with his wife to Maine where they could see the sun come up first and not have to tell a goddamn soul about it.

Morey and Johnny Ray, believe it or don't, became a hit with the kids. You'd never know it the way he lit into me the day I was taking requests from callers at the radio station, but Johnny Ray could be a real sweetheart around children, and the goofy slapstick he and Morey took great pains to describe or simulate with sound effects (*bonk! ka-boing!*) on the radio translated well to the little screen. They dressed up in suits with big clown ties, wore a series of ridiculous hats and renamed themselves. Weekday afternoons at 4, "The Jumbo J and Tiny Mo Show" aired and it was strictly low-budget entertainment. They sang and danced and fake-played piped-in music on tiny instruments. They read stories and acted out skits, told ancient jokes that would've drawn groans from vaudeville audiences 40 years earlier. Once in a while, a literal dog and pony show: Margo would lend out the Dalmatian for a fireman gag, or they'd wrangle a

Shetland Pony from a nearby petting zoo and try to get it on and off the set before it took a dump on Johnny Ray's shoes. And after each bit, the same line from Tiny Mo.

"Howza 'bout them apples, boys and girls?"

The little monsters ate it up. Morey and Johnny Ray performed on a set with not much more than an oversized table and a couple of chairs. For the background, a curtain with giant, painted ABC blocks on either side. On the other side of the cameras, a small set of bleachers, most days filled to bursting with kids—most chattering, yelling or screaming, some crying, a few afflicted with the thousand-yard stare brought on by proximity to a couple of weirdly dressed, hammy grown-ups, half the time showing up on set with day-old whiskers and the smell of Gilbey's Gin on their collective breaths.

But it worked, all of it. By the end of '52, we had a full schedule, even if a lot of the evening programming was Kinescopes of network stuff. But everyone had fallen into a sort of rhythm, more or less comfortable in their roles at the station.

I was too comfortable, I suppose, still living at home, still in the same damn room with the same shelves and the same books, the same little bed. At work, visitors often mistook me for someone older. My voice made me sound like I was flirting with 30. But at home, I was effectively still 14. I guess I could've found my own place, but I still liked to be around Josie, and help Mom and Dad when I could. And I was able to sock away money that otherwise would have gone for rent.

To keep my mother placated, there were a few more dates with daughters of her friends and a couple of girls from Ely High who were single and still loitering around Euclid. They were all lovely, all nice, good conversationalists, some of them. But it was a

sad parade as far as romance went, evenings that ended in expectant looks, lame innuendo, and from the more outgoing girls, passes that withered on the vine.

But TV was a mad hothouse where everything bloomed. People were hungry for anything—talk shows, game shows, music, interviews, supermarket openings, you name it—any tossed-off bit of nonsense that beamed to them on that small screen. Anything that would keep the kids placated after school, anything a housewife could stare at while she snapped beans in the kitchen or vacuumed the rugs. And every bit of the nonsense was a big deal to me. I nearly bust a gut when I got to come out of the announcer's booth for one of our first remote broadcasts—the opening of a Sav-Big Market in Rocky River—where I delivered a stirring oratory from the produce section and interviewed bright-eyed suburbanites groping musk melons.

In the spring of '52, we added two more cameramen, another sound technician and a producer. One of the camera guys, Mac Bennison, had done pretty well in Hollywood in the '30s and '40s, worked on sets with the likes of Cecil B. DeMille, John Ford, John Wayne. When his wife got sick, they came back to her native Cleveland to be around family. After she died, he puttered a bit, then considered a turn on the little screen. Happy Clark was glad to snap him up. True, he was a movie guy, used to multiple takes, lighting set-ups that took forever, the old Mitchell 35mm cameras, but he was a quick study in this new world. And Happy thought he classed up the joint.

The other new camera guy was Adam Weinstein. Adam was 22, the same age as me, and learning the business like all of us. Unlike me, Adam was a college graduate, fresh off a bachelor's degree in art history from Kent State. There weren't a lot of

openings in Cleveland for those who could expound on the fine differences between a Monet and a Manet, but Adam was holding an ace. His dad ran a top-notch camera shop down on Mercer Avenue. As part of his trade, Mr. Weinstein kept up on all the latest technology and made sure his son did the same. Adam grew up taking photos and having his photo taken, filming and being filmed. It was a well-documented childhood, he said, one he was sure would come back to bite him in the ass at some point.

"Somewhere in the house, Pop's got film of me, naked, on the can, reading the funny pages," he told me.

"Better find that reel and torch it."

"You're not kidding. And that was just last week."

We became friends pretty quick, partly because we were the youngest guys at the station, partly because we just got along. It was free and easy from the get-go. He was funnier and smarter than Mitch. But there was something else there, too. A noticing. A demand for attention that I answered with even thinking.

I'd always felt I had a good eye for detail. Maybe it came from my nervous habit of cataloging the things I saw, maybe just a natural talent. In Adam, I took note of everything, remembered everything, retrieved it and lingered over it when I was alone.

The Catalog of Adam was rich and vibrant, and I added to it constantly. I could tell you what he wore, every day, to work—he had four plaid shirts on rotation (I liked the brown/blue one the best), in chilly weather, he wore a dark blue Navy-style peacoat, sweater vests and brown corduroys and a homemade looking knitted scarf that he wrapped around his neck three times so that the fringe on the ends bunched under his

chin, a green beard that, along with his stocking cap, made him look like one of Snow White's dwarves gone terribly wrong. I could tell you what he brought for lunch each day (egg salad, chicken salad) or what he ordered in (pastrami or chicken soup from Minski's Deli, the spaghetti marinara from Roma Italiano), how he liked his coffee (one sugar, one cream, swirled counterclockwise, always, then two taps on the porcelain cup edge with the spoon, *ding, ding!*). He wore a Timex watch, gold face with a black leather strap, brown oxford shoes and a little bit of spicy aftershave lotion that I kept meaning to ask him about. He liked movies almost as much as I did. We caught "Moulin Rouge" with Jose Ferrer and Zsa Zsa Gabor after work one evening (Adam studied Toulouse-Lautrec in school and found the mini-Jose version hysterical) and "Singin' in the Rain" one sunny Saturday. We listened to crooners like Al Martino, sure, but our favorite was Frankie Laine grinding out "Rock of Gibraltar," and "Ramblin' Man" and "Settin' the Woods on Fire" and "I'm Just a Poor Bachelor."

I missed Mitch. He'd graduated and moved to Columbus to work in administration at Ohio State, and we wrote each other sometimes. But in six months, Adam and I had become tighter than Mitch and I had ever been. We caught a movie or a ballgame almost every weekend, and Adam's visits to the sound booth became a daily thing, helping to pass the slow march of hours.

One Friday in April, when we were in booth before the start of broadcast for the day, a light punch on my shoulder. "Hey, you…you want to come over for dinner sometime soon? Maybe Thursday night? My folks would love to have someone else to interrogate over brisket. What do you say?"

“Uh, sure. That’d be great.”

“Weinstein!” Mac appeared on the other side of the glass door, knocking. His gravel truck voice was reduced to a low rumble. “Get out here! We’re live in five.”

“Goddamn it, Mac, it’s Wine-steen, not Wine-stine!” Adam hollered back at the door. “Gotta go, Davey.” He put his hand on the door knob and turned back. “OK, right after work on Thursday. Here, I’ll give you the address.” Adam grabbed a pen and wrote on the side of one of my scripts. He stood for a minute more, looking at the paper and smiling. Then he pulled a pack of gum out of his shirt pocket, white with a red stripe, and held it up.

“Want some Beemans?” he said.

I stared at the gum.

“Gum?” Adam wiggled it in his hand. “Familiar with the concept?”

“Er, I’ll take a raincheck, OK? Got to get ready to make with the chatter.”

“I know, genius. Take it for later.”

I pulled a stick out of the pack, giggling like an idiot.

I reached Adam’s house a little before 7 that Thursday. It was nice house, sturdy brown brick with white edging around the windows and a front porch with a swing. I rang the doorbell and only then did I realize I’d come empty-handed. I should’ve at least brought some flowers for Adam’s mother.

The door opened and an old woman stood before me. On her head, a spin of frothy white, a giant cotton ball that ended in a little bun at the top. She had a kind, dried-

apple face and the same big hazel eyes as Adam, but at present they were squished together, squinting at me like small print in a newspaper.

"You are Daniel?" she said in a small voice.

"Uh, no. I'm David. David Zombrowski…a friend of Adam's?"

"Yes, yes, I know who you are. Come in, come in."

She stepped back to let me enter. It was a cozy house, not too big, and kind of old-fashioned, with dark, high-backed furniture, fussy-patterned oriental rugs and lace doilies on the tops of the chairs and tables. Adam came in from another room.

"There you are, Davey!" he boomed. "I see you met my Bubbe."

Bubbe shook her head. "His name is Daniel, Adam."

"It's David, Bubbe."

Adam's parents, Max and Lorraine Weinstein, came out. They were handsome people, well-dressed in dark wool, not excessively friendly but pleasant and civil. Both took my hand and shook it. Max asked if I'd encountered much traffic on my way to the house. Lorraine asked if I liked baked chicken. That was about the extent of the polite chitchat before she waved us to the dining room. "Sit, sit. Bubbe gets grouchy if she doesn't get her supper on time."

Five minutes went by as dishes were brought to the table, and we passed around the food—the chicken, boiled potatoes, lima beans and rolls. Another five minutes of silverware clattering and scraping against the floral-edged china. Chewing. Sipping. More chewing. Finally Max spoke. "So you like working at the station, David?"

"Oh sure, Mr. Weinstein. I've been there quite a while. Since before it was a TV station. I used to run errands for the station manager, Mr. Clark."

"I see. And Adam tells us you are a booth announcer?"

"Yes. It's a pretty good job. It can get a little monotonous in the booth, but Adam's helped with that. He comes up and keeps me company for a little while each day."

Mr. and Mrs. Weinstein exchanged glances over the platter of chicken. Bubbe was placing all of her energies on the food before her. "And Adam," Max Weinstein continued, "is he doing a good job over there? Working hard?"

"Oh yes, sir. A great job. He tells me you run a camera shop downtown."

"Yes, it was a business I started when we lived in Cincinnati. I'm sure Adam told you he grew up there."

"He did."

"Yes, well, we moved up here to Cleveland, oh…it was early '46, right after the war. I expanded the shop, brought in a lot more inventory. Doing pretty well."

"That's great. Adam's lucky to have you, to learn about cameras and stuff."

Mr. Weinstein smiled. "I've taught him a thing or two."

"Do your parents live in town, David?" Lorraine asked.

"Yes, they're over on Tracey Avenue in Euclid. Or should I say, *we* are over on Tracey. I live with them and my little sister, Josie. She's eight."

"How nice," Mrs. Weinstein said.

More chewing.

"Yes…" Adam ventured, shifting in his seat beside me, "seeing as how Davey and I both live with our folks, we've been talking about maybe sharing the rent on an apartment closer to the station. You know, it'd be easier to get back and forth, and it would keep expenses down."

I turned my head toward him, but didn't say anything. We'd never, not once, discussed anything of the kind. But I wondered what Adam's parents would say.

Bubbe continued to masticate, while Mr. and Mrs. Weinstein exchanged another glance. Then Max sighed. "Davey, our Adam seems to think this is a good idea. Do you think this is a good idea?" He'd stopped eating. Mrs. Weinstein had stopped eating, too.

"I-I-I'm not really sure," I said. My god, this was excruciating. "I mean…maybe?"

Max focused then on his son. "Adam, you're too old for me to be telling you that you can't do this or that. But you need to think about the consequences of your actions."

"What actions, Pop?" Adam said. "We're two bachelors, and we want to move out of our parents' houses! This is so revolutionary?"

"To some, yes, it is. Just…be prudent," Max said quietly.

This started to take on the cast of the long-ago meal with my parents, the one about Euclid Beach Park, and Mitch and his girlfriend. Accusatory. Or maybe like a test of some sort.

"It's important," Lorraine Weinstein piped in, "to take care before you make big decisions. Where you live is a big decision. How you live…" her voice faded away.

Finally, Bubbe put down her fork. “And Daniel should know,” she said, “that Adam is a homosexual.”

“Bubbe! Please!” Lorraine scolded her. Max’s face had gone purple.

“Well, it’s true. And he might want to know that before he takes on my grandson as a roommate. He might be against that type of thing.”

“Oh my god.” Lorraine buried her face in the fancy lace napkin she was holding.

Bubbe wasn’t finished. “But” she said, holding up an index finger to punctuate her crucial point, “he is my grandson. And I love him.”

Adam laughed. “I love you too, Bubbe.”

Conversation was scarce for the rest of the meal. I managed to choke down the vanilla ice cream Mrs. Weinstein had brought to the table in tiny silver dishes and wipe my mouth with one of the fancy napkins. It was delicate and old-looking, the kind of thing you hate yourself for using. I said my good-byes and received polite acknowledgments back. Adam followed me out the door to the bus stop.

Instinctively, we sought out a safe distance from the house, but our shoes had barely hit the side walk in front when he started talking. “Look, before you—”

“What were you thinking? We never discussed that! Getting an apartment together?”

“Look, OK, that was a little impulsive—“

“Ooh, you think a little bit?”

“You don’t understand! I’ve got to get out of there! My parents…they’re good people, but I just…I just have to get out on my own. And I didn’t mean anything by it…I wasn’t suggesting that you…or that we…” Adam stopped walking, and put a hand on my shoulder. “Hey, stop for a sec.”

I halted, and found it was hard to plant my eyes anywhere. I wasn’t mad. Not really. I was embarrassed. At what I figured Adam’s folks thought we would do with each other, what it was they thought we’d already done. I looked around. We were alone on the sidewalk, no one crossing the street behind or in front of us, no one in the yards of the houses around us.

“I’m sorry,” Adam continued. “I know we hadn’t really talked about…well, you know, my liking men.”

“And you thought…I like men, too?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Why? Why did you think that?”

“I don’t know! Just a sense. You don’t have a girlfriend. You never even talk about girls. And you and I…we just seemed to get along in such a way that…”

“What?”

“We just get along.”

There was no denying that. I felt no desire to deny that. “We do. But then you just kind of pull this apartment business out of nowhere.”

Adam smiled, and for a moment, I lost my breath. The chocolate waves of hair, the eyes a topaz hazel, brown-green with little golden glints. No raptor here, no attack. “I

gotta get out of that house, Davey. And it's just that I thought they would be more open to the idea if they knew it wasn't going to be too expensive. And that their only son wasn't…you know…going to be alone in the big city."

"I think that might be the issue here. You not being alone!" I looked around us again. "Do you think," I ventured in hoarse whisper, "that they think…that we're, you know, fucking each other?"

"No! At least, they'd never ask. But they know who I am. They know how I am."

"But I didn't know." I started walking again.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to put you on the spot. Or…well, maybe I did. It's just that it, I don't know, seemed natural somehow. Look, I'll probably just go get an apartment on my own."

My stomach dropped. There, right away, that sense of something being taken away, something offered that I hadn't even realized I'd wanted. And now I did. "I didn't say I didn't want to."

"What's that?"

"I didn't say I didn't want to. I…I just wish you'd mentioned it to me, alone, first."

Adam blushed a little. "Really?"

"Well, I actually do understand. What you said made sense. I want to live closer to the station."

"Yeah?"

“And I shouldn’t still be living in my parents’ house either. You and I, we’re friends, even if you are certifiable.”

“Well, alrighty.”

“But we should get a place with two bedrooms, OK? And…and…” What else did I want to ask? “…and we don’t advertise it at work.”

“Of course not.”

“Or say anything to anybody else, except our families, that is. I guess they have to know, don’t they?” I swallowed. “Oh god.”

“Whatever you say, Daniel.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Innocents Abroad

(1952)

Two nights after my evening at the Weinsteins, after we had cleared the dinner table, I told my parents I would be moving out. I waited until I could hear Josie thumping her feet against her bedroom wall, lying on her bed, noodling over her times tables. It was all in the presentation, I convinced myself. I was old enough, and it was time to get out there and live my life. I would share a place with Adam to save money. We would find a place close to the station to save time on the commute. It was prudent, practical and altogether appropriate.

"Well, David, that's fine. I mean, you are an adult," Dad said. There was no humor in his face, no *glad to hear it, it's high time, son* kind of thing. I would've loved that. Instead he nodded his head, a confirmation that this was all he was prepared to hear and and all he was prepared to say. Then he ambled from the room, his leather slippers

shushing on the wood floor as made his way to the small den at the back of the house, to the refuge of his tweed wingback and his *Plain Dealer*.

I stared after him, then looked back at my mother who taken a seat at the dining room table. The straight mouth, the crowded brow. She would require more information.

"David, you and this Adam are friends." Was that a question? An accusation?

"Yeah, we're friends. I've got lots of good friends at the station (*a lie*). Adam is one. Jesus, Mom, I'm 22. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"What does all this mean to you?"

"What does all what mean? It's a goddamned apartment!"

"David, your language. I cannot speak to you if you use that kind of vulgarity."

"I'm sorry. It's just that…I'm frustrated."

"I can see that. But you haven't answered my question."

"Maybe you can ask it again. Maybe you can just be clear about what you really want to know."

"David, there never have been any girls who…well, stuck around. Have there?"

"So what? We're talking about an apartment."

"And it isn't for lack of trying. I mean, you know I have tried. There was Gertrude's daughter, Linda, and the Pattersons' niece. There was the lovely MacNair girl from Lakewood. She's so pretty, David. And such a good head on her shoulders!"

"Pretty girl. Outstanding head."

"I feel, David, I truly feel like the right one just hasn't come along yet. And when she does, you will know it. Right away. I feel that's true. Because if it isn't…if you ever came and told me…"

"Told you what? I mean, let's just be honest here. Told you what? That I didn't like girls?"

My mother's face turned to stone, and her voice diminished to nearly a whisper. "There has never been a homosexual in this family. Not in your father's, not in mine…" She stopped herself, inhaled deeply, then placed an elbow on the table and rested her head in her hand. "I'm tired."

"If you don't want to talk about this now—"

"No, I need to say this to you. I don't think you can see this clearly right now." She leaned in a little closer to me, spoke quietly as if she didn't want my father to hear, as if they wouldn't discuss this at length in their bedroom tonight. "Think, David. It would ruin you. Any future you would hope to have in television. What do you think your sponsors would do if they thought you liked men? What do you think Mr. Clark would do?"

"You're way off base, Mom. I'm just moving out of the house. Living with a friend. That's all. Guys do that every day."

My mother gave me the look again, chin lowered, eyes trained on me, mouth straight. "As you say, you are an adult. You make your own money. You will do as you please."

"Yes, I will."

“But please also remember that you are very young. You may have a great future ahead of you. And you have a family that has to live their lives, too. Even if you don’t care about your father and me, Josie’s well-being is at stake.”

“What makes you think I don’t care—”

“Your bad decisions, your wrong choices could affect all of us.”

“Thanks for the pep talk, ma.” I got up from the table and moved to go around her when she caught me by the arm.

“David, this may all seem very funny to you right now—”

I swiped my arm away from her. “Believe me, I don’t find a goddamned thing funny about it.”

It took a couple of weeks to find a suitable apartment. We ended up with a decent two-bedroom on Lancaster Street, about a ten-minute walk to the station. It was in an old building, and the landlord rhapsodized about its turn-of-the-century character. There were four units, boxy affairs, but not without their charms. They had elegant lighting fixtures (pretty but weak), filigreed iron heat registers and a bit of dark wood gingerbread bracketing set in the corners of the doorway that led from the living room to the dining area. Less charming was the kitchen with its ancient appliances and the soft rumble of windows shimmying in their frames against the October wind. This place would be an icebox in the winter, I just knew it. Back to the days of Seabiscuit. In the back of the building, there was a separate entrance that opened into an alleyway. There was only street parking, but that didn’t matter much, since neither one of us had a car.

I didn't bring much from my old bedroom, just a few books—Adam crowed over my old favorites, *Treasure Island*, a leatherbound *Huckleberry Finn and Other Collected Stories*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*—along with a steel gooseneck lamp, some pillows, sheets, a frayed Hudson Bay wool blanket, and a box of old toys I couldn't quite part with, now part of my regular shelf bric-a-brac. If I was 14, the loot would have been just the same.

Among Adam's belongings, a weighty box of art books. I picked through a few at the top, Michaelangelo, Botticelli, Da Vinci. "Like them Italian fellers, do ya?"

"Very much, Huckleberry." Adam smiled. "The French, too. But here…" He reached in and handed me a large book with a glossy white jacket from somewhere in the middle of the box. "The best. My favorite."

"Picasso."

"Spanish. Visionary."

"Well, I ain't much on this paintin' business, but I'll give it a look-see."

"Thank you, Huckleberry. See that you do."

"Haw! You and yer book learnin'.

"OK, what have you got that's good?" Adam said, pulling a toy boat from the box I'd set on the weird-smelling, dark peach-pink couch Adam and I had dragged out of a second-hand (possibly third-hand) shop downtown. "I'm glad I'm not the only one who brought toys. I've got my scooter and my trusty jack-in-the-box with me, and I'm happy to share." He turned the tin ocean liner over in his hands, rolled the black rubber wheels that were set into small recesses in the bottom of the hull. It was in good condition, the

black and white paint crisp, the red stripes on the three smokestacks unmarred. “You were light on your toys. That’s good. I banged mine up pretty bad.”

“No,” I said. “That was Bud’s, not mine.”

“Who’s Bud?”

“Let me get some sheets on my bed, then you can get us some beers.”

For all our chumminess and time spent together, I’d purposely, resolutely not told Adam about Bud. It wasn’t a story I could toss off at work, or even over a beer after a movie. It wasn’t anything I relished telling. But it felt right, in the moment, to share that story. It was something I wanted to Adam to know.

When I’d finished with my bedding, I sat with Adam on the couch, feet propped up on the plain brown coffee table Adam’s mom had given us. I sipped from a squat bottle of Blatz and told Adam all about Bud. With the exception of Mitch, Brian and Bobby DeCarlo, I hadn’t told anyone else this story in detail. I hadn’t built up much of a standard narrative, so I was clumsy in the telling, leaving out bits and having to double back, having to explain who all the players were. And because it was a tale I hadn’t told in a while, and because I’d just held one of Bud’s boats in my hands minutes earlier, I cried a lot. When I couldn’t think of anything more to say, I stopped, drank the last few drops of the Blatz, wiped the corners of my eyes on my shirt sleeve. “Christ, well, I’m a mess.”

Adam had said nothing while I spoke. Now he cleared his throat. “Davey?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m so sorry that happened. That’s awful.” Adam put an arm around me. He might’ve leaned in then, might’ve tried taking the intimacy a step further, pushing me at a time when I might’ve done anything just to move beyond the moment. But it was just an arm around my shoulder.

“Thanks for listening.”

“Do you…do you still feel guilty about your brother? After all these years? You can see that as a 10-year-old there’s no way you could have…” He placed his hand on head, ruffled my hair a bit. “Have you forgiven yourself?”

“I’m not sure. I’m don’t consider myself a Catholic anymore, but that guilt business clings like shit on a shingle.”

“You’re telling a Jew? Please.”

“It’s very…difficult.”

“Forgive yourself, Davey. Or better yet, just free yourself. There is nothing to forgive.”

“Freedom from this…I don’t think that’s going to happen.” More tears then. Some from sadness, but more, many more from relief, from the ability to share my feelings with someone, without judgment, without a prior history. “I decided I wanted to, you know…try and live a life, a big life, one that Bud might’ve liked. Not to be just a working stiff or even a college graduate who works in an office or as a lawyer or something, but somebody people know, somebody people might look up to and admire.”

“Be famous?”

“I guess, yeah.”

“Well, you’re on your way.”

“Am I?”

“I’d bet money. Mr. Clark loves you. I hear him talking about you, when you’re not around.”

“Yeah?”

“But will that be enough?”

“You mean, like if I get my own show? I don’t know. I just…part of me feels like I owe Bud a share of my life. OK, put aside the guilt for a minute. He was my brother. And he’s not here anymore. So I feel…like he’s counting on me in some way.”

“And what does the other part feel?”

I hesitated a moment. “Resentment.”

“What do you resent him for?”

“For nothing he’s really responsible for. For looming over the last 12 years. For being the first thing people knew about me for a very long time, for being the only thing most of them cared about.”

“It’s OK, Davey.” Adam’s hand on my shoulder again. “It’s OK to feel that way. You’re no more responsible than he is.”

“But I’ll never be free of it.”

“Never’s a long time, Huckleberry. Why don’t you just give yourself a little elbow room, all right? Maybe it was a very good thing to get out of your parents’ house after all. See, sometimes my rash ideas are really very sensible.”

I laughed and kissed him then. I hadn't been thinking of it, no planning up to the big moment. It was gratitude, not lust. I was thankful for him and for this little space out in the world. Away from everybody else, with just this one person who understood, I felt lighter. And in that moment, Adam just felt like mine.

It was dark when I awoke. 3 a.m. by my bedside clock. Adam snored softly beside, curled up in a giant C. My mouth was dry. After three beers apiece, we'd gotten into bed together, only partially undressed. We'd kissed, hugged, held each other, but we hadn't fucked. I was not quite ready for that. I was thinking that maybe I would have to be really drunk, just to get through that first time, just to make sure I was comfortable enough to do it. I was scared, but I had decided that I wanted to try it. I wanted to know how it would feel. And I knew that, whatever it felt like, I wanted to feel it with Adam.

I went to the bathroom, got a glass of water and padded back to bed. Then I saw we were not alone there.

I don't know why I thought it would be different in this place. I had felt him, smelled him, heard him when we still lived on 224th Street. He had lurked in the corners of the Tracey Avenue home, long before and long after my high school graduation. So why not here? It wasn't the houses he clung to, it was me.

There, in a corner between my dresser and a coattree in the corner, a round head of baby chick hair shone nearly white in the blue moonlight that coated the room. The buttondown hung limply, the arms dangled, the stuffy breathing syncopated with Adam's, the big eyes burning low, gas flames fixed on me. Had he watched us? Had he seen?

“Bud…” I murmured.

“Davey.” The voice was small, but low, a groan dredged up from some unknowable depth.

Tears stung the edges of my eyes. Against his voice, mine rose sharply, whining like an old door. “What happened? Where are you?”

The blue gas eyes closed for a moment, and when they opened, they narrowed, the small brow crinkled above his nose. “Gone,” the voice said. “Don’t look for me.”

Adam snorted in his sleep and drew my attention for an instant. When I looked back, the corner was empty.

I said nothing to Adam about seeing Bud. I couldn’t, not yet. I trusted him with my sorrow, with my guilt, but not yet with my possible insanity. Bud’s visits had always been sporadic—sometimes many months between them—and brief, but they’d never stopped. Always the blond fluff of hair, always the blue buttondown, the blue eyes, always in the places I lived in, never at the station, or on the streets of the city. But he’d never spoken before that night, never more than a *chugga* sound anyway. He still looked 4, but his voice was older, as old perhaps as he would be now…16? Could I have told Adam any of this without the topaz eyes clouding over, the chocolate brown head of hair bowing with pity, the realization that I was not of sound mind? He might have decided it was all too much and walked away. I certainly would have understood. Just as certainly, it would have killed me to lose him. Without feeling him naked beside me, without a

chance to be close in every way, to know if this was the kind of love that it felt like to me, redemptive, a sort of antidote to the pain.

The next night, a Sunday, I decided I didn't want to wait any longer. We made spaghetti marinara and downed a big bottle of Chianti between us. Eager but still nervous, relaxed but not overly drunk, I was hard immediately when Adam stroked my thigh, nuzzled me, ran his tongue along my neck. I suggested Adam's bedroom, away from my books and toys. He led me to his bed.

There was no one in the apartment but us. Still I whispered. "Are we going to—? This is going to hurt, isn't it?"

"Let's just go slow, OK? We don't need to do everything all at once." Adam pushed me back on the bed, unbuttoned my shirt and slipped it from under me. Then he unbuckled my belt, and lowered the zipper on my pants. A little tugging, then "Huckleberry, I need a little help…" I slipped off my pants and underwear. Then he undressed. Naked on the bed, we stroked each other and kissed. He moved his lips, indescribably warm and soft, down my neck, the longitude of my chest, down to my cock. Then he took it into his mouth.

Each of the 15 seconds or so I lasted was shocking in its pleasure (*oh, the magic of the counterclockwise swirl, ding, ding!*). When I was done, I did the same to him. He held out longer than me, of course, panting, gasping and finishing with a giant sigh. It too was a marvelous shock. But with recovery came regret. Goddamn me for waiting so long. Goddamn me for being so scared.

After, we laid in bed, Adam's head resting on my shoulder. "You done broke me in, Mr. Wine-stine."

"We're just getting started, Huck. And it's Wine-steen, you jerk!" Adam laughed.

"How many does that make for you?"

"You mean, how many partners?"

"I guess. Or times?"

"*How many times?* Hard to say. But partners? This makes, oh, five…uh, six, for me, counting you."

"*Six?* I'm number six?"

"Yeah? Do you care? Does that make a difference to you?"

"No, I just…I feel so…like a child again. I mean, what have I been doing all this time?"

"Well, you stayed here in good ol' Cleveland with your parents, for starters. When you go to a university, you meet people from all over. Different races, different religions, communists, radicals, hoboes, homos. You go to a big enough school, you'll find somebody who thinks like you or who, just maybe, changes your thinking—somebody you can talk to, no matter what you like, no matter *who* you like."

"So you're saying I really screwed up, not going to college."

"I'm not saying that at all. You did what you thought was the right thing. And I might not have met you otherwise. You wouldn't have lasted five minutes on most campuses. Somebody would've looked into those blue eyes and snatched up a burly, deep-voiced dish like you." He ran his hand over my chest.

“So I’m six. You’ve made love to five other people.”

“A minute, please.” Adam got out of bed and went to a small bookshelf near his window. He pulled a large book from the bottom and brought it back to me.

I looked at the spine. “So we’re going to read The Art of Goya?”

Adam grabbed the book and flipped it to one of the back pages. There, a scraggly list, some words scrawled in pencil, others in blue or black ink. “The last guy I slept with in college was an English major. Big word guy, tiny cock.”

I barked out a laugh.

“Anyway, he and I had this game, see? Anytime we came across an unusual word for fucking—like some archaic term—we’d add it to this list. Between my history reading and his English lit classes, we dug up quite a few…let’s see, “Felter, swive, jape, jostle, jumble…”

I squinted at the list. “Commix, dance between the sheets—dance between the sheets! I like that—subagitate, copulate, carnalize—sounds like something you do in the kitchen—conjugate, mollock, screw, hump, root, bang—these are very sophisticated—lumber, jazz, jig-a-jig and…what’s this last one? Shtup? That sounds vaguely familiar.”

“That one Bubbe taught me, believe it or not.”

“Very nice. Very…descriptive.”

“The point is, Huckleberry, with the exception, maybe, of dancing between the sheets, which I find ecstatically romantic, none of these words mean what making love means to me. I didn’t make love with anybody in college. I feltered. I jig-a-jigged.”

“And you and me? Just now?”

“What do you think?”

“Wine-steen, you ecstatic romantic, you.”

Adam turned his face to mine and ran his hand along my chest again. “We are live in five, Huckleberry. So get ready.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Big Life

(1956)

Happy Clark was a progressive soul, never afraid to try new things at the station, that is, as long as they'd been proven solidly successful somewhere else. For several years, he'd admired the show "Bandstand" on WFIL out of Philadelphia. The music programs had always been his favorite at the radio station, and he loved the idea of finding a way to play the newest stuff and adding a visual element, in this case, good-looking teenagers Twisting and Strolling through the week's biggest songs—if possible, also snagging a live act to perform on each show.

Because I was relatively young enough (26) to pull off the hosting gig among a bunch of teens and willing to work for next to nothing, Happy offered me the show. He even offered to let me put my name on it: Davey Brown's Music Town.

"Not 'Dave Brown'?" I asked.

"'Davey' is more fun!"

There was already a similar show on Channel 8, but it was on only Saturdays, and it was strictly top of the charts stuff—no local bands. Happy wanted live performances, and a show that aired two or three times a week, a kind of after-school thing.

It all sounded pretty good to me. "Where are we getting the dancers?"

"You kidding me, Davey? A chance to dance on TV? Announce it once, and we'll have to beat them back with a stick. Cy Davis will handle production, and Lorraine can get us some kids and book us some acts."

"Swell." I turned to leave Happy's office, then turned back at the door. "Uh, can Adam be put on camera duty?"

"Weinstein? Sure, if you want him."

Davey Brown's Music Town debuted on September 10, a Monday, at 4 in the afternoon, just in time for all the high schoolers to get home from school, hit the can, get a snack and settle in, but before Dad got home to commandeer the TV. We'd promo'ed the show for weeks, on our own airtime, with splashy print ads in the *Plain-Dealer* and yellow street fliers wantonly distributed downtown and tucked under the windshield wipers of cars on random streets.

In Philly, this was an established hit. In Cleveland, our first show was a teenage hellscape, a full hour mired in a can full of loud, squirming, malodorous sardines.

I came in at 3:15 p.m. to chaos and no podium. Studio B was our largest, but made considerably smaller after the cameras were placed and the sets were up—not just

shiny backdrops, but actual set pieces, cardboard skyscrapers and office buildings that mimicked the skyline of downtown Cleveland. We'd wanted enough kids to make it look like a nice big dance party. I figured 50 max, but Lorraine had crammed at least 75 teens into the room. They were noisy, smelly, talking, laughing, yelling, whooping, some crying, others mouthing obscenities, curious to see what they might be able to get on the air.

But time and tide, etc., etc. Four p.m. arrived, and the countdown commenced, audibly "…6…5…4…" then with silent fingers…3…2…1…Then our little theme motif, just a jazzy little riff, like a rough saxophone version of the intro to Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill." 15 seconds later, I dove in.

"Welcome, welcome to Davey Brown's Music Town!" I had barely begun to speak when I choked on something, the air thick and noxious around me. My voice sounded thin, remote, as if I was simultaneously speaking and listening through two soups cans on a string. "I'm your host, Davey Brown, and I sure am excited! We're trying something new here in Cleveland. Starting today, and each day, Monday through Friday, we're gonna play the tunes you love, and some new ones that'll soon be your favorites."

I could feel the kids encroaching, the push of chests and breasts against my back, a brush of hands on my ass, someone's leg crossing over mine, the sole of a saddle shoe, perhaps, overlapping my cordovan brogues. And everybody all still talking, buzzing like they were in a cafeteria line waiting on Johnny Marzetti and tepid applesauce. Adam peered around at me from Camera 1 and shrugged his shoulders.

"Quiet, gang! Quiet! We want the folks out there to hear what we're up to. And what are we up to? Well, we've got nonstop music, dancers doing the latest steps, and we've got a special performance from a great local band, Van Wells and the Velve-Teens, a little later. So find a place on the floor and give yourself some dancing room! Let's start off with 'Hound Dog' by Mr. Elvis Presley!"

Then the kids went nuts. One of them tried to dance with me, but I waved them off and retreated to a corner. It was too crowded for most of the teens to do anything very fancy with their moves, but a few tried. From "Hound Dog," we went to "Why do Fools Fall in Love," then to "Be-Bop-A-Lula," then we slowed it down for the couples' dances—"My Prayer," "The Great Pretender"—then we sped it up again, "Tutti-Frutti" and "Maybellene." The scenery swayed with vibration of stomping feet and the air moved around by the overload of humanity in the room. Two dancers attempting a swing move got too close to the back set pieces and brought down the Huron Building. Another guy with crazy elbows bumped into the Terminal Tower, but caught and righted it before it took out the back of the line for the Stroll.

Finally, during the last commercial break, Van Wells and the Velve-Teens positioned themselves on the dais. Four homely guys dressed in knit shirts and corduroys, not teens, not a shred of velvet (or velveteen, whatever that is) in sight. When the lights came back up, they went into the only song anybody knew from them, a modest local hit, "She's a Lady, Baby." The sound levels on the mics hadn't been adjusted right, the band barely audible against the chittering teenagers. At the chorus, it was *"Sheese a waydee, waydee, Sheese a waydee, waaaaaay-dee!"* And somehow the song went on much longer

than I thought, much longer than it was supposed to, so I ended up standing in front of them at 5 p.m., while they were still playing, to sign off the show. "*Sheese a way*—'See you tomorrow, kids! Same time, same place! It's been fun!'"

And…merciful god, we were out. The lights went down. The teenagers milled around like Herefords. Several assistants appeared and herded them to the exit. A couple moved toward me with autograph books, but I shook my head and moved fast in the other direction, toward Adam. He was still seated, leaning on the little railing around the bulky TK-10 camera.

"What the fuck was that?" I sputtered and launched my song list across the floor.

Adam said nothing.

"How bad was that? Was it terrible?"

"As my people say…" Adam ventured, "it was a little *fercockt*."

"I don't know what that means, but it sounds really bad."

"Look, first off, you need some crowd control. Those kids are like animals."

"Tell me about it. You weren't the one down here on the ground getting groped. Somebody farted before I even got a word out." I looked around. The room had emptied surprisingly quickly. "Where's Cy? Where's Lorraine? Are they not in charge of this fucking free-for-all?"

Adam laughed. "I don't know. Cy had a phone call or something. I haven't seen Lorraine."

"That's just great. I mean, look at this place! There's just not enough room! We needed half that number of kids! And do we really need three cameras in here?"

"You do if you want to keep your audience from falling asleep. Most of the show is the dancers. We gotta have the shots."

"I'm going to find Cy and Lorraine." I walked toward the door. *"Sheese a waydee, waydee."*

"What was that, Davey? I didn't get that."

"No. Nobody did."

Music Town, which aired on a Monday/Wednesday/Friday schedule, was still painful through the rest of that week, but as we ground through September, we started to see some daylight. Lorraine brought the number of dancers down to a manageable 30, 15 girls and 15 boys. Cy made arrangements for a painted backdrop and for a slim podium for me, in a safe spot, a dedicated corner of the set that no dancer could approach unbidden. We fixed the sound issues, but kept the three cameras. Adam was right about those.

Once we got the set-up fixed and the dancers figured out, we could play around a little bit with the format. We did a lot of theme shows. Our Halloween show was a big hit. We asked the kids to show up in costume, spun tunes like "That Old Black Magic," and featured Screamin' Jay Hawkins performing "I Put a Spell on You." We did Christmas and Valentine's specials. Local bands clamored to be on the show.

We had debuted to modest ratings, a mercy given the disastrous first show, but as we went along, we followed Philly's lead and grew the ratings steadily. By early 1957, I was getting mail from viewers, lots of requests to play certain songs or book certain

groups, demands to know the name of that dancer in the pink dress or the guy with the flattop and the dreamy smile, but also honest-to-God fanmail, from kids who never missed the show, from housewives who washed, folded, dusted and vacuumed to the music, and from a few seriously delusional individuals—a divorcee in Rocky River, a Euclid widow, an elementary education student at Ursuline College (photo enclosed, looked like a sweet kid)—proffering proposals of marriage. There were two independent Music Town fan clubs, one in Euclid and one in Rocky River, and our official one. Kids sent in 50 cents to get a Music Town poster and a cheap white cotton bandana where floated a cutout photo of my neckless head, a train on a track made from a musical staff with notes and treble clefs, and the words, 'Davey Brown sez: Next stop, Music Town!'.

Finally, my big life.

I was called into Happy's office after a Friday show in October. The show had just passed its one-year air anniversary. Happy was sitting at his desk when I entered, two letters side by side in front of him.

"Sit down," he said.

"More fan mail? Who do I get to marry today? Marilyn Monroe?"

"No. This isn't exactly fan mail."

The look on his face quashed the smile on mine immediately. "Jesus, Happy, what is it?"

"We received these two letters over the last week, and what's in them worries me, frankly."

"OK. What's in them?"

"This one," Happy lifted the corner of the letter on his right, written in longhand over the entire page, "says that the writer witnessed you walking along 1300s block of East 9th Street at night recently, arm in arm with a dark-haired man. Apparently, you were intoxicated and…let's just say a bit too familiar with this gentleman."

"Too familiar?"

"Kissing, David."

"No, Happy. That couldn't have been me."

"And this one," Happy continued, gesturing to the letter on his left, typewritten, brief, "asks if the station is quite sure it wants a homosexual to host its most popular afternoon program and…" He turned the letter around to read from it. "…and be in a position of influence and camaraderie with our impressionable youngsters.'"

I leaned forward to look at the signatures on both letters. I didn't recognize either name.

"I don't know where this is coming from. I mean, isn't it just possible…that this is sour grapes from one of the other stations? I mean, we're tops in that late afternoon slot."

"I don't know, and I probably won't know. I'm certainly not going to contact either of these people."

"Look, I have a girlfriend. She and I, we've dated on and off, for a long, long time. But she lives in Columbus, see? She went to school there, and now she lives there, and I just don't see her that often, and—"

"David, that will do. We need to deal with the matter at hand."

"Who else has seen these letters?"

"Well, the typewritten one came addressed to the station manager, so Julie opened it for me, as she does all my correspondence. I'm sure she read it. She reads everything."

"And the other one?"

"That one came to Cy. Lorraine opens his stuff, so they've both seen it. Cy brought it to me."

"Well, that's just swell. So anybody can write anything about me, and I just have to take it?"

For a moment, we sat in silence. Then Happy leaned forward in his chair. "I like you, David. I always have. You've done everything I've ever asked of you. Always a hard worker. And you are good at what you do. Truly."

"You're not gonna fire me…over a couple of letters? Mr. Clark?" Since he'd chosen to revert to calling me David, I felt the need to go back to my pre-talent way of addressing him.

Happy sat back in his chair, and nibbled on one of his thumbnails. I waited, my eyes avoiding the toxic letters, instead once more seeking out the details of his desk, the square green marble pen holder, the photos of females now looking arch and accusatory in their smart chrome frames, the gray in-box, the Spanish sword.

"Here's what we do," he said finally.

Happy's big idea: take a page from the book of those Hollywood studio publicity departments. When one of their stars was suspected of unwholesome behavior, knocking

up a 17-year-old waitress, say, or fucking one of the young men who worked as set assistants (or even, as I'd heard from somebody somewhere, a set assistant's pet collie)—when that happened, you had to trot out a new narrative. For men in my sort of situation, you invented a girlfriend, or at least a series of dates with a girlfriend. And not any girlfriend, a real dish, preferably a celebrity of some stripe, someone of sufficient pulchritude to convince the public of your rippling, throbbing, unbridled heterosexuality. God help me. Then you got some photographers to take some photos, you made sure those photos ran someplace in the local paper, and bing, bang, boom…the problem just might go away.

The Cleveland version of this set-up was to make up a lack of star power with quantity. So, instead of concocting some long-term romance with a shapely actress, I got a series of dates with a sampler of local honeys. It would be better that way, Happy reasoned. Better to be thought a playboy and eligible to all ladies (including potentially, one's viewers), than tied down to one person who might, at some point, wonder why the relationship never progressed beyond some highly visible kissing and hugging.

First up, was the ample-toothed, compact-figured Miss Sav-Big Markets, Aileen Boudreaux. She was the very picture of supermarket beauty queen, blessed with a milk-and-red meat robustness, blonde hair kept shiny from shampoo on sale in aisle 10, teeth toothpaste-white enough to rival those of my friend the Hawk's, and the kind of superior posture required to keep her Sav-Big sash securely on her shoulder and centered between her firm, reasonably-sized breasts. Our first date was at Louie's Italian on Fifth Street, set up by Happy and the Sav-Big folks, who were one of our largest advertising accounts. I

still didn't own a damn car, so I had to borrow my dad's LaSalle to pick her up. I met her at the front door of her apartment and handed her the pink roses Julie, Happy's secretary, had purchased that afternoon. I wore a gray suit; Aileen was resplendent in a low-cut shimmery pink dress and white high heels. I wondered briefly if Julie had coordinated the flower color with Aileen ahead of time.

Louie's was a nice spot, an Italian place out of Central Casting, red-and-white checkered tablecloths and the lit candles dripping wax onto the tops of their wine bottle holders. A cheesy violinist who dressed like a gondolier and wandered around in the spaces between tables, sawing out "Funiculi, Funicula." But it was a see-and-be-seen place, so a logical choice for first date. We'd been seated only about five minutes when a man with a camera happened by. He did a very convincing double-take. Then in a booming voice: "Say, you're Davey Brown of Channel 14, aren't you? Host of Davey Brown's Music Town?"

A few people at nearby tables turned around, a couple stretched their necks to see what was going on.

"Why, yes," I said.

"Isn't this funny? I was taking photos for the *Plain-Dealer* nearby…and just thought I'd stop by for a bite. Louie's lasagna is the best in town!"

"So we've heard…"

"Say, can I take a photo? For the paper?"

"You bet. That OK, Aileen?"

Aileen was smiling broadly. "You bet!"

“Lean in, kids! Smile!” A flash of white. Another. “Hey honey, how do you spell your name?”

After the photographer left, I started looking at the menu. “Want some wine?”

“Oh no, I don’t drink. Water’s fine.”

“Well, I want wine.” I ordered a glass of Chianti, then crunched on one of the breadsticks the waiter had left us.

“Weird, huh?” Aileen said without taking her eyes off her menu.

“What?”

“This arranged date. Kind of old-timey, isn’t it?”

“If it was really old timey, we’d have a chaperone, I guess. But yeah, it is a little weird.” Also weird: I hadn’t until that moment given one thought to what anybody from Sav-Big Markets had told Aileen regarding to this date. Did she know she was a beard? Did she think it was on the up-and-up?

“Well,” she said and put down her menu, “the Sav-Big people have me go to all kinds of events and things. I meet a lot of people, but it is hard to meet men, you know, for dates. So I really appreciated them setting this up. Especially with such a handsome TV personality.”

“Yeah…” So she thought it was on the up-and-up. Fuck. “You are…very lovely…too.” You are quite the smoothie, Davey Brown.

The wine came. I drank it down and ordered another. And it just kind of went like that. Pleasant pleasantries for the evening. I took her home early—no kiss at her door, but

I made sure, as Happy had instructed, to ask for another date before I left her. She said yes. I got home around 10.

"How was your date with Ailing Butthole?" Adam asked.

I groaned. "Aileen…Boudreaux. She's perfectly lovely. Jesus, this is miserable."

"Yes," Adam said, "no doubt, for all three of us. But gee golly, I can't wait to see the photo!"

Aileen and I went out three more times. Each date had to be somewhat high profile, so that at least one photographer Happy had paid off could catch up with us. That made anything like seeing a movie out of the question. I took her to the Goodnight Jazz Club on Miller Street. This time, two picture-takers approached. Aileen squealed with delight. "Why, these guys follow you around like a pack of dogs, don't they?"

"Just can't shake 'em." I kissed her chastely on the cheek for these photos, much to the delight of the folks around us. Hoots, whoops and applause erupted from a few scattered places around the room. Aileen giggled and put her hand on my thigh under the table. The rest of evening, I had my arm around her, and we enjoyed the music, but there was only another light kiss at the door when I dropped her off.

Then, after our third date, she took control of matters. We were standing on her front stoop. She grasped my face with both hands, drew me to her and planted a great big lippy, lengthy kiss. Like a piece of thick velvet rubbing against my lips, pleasant, soft, but nothing that stirred me down below like Adam did.

When she'd finished, she looked up at me with her eyes half-closed and one of those dreamy smiles like Sandra Dee or Debbie Reynolds would get in a movie, a soft-focus scene where they feel like they've crossed some sort of threshold, and shown the too shy or too polite guy in front of them how they really feel. It's OK, the look said, I feel something too. Don't hold back. Let's fall in love. Then the music—always achy-sweet violin music—would crescendo, and they'd kiss again, and it would be love.

All I could think was, How do I negotiate one more date with this woman, so I can go on to the next one, and the next? "Aileen," I started, "I really like you. You're very nice."

"I really like you too. In fact, I think—"

"It's just that…" I faltered.

"Oh. Maybe you don't want to see me any more?"

"It's not that, it's just…I just want to be a casual dater at this point. You see, I'm so busy with the TV show, and all."

"Davey, no one's asking you to do anything drastic. But I want a boyfriend! A real boyfriend! I want romance!"

"Uh-huh. I understand, I do. It's just…I want to go out and have fun with a nice girl and…I guess…not get tied down."

"Oh, I see. You're just looking for fun…for sex, then it's on to the next girl?"

"Sex? How did you—?"

"Forget it! I'm not easy, Davey! I'm not 'fun' like that!"

No, you were not fun at all, Miss Ailing Butthole.

So, my first strategic girlfriend lasted three dates. Not the four we had projected, but that wasn't the end of the world. I went on to Happy's next candidate. Lorraine at the station had a niece, Daisy Grant, who worked as a model for Higbee's Department Store. She was, as a matter of course, slender, beautiful and tall, and she was willing to meet me for dinner.

The day before, Lorraine had placed a copy of the *Plain-Dealer* in front of me. To the right of the page, a large ad for Higbee's, a stunning brunette in some sort of smooth satin suit, one gloved hand placed jauntily on her hip, the other raised in a casual greeting to some unseen friend. "Wow," I said. "You'd think a woman like this would have men beating down her door."

Lorraine chuckled. "A few have. But most, I think, are too intimidated. Some men are like that, threatened by beauty."

"But drawn to it, too."

"Most men are insecure, Davey. Lots of them think somebody else—somebody richer, more handsome, more accomplished, more, shall we say, gifted?—has already beat them to her. So they don't even try."

"Well, that's too bad for her."

Lorraine smiled cryptically. "I don't know. She seems happy. She's quite a confident girl. Spends her free time with friends, off to the movies or on weekends away with her friends." Lorraine picked up the paper and folded it. "I understand they go

camping someplace down near Columbus. Can you imagine those glamorous creatures snoozing away in pup tents?"

"Not really." I thought for moment. "How old is she, anyway?"

"25—not too much younger than you."

Lorraine never mentioned the reason for the arranged dates to me. I guess she didn't have to—she'd seen at least one of the notes Happy had shown me.

For our first date, Daisy and I ate at La Gallerie, a preposterously expensive restaurant downtown (the station was footing the bill for these outings, thank god). She looked different from the ad Lorraine had shown me. There, her brown-black hair had been styled for maximum glamour, in an above the shoulder bob that swooshed around to one side of her face and she'd been wearing dark lipstick and heavy eye makeup. She looked younger, fresher for our date, less made-up and her hair less teased and curled, so it hung straight, just past her shoulders, slightly curled up at the ends.

I ordered us a couple of drinks and launched into my regularly scheduled small talk. "Are you from Cleveland, originally?" I asked.

"Yes, born and raised, I'm afraid. My dad is Lorraine's brother…but you probably know that.'

It hadn't even occurred to me to ask.

"You mind if I ask you a question?" she said.

"Go ahead."

“My aunt told me that you’re…you were Bradley Zombrowski’s brother. The little kid who went missing all those years ago.”

My stomach dropped. “I am. Uh, what’s your question?”

“I don’t know…” she said and looked around the restaurant. “I guess it’s just that…you see, I was 8 when that happened, and I remember it.”

“You do?”

“Sure. I remember hearing the news reports and my parents talking. I remember them warning me to be careful outside. I remember how sad and scary it was.”

“Me too.” I picked at the edge of the menu with my finger.

“And I just wanted to know, what that was like?”

“What was it like? Well, it was pretty goddamned awful.”

“I can imagine.” She readjusted the napkin on her lap. “Or maybe I can’t. What I’m driving at is…look at you now! How did you manage to get past something like that?”

“What makes you think I’m past it?”

“I-I just mean…well, you’re on TV, doing well for yourself.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be short. It’s just…it’s the kind of thing that stays with you—changes you—forever. And if I’m doing well at all, it’s probably dumb luck more than anything else.”

“I think you don’t give yourself enough credit.” She picked up the menu, peered at it for a moment, then set it down again. She looked around for the waiter with our

drinks, then back at me. “I think it’s quite admirable to go through something like that, then go on and make something of yourself.”

“I like to think that at least a part of it is to honor my brother’s memory.” God, that sounded awful and achingly pretentious—like I was a fucking senator or a Supreme Court judge or something. You’re a glorified deejay in Cleveland, Ohio, you bastard. Get over yourself.

“Yes, I see. That’s lovely.” She frowned. “I’m sorry. This is a pretty bad way to start a date, isn’t it? Prying, dredging up bad memories. Aunt Lorraine’s always said I was too curious for my own good.”

“Oh well, so much for first-date small talk, Miss Grant.”

She laughed. “I really am sorry.”

“No, it’s OK. To be honest, I’m lousy at small talk.” The waiter finally dropped off our martinis. I seized mine and took a long drink. “But after all the crying and the beating of breasts and the gnashing of teeth, you still have to live your life, you know?”

“I do. I know Aunt Lorraine has always felt that way.”

“Oh? How is that?”

“Didn’t she tell you? She’s always so tight lipped. Her husband died in a car accident, in 1948, just two weeks after they were married. So, you know, she’s known her share of heartache.”

“She never said.”

The photographers found us again, two of them, and snapped away. Daisy and I raised our martini glasses, leaned in toward each other and smiled. I actually enjoyed dinner that night—more accurately, a dinner and a half. Daisy, continually dealing with the tyranny of fitting into the clothing sample sizes she sashayed around in, ate very little. But she downed two more martinis.

We piled into the LaSalle and I turned to her. "I'm sorry, but I have an early morning tomorrow. OK if I take you home now?"

"Of course, of course." She stretched her legs in front of her and lit a cigarette. "You can cut the act, you know. You're doing me as big a favor as I'm doing you."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"This whole deal. I get it. I'm in on it."

"What did Lorraine tell you exactly?"

"Well, she said that you don't really go out all that much, that you haven't had too many chances to meet eligible women close to your own age."

"OK, so—"

"But I didn't buy that. Not really."

"You didn't?"

"Davey, you're a good looking man. And we're all busy. I figure you've got about the same number of opportunities to meet eligible women as I do to meet eligible men."

"Which is…?"

"A lot, my friend. A lot."

I laughed out loud, in spite of myself. This was all so ridiculous.

Daisy was laughing now too, and smoke escaped between her lips in little spurts. “You were so busy pretending to be interested in women, you neglected to find out if I was interested in men!”

I stopped laughing. “You’re not?”

“Not one goddamn bit!” Daisy howled. “Got no use for cock!”

I started in again, outright gaffawing now. So hard that tears came. My road on the other side of the windshield bleared a bit, just a bit, then snapped into sharp clarity. “Well, that’s just hunky-dory! What a great first date!”

We went out half a dozen more times, including a very high profile, much photographed evening at the Cleveland Radio and Television Awards ceremony held under the Moorish arches of the Alcazar Hotel. Even better, we became friends—real friends. She was someone I didn’t have to pretend around, someone I could even take Adam to visit.

I’d have been content to be regularly photographed with Daisy out on the town—even if we’d part company as soon as the photographers left—but Happy wanted me to have one other special date, this one with my little Ursuline College sweetheart, Mary Elizabeth Farrelly. Shaky ground to be sure—the girl was 19—but this date was less about touting my rollicking heterosexuality and more about making myself accessible to my loving fans.

I had to write first, to the sisters of the Ursuline Convent and ask permission to take Mary Elizabeth out, purportedly in gratitude for her earlier proposal. The sisters were amenable, but the women's dean insisted on a chaperone.

I picked Mary Elizabeth up at the door of the campus's main building. She was short and cute, with reddish brown hair worn short, a round face and round brown eyes. She wore a modest blue shirtwaist dress with a matching head band and carried a small white handbag. Standing beside her, the tallest nun I'd ever seen—taller than Daisy the model, taller than me—clad in her full-length habit. She wore gold wire-rim glasses, and had a turned-down tortoise mouth. There was a silver crucifix hanging from her neck, and she carried a handbag, hers a shapeless crochet number in Pepto-Bismol pink. Hellooooo, ladies!

We had arranged for a meal at a diner, but didn't have to worry about photographers stopping by between bites. This being more of a public relations thing for the station, Happy had sent over a photographer early and we posed for photos outside the eatery before we went in.

Mary Elizabeth turned out to be bolder on paper than in person. She asked questions, like she was interviewing me for the school newspaper or a term paper. How did I like hosting Music Town? When did I start becoming interested in music? What were my favorite songs, favorite dances, favorite bands that performed? Those questions satisfactorily answered, she sat gaping at me with her mouth half open between bites of her burger and fries and sips of her malted.

My real date that night was Sister Mary Michael, whose turtle frown upended when she started to talk. She was a black-and-white, giant panda chatterbox, and she too loved Music Town. She wanted to tell me all about the kinds of songs she loved best, and what she hoped we'd play on upcoming shows. She also discussed Ursuline College with me, her students, the state of education in our modern world, and the future of the Catholic Church.

After dinner, we saw "Decision at Sundown," a not-very-good western with the handsome cowboy idol Randolph Scott. I'd have been much happier with an action or horror picture—"Zero Hour!," which was doing great business, or "I Was a Teenage Frankenstein." Halfway through the movie, Sister Mary Michael rose. "Mary Elizabeth," she said in clear whisper. "I am going to the women's lavatory. I will return shortly."

As soon as the Sister had cleared out, Mary Elizabeth giggled. She said something that sounded like "Onion wag."

"What?"

The girl moved in, her lips nearly touching my ear. "She's…on…the…rag! I think that whole bag of hers is filled with Kotex pads!"

I smiled, and it kind of froze on my face. I wasn't sure how to respond to that.

Mary Elizabeth took the opportunity to lay her head on my shoulder. "Oh, I wanted to see 'Pal Joey' instead."

I shifted in chair and started to look over my shoulder. "Oh yeah, that's…that looks like a good one."

“It’s Sister,” the girl hissed. “She adores Westerns! I think she has the hots for Randolph Scott!”

Who doesn’t? I thought, but didn’t say.

Mary Elizabeth turned her face toward me, much too close now. “Can’t we go out again, Davey?” She was getting the soft-focus, eyes half-closed look. “I’m *aching* to see Peyton Place! It comes out next month…I could sneak out and meet you! Oh, please!” Just for a minute, she reminded me of Josie, that sweetness mixed with desperate enthusiasm, where everything she wanted to seem like a matter of life and death. It made me want to give her a Valium.

I kept looking over my shoulder, and as soon as I saw the top of the Sister’s headgear at the back of the room, I shrugged Mary Elizabeth to an upright position. “She’s coming back…you shouldn’t…”

We made it through the rest of the movie, then I deposited the women back on campus, at the door where I’d picked them up.

“Thank you so much for such a lovely evening,” Sister Mary Michael said. “It’s been wonderful. I hope Mary Elizabeth realizes what a lucky girl she is!” For a minute, I thought the nun would make me promise to call her. Instead she placed a shoulder on Mary Elizabeth’s shoulder and turned her toward me. “Say thank you to Mr. Brown, dear.”

“Thank you, Mr. Brown. It’s been a lovely evening!”

“Thank you, Mary Elizabeth. And Sister. I hope our paths cross again…someday.”

Margo Thompson made prominent mention of my newfound social life during the gossip portion of her afternoon ladies' chat show, which translated into a couple of well-placed squibs in the *Plain-Dealer* social column. I guess it worked. I don't know if any more letters were received, just that I didn't hear about any more letters. My mother called me a couple of times, thoroughly confused, though not, I noticed, displeased. Now that I was a big celebrity, I told her airily, I was taking time to enjoy the perks of my profession, living it up while I was still young enough to do it.

Somehow, through the extended charade of Friday and Saturday nights, Adam did not leave. Was he home those nights? Was he alone? He caught a movie, he told me, or went to see his folks, or somebody he went to high school with. I believed him. But I was scared. The logistical hassles, the reasons against being with me were piling up.

He and I were five years in, more or less. After the earlier indiscretion, we had redoubled our efforts to be careful in public (meaning around pretty much any other human being). No more drunken nuzzling after hours on street corners, a manly distance maintained at all times.

CHAPTER NINE

Surf

(1961)

I considered it a truly Herculean achievement, how Adam and I kept true to our original arrangement after the scare in ‘57. The tiny apartment on Hamilton Street was our refuge, the only regular place Adam and I could be ourselves. We avoided talking about it with anyone, asked only a few people over, like Daisy and a couple of her camping buddies. We took advantage of the alleyway entrance, which cut down on people who might have nothing better to do than monitor our comings and goings. The small life, within those walls, was the realest thing in my life, the compensation for all the bullshit that went on outside.

In the station’s personnel files, my home of record had always been the apartment. Adam had used a cousin’s address—the thinking was that my records were far more likely to be scrutinized than his. And we’d started early on, when we were first living together, staggering our daily arrival to and departure from the station. I’d stop for

coffee or a paper, while Adam went in; he'd linger with his camera equipment or shoot the breeze with Mac after work while I headed out the door, or some variation of that. We didn't even have to think about it anymore.

Mr. and Mrs. Weinstein knew their son, knew the arrangement, more or less, and kept their distance for the most part. They brought Bubbe over exactly twice in nearly eight years, at the old lady's insistence. They did graciously invite me for Passover Seder each spring, and I generally joined them to feast on latkes and sour cream on one of the nights of Hanukkah.

As for my family, I might as well have lived in Timbuktu, or Dayton. Mom and Dad never asked to visit, which didn't surprise me all that much. I would go to them for lunch on Sundays, maybe see them once in a while during the week and for birthdays and some holidays. But not Christmas. Not for years, anyway.

Since 1940, my parents hadn't spent even one Christmas in Cleveland. They always went away, first with just me, then with me and Josie, to Uncle Champ's in Toledo or out to see Aunt Pat and Uncle Bob in St. Louis. But for the last 10 years, I'd stayed put in Cleveland. I usually had to work some portion of the holidays, so I would make myself dinner and see a movie by way of celebration. The first year I knew him, Adam had informed me that this was remarkably close to a traditional Jewish Christmas, and ever since, we'd spent part of each December 24 and/or December 25 going to the movies, then out for Peking duck and moo goo gai pan.

The sole bright spot in my family was Josie. She was no dummy, and she was a masterful snooper, so I was sure she'd heard Mom and Dad talking. When she was 15,

she asked me, point blank, if I liked men. We were at my folks' house in Euclid, in the back yard, waiting for Mom to call us in for Sunday dinner. She was sitting in the tire swing that was suspended from a large oak. I was laying on the grass, looking up at perfectly blue sky.

"What would you do," I asked her in response "if I told you I liked men? Would you wig out? Or tell me I'm disgusting and that you don't want me to come around any more?"

"No, Davey. I'd never do that. I…I mean, do you?"

I sat up and looked at her. "Yes."

"And that guy, Adam, your friend…is he your *boy*friend?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"That's it? Oh?"

"I mean, what do you want me to say? I'm not going to go blabbing it to all my friends, if that's what you're worried about."

"I was hoping you wouldn't."

"Well, I won't."

"Does it make you feel weird?"

"I don't know. I mean, I don't hate you or anything. It's not like I won't want to be around you…or Adam."

"That's good to know."

"I mean, honestly? It's kind of hard to picture you dating a woman. It would seem out of place somehow."

"I have, you know. Plenty of times."

"I know. But I guess I mean, being romantic. Kissing. Getting married. Having babies." She blushed.

"I love you, Miss Josephine. And I always try to tell you the truth."

"I love you, too, Davey. Thanks. And…and I hope Adam is always nice to you."

"Aw, he's waaaayyyy nicer than I am," I laughed. "And smarter, and better looking, don't you think?"

Josie jumped off the tire swing. "You think he needs a sister?"

Adam and I stole away for occasional weekends to New York or Philly, big enough places that we could be together without feeling self-conscious. A couple of times we even checked out some bars for people like us. They were fun, friendly—not nearly as nefarious as I'd imagined. I'd pictured surreptitious hangouts, secret passwords required for entry, leering figures skulking in shadowy corners, sad piano music playing in the background. The bars we went to were low-key, the music either jazz or rock n' roll. They had reputations, sure. People in the neighborhoods knew which bars were for the queers. Once in a while, a bartender at Chevy's in New York told us, a tourist or a newcomer would wander in. Usually within a half-hour, they'd figure it out and leave.

Daisy had told me about a similar bar in Cleveland, Mister's downtown, but going there was out of the question. The risk of being recognized was too great, not worth it.

Ours was a carefully tended façade. We presented ourselves to the world as each other's best friends, confirmed bachelors playing the field, taking in ball games together, eating lunch, walking around town and shooting the shit. Nothing special to see here, folks. Keep moving.

During the late spring and summer—the warmer the better—Adam and I liked to walk along the lake at Edgewater Beach. There, one late May morning, smoky clouds huddled over the water and a steady wind tugged at our jackets and pants legs, sure signs of a storm in the offing. Adam carried a new Leica camera, on loan from his dad's store, and every so often he stopped and took a little footage of the water and the clouds, or sometimes of me. A little way ahead, four people were in the water. Two stood, waist-deep, each holding onto the sides of long, white oblong surfboards. Two others were laying on their boards. Each had his head turned toward the incoming swells, whipped up by the stiff breeze coming from the west.

"Jesus, are those guys surfing?" Adam choked out a laugh. "Good luck."

"Looks like somebody caught 'Gidget' at the theatre."

The four men considered the waves for few more moments. Then a swell noticeably larger than its predecessors eased toward them. The two guys lying on their boards started to paddle. As the crest of the wave caught up to them, they raised themselves to wobbly crouching positions. The wave lifted them three feet or so, then transported them to shore, a ride of no more than 6 or 7 seconds. One man shouted, "Shit, that was fun!" The other shouted "Shit," but that was all. They upended their boards in the sand, and took seat on some towels already laid out on the beach. The other guys, the

ones who'd been standing by, lowered their boards onto the water, turned their heads and waited for the next acceptable swell.

Adam and I approached the two on the towels. "Does this…work?" I asked. "How does this work?"

The chunkier of the two men laughed. "It doesn't work all that well. We're just having a little fun. Kip out there," he pointed to one of the men still in the water. "He's trying to teach Pete and me."

"Well, it looks…fun," Adam kindly put in.

"It is, kind of. But it's ain't easy. You gotta be patient."

"Water's colder than shit," Pete finally said.

"I bet." A whoop from the water made me look back in time to see the two other men float through a short trip to the shore, a longer ride, and smoother, than that of their compadres. The one I guessed was Kip picked up his board and approached us. He was a real Tab Hunter type, tall, dusty blond, chestnut-skinned, muscular. Not-Pete threw him a towel. "These guys think we're crazy, Kip."

"These guys are right." He laughed lightly and extended a hand. "How're you doing?"

"Hey there. I'm Dave, and this is Adam."

Hand shaking all around.

"I guess you've met Pete and Mike."

"Sort of."

“And that sorry sack of shit back there is my brother, Douggie.” He motioned toward a shorter, slighter, even blonder version of himself. “You guys interested in surfing?”

“Not really,” I said. “I mean,” and I looked at Adam, assuming I spoke for him too, “we’ve never tried.” Somehow, we’d never discussed surfing in all our years together.

“It’s fun. You should.”

“I suppose. I’ve seen it done on TV, and in the movies. I just never figured to see it in Ohio.”

Kip spread his arms. “This little puddle’s all we got.” He motioned to the white and red cooler sitting by Mike. “Sit down. Have a beer with us.”

We sipped some Stroh’s and Kip proclaimed his personal Gospel of Surf. He’d moved out to California in 1954, after high school, at the invitation of an uncle who thought the tall, good-looking kid might get some work in pictures. Kip proved talentless as an actor, but he loved California. He waited tables in Malibu, and after work, hung out at the beach. There he discovered the big waves, the curling, cresting, never ending arcs of blue glass. He caught the surfing bug after watching some of the guys out there who really knew what they were doing. He never got good—really good—but he loved trying and he got the basics down.

Disheartening then, on many counts, when he was obliged to come back to Cleveland last year to help Douggie take care of his mother, who had been diagnosed

with emphysema. But he came back still wanting to surf, on whatever water was available, with whoever was available.

"Pete here and me were tight with Kip in high school," Mike said. "He looked us up when he got back from the west coast, and all he could talk about was riding those big monsters." He took a swig from his beer bottle. "He made us come out here with him. We're shitty at it, but it's kind of fun to try."

"You guys need to surf!" Kip announced.

Adam considered the water for a moment. "Well, maybe…"

Mike sat up a little straighter and narrowed his eyes at me. "You know, there's something about you that looks familiar to me. Do you…do you play on TV?"

"I do, actually. I'm Davey Brown."

"Davey Brown? As in, Davey Brown's Music Town on Channel 14?"

"In the flesh."

"Hot damn, Kipper! This guy's a celebrity!"

Douggie leaned in. "Love your show, man. Been watchin' it for years."

"Years and years, I'm sure," Adam murmured. "It's been on for years and years and years."

"Sure," Mike said with conviction. "'Cause it's a good show. You play some good tunes on there."

"And what about you?" Kip grinned at Adam. "What do you do?"

"I'm in TV, too. Just not on TV. I run the camera so Mr. Davey looks good."

“Hell, that’s a sweet gig right there,” Douggie said. “You get to point the camera at all them good-lookin’ chicks on Davey’s show. The ones in the tight skirts and those tops that show just that peek of stomach when they’re dancin’.”

“You gettin’ any of that tail, Davey?” Mike asked. “’Cause them girls must be all over you.”

“Nah, too young,” I said, almost too quickly. I glanced over at Adam, who had crossed his arms and was staring at the sand, smiling. “There’re some cute ones, though.”

Adam looked up. “Lemme tell ya, fellas, he’s gotta fight ‘em off. It’s all, *Oh Davey baby, I’d just love to do the hand jive in your pants if you give me some camera time on tomorrow’s show!”*

Thunderous guffaws all around. All right, Weinstein, I deserved that. “That water must be pretty cold this time of year,” I said.

“Colder than shit,” Pete said.

Kip waved away the comment. “Aw, it’s not so bad. Livens up the blood! Pete’s being a fucking titty baby.” Pete eyed the waves, morose, but said nothing. “Besides,” Kip continued, “my people come from Sweden. We don’t mind a little cold water! We got Viking blood in us.”

“So, you guys come here on the regular?” Adam asked.

“No sense in it. Unless the waves are this big—or bigger, like before a storm or something—there’s not much surfing to be had.”

“Then how do you—”

“You watch the lake.”

Adam chuckled. “Watch the lake, huh? You guys have jobs and all, I presume?”

“Oh, you bet,” Kip replied. “Mike and Pete work on cars at Lester’s Automotive in Lakewood. Douggie and I work construction, so we’re outside a lot. We keep an eye out for good waves. And I stay on top of the weather, too.”

“Well, I gotta hand it to you,” I said. “My people are Poles, but I’m not one for cold water.”

“No problem, brother,” Kip laughed. “Come when it’s a little warmer. Maybe you’ll see us here. And maybe we can coax you out on a board.”

“I don’t know.”

“Aw, we’re easy here, man. Just come. If you don’t want to surf, don’t surf. Sit on the beach and shoot the shit. We’re just here to have fun.”

Adam and I stayed for a bit longer, watching Kip and Douggie have another go in the modest surf. I liked the feel of this. None of these guys seemed to give a shit about much of anything except being outside in the sun and the water. It all seemed free and open, easy in a way that too little else outside our apartment seemed to be.

At 7 a.m. on a Friday, about a week after Memorial Day, the receptionist handed me a yellow telephone message slip when Adam and I walked in the door. “He’s called twice, apparently,” she said. “Once last night, after you left for the day. Cindy took that note. And he called this morning about 20 minutes ago. He said exactly the same thing both times, so you’re only getting one slip.”

The message, terse as a telegram: *Storm coming. Waves should be good Saturday morning. Meet you at Edgewater. Bring towels. Beer not unwelcome.—Kip*

Kip had declined to leave a phone number with either receptionist at the station, and Adam and I had no precise understanding of what "Saturday morning" meant. 5 a.m.? 11 a.m.? We split the difference and got to Edgewater at 8. Kip and Douggie were there already. No sign of Mike or Pete.

"There's our big Kahuna and his trusty sidekick," Kip shouted from the sand. "Thought you'd never get here."

"Good day, gentlemen," I said. "Hey Kip, you should have left us a number to call you, or at least given us a solid time."

"The waves, man," Kip murmured. "We're here when the waves are up. *That's* the time."

"That's great." Adam tossed his towel on the sand. "But I'm still a little fuzzy on the whole wave business."

Douggie laughed and laid his board on the sand. "We ain't got no phone, man."

"Kip? No phone?"

"No." Kip gave a Douggie a nasty look. "Didn't pay the bill. I'll get that taken care of."

"Then how—?"

"Called you from a payphone. I'll take care of it." Kip tucked his board under his arm. "But just now, we got some waves to surf. C'mon, Mr. T.V. star."

I went with Kip out to the water. Adam followed with Douggie.

I know everybody says this about everything, but truly, surfing is much harder than it looks. Just balancing on the board was a major obstacle, though the cold water gave me plenty of motivation to stay on top. Eventually we got up and could stay up, sort of. Herky-jerky, looking like the arthritic chimpanzee I'd once been compared to, I kept my balance and rode a bit of a wave for a good three seconds…maybe four.

Adam, being a little shorter and bandy-legged, had a better time. I figured his center of gravity was lower, which made him more stable on the board. He rode kind of a big wave, four feet or so, all the way in to shore.

"Yee haw, that was a little bit of all right! Let's do it again!" he crowed to Douggie, who had floated in nearby.

"Sure you're not getting too cold?"

"I'm fucking freezing," Adam laughed. "Let's do it again!"

After a couple more attempts to get out and back to shore and repeated falls in the water, I was turning blue. The wind was picking up, raising serious goose bumps on my wet skin. "We got Blatz!" I called out to the water. I wrapped my towel around my shoulders, took a seat and opened one of the brown bottles. Truly, there was nothing like a mid-morning beer to put things in perspective. Or to avoid perspective altogether.

The other guys came up on the beach then. We sat without much conversation, drank our beer, watched the stone-gray clouds develop a fringe of charcoal on their undersides. I felt a drop of rain on my head, then my arm.

"Hey guys," Adam said. "This is a blast. We gotta do this again real soon."

"You bet. You'll know when to find us." Kip downed the rest of his bottle and motioned to Douggie. The men picked up their towels and boards. "Watch the winds."

Regrettably, I mentioned our morning to Josie.

"You what? You *surfed*?"

"We did. Adam and me. These guys…out at Edgewater, they showed us how."

"You did not!"

"We did!"

"This is completely and utterly unfair! I've seen Gidget three times! Have you?"

"Er, no."

"And I worship Sandra Dee! I mean, she's my idol!"

"That's great, Josie—"

"Davey, you have to take me next time. You simply have to!"

"Well, maybe…"

"And Muriel. You have to take Muriel, too."

"I do, huh?"

"Well, of course. She would murder me if I went and she didn't. And…something you didn't know. She actually has her own surfboard."

"So she knows how to surf?"

"No, but she's a lucky duck. Her dad's into woodworking, and he knows she loves Gidget, so he made her a surfboard! He even painted flowers on it. She keeps it in her room!"

"That's terrific. But I don't know if I want you guys out there."

"You think it's dangerous?"

"No. Not really. But the water's pretty cold and it's not the cleanest."

"I know that. Why else?"

"These guys we've seen on the beach…they're a little…skeevy."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know…rough around the edges, I guess. They work construction. And they're a lot older than you."

"Geez, Davey, I'm not going to date them. I just want to try surfing."

"We'll see, Miss Josephine. We'll see."

We watched the weather. We consulted Stan Kershaw, the weather guy at the station. The next two storms came on weekdays, which was no good with our work schedules. Josie and Muriel were more than willing to skip classes, of course, but we let those opportunities go.

Finally, something was forecast to come in on a Sunday night, the remnants of a tropical depression pushing up from the south, or so said Stan. Early Sunday afternoon, we headed to Edgewater. We were met with an empty beach, steel clouds overhead and a lake full of whitecaps.

For the next half hour, the arthritic chimpanzee, the boyfriend and the Gidget twins took turns trying to balance on a pink surfboard about half the size of Kip's. Muriel's dad had painted a bunch of big daisies and roses and the word "SURF!" on the

top, just in case you forgot what you were supposed to be doing with this floral pink monstrosity. Only Adam and Josie had any luck at all, up once or twice on the modest waves, and only Adam for an entire ride onto shore. I had already given up and taken a seat on the beach when I heard a voice, Mike's voice, in my ear. "That's a real pretty board you guys got there."

I turned and this time it was the whole gang again—Kip, Douggie, Pete and Mike.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" I asked. "I though you guys liked to get out here early. We were watching the waves."

"Had a few too many cocktails last eve," Kip said. "Then we had to take Mom to Mass."

The sight of the four men with the tall, official-looking boards was too much for the girls. They ran up from the water.

"Oooh!" Muriel said. "Nice boards."

"Well, thank you, ladies." Douggie had that smooth, young-guy smarm down. "These are the real deal. From California."

He said it in a way that sounded like Shan-gri-la. Josie's eyes turned to stars, and she thrust out her hand. "Looks like my brother's not going to introduce us, so…I'm Josie, and this is my friend Muriel."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Douggie, this is my brother, Kip, and Pete and Mike…"

"Hello, girls," Mike piped up. This comment was ignored. Josie and Muriel kept their eyes on the two handsome sons of Odin. "If you don't mind me askin'," he added, "how old are you two?" This comment too went unanswered.

“Gosh, Davey,” Douggie said, “you didn’t tell us how lovely your sister and her friend are. You girls must be on television, too.” He snapped his fingers. “Hey! I bet your brother’s had you on Music Town a few times, right?”

“No,” said Josie, instantly furious. “Not once! My mom and dad…they don’t want me on television.”

“But your brother’s a big star,” Kip said.

“It’s different with him.”

“How is that?”

“I don’t know,” Josie answered. “They say it just is.”

As the sky darkened, Kip and Douggie took the girls into the water with the big boards. Whether out of pure enthusiasm or the desire not to look stupid in front of the Nordic supermen, both of the girls met with decent success.

Adam and I were content to sit on our towels, but I continued to scrutinize the girls and the men with them. Just making sure…no wandering hands, no unauthorized nuzzles. Kip guided Muriel, all red curls and freckles, on her little pink board. Nearby, Douggie helped Josie, her long brown hair pasted wet to her neck and shoulders. The two looked at each other a lot and laughed and laughed, but I didn’t see anything too out of line.

Pete and Mike joined us on the beach, this time drinking their own beer. Mike turned to me. “So, how old *are* those girls?”

“17. So hands off.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. Nice age, though.”

“I didn’t find anything particularly nice about it.” I started a little calculation. “So, you said before you guys graduated in ’55…?”

“’54.”

“’54. So that makes Kip…25?”

“Yup. Just turned in April.”

“And Douggie?”

“He was a coupla years back of us in school. He’s…what, Pete?”

Pete shrugged and took a swig of beer.

“I think he’s 22…or maybe 23. Something like that.”

“Either of them have girlfriends?”

Mike gave me a sly smile. “Why are you so interested?”

“Just curious.”

“They’ve got lots of girlfriends. I mean, just look at ‘em.”

I turned my eyes back to the water, where the well-built blond men frolicked in the surf with the slender, giggling girls in nearly identical ruffled pink bikinis. At one point, I saw Josie touch the bicep on Douggie’s left arm. She turned to Muriel, and they both giggled even harder. She’d always been a giggler. But when did Josie become a girl noticed muscles and wore a ruffled pink bikini?

We kept the surfing up for the rest of the summer and into as much of September as we could stand once the water temperature really took a dip. Kip and the gang

regularly met us at Edgewater, along with some of the aforementioned girlfriends. Josie and Muriel tagged along some of the time, and when they did, I noticed that Josie kept close to Douggie. More than I few times I saw them break off from the crowd to walk down the beach. I followed them as much as I could, at a distance. But I couldn't be around all the time. The girls could just as easily visit Edgewater without us, whatever afternoon they wanted.

One muggy August night, Adam and I borrowed his dad's Chevrolet and ventured over to a party at the dirty, cramped apartment the brothers Johanssen shared in Lakewood. It was loud and crowded, lots of rangy looking people hoisting beer bottles and drinking Old Grandad whiskey out of paper cups. Terrific music on the turntable, the first wave of surf music by The Ventures, Duane Eddy and Jan and Dean, but there was a little Del Shannon and Chubby Checker thrown in there, too. I wasn't trying to make a big deal of it, but I still got recognized by a number of the less inebriated partygoers. A few asked for autographs. One girl, right there in the living room, asked me to sign her décolletage with a black magic marker. This amused Adam greatly.

From somewhere upstairs, a voice bellowed. "Where is he? Where's my pal, Davey?" A few seconds later, Kip was barreling down the steps with a great big white surfboard. Young girls who had been chatting on the stairs scattered like a flock of starlings.

"Davey," Kip yelled again and approached. "Stop playing with that girl's boob and pay attention."

"What is it?"

"I…" Kip exhaled with deep emotion and a poisonous blast of Old Grandad, and continued, chin up, chest out, with a sudden sense of ceremony. People stopped their conversation to watch. "David Brown, you are a gentleman and a big fat fucking TV star, and you are my friend. I want you to have this." He handed over the board. On one side, a red imp with horns, a spiked tail and a pitchfork grinned luridly. The black lettering under him said, "Sea Devil."

"Thank you, Kip," I said. "That's really nice of you. But how am I getting this home?"

"Like any good Californian, my son. On top of your car."

"How…?"

"Rope, son. Rope. Tie it on."

With Adam's help, I found a safe wall to rest the board against, then we joined Kip, Mike and Douggie, who had decamped to the porch. "Pull up a seat," Kip muttered, slurring the syllables together. "Have another drink!" He took a paper cup from a nearby stack, sloshed some Old Grandad in it, and handed it to me. "Master Weinstein?"

"No thanks, I'm driving. I'd like to get us home alive, if possible. And we've still got to get that…gift up on my father's car roof, God help us."

"It'll be fine," Kip oozed. "Fii-iiine! It's a quality board. Great lines, great weight, real balanced. I rode it in California, out in Malibu. The best surfing…the best!"

I took a small sip of the whiskey. "Big waves, eh?"

"Huge. Huge."

"It must be disappointing, after the ocean, to try and do the same on the lake."

Kip hunkered down and leaned in, eyes unfocused. “I’ll let you in on a little secret, Mr. Brown. Davey…Davey Brown, may I call you Davey?”

“Mr. Brown to you.”

“Mr. Brown, then. It isn’t the waves! Not really! It’s the *an-ti-ci-pa-tion* of said waves.”

“So…just watching and waiting?”

Kip cocked his head. “It’s about hope.”

“It is, huh?”

“Shit, yeah! It’s the watching and the waiting. The possibility that the next wave could be that one sweet wave that lets you ride high and drops you off easy, or the big monster that wipes you out and throws you on the sand, broken, begging for mercy.”

“That would be terrifying.”

“Sure, it might scare the shit out of you, but if you’re begging, at least you made it out alive. Showed that you could take it.”

“And if it’s not sweet, or a monster?” Adam asked.

“Like it is most of the time?”

“Yeah, just blah.”

Kip smiled. “Then it’s enough to be out there, y’know? Just out there, in the water, in the middle of things. Like those game shows they put on over at Mr. Brown’s TV station. ‘You didn’t win anything, Mr. So and So, but thanks for playing.’ And maybe Mr. So and So feels bad, like a loser, but shit, at least, he got onto the show.”

“Big deal.”

"It is! At least he experienced it. The people on their asses watching from the sofa never did."

"Surfer philosophy," Adam intoned. "Immanuel Kant with a sunburn. Kierkegaard with a bottle of Blatz. Deep."

"Fuckin' right, it's deep!" Douggie took a pull off a whiskey bottle. "You guys should listen to my brother. He has seen some shit."

"That I do not doubt," I said.

A beneficent smile broke across Kip's face, sunny, broad as a Buddha's. "I wanna see it all, motherfuckers. And you should too."

Mostly that summer we hung out on the beach, where the scene was easygoing and fun, and nobody talked about anything of much consequence or asked any questions about Adam and me—not that we were holding hands or making out or anything. Nope. Just buddies enjoying the beach and the free and easy company. I invited Daisy to come out and a couple of times, she and her camping friends did. They popped a few eyeballs, this gaggle of models in bikinis tearing out onto the sand, lazing in the sun with their broad-rimmed straw hats, giant black sunglasses and a great big thermos of martinis. Kip and the gang were, of course, enthralled, but after their first couple hundred advances were spurned, they gave up and moved on.

A lot of other girls showed up that summer, ones who loved Music Town and therefore decided they were interested in me. Once or twice, early on, Kip tried to fix me or Adam up with a girl, but I begged off—that steady girl in Columbus wouldn't approve.

Not to be left out, Adam created a girlfriend too, his, a big-titted blonde who sold lace lingerie and rubber sex toys out of a shop in west Toledo. Subtlety, thy name is Weinstein.

CHAPTER 10

Life and Death

(1962)

One Friday in late April as I finishing up the afternoon's Music Town, Josie came to visit. As the lights came down and the dancers shuffled off, I noticed her standing just off-set, looking like she'd just woken up from a three-day nap. Still in her coat, hair hiked up in the back, slacks wrinkled, half-tucked into a pair of black galoshes. Her eyes sparkled with tears, and her nose was pink.

"Jesus, Josie, what's wrong? Are you sick?"

"Yes."

"Well, if you're sick, what are you doing here? Why aren't you home?"

"I need to talk to you, Davey."

"OK, c'mon, let's go to my office." I looked over at Adam and cocked my head toward my sister. He nodded and rolled his camera in the opposite direction. I herded her

down the back hall and into the little room I called my office. There was desk and a couple of chairs, a small sofa and a little coffee table. As soon as we took a seat on the sofa, she collapsed in my arms and the tears came.

"Oh, Davey. I'm…I'm in trouble."

"Ah god." My stomach turned to stone. "Please tell me you shoplifted some nail polish from the drug store."

"No!"

"Oh my god, Josie."

"I'm gonna have a baby!" she wailed in a thin voice.

"Are you sure? I mean, how do you know? You're just a kid!"

She lifted her head and scowled at me. "Goddamn it, Davey. I'm 17! I'll be 18 in June! Mom was *married* when she was my age."

"I know, Jose. It's just that…well, things are different now." I touched her arm. "Have you told Mom and Dad?"

"What do you think? I'm still alive, aren't I? Of course, I haven't told Mom and Dad!"

I swallowed hard and asked the question I already knew the answer to. "Who's the father?"

"I'm not telling."

"What do you mean, you're not telling? It's his responsibility, too!"

"I don't—"

"It was Douggie. That blond surfer bullshit worked on you like a charm, didn't it?"

"I'm not telling. It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter?"

"Muriel's sister, she has a friend who knows somebody. A woman downtown. She can get rid of…unwanted babies. I just…I just got to come up with the money."

"How much?"

"250 dollars."

"And who is this friend of a friend of a friend's sister? Is she a professional? Does she know what she's doing?"

"I…don't…know! Stop asking me so many questions!" More tears.

"I'm sorry, Jose. But I've heard it's dangerous if the person doesn't know what they're doing."

"Don't you think I know that?"

There was a gentle knock on the door, then Adam poked his head in. "Is everything OK? Do you guys need anything?"

Josie wiped her nose with the back of her sleeve. "It's alright, Adam. Come in. Davey's just going to tell you all this later anyway."

Once he'd been brought up to speed, Adam took on a business-like demeanor. "I've got some money in savings and so does Davey. That part isn't a problem. But you can't go to some lady downtown unless you know more about her. See if Muriel's sister can get you some more information, perhaps some literature. My cousin in Cincinnati had

a friend…I'm not saying this to worry you or anything, but…you can die of infection if it…the abortion…isn't done properly."

"Oh my god, I'm going to die anyway," Josie moaned. "Either Mom and Dad will kill me or I'll die of embarrassment."

"Jose," I ventured, "how far along do you think you are?"

"I…don't…know!"

Adam cleared his throat. "How many menstrual cycles…how many periods have you missed?"

Josie stopped sobbing for a minute. "My periods aren't always regular. But I think…two."

"OK, well, it's still pretty early," I said.

"And it's even possible," Adam added, "that you could miscarry. That happens a lot. More than you might think. I'm an only child—my mom had, like, three, before I came along."

"But I can't count on that!"

"No…"

"And I don't want to wait 'til I'm so far along that I start showing." The tears returned, then she started to breathe heavily. "Oh god…I feel like I'm gonna puke."

"Jesus! Davey, get the wastebasket!"

I reached around the side of the couch for the basket and slid it over in front of Josie. She pitched forward, dry heaved a couple of times, then leaned heavily back onto

the couch. “Is it…is it even the right thing to do?” she asked in a small voice. “I mean, am I a bad person if I do this?”

“Of course you’re not a bad person, Jose.” I said. “Having a baby…raising a child…is no small matter. It’s the rest of your life.”

“If you have it,” Adam said, “then you’d have to tell the father at some point. It’s only fair.”

I choked a bit on my own saliva. Douggie as a dad. Please god, no. I pictured him in his stupid flowered cotton swimsuit, soggy from the lake, standing by Josie, holding her hand, holding a baby. Might as well give it to some passing hobo on the street.

Josie’s tears started again. “I could…maybe…you know, give it up for adoption, once it’s born.”

“Well, OK, that’s true, too.” I put an arm around her. “Look, this doesn’t have to be decided this minute. You look exhausted.”

“I am! But I’m also worried sick.”

“Here’s what I want you to do. Go home. Eat something. Get some rest. Call me tomorrow.”

“Then what?”

“If you want to go see the lady uptown, we’ll find out more about that. If you want to talk to Mom and Dad, I’ll be there with you when you do.”

Josie hugged me. “I love you, Davey.”

“I love you, too, Miss Josephine.”

She stood up and readjusted her coat and scarf. “Thanks, Adam. Davey was right. You’re a very nice person.”

“Davey said that about me? Ah, I love you crazy goys. Never a dull moment.” He put an arm on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, kid. You’re not in this alone.”

“You want me to walk you to the bus stop?” I asked.

“No, I’m OK. I just…I just want to be quiet and think right now.”

Adam and I were in the middle of the dinner dishes when the telephone rang. I dried my hands on a towel and answered, ready to reassure a weeping Josie again. “Hello?”

“David?”

“Mom?”

“Did you know about this?”

“About…”

“About Josie? About the baby?”

I hesitated a moment. “Yes. But I just found out today. I’ve only known a few hours.”

“Then tell me who did this to her.”

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t tell me.”

“Was it one of your friends? Was it someone she met at that beach she was always at last summer?”

The woman was sharp, I’d give her that. “Mom, I don’t—”

"Because she won't say. And I don't know what's been going on with her for months! I don't know who she's been with, except for Muriel. I don't know where she's been when she's left the house. For months it's been this way!"

"How do you know it isn't someone from Ely?"

"She's never shown much interest in those boys before. She told me dozens of times she thought high school boys were too immature."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you…does Dad know?"

"He does."

"And?"

"And what? He's upset. Which means he's sitting in his chair in the den clutching his *Plain-Dealer* and staring at the television, and he's not saying anything. What can he say?"

"Well, what do you think she should do?"

"Do? I suppose she's going to have a baby, isn't she? At least somebody around here will give me a grandchild."

"She doesn't have to…"

"No, David. No. I know what you're suggesting. I can't live with that. Your father can't live with that. And I know in my heart that one day, Josie would regret doing something like that."

"C'mon mom, it's not like you've got the church looking over your shoulder anymore."

"Nevertheless, that way will never be right to me."

"So…what? Are you going to kick her out of the house?"

"Oh, David, please. Don't be ridiculous."

"Do you and Dad want to raise another little one?"

"I…I don't know."

"Or she could give it up for adoption."

"It," my mother repeated. "It."

"Mom, what can I do to help?"

"I would've appreciated your help last summer. If you were with her, you should have been watching out for her."

This last comment sliced through my gut. I'd tried, but not hard enough. Again. David couldn't be counted on to watch out for anyone, not Josie, not Bud. All would come to a bad end with David in charge.

It was freezing Saturday morning. I left Adam still sleeping and took a bus over to Lakewood. It wasn't quite 8 when I pounded on Kip's door.

Thumping steps, then the door opened slowly. Kip winced and peered up toward the cold sun. His cheek just under his left eye was bruised, and he had a brown-red scuff mark on his chin. "Jesus, Davey, I thought it was a bill collector."

"Where the hell's Douggie?" I pushed my way in. "Get him up."

"What's going on?"

"I need Douggie out here right now." My eyes darted around the room, a minefield of shoes, shirts, socks, jackets, beer cans, cups, whiskey bottles, brown glass

ashtrays littered with the stumps of cigarettes. Near the door to what I supposed was the bedroom, several pockmarks in the wall, roughly fist sized.

Kip trudged to the tiny, filthy kitchen. “Hate to break it to you, but he’s gone.”

“What do you mean, gone? Where’d he go?”

“Pulled up stakes. Gone. We had a fight.”

“Is that what happened to your face…and your wall?”

“You wouldn’t know it to look at me, Davey, but I have a temper. We Nordic people are slow to anger, but when we get riled enough...” He shrugged. “What can I say? Punches were thrown. Douggie left—looking a lot worse than me.” Grabbing a coffee pot on the counter, Kip smelled the contents, then held it up toward me. “Java? I made it yesterday, but I think it’s still good. I’ll warm it up.”

“No…Kip, I need to speak to Douggie. This is a serious matter.”

“I can see that.”

“He left…I mean, he just left? Did he take his stuff?”

“Yep.”

“Your mom’s sick and all, and he just took off?”

“You gotta know Douggie. Why do you think I had to come back from California to help with my mom? Not the most responsible young man.”

“Of course not. Of course not! Fuck!” I kicked the bottom edge of the filthy, food encrusted sofa.

“Jesus, what’s got you all in a snit?”

“I’m not sure I should say…I just…oh hell, Josie’s pregnant.”

Kip paused a minute and replaced the coffeepot on the counter. “Really?”

“Yes, really. What do you think? I just got up at the crack of dawn and froze my ass to get down here and yank your chain? Jesus God, he needs to know about this!”

“Pregnant,” Kip said. “Holy shit.”

“Do you have any idea where Douggie might have gone?”

“I really don’t, man. I’m sorry.”

“What did you guys fight about?”

“Aw, just shit. Brother shit. You got a brother?”

“I…No.”

“Well, if you did, you’d understand. Things can escalate quickly. Get way out of control.”

“Look, I need to talk to him.” I headed for the door.

“What do you want him to do? You think he should marry her or something?”

“No. God, no. I just…he needs to know this is all going on.”

“Is she…is she going to have it? The baby?”

I hesitated with my hand on the doorknob. “Who knows at this point? Everything’s just way fucked up.”

“Davey, I promise, if I hear from him, I’ll call you.”

“Please,” I said and nothing more.

No news of Douggie through the spring, summer and into the fall. Adam and I saw Kip out on the beach a few times, surfed with him a few pre-storm mornings. Other days we drank martinis with Daisy Grant and her friends.

Josie stayed away from Edgewater. She finished her junior year, months of long cardigans and loose dresses, of books held tightly against her midsection, of home right after school. She stayed inside for most of the summer and didn't go back to school in September. It crushed Mom and Dad to have her miss her senior year at Ely, but there was no alternative as far as they were concerned. Eventually, they would hire a tutor for her. She'd receive her diploma in the mail.

Over the later months of Josie's pregnancy, Mom had made a few half-hearted inquiries into putting the baby up for adoption. She found a couple of reputable services in Cleveland that would gladly take a healthy newborn. But nothing seemed to be settled, right up until the birth of the child. No one was sure of the right course.

Baby girl Dee Sandra Zombrowski was born on October 1 at the Euclid hospital. She made her entrance red and squalling, and when we looked at her, none of us had any pretensions about handing her over to anyone else.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Monsters

(1964)

Dave Brown's Music Town kept up its solid ratings. Not a huge shock, I guess. It was the kind of show that changed with the times, always getting new viewers as kids cycled from watching the "The Jumbo J and Tiny Mo Show" into their teen years. Whatever music the kids loved we played, whatever dances were hot were trotted out onto the studio floor. And it was still fun, but to me, a known quantity. The music changed, and the dances, and the dancers, but my role never did.

I started feeling like I wanted to branch out a bit. I could still do Music Town, and something else, too, maybe a variety show, something more than standing around in a suit, introducing music and watching kids Madison and Watusi around the set. A little more money wouldn't be out of order either. Or a lot more.

On a Thursday afternoon, just after our gimmick-packed Easter theme show (*Live rabbit giveaway, Rockin' Egg Roll)*, Happy showed up on the set. My stomach fluttered a bit. He almost never did this. Were there more letters? Photos? "Davey, let's talk he said," he said, but he was smiling this time. "You ready for this?"

"I don't know what it is, but sure…"

Happy started to lean an elbow on the Music Town podium where minutes before a giveaway Easter rabbit had rested. He noticed a few pea-sized bits of rabbit poop lingering there and took his arm away.

"Sorry," I said quickly and flicked the poop unto the floor with my thumb and forefinger.

"Davey, I've got an opportunity for you. It's something I'd like you to seriously consider."

"OK…shoot."

"How would you like to be a movie host?"

"Movies?"

"You like them, don't you?"

"Sure, I love movies. But Harry's our guy. He's so good at that. He's got all those great stories about the '30s, and Clark Gable and Hoot Gibson and Lillian Gish, and all."

"Harry's fine doing what he does. We're keeping "Weekday Matinee" just as it is. He's got his audience of housewives and old folks, and they love him." He leaned in a little. "But Harry's pushing 70. What I'm talking about is something new…well, not new exactly. But new to us. And I need someone younger."

"For what?"

"Monster movies!"

"Monster…You mean like the stuff Ghoulardi shows?"

"Precisely."

A sensation in northeastern Ohio, Ghoulardi was a TV personality created by Ernie Anderson, a longtime Cleveland area disc jockey and announcer. Ghoulardi was a hybrid geek/hepcat schlock horror movie host who wore a furry hat and an inky moustache and goatee. He played great jazz on his show, and introduced his own deeply weird vocabulary. He had a wacky good time completing ripping apart the movies he introduced—even going so far as to have his production people insert him and his smart-ass commentary into some of the cheesier scenes in a few of the films. He had also mercilessly ragged on a number of Cleveland's bigger local media celebrities. Fortunately (or unfortunately), I had not been one.

"I love Ghoulardi," I said.

"Yeah, you and countless other Clevelanders. But we can't just cede the ground completely. I'm getting that same package of godawful horror movies from Screen Gems. We need our own monster movie guy…our own Ghoulardi."

"But I can't just…"

"Look, it's very clear. Be the same thing. But different."

"That's crystalline."

"You know what I mean! Somebody the kids will like. Be goofy and quirky. But—obviously—don't just steal his entire act."

“You want me to go head-to-head with him on Fridays? I’ll get killed.”

“No! We’d air on Saturday nights.”

“Well that’s something.”

“Look, you just come on, tell a few jokes, make a few cracks about how bad the movies are, maybe even play some spooky music. But you’ll need a different set-up and your own look—different from Ghoulardi. Talk to Mabel and Frannie, and see what you can come up with. I’ve even got an idea for a couple of people to bring in.”

“Who?”

“New faces. Co-stars…people you can play off of in between reels.”

“Swell.” I took a deep breath. “Am I…er, getting any more money for this?”

“Sure you are! I’m taking your Saturday nights!”

“Great.”

“I mean, it’s going to be a modest uptick, Davey. Very modest. But you understand, right? Same deal as with Music Town. We gotta see if it takes off before we get into any substantial pay raise.”

“Uh, sure. That’s OK.”

“Terrific. Talk to Mabel and Frannie.”

“I will. Thanks, Happy,” I said. “Really, thank you for wanting me to do this.” I extended a hand (the poop-flicking one, I realized too late) for a shake.

Happy hesitated a moment, then clapped a hand on my shoulder. “You’ll do great, Davey. Just great.”

Mabel White and Frannie Schenk were our make-up and costume ladies, wonderful, gravel-voiced old birds who'd worked in the vaudeville theatre in the old days, and still had the nimble fingers to pull off minute miracles between commercial breaks and between programs. I found them in the makeup room, Mabel seated, stitching up some brightly colored fantasia for Johnny Ray, Frannie puffing away on a Camel and wiping off up her makeup table.

"What about a vampire?" Mabel said after my third try at explaining what I was trying to do. "Pretty scary. And the costuming would be easy."

I waved away the suggestion. "Nah. Too obvious."

"A wolfman?"

"Hmmm…"

Frannie frowned. "Tough to pull off. We either have to paste hair on your face for every show, or you gotta go with a mask."

"If I wear a mask, no one will see my face."

"You catch on quick."

"No, that's no good."

"I guess that leaves out a mummy and a Frankenstein, too?" Mabel asked.

"I need something different."

Frannie pulled another Chesterfield from the pack behind her and lit it. "What's that Ghoulardi character s'posed to be, anyway?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, he's just a…ghoul. A creepy guy. A weirdo."

“Ha!” Mabel picked at a hem in Johnny Ray’s costume. “You’re gonna fit right in around here.”

Adam had met his parents for dinner and when he returned, I was listening to the Chantays on the turntable and standing beside Kip’s giant white surfboard, which we’d leaned against the wall in a corner of the room. I ran my hand over the little red imp near the top.

“How was dinner?” I asked.

“Bubbe’s sick.”

“Oh…I’m sorry. What’s wrong?”

“Well, she’s 94, so there’s that. But she’s got fluid collecting in her lungs. Her breathing’s getting noisy.”

“Are they going to take her to the hospital?”

“She’s been to the doctor. He’s given her some medicine. Let’s hope it works.” Adam sighed. His face was pale and the corners of his eyes drooped. “What are you doing with the surfboard?”

“What do you think of a devil?” I asked Adam.

“A devil? As in Satan? The guy on the canned ham?”

“Yeah.”

“Not crazy about him.”

“No, no, for the bit. For the movie host thing.”

“Oh, you mean, ‘a devil,’ not ‘the Devil.’

“Yeah, like Mr. Sea Devil here.’

“So you’re gonna be a guy who runs around with horns and a pitchfork?”

“Maybe.”

“It’s all right, I guess.” Adam walked to the kitchen, got a glass down from the cupboard and filled it with water.

I followed. “Hey, don’t I get a kiss?”

“Well, you see, it’s been a swell day all around. Happy Clark came to talk to me this afternoon.” He stayed beside the sink and took a quick sip from the glass.

“Oh?”

“Yeah…and he told me I wouldn’t be working camera for the new show.”

“What? He didn’t tell me that. And what’s he doing, making that decision this early on?”

“Guess he didn’t want to waste any time. He told me Saturdays will be like any other day. I’ll be done after the 6 p.m. newscast.”

I took a seat at our tiny kitchen table, and ran my hand along the blue starburst pattern on the top. “Did he give you a reason?”

“I know the reason, Davey. And you do, too.”

“Is that what he said?”

“No, he just told me Roger Manning would handle it.” Adam set the glass down on the kitchen counter and sighed.

“Geez, Adam, I swear I didn’t know about this. I’ll talk to him, as soon as I get in tomorrow and—”

Adam raised his chin a little and frowned at me. “Is that going to make you feel better?”

“What do you mean, me? I want you in on the show.”

“So you’ll go salve your conscience by talking to Happy. And he’ll tell you no. And you’ll accept it, because you do whatever he says, take whatever pay he cares to throw at you. But then, at least you can say you *tried*.”

“Now, wait a minute—”

“You know he won’t change his mind just because you ask him to.”

“I could tell him I won’t do it otherwise.”

“You really feel prepared to back that up?”

“Jesus, Adam, it’s a fucking monster movie host gig. It’s not like I’ve been offered a Hollywood contract.”

“Answer the question.”

“I’d like to do it. But you know, the more valuable I am to the station, the harder it will be to get rid of me.”

“But it’s easy to get rid of me.”

“No, they have no reason to do that. You know every piece of equipment. You’re the best cameraman they have. We’ve given Happy no reason.”

“Except the big fat elephant in the room.

“C’mon, it’s been years now. You can’t say people aren’t used to seeing us together.”

“Yes, we are the best of friends. As long as everybody can explain it that way, as long as they don’t see anything objectionable, then it’s manageable. But there are some—”

“Look, I’m not stupid. I don’t pretend that only Happy, Cy and Lorraine are the only people who know about those goddamned letters.”

“Don’t forget Julie.”

“And Julie.” I traced another starburst on the tabletop. “I know there are rumors. But they stay on simmer. And they have for ages. I think most people at the station are probably bored with them.”

“Well, I wouldn’t expect Margo or Frank Sherman or Morey or even Johnny Ray to say anything. Not anymore. They would’ve raised a stink long ago, if they were going to. But we get new people in, all the time. And they may not be so accommodating.”

I thought of those new faces Happy had mentioned. “I’m sorry. I really wanted you to work this with me. To be there.”

“Well, I can’t. So we’re just going to let it go.”

It was cold in bed that night, and it was cold the next day. We did our usual staggered entrance to the station, and Adam avoided me at lunchtime.

At the end of the day, I left before him, and was home by 7 p.m. Adam didn’t call. I nibbled the ends of a turkey sandwich for supper and brooded. When he came in the door at 10, I was already in bed, simmering, pretending to read some godawful Mickey Spillane thing.

Adam came through the bedroom door, instantly accosted by the question that burst out of me, the shrieking interrogation of a frying pan-wielding hausfrau. “Where have you been?!”

“I just—went to a movie. I needed to think.”

“Jesus, you look like shit.” He did. His complexion had turned grayish, and his hair was all messed up. Under his eyes, two lavender semi-circles had set up shop.

“Thanks a lot. I’m tired.”

“What’d you see?”

“What?”

“The movie. What’d you see?”

“I don’t know, just a movie…”

“Christ, you are a terrible fucking liar!”

“OK, I went to a bar! So sue me!”

“What bar?”

“I went to Mister’s.”

“I thought we agreed we weren’t going to go there.”

“*We* didn’t. I did.”

“Did you let somebody pick you up?”

“What?”

“Did you let somebody pick you up? Did you go home with anyone? Did you fuck somebody else?” I slapped the crappy book shut and threw it away from me. It hit

the wall and landed spine-up on the floor. “So what would this make now? Seven? Eight? Twenty?”

“Fuck you! You have the right to ask me that?”

“Just answer the question!”

Adam faced pulsed red for a moment. “Before I say something bad…really bad…” He turned and left the room. “I’m getting the fuck out of here.” I heard the door close, not with a slam, but a very deliberate click.

The next day was a Thursday, not a Music Town broadcast day. Adam called in sick. When I arrived home after work, I noticed a few of his dresser drawers not fully closed. The things inside were jumbled, some items clearly removed. I looked in the closet. Some—not all—of his clothes gone. A few Adam-plaid shirts. His corduroys. A few sad wire hangars nestled against the things that still hung there—Adam’s light summer shirts, a pair of khaki pants and some blue jeans.

I called the Weinstein house, but there was no answer. I tried again, a half-hour later, and Mrs. Weinstein picked up.

“David, Adam isn’t here right now.”

“Please, Mrs. Weinstein, do you know where he is?”

“I believe he said he’d be downtown today, then he was going to meet his father at the camera shop.”

“Will you ask him to call me?”

“I’ll give him the message, David. But I can’t promise anything.” There was a rustle as she coved the phone and spoke to someone else. Then she came back on. “I have to go now.”

“Mrs. Weinstein? I hope Bubbe feels better soon.”

“Me, too, David. Good-bye.”

Friday came and went. Adam didn’t show up at work. I poked my head into Cy Davis’ office. “Did Adam call in sick again today?” I asked.

Cy looked up from the papers on his desk. “No,” he said, his expression flat as typewriter paper. “Happy told me he called in and quit.”

Roger Manning joined Mac Bennison and another cameraman to handle that afternoon’s Music Town. I took the bus to the Weinstein house right after the show, but with the rush hour crowds, it was almost 7 p.m. when I got there. Mr. Weinstein answered the door, looking somber, moving slowly. “Hello, David.” He did not invite me in. The space behind him was dark and quiet.

“Hi there. I’m so sorry for coming unannounced, but…look, I really need to talk to Adam.”

“I’m not sure he’s in a talking mood right now, David. Bubbe’s doing very badly. I don’t think we’re going to have her for much longer. He’s upstairs sitting with her.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I—”

“I’ll let Adam know you stopped by.” He closed the door.

I stood on the Weinstein's porch, just for a moment, stared stupidly at the door in front of me. Then I turned and headed home alone.

I woke that night, stirred by the murmur of thunder. A mild spring storm, the kind with minimal *sturm und drang*, but rain that might linger for hours. I could hear the spray of drops, like distant fireworks, as they hit the windows, rattling them in their panes. Why was I still in this old place with the loose windows and the ancient appliances? I didn't want to be here without Adam. I didn't want to be anywhere without Adam.

I thought about calling Daisy, just to talk, and wondered if she'd possibly be awake at 2:37 a.m. I was so lonely I would almost have welcomed Bud and his boat if he'd visited me just then.

I thought again about Adam. I pictured him, bleary-eyed, exhausted, listening to the rain, watching for the weak lightning, waiting for the gentle thunder that trailed behind, each time later in coming, a call and response demanded of a flagging congregation. I saw Adam, sitting near the bed where Bubbe lay wheezing. He was watching her chest rise and fall, rise and fall beneath the covers. But with each breath, the time between the rise and the fall lengthened, as the lightning and the thunder—nearly imperceptible at first, then stretching and stretching, until Adam held his own breath as he waited for the next rise to commence. Near dawn, the waiting was over.

Saturday morning, the phone rang. Adam's voice was ragged. "Bubbe died a few hours ago."

"I know," I said.

Adam and his family sat shiva for Bubbe for the next week. I offered to come, but he said he didn't think it would be a good idea. He'd call me, he promised. We would talk.

After the week of mourning, we met at the apartment. Adam had a light beard going. It suited him, somehow. And he looked calm and rested. I was wrecked. I'd wrested ownership of the little purple half moons he'd had under his eyes, and planted them firmly beneath my own.

"You look like shit," Adam said not unkindly.

"Well, you look good. Nice whiskers."

Adam nodded. "Shiva tradition. No shaving allowed." He took a seat on the couch. "I haven't quite worked up the effort to get rid of the beard."

He'd hugged me when he arrived. He'd even smiled. Now he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "That night…when I went to Mister's…I want you to know, I didn't fuck anyone. I didn't do anything."

"OK, I…it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter?"

"Ugh, it *does* matter. It's just that…I mean, I'd understand if you did go home with someone. Someone less complicated."

"Well, I didn't. I just needed to spend some time with my own thoughts."

"And what were these thoughts?"

"I needed to think about us."

"What specifically?"

“About whether it makes sense for me to be with somebody whom so many people recognize, whose life seems to be fodder for everyone’s speculation.”

“And?”

“It makes no sense. It never has.”

“I see.” I was tearing up already.

“I mean, it’s ridiculous! I’ve had to pretend I live at a different address. I can’t even answer the goddamned phone in this place.”

“Yeah, but,” I said, trying to smile, trying to be funny. “We really don’t get that many calls.”

“We’re sneaking around, we’re hiding. I’ve needed this grief for a decade of my life?”

“I’m guessing you don’t.”

“I don’t.”

I started to sob. I wanted to be strong. I was failing spectacularly.

But the thing is, Huck,” Adam leaned over and took my hand. “I need you.”

“I—”

“Just let me get this out. I realized that you matter to me more than anyone. And if that means living with a little grief—”

“Or a lot.”

“Or a lot, then I guess that’s the way it will be. Because I am fucking miserable with you.”

“Oh, thank Christ.” I pulled his face to mine and kissed him. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry we’re always hiding. I’m sorry about all those fucking sham dates. I’m sorry my childhood was so fucked up.”

Adam smirked. “Yes, well, that was very inconsiderate of you, Huckleberry.”

“You’ve been really patient with all of this.”

“Well, the truth is, no matter what guy I was with, we’d have to hide if we wanted to live together. That part wouldn’t go away.”

“I guess…but I know I make your life more complicated.”

“You do.”

“And if you’d left…for good, I would’ve understood. I would’ve.” I drew my face up close to his, pondered the green-gold eyes. No, I would definitely not have understood.

“Nope. We have to stay together. No one else would have such nut cases.”

“This is true.” I took his hands in mine. “And I want you to know…that nothing I ever have…no success or whatever, means anything without you.”

Adam kissed me. “Thank you for that.”

And then, as if I’d just heard the news, “You quit.”

“I had to, Davey.”

“But what are you going to do? God, Adam, you’re so good at what you—”

“Do you hear yourself sometimes? You act like Happy’s little fiefdom is the only gig in the world.”

“You mean there are other TV stations in the world?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“So, you’ll look around and…”

“No need. Done.”

“You have something else lined up?”

“Channel 5.”

“Channel 5? Please do not tell me you’re doing Ghoulardi’s show, or I’ll have to kill you, which would be terrible, but—”

“Not Ghoulardi’s show. They’re all set there. I’m doing daytime stuff.”

“You’re a piece of work, Weinstein.”

“Ain’t it the truth?” He smiled. “It’s going to make things easier, Davey. I think you know that.”

I took Adam’s hands in mind. “I want to tell you something, and I mean this sincerely. To me, it feels like…like we’re married. If we could, I would. Ask you, that is.”

“Thank you for that.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What would you say?”

“I’d say, I love you, Six. There is no Seven.”

In bed a few nights later, I rolled over to face Adam. “I think I may go with the devil.”

"You may go to the devil? I think you already have."

"No, no…*with* the devil. With! For the show."

Adam propped himself up with an elbow on the pillow. "So, how's that going to work? Horns? A cape? Hooves?"

"I guess. That's how we always drew him in religion class." I thought for a moment. "But you guys…do Jews even believe in the devil?"

"Yeah…at least the way I learned it. But the big D devil, not the little Ds. Not the little demons and imps, or whatever, who chase everybody around Hell like Dennis the Menace."

"Big D?"

"We believe in Satan—just not the Christian version."

"How is it different?"

"Well, he works for God, for one thing."

"Yeah, I know that. Lucifer, the Morning Star, the fallen angel…"

"No, I mean he *still* works for God. As Rabbi Gurwin used to say, 'God is the only game in town.'"

"Clearly, he's seen the Cleveland Indians play."

"This was Cincinnati, Huck. What he meant was nobody presents any real challenge to him—certainly not the Devil. No one goes against him in some big wrestling match for your soul. There's no real contest there."

"So what's the point of the Devil?"

"Well, he…er, makes difficulties for human beings. He puts up obstacles."

“Interesting.”

“He’s…his name means “the challenger.” You meet the challenges, you show your faith, you do your mitzvahs, everything turns out OK.”

“And if you don’t?”

“You screw up, you become a bad person, then you will live eternity at a great distance from God. Not Hell, per se, but you are removed from God, which is not great.”

“The challenger, huh?

“Yes.”

“I like that.”

“And what are we calling ourselves?”

“I don’t know. Should I go with something oddball, like Ghoulardi did?”

“Nah. You don’t want to be that much of copycat, do you? Try something cool.”

“Cool. Dave the Devil…Davey the Demon…Demon Dave. Hey! That’s pretty good! How about Demon Dave?”

“I like it.” Adam kissed me and moved his hand under the blanket. “I like it very much.”

As Demon Dave, I would spend time in Frannie’s chair, getting smothered in red make-up. She gave me slanty, 45-degree eyebrows and some lurid black lipstick. Mabel did up some horns for me, but we differed on the rest of the get-up.

“You’ll want a cape, right, and probably a suit?” she asked. And a pitchfork, of course?”

"No, see, that's too normal. That's you'd expect."

"Yeah, 'cause you need to look like what it is you're supposed to be. You want me to dress you like an angel and call you a devil? You're gonna confuse people."

I took a deep breath. "I'm trying to be the Devil, but a little different, OK? Something that might appeal to younger audience, really get their attention. That's what the boss wants."

"I don't know, kid. All the photos I've seen of the Devil have him in the buff. Dante and Milton and my family Bible." Mabel snorted. "But that might get a little too much attention."

"You flatter me. Look, we're kind of going with a surfer theme here."

She narrowed her eyes. "A surfing devil?"

"Sure, the kids dig that kind of stuff. So, maybe a Hawaiian shirt? Real loud. With a red…or black background? Dark, anyway, but the designs have to be big so they stand out. And a pair of beachcomber pants."

"What the hell are beachcomber pants?"

"You know, like pants that have been tattered. Did you ever see a show about somebody shipwrecked on an island, and after a while, their pants get shorter—like pedal pushers, only on men—and the ends get all frayed and they have to use a piece of rope for a belt?"

"Why is the devil holding up his pants with rope? Where did he get the rope?"

"Please…just do the beachcomber pants. He's a surfing devil. It'll be OK."

"Fine. And for footwear…let me guess. Sandals?"

“Bingo.”

“Hell, kid, that’s a cakewalk.”

“Don’t get too comfortable. Happy’s got some plans for some other folks on the show. God knows what they’ll need. And thanks, Mabel.”

I was halfway out the door when I heard her yell. “Hey, am I doing a tail?”

“You bet, Mabes. And make sure you put a fork in it!”

Happy was not above gestures of nepotism when it suited him. The new talent for the show were his twin daughters, Molly and Meg Clark, the jumpsuit clad youngsters in the frame on his office desk. Except now they were young women with dreams of stardom, or at least capitalizing on their starring roles on the high school stage by hamming it up on TV. Of course he was indulging his offspring, but it wasn’t an idea completely without merit. They were two spectral chicks, wispy and pale like their dad, but a little taller—willowy, I guess you could say. They had these big moony eyes, and dark hair that slunk around their shoulders like they’d just stepped out of the water and brought some of the seaweed with them.

“I’m seeing them as ghosts or maybe some kind of aliens—to play up the horror angle,” Happy explained when we were all gathered in his office. “But I’ll let you girls have a say in this.”

“We were thinking!” Molly suddenly animated and a small flush came up into her cheeks. She trained those peepers on me, huge green marbles out of kilter on the thin

face, and the words came out in a screech, as if the idea had just occurred to her. “We’ll call ourselves *the Moon Goddesses!* I’ll be Luna One…”

“And I’ll be…” Meg started in an only slightly muted version of her sister’s voice.

“No, no.” I put up a hand. “Let me guess…Luna Two.”

Meg frowned. “No! I will be Selene!”

“Selene?”

“Greek goddess of the moon!”

“And Luna is…”

“Roman goddess of the moon!” Molly continued in her shattered glass voice. “It all makes perfect sense!”

“What’s with the ‘One,’ then?”

“My own personal touch. I thought it sounded more, you know, spacey.”

“Great.” I turned to Happy. “You know I wanted to work with a surf theme, right?”

“I thought you were doing a devil. I thought we were calling it ‘Movie Inferno.’”

“We are. But we’re going to have to work in something weird and little offbase to compete with Channel 5, right? I thought the kids would dig the surfing stuff.”

“I don’t get it, but fine. I’m leaving it to you and the girls and Cy Davis. Just have something ready by the first Saturday in June. I want to head into the summer with this show.”

Cy and Lorraine worked as our production team on the new show. The set was a little more involved this time, a kind of infernal cavern. Even though we broadcast in black and white, the walls themselves were vivid, Dali-esque, with slashes of black, crimson and gold, cleverly angled to look like rock. Lorraine had the idea to put me a throne—in this case, a big, high-backed Victorian dining room chair which Mabel covered in crushed burgundy velvet. Lenny, one of set assistants, had two little gargoyle statues his parents had brought him back when they toured Notre Dame in Paris. He drilled holes in the bases of each statue and glued them into the top finials on each side of the chair. Then Mabel made a small canopy of red fishnet over the top. I had to admit, it all looked pretty cool.

When we had the Hell angle down, we went to work on the surfing flavor. Lenny and a couple of the other set guys made me some fake surfboards out of balsa wood and painted a bunch of flames and pitchforks all over them. Of course, my original muse, Kip's white board, took a place of honor on the wall in back of me. We scattered a few other mood setters around, a couple of plastic palm trees, some big conch shells. Gene Bertram, our music director, and I conferred on the music. I wanted to use The Chantays' version of Pipeline. I'd heard it at Kip's and loved that itchy-scratchy, watery opening guitar riff, the silk-smooth melody, the ringing keyboard. In the end, Gene talked me into our own version, what he called "Demon Dave's Devil Wave." Similar, but he slowed it down to up the creep factor; it was different enough to keep us from having to pony up for song royalties. Just as long as it had some kind of bitchin' surf-scratch descending slide at the beginning, I was happy.

We started with the music, that sliding riff, and a title card, “Demon Dave’s Movie Inferno” with letters made from little licks of flames. Then, you saw a tight shot, just my face, livid red, triangled black eyebrows, black lipstick.

I grinned and did the voice, going for raspy, a languid, throat-sore kind of drawl. I was going for evil, but not of the British or Transylvanian stripe. Demon Dave was a by-god American embodiment of evil. “It’s Saturday night, it’s 11:30,” I said “and the time has come at last. This is ‘Demon Dave’s Movie Inferno’ and I am your host, Demon Dave!” A little repetitive, I guess. I might need to work on that intro line.

Then the camera panned out to show me sitting on my throne. On the back to my right, Kip’s board; to my left, a plaster skeleton enclosed in a giant bird cage. “Thank you for joining us tonight. I will be your personal tour guide through an unimaginable underworld of movie maaadnesss!” I turned, cheating my left a bit. “Good evening, Skelly. How are you, this evening? Is it just me, or is it hot in here?” Then a chuckle (type: evil). “No bones about it, folks, Skelly’s not saying much tonight. Perhaps he’s not enjoying his time in…Hell-ooooooo, my lovelies!”

At this point, Meg and Molly Clark sashayed out. Mabel had talked them into a Siamese twin bit, their two heads sticking out of a single, wide, silver leatherette tunic. We couldn’t really figure out a good way to do the legs, so Luna One/Selene had four.

“Folks, I want to introduce you to someone—or two—very important. These are Space Twins from the planet Duotron. This is Luna One.” Molly cocked her head to the left. “And this is Selene.” Meg nodded. “Say hello to the folks at home, girls!”

“Hello, folks at home,” they said in a robotic monotone, perfectly in unison. Slowing down their speech took out some of the brittleness, but their voices were still high and kind of tinny. In this case, it worked.

“And what have you been up to this evening, my dears?”

“Just a little moon bathing, Your Badness.”

“Oh, yes, you’ve got that healthy purple glow I love so much.”

“Thank you, Your Dreadfulness. What movie will we be seeing tonight?”

“Let’s look to the Ninth Circle and see what it is!” To my right, placed in front of the surfboard, was a little table with nine concentric cardboard circles set up. I took a small slip of paper from the innermost. “Ah! “Why, it’s one our viewers will go ape for: “The Murders of the Rue Morgue,” starring Bela Lugosi, Sidney Fox and Arlene Francis.

“Sounds blood-curdling.”

“Who, Arlene Francis?”

“No, the movie, Your Awfulness.”

“Well, that’s kind of the point, isn’t it?” Close up to me again. “Stick around with us during the movie, folks. We’ll be checking back with Skelly and the girls. But now, without further ado, Part I of “The Murders of the Rue Morgue!”

Throughout the two-hour broadcast, just kind of more like that—reels of a crappy old movie interspersed with awkwardly paced, corny bits, most of it unscripted. Happy’s expectations were fairly low, but I think we had trouble meeting them.

“I seem to be…still a little confused,” he said, after the show. “You’re a devil, and the girls are space creatures, but you also like surf music and you’ve got on a Hawaiian shirt…and the setting has surfboards…I mean, are we still in Hell?”

“Oh, we’re in Hell alright.”

“But I thought you guys were going to explain something about why two girls—er, a two-headed girl—from space would be in Hell. Is she—are they—criminals? Are they just evil aliens?”

“I don’t know, Happy. You told me to come up with some ideas, and you wanted to let the girls create their own characters, and they did, or Mabel did. And it makes no sense. But it’s sure as hell nutty, as requested.”

Happy frowned at me.

“Look, we’ll fix it…we’ll explain it next time.”

We explained it the next time (*But of course, evil aliens!*), and I got a chance to work the surfing bit. Demon Dave, I explained to the viewers at home, surfed on waves of flame, down in the sea of fire that lay somewhere in Hades. We brandished the flaming boards, played Gene’s bastardized surf riffs and danced the Watusi. And we set a solid precedent by ensuring that nothing we did ever had a rat’s ass to do with the movie we were showing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Devil You Know

(1965)

Over the rest of ’64 and into the next year, we screened some beauts from Screen Gems’ Shock! Collection—*The Cat Creeps, Pillow of Death, The Frozen Ghost*—roundly ignoring them with our own ridiculousness. We fell into a sort of pattern, got off some mildly amusing bits, but Meg and Molly’s Siamese Space Twin thing was limiting. Moving together around the set in the bulky outfit was difficult, as was speaking their lines in unison all the time. One Saturday, while we aired *The Strange Case of Doctor Rx*, I had what I believed to be quite a good idea—just strange enough, a little subversive. Part of me wanted to do it just to see how Happy would react. And I decided not to tell anybody about the plan beyond the girls, the crew and Mabel.

For the following Saturday’s show, I made a special allowance and based our between-reels bit on the movie. We were showing *The Mad Doctor of Market Street*, and

we started as we always did, surf theme music, tight shot of me, *It's Saturday night, it's 11:30,* then the girls' entrance. I greeted them and we intro'd the movie and started with the first reel. Before the first commercial break, we came back on. I stood to the left of Meg and Molly, who were midframe.

"Oh, girls…are you enjoying the movie?"

"Oh, yes, Your Bleakness!"

"As am I. Quite a lot. In fact…" I rubbed my chin and gave them a lascivious side eye. "In fact, it is giving me ideas!"

The twins' giant green marble eyes stretched freakishly wide. "W-what kind of ideas, Your Lugubriousness?"

"Terrible ideas. Wonderful ideas. I feel…the need…to operate! What do you say, girls?" I reached behind my seat and brought up a chainsaw (borrowed from some dark corner of Kip's mother's garage). I held it high, threw my head back and cackled like a maniac. The sound guy served up a terrible, grating whining, a rusty chain toiling on a saw turned to full power.

The girls screeched as only they could, a heady cocktail of nails on chalkboard and bad car brakes, and ran off set. I pelted after them. Further cackling, more screaming, copious rusty saw sounds ensued. And…we went to commercial.

"You ready for this?" I asked Meg and Molly.

"Dad's going to be mad," Meg said.

"Well, he wanted weird. This is weird."

When we came back to an empty set. No music, no sound effects. Then slowly, I walked on, the chainsaw now dripping blood—I'd doused the blade in Hershey's chocolate syrup (God bless black and white broadcasts). For extra effect, I had a squeeze bottle of the stuff in my pants pocket and let it drip out over the saw. A puddle started to form on the floor. Then a tight shot of my face again, so you could get a good look at the droplets of syrup blood spattered there. "The operation…" I screamed, "…was a success!"

Then a wide shot. The girls came back in, as two, in these little glittery gauze dresses Mabel had concocted. We'd dabbed them with more syrup blood, dark smudges on Molly's right side and Meg's left.

"Look at us!" Luna One chirped, goggle-eyed.

"We're free!" Selene squealed.

"Yes, at last, you are! And I *so* adored cutting you up! Enjoy, my darlings! And now, for you, my boars and ghouls watching at home, back to *"The Mad Doctor…of Market Street!"*

When we cut to the movie, Cy appeared by the camera guy, not smiling. "What the fuck was that?"

"Just fun. Spontaneous weirdness."

"No. Not spontaneous. You didn't just happen to have a chainsaw on the set. Or…whatever the hell that blood is. Chocolate?"

"Hershey's."

"Is there some reason I wasn't in on this?"

"You would've said no."

"Damn right. You're gonna get us in dutch with the S&P guys. Too much blood."

"It's syrup, for god's sake. And we didn't show any cutting or violence or anything."

"I'm gonna go ahead and presume Happy didn't know about this either."

"Nope."

"OK. Great. You deal with him then. I'm gonna plead ignorance of the whole matter." He turned to leave, then shifted back. "And wipe up that floor. That's all I need is somebody slipping on that mess and suing us good."

Monday morning, I stopped for coffee. When I came in, Mac Bennison was coming out of the tech store room. "Happy's looking for you," he said. He was almost past me, when he caught hold of my arm. "And hey, when you see Wine-stine, tell him hello for me. We miss him around here."

I entered Happy's office to find him reading, signing, shuffling bits of paper. He made me wait a couple of minutes while he perused—or pretended to peruse—a form. Then he looked up at me. "What did you think you were doing Saturday night?"

"You talked to Cy?"

"I watched the show, David. It's my station. My daughters are on it."

"Oh."

"And we've had calls, of course. From viewers and from standards and practices."

"We were just trying something new. And the girls, they must have told you they were miserable with the Siamese twin costume."

“Sure, they complained. But that’s not the point. If you are trying something new with the show—changing the characters in some way, using potentially disturbing props, how is it that you don’t let your producer know, even if you don’t ask me about it?” He didn’t seem mad to me. More hurt. The way his eyes sagged at the corners, the tilt of his mouth.

“I don’t know. Like I said, it was kind of, just an idea I had, and we ran with it.”

“Well, don’t run with anything else like that, without asking.”

I said nothing, and looked at the carpet.

“You know, I’ve done a lot for you, David.”

“Yes, I know. I—”

“I’ve invested a lot of money and a lot of time to make you a star for this station—to keep you a star. I’ve done a lot that other station managers wouldn’t have. You know, there are other stars out there. Other talented people who don’t make trouble…who don’t…” He stopped.

“I’m sorry, Happy.”

“We’re probably going to get fined…for the blood.”

We did. My pay got docked over the next six months to help defray the penalty and also to pay the dry cleaning bill to get the chocolate syrup out of our costumes. Mabel gave me the stink eye for weeks.

The calls to the station, as it turned out, were mixed. There were of course, the fainting couch and smelling salts gang (why the hell would they be watching a horror

movie show anyway?) who wanted me fired. But there were others—the kids, the teens, the Music Town fans—who loved the whole bit and wanted more.

The surgery opened up new avenues. Gene Bertram wrote us some more surf-style music and we improvised some new dance steps, gawky, seizure-like moves dubbed on the spot, the Selene Slide, the Luna Ladder, the Devil Dip, the Skelly Shake. We devised new skits, like one with a new character, Myron the Surf Instructor of Hades (played by our old afternoon movie guy, Harry Singleton) who had a crush on Luna One, but hated Selene.

I knew things had really taken off, that worlds had collided, when I saw some kids on Music Town start breaking out the Selene Slide and the Devil Dip on Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoons. I was building a solid fan base. We weren't reaching Ghoulardi numbers, but we got attention in the press and more letters and calls—favorable—from viewers. Happy, of course, wanted more. "You need some more gimmicks!" he insisted. "Kids love the gimmicks!"

So we ran contests: a free pizza to the tenth caller on the Inferno Red Hotline, a raffle to win a custom Demon Dave surfboard, viewers answering trivia questions to win a free miniature Skelly. And we started another fan club, again with posters, and, instead of bandanas, Demon Dave decals and autographed photos of me and the girls. But the most popular feature was the Inferno Word of the Week. We'd mail a secret word to our fan club members; then, when they were watching on Saturday nights, we'd say the word sometime during the broadcast. When the viewer heard the word, they'd have to call in to

our Hotline. If they were the 6th or the 10th or the 25th caller, or whatever we decided for that night, they'd win $50.

With Halloween coming up, Happy wanted to do something big, and I knew just the thing. I had long wanted to do a beach party down at Edgewater just as a Music Town thing, but it never happened. Now I suggested dovetailing the monster and music angles into a big-ass Halloween party. Demon Dave's Monster Beach Bonfire Bacchanal would go down Saturday night, October 30. By that time, the wind would already be rattling through bare branches and it would be nippy by the lake, but this idea was too good to pass up.

We got a permit for a bonfire, and Happy shelled out for a truckload of Blatz kegs, about a thousand corn dogs and some red and white glass-sided, carnival-style popcorn poppers. We arranged to broadcast portions of the stage show live (in lieu of airing Movie Inferno that night) and included performances from three bands: our old friends, Van Wells and the Velve-Teens, and two Halloween specialty bands, The Skeleton Boys and The Werewolves. To make our big entrance, Happy rented Meg, Molly and me a great big black hearse from Mortimer Funeral Home, and got the owner, Chic Mortimer, to agree to act as chauffer.

Adam had vacillated for weeks on the whole question of the party. I didn't blame him. But he knew he could go with Kip and Mike, if he wanted. They were squiring Muriel and Josie, who was going to enjoy a rare night out and leave Dee with Mom and Dad.

The hearse reached the access road above the beach at around 7 p.m. We got the whole opening night treatment. Chic Mortimer, wearing a somber black suit, stopped the hearse, came around and opened the door for each of us. Arm in arm, Meg, Molly and me in the middle, we walked down to the sand on a path marked by tiki torches, shouting fans and popping flashbulbs. It was my first big in-person appearance, so I went in the whole Demon Dave get-up, bright red Hawaiian shirt and frayed-edge beachcomber pants. But since it was also late October in Cleveland, Mabel made me a big red cape lined with fake tomato red fur. We also were obliged to do the full red makeup on my face, neck and hands, the black lips and arched eyebrows, and the headband with the devil horns. We forewent the plastic arrow-headed tail I usually wore on air—I was sure it would get grabbed and yanked off at some time during the evening. Meg and Molly had Mabel whip them up a couple of full-length versions of their silver glitter dresses, which they topped with giant fake-fur coats. Frannie painted their skin a sea foam color (moon cheese green, she called it), shot through with crazy lavender streaks and more glitter.

At the peak of the party, there were 300 people there, easy, kicking up sand and throwing back beer. Most attended dressed for the occasion, Demon Dave-esque devils, teen angels, ghosts, witches, hoboes and gypsies. Some asshole came dressed like a gorilla and spent his evening hoisting his tiny, half-naked girlfriend up above his head.

I was the host, so for three hours I was working, introducing the bands and presiding over the twist, limbo and costume contests. I had just finished the last of these

and was stepping off the small platform stage, scanning the crowd for Adam, when I heard a voice separate from the general din.

"Zom-BROW-ski!" somebody shouted in a high, sharp howl. "Hey, David! David Zom-BROW-ski!"

A number of people turned to look as a pirate, tall with gangly legs and a small pot belly, ran toward me, dragging a younger, giggly wench in his wake. When he was still about 10 feet away, he paused, spread out his arms and bobbed his head, making the huge-brimmed hat flop at the edges. "David!" he shouted. "Do you know me?"

"Er, Blackbeard? Or maybe…"

The overly chuffed buccaneer thumped his chest with his fist. "It's me! Jeffrey! Jeffrey Hines… I was a year behind you at Ely High! Remember?!"

Good lord, it was the foot- looker.

"Aw c'mon! You remember!"

"I do. How are you?"

He was upon me now. Great sweet-sour wafts of alcohol emanated from his mouth and clothing as he caught me in a giant hug. "I'm great, you old son of a bitch. C'mon, I'm buying you a drink."

"I'm drinking for free tonight, Jeffrey. You see, I'm kind of the host of the party."

"Oh sure!" Jeffrey said sheepishly. "'Course you are! But looky here, I smuggled a bit of rum in my flagon here." He held up an enormous silver tankard and smiled big, and yes, even through the faux fur beard and the unsettling brown eye shadow, I could

see the boot-licking people-pleaser who stood in my living room the day I graduated high school.

"Rum, huh?"

"C'mon! C'mon and have a drink with me. This is the good shit. Very expensive! Picked it up in Jamaica last year. I go there all the time!"

I looked at the wench. "Who's your friend? Is this Mrs. Hines?"

"No, Mrs. Hines was busy this evening. She took the children trick or treating," Jeffrey said. He never stopped smiling. "This is a…co-worker…from my office. Her name is—"

"It's Nancy!" the woman nearly yelled, pushing past Jeffrey. "I'm a nurse. I work in Dr. Hines' office. I am so thrilled to meet you, Demon Dave. I love your show!"

"Well, thank you, Nancy, that's good to hear."

Jeffrey became impatient with such niceties. "Drink!" he shrieked, thrusting the flagon toward me. "You must drink! *You must!*"

"Take it easy, Jeffrey! All right, I'll have a little nip." It was a broad, brown rum and to me, it tasted no different from the stuff you'd grab off a drugstore shelf, like someone had tossed a spoonful of molasses into a bottle of rubbing alcohol.

"Smooth, isn't it?" Jeffrey grinned. "I tell you, David, it's good to see you!"

"So, you're a doctor."

"Oh, you bet! And business is booming, let me tell you!"

"Are there a lot of bad feet in Cleveland?"

Jeffrey considered this for a moment and almost seemed sober. “Bad feet? I really can’t say. Why do you ask?”

“Aren’t you a podiatrist? I mean, wasn’t that what you went to school for? To do what your dad did?”

“Oh, that! Well sure, I thought about it. But, you know, I wasn’t cut out for the foot game.”

“No?”

“No. There’re too many podiatrists in Cleveland the way it is. At the rate women are cranking out babies these days, there’s *way* more money in obstetrics and gynecology. Business is good, my friend. Business is good!”

“I see.”

He leered at me then, and poked an elbow at my side. “And the view is way better! Am I right? Huh? Huh?”

Nancy giggled at this. “Oh, Dr. Hines, you are so bad!”

“I have to go now,” I said. “More host duties.”

“Aw, don’t go yet, David! We just caught up with you!”

As had always been my policy with Jeffrey, it was good to not to linger. Keep moving. “It was good to see you, Jeffrey.” I clapped him on the shoulder. “Take care of yourself. And nice to meet you, er, Nancy.” I moved back toward the beer truck, searching the sea of faces for Adam’s.

“Good to see you too, pal!” Jeffrey hooted after me, flinging his arm around the nurse/wench. “Look what we’ve made of ourselves! Who would’ve thought? From such humble beginnings?”

Yes. Just look at us. The pirate/philanderer/cooch looker and this fully grown fool standing on a cold beach in Cleveland, covered in red makeup and wearing devil’s horns. What had we made of ourselves?

After I left Jeffrey, I was overcome with the strong urge to drink. People were sloshing full cups of Blatz and other smuggled liquors at me, begging me to chug, pose for pictures, say “Surf’s Up, Boars and Ghouls!” I obliged. Of course, I did. This was the big life. This fully grown fool was living it. Where the fuck was Adam?

I continued to bob, from clutch to clutch of fans. Somewhere in between, there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see another Devil, not Demon Dave. This one was smoother, suaver, decked out in a white shirt and a red satin suit. “The challenger,” I said.

“Huckleberry.”

“Whurve you been?” I was aware I was slurring my words. My mouth seemed to be giving a hearty middle finger in response to my brain’s polite requests to speak. “I been lookin’ everwhere for you!”

“Why, Huck,” Adam said, “I do believe you have been imbibing. And unless I miss my guess…to excess.”

“Bingo.”

“How much, Huck?”

“All of it.”

“I see.”

“But you’re here now. Oh, than’ god, you’re here!” I did a 360, looking around the crowd, then instantly regretted it when my head kept going after I’d stopped. “Did you…did you come with Kip…and Josie?” I considered for a second. “But no…they’ve been here for hours and hours and hours.”

“Believe it or not, I took a cab. But it’s fine. I’m here now.”

“The challenger,” I said again, and cackled Demon-Dave style.

“I could say the same about you, friend. You are a fucking challenge.” He looked around. “Are you, more or less, done with your duties for the night?”

“I am now, pal o’ mine!” I wanted so badly to hug him right then. But I didn’t. And he didn’t. Why? Why was it OK for someone like Jeffrey to hug me, big as he wanted, there in front of everybody, but not for me to hug Adam, the person I loved most of all? The world made no sense.

We were supposed to end at 11 p.m., and fortunately, most of the crowd had left by then. The wind was picking up and a gibbous moon was frosting whitecaps on the water. But there were still 50 or so people milling around. Van Wells and one of the other Velve-Teens sat on milk crates around the waning flames, now more of a campfire, strumming guitars and singing Buddy Holley and Everly Brothers songs. Along with Meg, Molly, Muriel and Josie, there were a sprinkling of teenagers at their feet, mostly

moony girls and the boys humoring them in the hopes of getting laid or at least tapping second base before the night was over.

Adam had made me stop drinking when he showed up. He and I sat a short distance away from the fire, talking to Kip and Mike. I yawned.

"Jesus Christ, am I that boring?" Mike yelled.

"Yes, and I'm fuckin' tired and drunk."

"Nothing wrong with a man enjoying himself," Kip said expansively. He pulled a small misshapen cigarette from his pocket and sniffed it like a fine Cuban cigar.

I sat up a little straighter. "Is that reefer?"

"It is."

"You gonna smoke it…now?"

"I am. Want some?"

"I never…tried it."

Kip placed the cig in his mouth and found a book of matches in his trouser pocket. He lit the end and took a slow drag, the tip a lone firefly in our dimly lit surroundings.

He passed it around, and we each took a turn. Adam smiled. I knew he'd smoked marijuana before, not as a regular thing, but just a couple times, at college parties. He inhaled and held the smoke as long as he could before exhaling into the night air. He hesitated before passing it to me.

"Think you should, buddy?"

"Gimme. I want to try it."

I snatched the joint from Adam and tried to smoke it like a regular cigarette, which is what I thought Kip and Adam were doing. Of course, I had no experience with regular cigarettes either, only a general idea of how the whole thing worked. I inhaled deeply, ready to savor the smoke.

"Easy there. Easy!" Adam laughed.

It entered my lungs like hot glass, and the stink of the weed filled my head. I coughed violently. "Jesus! That stuff…is nasty!"

"It's not the best," I heard Kip murmur from somewhere above me. I hadn't noticed that he'd stood up. Mike took the cig from my hand. "My turn!" he said, then got up and followed Kip to the bonfire.

I'd just seen them go when my brain started to bounce it my skull, then turn itself inside out. "Oh god. Oh, Adam…that stuff. That stuff…it's made my head go woozy. I don't feel right."

"Take it easy, Davey. It'll be okay. Just sit tight for a minute."

"No, no." I struggled to stand. "I think…I'm gonna throw up."

"Christ."

I finally got upright, ripped off the headband with the devil's horns and ran up the beach as far as I could get, as fast as I could manage, away from the bonfire crowd. The sudden and vigorous movement dislodged the gunk in my stomach, the beer/rum/whiskey/corndog/popcorn mass, and I vomited, right there on the sand.

"Davey? Davey? You okay, sweetie?" Adam came to my side and put a hand on my back.

He wasn't supposed to hug me and he wasn't talk to me that way either, not in public, not if there was any chance anyone could hear. But there I was, doubled over, gurgling. I wasn't supposed to be a sloppy mess, either. But I was. And Adam was here, beside me.

And then I wanted to hear him call me 'sweetie' again. Just say it, right there, like anyone else would say it to someone they cared about. I wished everyone was there…everyone I knew…all my family…everyone who watched me on TV. *Go on and say it, Adam, and I will say it back to you. This is us, everybody. And we are in love.*

I dropped to my knees and stayed bent over toward the sand, until the inevitable second wave came. It came. I let go. And then, I felt a bit better. My head rubbery, brains still sloshing in my skull cavity, but my stomach was unburdened. I felt oddly light.

Adam helped me stand. "Let's go get the twins and Josie. You need to go home now."

We started to walk back toward the bonfire when we were approached by a man and a woman walking the other way down the beach, a flashlight bobbling in the space between them. *Oh god, please, no autographs now, no excruciating introductions.*

"Davey? Is that you? Is that…are you Demon Dave? Davey Brown?" The man was short, bulky. The woman beside him slim and a bit taller. For a moment, the flashlight fell on our faces and my eyes burned.

Adam intercepted. "Can you put that light down, please? We were just leaving. We need to—"

"We wanted to be sure and catch you before you left," the man said, "Please, just give us a second. You might want to meet this woman."

"No, really, I—"

"Please," she said. The couple had planted themselves in front of us, and they were pleasant-looking, but not smiling. We were unpleasant looking, and also not smiling. They were both younger than me, he He maybe 25. She was harder to peg, but certainly not a teenager.

The woman extended a hand. "David? My name is Dominique Gaubert. Your name…I'm told that Brown isn't your real last name."

"It's made up…y'know, for TV," I said and wiped the back of my hand across my chin, hoping to swipe any trace of vomit that might be lingering. "Look, I'm sorry, but I'm not feeling—"

"Your real last name is Zombrowski, yes?"

"Yeah." I looked at Adam, who stared back at me.

"I heard a man call you that and run toward you earlier tonight. Like he knew you. Like you were old friends."

"Yeah? So?"

"Well, it's really quite strange, but…you see, I've heard that name before. I moved to Cleveland recently, from Ontario…in Canada. I used to live in a town called Oshawa. And I…I knew of someone there. A man. Well, a boy, when I knew him."

"Ma'am, I don't…"

“I have reason to believe this man’s last name was Zombrowski. Or, used to be his last name. He’s a bit younger than you.”

I stopped talking then and gaped at the woman. The gathering wind curled the sand-crusted red fur cape around my knees. “When? When was this?” Without realizing it, I grabbed the woman’s arms. She recoiled a bit, doubtless from the sudden motion and the wafting stench of vomit—or maybe it was being close to a strange and drunken man covered in red grease paint. I backed off. “I’m sorry. But when?”

“A long time ago. The boy came to them before the war.”

“1940?” Adam asked.

“Yes…I think that’s right. Or maybe early ’41.”

“Oh my god,” I moaned. “Oh my sweet Jesus.” I dropped to my knees, then sunk onto the cool sand and lay immobile, keening like a shot animal, my cape tangled up around me.

“Please, may we have your name and telephone number?” I heard Adam say. “We’ll call you tomorrow…when Mr. Zombrowski is feeling a little better.”

“Will he be all right?” Someone asked.

“I think he’s going to have a lot of questions,” Adam answered.

Some minutes later, Adam picked me up off the sand. We were alone again and headed back to the party site. Everyone except the tear-down crew had cleared out. The fire had already been doused. Here and there, men picked up cups and paper wrappers.

Others were dismantling the stage area, disconnecting speakers or cleaning the food areas.

Adam helped me back up the hill where the hearse was still waiting. “Where were you guys?” Josie asked. “We’ve been waiting for hours!”

“More like 30 minutes,” Meg said. “Is he OK?”

“Just a little too much to drink is all,” Adam said.

I felt weak and disturbingly limp, my bones wobbly, an infrastructure of pipe cleaners.

“Er, did he puke?” Molly asked.

Adam opened one of the side doors of the hearse. “Yep.”

“Stop right there,” Mr. Mortimer spoke up from the driver’s seat. “He goes in back.”

Adam barked out a laugh. “Seriously?”

“If he vomits again, I don’t want it all over the inside of my hearse, thank you very much. Bring him around to the back and lay him out.” The mortician opened his door and got out.

“Well, you don’t want him vomiting all over the back, do you?”

“I’ll give him a flower urn. He can puke in that.”

Muriel chimed in. “This is gross! He smells really bad.”

Mr. Mortimer came to the back of the hearse, grasped the handles of the double doors and pulled them open.

I turned to Adam. “I’m feeling a bit better. I’m…I’m really not that drunk…anymore. I don’t think—”

“Not taking any chances,” Mr. Mortimer said matter-of-factly. “In you go. Lie on down there.” He pulled a low pewter flower container over near me. “Like I said, puke in that if the spirit moves you.”

“I’m going in back to help Davey,” Josie said suddenly. “Adam, it’s OK. You can ride up front. Muriel can get in the middle with Meg and Molly.” She climbed in the back seat and put the flower pot in her lap.

Adam took a seat beside Mr. Mortimer. The three Ms piled in, and at last, we left the beach. “You don’t need to tell your dad about this, do you?” I heard Adam ask. Then a snort/laugh from one of the twins.

As we tooled along, I laid in the space at the back of the hearse and looked up at the deadman’s view. The inside roof was lined, end to end with a swirling brocade fabric, egg-shell white patterns as ethereal, pristine and imprecise as heaven.

“There are some things,” I told Josie, “we’re not supposed to see.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Oshawa

(1965)

I woke the next morning with cottonmouth and slight hammering at my temples, but thank god, no nausea. Adam was sleeping beside me. I leaned over and kissed him, remembering only afterward that I'd tossed my cookies pretty good the night before.

His eyes opened and his nose wrinkled. "Oy gevalt…"

"I know, I know, should've used the Listerine first. But thanks…you know, for taking care of me last night."

"It's OK."

"I don't know what happened. I just went bananas last night."

Adam stretched a bit. "I figured you might be up early."

"Why?"

He frowned at me then. "C'mon now…the woman on the beach? What she said?"

“The woman…” My stomach lurched, and the nausea reestablished itself. “Oh god. I hadn’t…she said something…about Canada, right? About Bud, maybe.” I sat up, and immediately felt like my head was going to cave in. Sudden moves were a bad idea just now. “Did she give you her phone number, Adam? Did she write it down for us?”

He held out his left forearm to me, then twisted it. On its underside, in blue ink, a local Cleveland phone number was written thickly, traced over several times and smeared a bit at the edges.

I reached the woman on the third ring. It was early, but she answered good naturedly. I had to ask her to repeat her name—Dominique Gaubert, yes—and to speak slowly, partly because my head hurt, partly because she had a curly, whispery French accent that delayed my recognition of every word about a half second.

Growing up, she’d lived in the Ontario town of Oshawa, located about an hour east of Toronto. Her family home was in a quiet neighborhood, next door to a couple named Jean-Marc and Colleen Cherubin. The Cherubins were quiet people, the husband mostly seen going to and coming home from work, the wife running errands, lingering at the front door, fumbling for keys, wrestling with bags of groceries, or fussing with a few flower pots near her outside steps. Sometimes when Dominique was standing outside, in her front yard or in the driveway beside, she heard what seemed to shouting from the Gaubert home, but this was not unusual. Passersby might have heard the same from any number of houses on her street, hers included.

I grunted at intervals as she spoke, at once impatient for her to get to the part about Bud and wanting to hear all the background details. She said she remembered

asking her mother at some point why the Gauberts had no children and being told that some people just didn't have children, couldn't have them. Dominique wondered if this made the couple sad. Their neighborhood, after all, was full of children, all ages, playing, screaming, riding bicycles up and down the wide sidewalks, crisscrossing yards as they chased each other through the short Canadian summers. Then, when Dominique was about eight, a young boy, blond, very beautiful, appeared, getting in and out of cars with the Cherubins. The Cherubins called him Paul, and Dominique was told he their newly adopted son.

"I was older," she said, "but in the first few years he was there, we played together a lot, along with other children in the neighborhood. There was a day I remember very well, the first summer he was with the Cherubins. Paul was playing in the mud—he was 4, I suppose—and the clothes he was wearing got very dirty. It was a blue shirt that buttoned down the front and a pair of dungarees."

"A blue shirt."

"Yes. I told him to go home and change his clothes. But he said he couldn't. That his mother was not home, and his father was sleeping. That if he woke his father up he would get into trouble. My mother saw and offered to wash them for him. She gave him one of my brother's shirts and a pair of pants to put on while she washed his things. And before she washed it, she noticed, on the back collar, Paul's shirt said, 'Zombrowski.' Such an unusual name."

"Oh Jesus."

"Are you all right, sir?" Dominique said in her curly French accent.

“My mother…” I said. “My mother used to sew our name in the back of our clothes, in case they got lost.”

“I wondered about that….I—”

“Did you ask those people, the Cherubins, about it?”

“Yes, of course. My mother was curious, so when Paul went home, she followed him up, onto the porch with his freshly laundered clothes. And she asked Mrs. Cherubin about it and—”

“My brother, you see…” Tears coming now. “He had this habit, of taking off his shirt and leaving it places and…she wanted to make sure...” I started to sob.

“Would you like to call me back, sir?”

“No! I’m sorry.” I grabbed a tissue from a nearby box. “Please. Continue.”

“My mother asked Mrs. Cherubin about it, and she said that was the name of the family Paul had been adopted from. She told my mother…well, something that wasn’t very nice.”

“What?”

“She said, ‘Isn’t it good his name is Cherubin now? So much prettier than that ugly Polack name.’”

“He wasn’t fucking adopted.”

“It is what we were told.”

“He was stolen.”

Dominique had spent a good deal of her youth playing often with the blond Cherubin boy, but when he reached school age, she started to see less of him. She

attended the Catholic academy in town, he the parochial school. It seemed he was sick a lot, with flu or mumps or colds. He was accident prone, was said to climb trees and fall out of them, or trip down stairs, though Dominique saw none of these accidents herself, only the bruises they left behind. He was an active boy, so no one thought too much about this.

After she left for university in '51, she lost track completely. She moved to Toronto after she graduated, to work as a nurse. When she had last returned to the old neighborhood, the Cherubins had moved away. But she remembered the family and she remembered the odd name sewn into the little blue shirt. On the previous night, at the party, she had heard Jeffrey shout my name and it perked the memory in her head. She mentioned it to her companion, the man on the beach, who knew all about me. He was a fan of Music Town and Movie Inferno and a native of Cleveland, but too young to have been around during Bud's disappearance. But when he'd first started watching me on TV, his dad told him all about my family, about the terrible occurrence which had disturbed Clevelanders for months in the early '40s, how he had read in the papers that David Brown of radio and TV was also David Zombrowski of the Euclid Ordeal/Tragedy.

"So when was the last time you saw Bud…uh, Paul?" I asked.

"The last time would have been…I suppose around…eight years ago, or so."

"So, what…1957?"

"Yes, that sounds right…I think, yes, because I went to see my mother for her birthday. And I saw him. He was still living with his family in the neighborhood."

"Is your mother still there? Can I talk to her?"

“She’s…I’m afraid she has some…mental issues. She gets confused easily. She’s in a group home now, in Ottawa.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Dominique gave me the address of the old Cherubin place in Oshawa. “You wouldn’t…happen to have a photo of Bud, er, Paul, would you?” I asked her. “I mean at any point, little or as a teenager, or something?”

“No, I’m sorry. I wish I did. I am forced to rely on my memory, I’m afraid.”

Yes, undoubtedly, this was the safest course of action. To let our memories be our gatekeepers, to allow our minds to hold whatever version of the past we can bear.

Adam was in the kitchen sipping a cup of coffee and looking at the morning paper. I relayed the story from Dominique.

“Jesus,” he said, and ran a hand over his hair. “So this whole time, he’s been less than a 6-hour drive away?”

“Well, in another country, but yeah.”

“What are you thinking? What do you want to do?”

“You even need to ask? I’ve got to find him, Adam.”

“I know that. I mean, where do you start? Cleveland P.D.? State Police?”

“I think maybe I need to go to Canada.”

“Doesn’t it make more sense to get our law involved?”

“I don’t know.” I got a cup and poured myself some coffee. “What if…what if the word gets out that the police here are looking into this?”

"So?"

"You weren't here in 1940. I know it's been a long time…I know everybody's moved on, but Bud's disappearance was a big deal back then."

"I don't doubt it…but—"

"Look, the police couldn't help us then. You think now, 25 years later, they'll just solve this like Sherlock fucking Holmes?"

"Well, you're giving them a hell of a lead."

"But what if it doesn't pan out? What if Bud's dead?" Adam put his hand on my arm. "I don't want to drag my mom and dad through this whole agony again."

"So you're going to Ottawa yourself and flag down a Mountie?"

"Something like that. And if I find out something bad…I can tell my mom and dad privately. Quietly."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"No. I need to just…do this alone. And to keep it quiet."

I finagled a week off from Music Town, telling Happy I had an urgent family matter to attend to. I didn't ask about the following Saturday's Demon Dave show. I figured with luck, I might be able to return before then. Happy understood, but there was still a grudging tone in his voice when he said he'd get the weather guy, Stan Kershaw, to cover the shows for me.

There was also the small matter of transportation. I'd looked into trains, but I far preferred the flexibility of a car. I could rent, I guess, but I was going out of the country

and I wasn't sure how complicated that would be, especially if I got into an accident. My parents only had the one car, so that wasn't going to happen. I thought about asking Adam if one of his parents would mind, but I felt weird about it and I'm sure they would feel weird about it. Then I remembered Kip mentioning that his mom had a '55 Chevy Bel Air sitting in her garage (beside the rusty chain saw, no doubt). Kip borrowed it occasionally, so I was reasonably confident it would run. I called him in the early afternoon.

"Hello?" A woman's groggy voice answered.

"Uh, yes, hello. Is Kip there?"

"Kip?"

"Yes, Kip. Kip Johanssen. Maybe I have the wrong number?"

"No, he's here. He…hold on." A rustle, then a muffled *"Kip! Phone!"* A giggle. "He's coming. He's on the can."

"I'll hold."

A couple of moments more, then Kip took the phone. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, Kip? It's Davey. Hey, I need to ask you a really big favor."

"You OK, Mr. Brown? You seemed to have exceeded your cocktail quota last night."

"And then some." I cleared my throat. "Look, I was wondering, what would be the odds of me borrowing your mom's car for say, three or four days?"

"Three or four *days*? What the hell, Davey?"

"Look, I have to…take a road trip…to Canada."

"So, you'd be taking the car out of state? Out of the country?"

"Well, yeah…but, I'll be careful. It's really important—really, really important, like life or death—or I wouldn't ask."

"What's in Canada?"

"I…can't tell you. Not right now. I just have to track something down. Please."

"Can I know when you get back?"

"OK. Sure. Uh, do you need to ask your mom before I take it?"

"Mom's not talking a whole lot nowadays. Actually, they think she might have throat cancer. Those cigarettes are the devil."

"They are."

"When do you need the car?"

"Well, I was hoping for tomorrow morning, first thing."

"I gotta work—"

"I know. But I remember your mom's house from when we got the chainsaw. I could take the bus there early, if you OK it with her first, so she doesn't think her car's getting stolen."

"You owe me, man. I'll leave the car key under the mat by the back door. And don't wreck it. That's my inheritance you'll be driving."

Mrs. Johanssen's Chevy was a real peach, low mileage and a sweet two-tone job, white and swimming pool turquoise on the inside seat covers and the outside paint. It was clean, more or less, but inside there was a musk of disuse, a corn-chip, stinky feet odor

that gagged me a little when I got in. I cranked down the window and turned the key in the ignition. Who knows when it had last been driven, so I tooled around the block first before heading out on the highway. A little sluggish, but she seemed solid. I figured it would be OK once I knocked some of the cobwebs out. I gassed up and pointed the car east, leaving the window open to air her out.

I didn't drive much, and it felt good. I also didn't get away from Cleveland much. Vacations had been very scarce over the years—Adam and I had taken day trips around the state, to Cedar Point in Sandusky, to Columbus and Cincinnati. We spent a weekend in Chicago once with one of Adam's cousins and saw a couple of Cubs' games. And of course, we went places with our families, separately: weddings, funerals, confirmations and bar mitzvahs, christenings and brises. But I harbored a fantasy—two weeks, maybe three—Adam and me, flying out west, or maybe driving in some sleek beast of a Cadillac (convertible, of course) out to California. Really making a trip of it, stopping along the way to see the Mississippi and the mountains, the red rock of Arizona, tooling down Route 66, and ending up in Hollywood, near the ocean where the giant waves assaulted the beaches. The biggest lives were out there, everything slicker, faster, and better done than anyone in Cleveland could imagine.

And when I thought of these things, I could see how I was chafing, how Adam was chafing, against the edges of our lives. We, like unhappy, bobble-eyed goldfish, had swum and stretched to the scale of our glass bowls. But there were other bowls, and fresher, stranger waters to plumb. Adam and I, we were good at what we did. We could make something of ourselves, maybe work on national TV or even the movies. But even

more than that, we might have the chance to be ourselves. I had read about the way folks lived out west, in certain parts of Hollywood, in San Francisco. Wasn't that worth taking a chance?

A little after noon that Monday, I passed Buffalo. As I got nearer to the Canadian border, I thought more about Bud and I started to get scared. I wasn't hungry, but I stopped at a diner before Peace Bridge, the span over the Niagara River, and bought myself a hot dog and a Coke. For a brief moment, I entertained the idea of stopping at the Falls, just for a look, and to collect myself. But I knew I needed to keep going. And I needed to prepare myself. For what Bud might be now. Or for no Bud at all.

I went through the customs station without a problem and entered Ontario. There was very little separating southern Ontario and the northern edge of upstate New York, but I felt a change just the same. I rolled the driver's side window all the way down to consider the breezes of this undiscovered country. The sun appeared to me at a different angle than it did mere minutes before, the sky an unfamiliar shade of blue, something about it scrubbed pale and vague. This place was different. I felt it. I knew it then. And if Bud grew up here, then he would be different too.

It took me another hour and a half or so to get to Oshawa from the bridge. I found a small motel near the main road, The Lamplighter Inn, and got a room. After I was settled, I headed for the downtown area, in search of the police and Bud's cold trail.

I walked into the first store I saw in Oshawa, a little gift shop full of tiny bottles of maple syrup and various moose-shaped merchandise, and asked the proprietor for directions to the police station. He asked if it was a major or minor matter.

"Er, fairly major," I said.

"Then you need to go to Whitby, next town over." He took the burled wood pipe out of his mouth and poked it in the direction of his front display window. "Go back out this main road here, and turn left at the traffic light, and…"

In Whitby, I found the Regional Police Station of the Durham Municipality—Durham being as near as I could tell, the Canadian equivalent of an American county. It was a spartan, low slung building. I walked in and found a plump, apple-cheeked man seated behind a high-topped desk.

"Hello, sir. May I help you?"

"Yes…I'm here, well, on a matter of some urgency."

"Yes, sir. What might that be?"

"I need to—" It seemed to me that my voice was entirely too loud. I lowered it by half. "I need to see someone, about a missing person?"

"Your name?"

"David Zombrowski."

"Zom-brow-ski?"

I spelled it for him, slowly.

"And your address?"

I provided it.

“You’re an American?”

“Yes.”

“Is this a child, sir? Is your family visiting?”

“No, an adult. He would be, oh, he would be 29 years old by now.”

“By now? How long has this person been missing?”

“25 years.”

“I see. One moment please.” The man plopped off the sturdy wooden stool he’d been sitting on and moved to the back of the station. Now, as my gaze followed him, I saw rows of desks beyond, sitting on a glossy green linoleum floor and separated by a main walkway. Finally, the man ambled back up the walkway with yet another man, this one tall and slender with close-cropped, slicked back hair.

“Mr. Zombrowski?” the slender man said gently. “I am Detective Constable Kingsford. I wonder if I might be of some assistance to you?”

Kingsford directed me to one of the desks in the back of the building and asked me to take a seat opposite him. “Well then, how may I help you?”

I spewed out the 5-minute version of the occurrences of 1940 and Dominique Gaubert’s story, trying to include as many pertinent details as I could.

“I appreciate your situation, Mr. Zombrowski, but there are some aspects we must consider, uppermost among them that your brother, Bradley, is an adult. As a result, we cannot go chasing around Oshawa, knocking down doors, with intent of locating him, taking him out of whatever situation he is in, and delivering him to you.”

“I know. I understand. I just…I just want to know if you can give me any information at all. I mean, I have his last known address. I’m going there, tomorrow. But before I go, I guess I…want to know what my rights are.”

“Given his age—29, did you say?—given his age, he is in all likelihood, married with a life of his own. That is, if he is still around here. He could be in Katmandu herding elephants, for all we know.”

I nodded. The Detective Constable was kind of a jerk.

“However, with regard to your information about the couple’s possible adoption of your brother, I will say this. Over the years, I have heard some of the gaffers in the constabulary mention past cases, nefarious adoption houses operating in the province.” He leaned toward me a bit and lowered his voice. “It was not unheard of in the old days…children obtained in shadowy manner, spirited from teenaged mothers still under the sway of medication, occasionally snatched from backyards or school playgrounds, sold to these adoption places for quick money, and in turn, sold for adoption into families who wanted children.”

“Exactly! Exactly! I think that’s what happened here.”

“I will further say that I have heard, in a very few cases, that some children were brought in from the United States, over the border. Harder to trace, I should think.”

“Yes.”

“The demand for adoptions seemed to fall away during the war, and after. But in 1940, it certainly could’ve still been going on.”

“And?”

“Well, we are dealing in the here and now. We have no evidence of any foul play, we don’t even know the whereabouts, or—if you’ll excuse me—the existence of your brother, Mr. Zombrowski.”

“So I’m on my own?”

“My statement to you, sir, is that you are free to act upon your information, if you do so lawfully. You may inquire at the address you have been given. If you become aware of something that constitutes a crime or violation of Provincial law, we stand ready to serve.”

“So I’m on my own.”

I drove back to Oshawa, to the neighborhood Dominique had described to me. It wasn’t a big city, and the street was easy to find. The place was simple, nice, less European than her French accent had conjured in my mind. The oak-lined streets, bare now that November was here, could easily have been mistaken for Euclid. Wide brick sidewalks led from modest home to modest home, most two-story, of brick or stone. Now nearly 4 p.m., the sun had already retreated behind a line of clouds as it headed for the horizon, and in some of the windows, amber lights glowed. A few children loitered in the small yards of short yellow grass.

I found the address Dominique had given me, No. 217, and knocked on the door. It was painted dark brown and arched at the top. A rustle and a thump from the inside, then the door opened. “Yes?” A middle-aged woman stood blinking at me. She wore an

apron, and her face was a bit hectic and slightly pink as if she'd been bending over a boiling pot. She did not smile.

I felt immediately idiotic. I had no idea how to begin. How could I have not thought this through? I wished I had printed up a card that had the whole story printed on it. Then I could just hand it to people. *Read, please.*

"Hello, sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for the Cherubin family. Do they…are you Mrs. Cherubin?" *Because if you are, I will be strangling you now.*

"No, our name is Morris."

"Oh…"

"We bought this house from the Cherubins."

"How long ago?"

"Two years, more or less."

"Can I…may I come in? Please? Just for a second. I promise, I'm not a maniac or anything."

"No, I'm afraid I can't let you do that. I'm not in the habit of letting strange men in the house, and I'm trying to get dinner cooked before my husband—"

"Can you just…" I was angling my head around the woman, trying to see just a glimpse of the inside of the house where, possibly, my brother had grown up.

"Sir, I'm sorry. But if you have any more questions, you're going to have to wait until my husband gets home."

"Where did they go? The Cherubins—did they leave a forwarding address?"

“Yes, they did. But I’m afraid it’s just a postal box, at the Lake Champion bus depot.”

“Lake Champion?”

“About an hour north…uh, northwest, I guess, from here.”

I sighed. “Can you tell me—”

A hiss behind the woman drew her attention. “Ah, my pot’s boiling over! I’ve got to go.” She shut the door.

I waited in the Chevy, parked in the street, until I saw a dark sedan pull up into the driveway at 217. A man got out and went inside. I gave it a respectable 20 minutes or so, then knocked on the door again.

This time, the man answered. *The card, damnit! Why hadn’t I printed that card?*

“Good evening, sir…” And I was off to races once again, now adding the earlier conversation with his wife, although I was sure she had already related to him as she struggled with her pots.

The man invited me in, but he was no friendlier than the Mrs. We all stood in the front hall. “Your wife told me where the Cherubins moved,” I said. “But I want to know about the family.”

“I don’t understand,” Mr. Morris said crisply. He spoke his words with impeccable enunciation, so you heard, very clearly, the “t” at the end of don’t, the “d” at the end of understand. “Don’t you know these people?”

“I do. I just…I haven’t seen them for a long time. I was afraid…maybe that Mr. or Mrs. Cherubin had passed away, or maybe one of the children?” The sentence started as a statement, but ended as a question.

“Yes, well, those were tragic circumstances,” Mr. Morris said with sibilant precision.

My stomach dropped. “What do you mean?”

“Mrs. Cherubin. Died. Pancreatic cancer. Terrible and swift, as they say. Six months from diagnosis to her passing.”

“That’s awful. So, who did that leave? Who was still living here?”

“Just Mr. Cherubin and his son, er, what was his name?

“Robert, I think,” Mrs. Morris put in helpfully.

“Robert?”

“Or John?” The woman looked confused.

“Could it have been Paul?” I asked.

“I mean, I guess,” she admitted. “What do you think, dear?”

Mr. Morris shrugged. “I can’t remember. He was a skinny fellow, I can tell you that, with blond hair, and he had a big black dog. Labrador Retriever, I think. Not much of a shedder, thank god.”

“That’s really all we know,” Mrs. Morris said. She opened the front door again.

“Thank you so much for your time,” I said. “I appreciate your help.”

I drove back to Oshawa, stopping along the way at a gas station for a map of Ottawa. I grabbed a sandwich at a diner in town, poring over the route to Lake Champion. When I returned to the Lamplighter, I called Adam, then collapsed into bed.

The road to the lake took me into a wild and rolling country. A few houses sat near the road, a gas station here and there, but mostly it was a sea of trees, endless stands of shadowy pine interspersed with deciduous trees clinging to the last of their leaves, sure to be swept away soon by the pitiless winds of the great North. Peeking over the tops of the trees, undulating land covered in more pine, more oak, more maple. Trees upon trees upon trees.

It was a little over an hour's drive to Lake Champion, and not hard to find the depot I was looking for. It sat near the water's edge, among a cluster with three other buildings—a tavern-style restaurant, a hardware store, and a small shack-like structure on the water with a row of canoes upended and leaning upright against it. What a rustic heaven, I thought, as I climbed the steps to the depot's front door. I pictured a quartet of grizzled old-timers inside, wearing eccentric hats, telling tall tales and warming their hands by the fire in between bouts of whittling and dips into a nearby pickle barrel.

There didn't seem to be anybody inside the place. It was old all right, and rustic enough. Faded plaid curtains on the windows, panes of rippled glass. There was an old-style register on the wood counter and a large, black leather-bound binder beside it. Some distance behind the counter sat a desk with an old typewriter on top of it, along with what looked to be a telegraph machine. To the side of the register, mounted on the wall, a

collection of worn tin signs advertising the Canadian National Telegraph Company, Northern Winds Bus Lines, Royal Mail Canada. And along the far side of the building, a grid of small metal doors with tiny glass windows, each with an assigned number and a keylock.

"Hello!" I called.

"Hullo-a-yoohoo!" a voice hooted. A rumble, then creak of a light door opened and closed. A large woman came in, puffing like a locomotive, struggling with a load of wood barely contained in a green canvas holder.

"Can I help you with that?" I asked.

"I've got it. I've got it," she said loudly, good-naturedly. When she reached the woodstove near the desk with the typewriter, she dropped her arms, crashing the logs onto the floor, sending wood chips flying and dotting the rays of sun from the window with sawdust. "If I wasn't so lazy," she said with a smile, "I'd make more trips out to the woodpile instead of trying to carry the whole mess in at once."

"I don't blame you," I said.

She dusted a few bits of woody debris off the arms of her sky blue plaid flannel shirt and stepped to the register. "What can I do for you? I'm afraid there's no bus running today. Monday, Wednesdays, Fridays only. Comes in around 10 a.m., leaves at 11."

"No, I'm not interested in a bus. I need to ask for an address. I'm trying to find a family. The Cherubins?"

The woman's face fell. "The *Cherubins*."

"Yes, ma'am."

She softened her tone. "Well, love, they don't…they're not here anymore."

"*Shit.* Excuse me, it's just that…"

"Are you a friend of theirs?"

"Yes. A friend of the family. But, you see, I haven't seen them in a very long time. I was hoping to surprise them. I was told that Mr. Cherubin—"

"Jean-Marc."

"Yeah, that Jean-Marc and his son—"

"Paul."

"Yes! I was told they lived up here."

"They did." The woman pressed her lips together tightly, which made her chin crinkle alarmingly.

"Did?"

"They moved here, I guess about two years ago, maybe a little less. Lived here a few months."

"Didn't they like it here?"

The woman softened her tone a bit more. Her eyes crinkled downward at the outside corners, and she smiled a smile I'd seen often enough before, warm, brimming with pity, the way people smiled at you when there was an awfulness that could not be avoided, but it was happening to you and not them. "What's your name, love?"

"Zombrowski. David Zombrowski."

"Mr. Zombrowski, I hate to be the one to tell you, but…"

Fire. Destruction. Their small cabin, on the remote northeastern edge of the lake, nothing but charred remains and among them, the bones of Jean-Marc Cherubin. Right in the middle of a sunny weekday in June, a Wednesday, a day the bus came, when everyone was going about their business. Paul was out on the lake with his dog, fishing for bass in the old dory they kept docked behind the cabin. He saw the smoke and rowed in. But it was too late. The wood cabin in that dry season went up like tinder. No firemen could get to the site until it was much too late.

"Does anyone know what caused the fire?"

"There was a lot of talk and guessing among the locals, but I think the official report said the cause couldn't be determined for certain. I'm so sorry."

"Me, too." I thought for a moment. "Please tell me Paul left a forwarding address. Some way to get ahold of him…at least for his mail."

"Well, he didn't get much mail, love. But he did leave an address."

The woman wrote down the information for a place in Scarborough, not too far from Oshawa. I wanted to rush right over there, but first, I had to see what remained of the cabin. The way was straightforward, the woman said. Just follow the lake around. The depot sat at the furthest point across the water from the cabin, so I could take the road in either direction. But, since there was no longer a cabin there, I had to look for the little house marker, a teal duck on a wooden stake, set out by the road, with the number 19.

"If you do see Paul," the woman said, "be sure and tell him Maureen said hullo. He used to pop in here from time to time. Quiet young man, but nice."

Not so young, I thought. Almost 30.

I poked along around the lake in the Bel Air, watching for the wooden duck on the stake. Though long grass and weeds did their best to hide it, I found the little guy eventually and beyond, the cabin site. More tall grass and countless stands of weeds obscured most of what laid there, but in a few places, sizeable fangs of splintered, charred wood still jutted up from the ground. A year and a half's worth of weather, countless soaking rains and deep snows, winds, animals picking at the blackened detritus, had scoured the area. I don't know what I was expecting to find. No charcoal rimmed bones remained, no melted toy steamships or tugs, no photos, nothing that evoked the Bud I knew, or the Cherubins I'd dreaded.

Behind the cabin (or what I deemed to be behind the cabin), Lake Champion shimmered in the late morning sun. A dock still extended out into the water, but whatever fishing boat had been secured there—Bud's boat—had since sought harbor elsewhere.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Thieves

(1965)

I returned to Oshawa and the Lamplighter. I had initially wanted to storm Scarborough, run all the traffic lights, and kick down the door at the address Maureen had given me. But thinking about the conversation with her had made me pause. Bud had a right to know the truth, certainly, and I and my family had a right to see him, talk to him. But he had suffered two traumas, lost both of his adoptive parents in a matter of months. Was it right to race over there and just show up on his doorstep?

And who knows what else had gone on in his life? It would seem that, at nearly 30, he was living with only his dad. No wife, no children, that I knew of. Maybe he was divorced, or something terrible had happened to them? Maybe he was like his older brother, and kept a secret male lover hidden away someplace.

I dialed the operator from the phone in my room and asked if she could give me a phone number that corresponded to a certain address. I also asked her if she had a listing for a Paul Cherubin. She had no listing under that name in Scarborough, but she was able to give me the number that matched up with the address. I called the number.

It rang only once before a man answered. It was an old voice, surely not Bud's.

I told him my name and explained that I was trying to locate Paul Cherubin. The man on the other line seemed surprised, but not unkind.

"May I ask what this is regarding?"

"This is really, really complicated," I said. "It's…it's a family matter."

"Sir, Paul is not here now, and I am a family member, so perhaps you'd like to tell me your business."

"Wait…who are you?"

"My name is Ray McInnis. I'm Paul's uncle. Now would you please—"

"Mother or father's side?"

"I don't see how this is any of your business. If this is so very complicated, kindly send us a letter, and we'll consider—"

I spilled it then, just spilled the whole damn story. Ray didn't interrupt me anymore and he lost that bit of pomposity he'd started out with. He just let me vomit out the whole narrative. Then he sighed. "I think you better come round," he said. "Tomorrow morning. 10 o'clock."

I drank no alcohol the night before, but the next morning, Wednesday, I was so nervous I wished I could've stopped for a beer or two, or even a snootful of Jeffrey's dreadful pirate rum. I drove to Scarborough, and stopped at a quiet, uncrowded diner to get a little breakfast. As I choked down a piece of toast and drank some coffee, I catalogued the things on the table. The gray, false marble surface, the chunky cup and saucer, ivory with two brown stripes near the top, the golden terrain of the toasted bread and the tiny bits of butter that pooled in its indentations, the black void of coffee in the cup, featureless, bitter.

I finished, paid my bill and left a tip. Then I followed Ray McInnis's directions to his house. I was on time, and when I arrived, I parked on the street and got out.

A blond boy—someone who looked like a boy—stood by a small barren tree in the front yard. Another man, massive—6,4 or maybe even 6, 5—with wispy white hair and wire-rim glasses, was holding onto the younger man's upper left arm. They'd been talking, but when they both turned to look at me, the old man released his grasp. "Mr. Zombrowski?" he asked.

I nodded.

"My name is Ray MacInnis. And this is Mr. Paul Cherubin."

"Bud?" I had promised myself I wouldn't muddy the issue by springing this name on him right away, but in that moment, it was all I could say. "Bud?"

Again I catalogued, this time seeking to make the details add up, trying to see my brother in the face of the man before me. The shape was the same as mine, the same as Dad's, long with prominent brows and a small, square chin. His nose was my nose,

straight, not too prominent. His hair was still blond—it hadn't darkened over the years as mine had—and he wore it close-cropped on the sides but thick and longer on the top. His eyes, well, they were Bud's, big and jaybird blue. And the capper, at least as far as positive identification went, was the pea sized chicken pox scar on the left side of his nose. He was shorter than me, five ten or so, and much too thin for his height, maybe 125 pounds, so slight he appeared far younger than his 29 years. When he looked at me, I saw no hint of recognition. I, on the other hand, had no doubt.

The moment took hold of me, and I started to fling my arms around the younger man, but he recoiled and stiffened. I checked the gesture, but still leaned in, impinging on his space, trying to get closer.

"It's David," I said, my face in a wide, toothy smile that, in retrospect, must have been terrifying coming from a stranger. "David Zombrowski! Do you know that name, Paul? Does that ring a bell? Your last name was Zombrowski. Your first name was Bradley, but we called you Bud. Do you remember?"

Ray McInnis cut in. "Uh, Mr. Zombrowski, please—"

"You lived in Cleveland—uh, Euclid—with me and mother and dad. We lived by the lake. Lake Erie. And then you disappeared…you were only 4." I pelted him thus with questions and factoids, and he frowned, deep in thought.

At last he spoke. "I remember…a dog."

"A dog?" My turn to frown.

"There was a puppy."

“Uh, no. We didn’t have a dog. You don’t remember, but our dad was allergic, so we never—”

“There were men,” Paul continued. “They had a puppy.”

“What men?”

“Please,” Ray interjected again, “it’s a bit chilly out here, and this conversation is nothing that concerns the neighbors. Do you mind if we go inside?”

I wanted to stay right where I was and hear the story, but the enormous man was already walking toward the front door and Paul was following like…well, like a puppy. I followed them inside and into a small and cozy living room. He motioned me toward a flowered armchair near a fireplace made of river rock. “Mr. Zombrowski, have a seat. Paul, do you want to—”

“I’ll sit on the floor,” he said. He took a seat on the Persian-style rug at my feet, crossed his legs at the ankle and hooked his arms over his knees.

“Either of you want some coffee?” Ray asked.

“No, thank you,” I said. Paul shook his head. The old man took a seat nearby and stared at us intently.

I tried again. “So, Paul, there were men?”

“I was outside…”

“Outside our house? It was small, painted dark green. It had a black shingle roof, and a small porch in front. Does that ring a bell?”

“I was outside by some water. I remember looking at the water. It was pretty.”

I remember that day, wondering if Bud had run down to the lake. I guess he had. "Then what?"

"Two men…they were holding a really cute black puppy. They said, do you like this puppy? And I said yes. Then they said, we have more. Do you want a puppy? Do you want a puppy for Christmas?"

"Yes, that's right! It was Christmas Eve."

"Yes," Paul agreed. "And the men said, come with us. Come see the puppies. You can pick out the one you want."

"And you went with them?"

Paul frowned at me again, as if this was a preposterous question. "I wanted a puppy."

"Do you remember if you had something else with you? A toy boat?"

"Toy boat?"

"A tugboat. About yea big—" I held my hands parallel to each other, about 10 inches apart.

"No. I'm sorry."

"What happened then? After you went with the men?"

"A car ride. Pretty long, I think," Paul said uncertainly.

"What else?"

"The puppy was very squiggly. It kept wanting to get down and run."

"Uh huh."

"That's pretty much what I remember. The men gave me the puppy they had."

“They did, huh?”

“Yes. You know, I think I remember that story because I had that puppy a very long time. She was a Labrador Retriever, a black one, and I raised her and I took good care of her. She lived to be 17.”

“That is a long time.”

“Her name was Gertie. I loved her.”

“About the men...you can’t—”

“You know, Gertie had a litter of puppies!” Paul was smiling broadly now. “And I kept one and named her Gwendolyn. And I raised her, and *she* had lots of puppies. And I kept one of those and named her Guinevere. And *she* had a few puppies, too. And I still have one of those! Her name is Genevieve, and she’s nine years old.” He pronounced the dog’s name ‘Jon-vee-ev,’ like a Frenchman.

“That’s great, Paul. I like dogs, too.”

“I can get her, if you want. She likes to wander around the neighborhood, but if I call—”

“That’s OK. So, you can’t remember anything about the time before…before you were outside and the men came with the puppy?”

“No…I’m sorry. The rest of what I remember is Oshawa, growing up in the house on LaSalle Street, then living in the cabin.”

Ray cleared his throat. “Paul, why don’t you go get Genny? You really shouldn’t let her run around the neighborhood like that. Most folks don’t care, but Mrs. Whitford is such a damn old bitty about that kind of thing.”

“OK, Ray. I’ll be back, Mr....” He’d forgotten the name.

“It’s David. Call me David.”

When Paul had left, Ray filled in some blanks for me. He and his sister, Colleen, had grown up in Scarborough. She’d been sick when she was younger—scarlet fever—and was left barren by the illness. She’d married relatively late—she was 29 when Jean-Marc Cherubin proposed. Ray figured it had been hard for her to find a husband because she couldn’t get pregnant. But Jean-Marc seemed not to care. They did, however, hold out hopes of adopting. They’d filled out all the paperwork, interviewed with some adoption agency outside Toronto—Ray couldn’t remember the name—and by the end of 1940, were just waiting on a phone call. Then, of all times, on Christmas Day, a most special gift. Bud. Ready for delivery. Nobody asked questions. They had the money, and a room ready. It was all done quickly.

Ray smiled. “Colleen decided she didn’t want to wait for a baby. Said she was kind of scared of them—they were so little, so helpless. She was glad for the little boy, and he was beautiful.”

I wanted to punch Enormous Ray in the face. I wanted to dig up the Cherubins and kill them again, slowly, set them on fire and watch them twist, writhe, wither into black oblivion. Nobody, nobody in all of this, gave a shit where the little boy had come from, how they happened to suddenly have him on Christmas fucking Day. I said nothing, but my teeth clenched until my jaw ached and my knuckles paled on my hands.

Ray saw the boy only a few times. He moved to Alberta for work, and rarely came back for visits. Occasionally he’d call and he and Colleen exchanged a few letters,

but he didn't keep up on the day-to-day workings of the family. One thing he'd gathered was that the blond boy was not the brightest bulb.

"Paul made it through secondary school," the old man said, "but only just barely. He was never going to go to university. Just didn't have the brains for it. He's not stupid—or mentally retarded—just a simple soul. That kind of knowledge, a degree, well, it was hard to see what he would do with it."

"Well, I guess the Zombrowski boys have that in common."

Paul Cherubin stayed with his parents after school and busied himself, mostly with short-lived jobs stocking shelves or helping out at construction sites. When his mother died, in August 1963, Paul was 26. Then it was on to Lake Champion and by all indications, a humble life. The cabin had been in Jean-Marc's family for decades, so they paid no mortgage. They pulled fish out of the lake. They had a little savings. Paul worked a few times at the general store to earn some spending money and for something to do.

Shortly after his sister's death, Ray moved back to Scarborough. And after the fire, Paul came to stay with him.

"I think he was…what do they call it? Traumatized, by all of it. Nervous, anxious about the world. Sick of bad surprises, I guess. He didn't want to live alone. Jean-Marc had a huge family, but none of his siblings would take him in. None of them ever had any use for Jean-Marc."

"That's very sad."

"He could be a hard man, and he was not…well liked by many who met him. The drinking. The smoking. Too much."

“I don’t mean sad for Jean-Marc. I mean, sad to punish Bud…er, Paul for that.”

We sat a few minutes not speaking. Then a dog barked outside, followed by the rattle of a doorknob. “Found her!” we heard Paul say. “She was far…almost to the highway.”

“You shouldn’t let her run around,” Ray rumbled. “She’ll get hit by a car one day.”

A black retriever, sleek as an otter, ambled into the room, her back half rocked by her wagging tail. She approached me. I let her sniff my hand for a minute, then I petted her a few times on the head.

Paul followed her into the room, eyes bright and cheeks ruddy from the cold air. “That’s Genevieve, David. Isn’t she something?”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Go dump some more kibble in her bowl, Paul,” Ray said. “She’s probably hungry after all that exercise.”

Paul shooed the dog into the kitchen, and the old man looked at me. “Simple-minded or not, Paul’s an adult. And if he wants to go with you back to Cleveland, he’s free to do so.”

“Do you believe me? That he’s my brother?”

“Looking at you two side by side, I can see the family resemblance. The timing of the disappearance…and the shirt and the name inside. All that’s too much of a coincidence.”

“Do you think he’ll want to go?”

“Well, he’s not a big one for change, but truth to tell, there’s not much for him here. I’ll tell him I think it’s a good idea.”

“Thank you.”

“Paul!” Ray called. “Come in here, please.”

Paul entered the room with Genevieve close behind.

“Sit down,” Ray said. “David wants to ask you something.”

When Paul was seated, again on the carpet at my feet, I leaned forward. “I know your uncle has told you that I came here today because I thought you and I might be brothers. Seeing you, and hearing what you remember, knowing what I know, I’m satisfied that that is true.”

“OK.” Paul swallowed hard.

“Look, I’m not here to upset you or anything, but there are some people in Cleveland who would love to see you again. Your mother and father, the ones who gave birth to you and raised you until you were 4. Your sister, who’s never even met you. And a niece. You have a niece!”

Paul’s eyes grew very large. “That’s a lot of people.”

“That’s right. It’s a whole other family. So, I want to ask you if you would be willing to come with me, visit Cleveland, meet these people, and if you like it there…well, stay.”

“But what about Ray?”

The old man clucked his tongue. “Paul, I’m getting too long in the tooth. I’m not a good companion for you. And, besides, maybe I could come and visit sometime.”

“What about my job at the bakery? David, did you know I work at a bakery? I used to—”

“It’s fine,” Ray interrupted. “We can explain the situation to your boss.”

Ray nodded toward me. “We got him a job at a bakery when he arrived from Lake Champion.” He looked back at Paul. “And you can get another job in Cleveland. They have bakeries there, don’t they, David?”

“Sure.”

“Can Genevieve come?”

“Uh, I think so,” I answered. “I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“Can we go see Mama and Papa’s graves before I leave?”

“We’ll go this afternoon,” Ray said.

“And if I don’t like it, can I come back?”

“You’ll like it,” the old man said. “But if you don’t, call me and we’ll talk about it.”

“OK, then.” Paul looked like he might cry. I certainly wanted to. This was not how I had imagined the moment. There was no crystalline, simultaneous instant of relief or recognition or reunion, no grand embrace at the end of the odyssey. Instead, I felt like a thief, stealing from thieves, taking a man away from a family he should never have known and who, really, no longer existed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gifts

(November 1965)

We spent a good deal of that Thursday afternoon talking and looking at Bud. We appraised his face as a mystified art patron might examine a Picasso, *Portrait of Sabartes* or *Le Pleureuse*, as a sum of his parts, the things that we recognized (eyes, nose, chin, scar), the things we didn't (He talks kind of funny. Didn't anyone feed him?).

I had called my parents after I left Ray's house the day before. It was a halting, surreal exchange. I didn't want to just drop another anvil—*Hey you know that kid you thought was dead? Well, guess what?* But it was excruciating, trying to get the story out. Trying to mete out the details, so little by little it would dawn on them. *He's talking about Bud. He went to find out what happened to Bud. He found Bud.* I expected gasps

and tears, and I got them. I thought there might be some joy, some relief, and there was. But what I sensed most of all on the other end of the line was fear.

We arrived at the house, after a six-hour drive from Scarborough to Euclid (counting a wait in the line at the border). Bud had slept most of the way back, finally rousing once we headed into Cleveland, but still bleary-eyed. Genevieve sat in the back, partially obscured with a blanket, panting in that smiley way dogs do.

My father and mother had met us outside in the driveway, walking deliberately, as if rehearsed. *This is how we will approach the son we lost for years, at medium pace and steady. We're sure to spook him if we run at him, or hug too tightly. We are sure to spook ourselves.* But each of them hugged Bud, did not hesitate to hug him, and then to cry, which could not be avoided no matter how you prepared yourself. The young man was polite and smiled at them, endured the hugs, befuddled by it all, clutching Genevieve's leash. The dog sniffed the new people, silently vetting them for her master.

We went inside. Josie and Dee, who had lived now for two years in a small rented house nearby with Muriel, were already there. Josie acknowledged the hugeness of the event, and got the day off from her job as a receptionist at an insurance agency there in Euclid.

I asked Bud to take a seat on the sofa. I had left a space for Mom beside him, but instead she sat in a small chair just opposite. Dad didn't sit but hovered around the room, first placing his hands on Mom's shoulders, then standing beside Josie, then wandering behind Bud. With everyone as situated as they were liable to be, I clattered cups and saucers in the kitchen and inched out with coffee for everyone.

At first, it was hard to know how to begin. Say everything or say nothing. Now that it had come to it, no one was anxious to reconstruct the Christmas Eve of 25 years ago. There was no point in asking any more details of that day. Perhaps in time, he would remember more. But we knew the dread truths we wanted to tell, the things we had to tell, as victims of a terrible crime. And how would this seem to Bud? *I had negligent parents and an uncaring brother*. Or, *I stepped outside one day when I was 4 and sentenced my family to misery for a quarter of a century.* Or most likely, *You are trying to be my family, but I don't know you.*

The conversation initiated by the three of us—Mom, Dad and me—came in awkward packets of words, clumsy attempts at familiarity or brandishing items (*Remember this book? You loved this book!*) we thought might trip some switch of memory inside his brain. Josie, unfettered by the past, fared better, asking about where he went to school and what he did for work, the neighborhood he lived in and the friends he played with as a boy.

Little Dee came at Genevieve, laughing, plowing her belly into the dog's nose and plunking her on the head with a little fist.

"Try to be gentle," Bud murmured to her. "Here…" He took her hand in his and ran it along the oily black satin of Genevieve's back. "See? Gentle." Genevieve's tail started to sway. "There. That's better."

Bud had no questions for us. Instead he kept his attention on the little girl and his dog. "We've got to watch her tail. I've seen her knock over a small child with it before."

"Guess we shouldn't make her too happy," Josie laughed.

My mother perked up then, as if she'd just then remembered something, although this too was undoubtedly rehearsed. "Oh, David," she said, "would you please go up to the attic? There's a box there…you're probably going to have to dig for it a little. It's about yea…" She held her arms out in front of her, palms parallel, about three feet apart, then did the same vertically. "It's tied with twine, and it's got a red star drawn in magic marker on the top. Will you bring it down? It shouldn't be too heavy, I think."

When I had retrieved the box, I set it down on the family room floor. "I know what this is," I said. "I remember."

"What?" Josie asked.

Dad found a pair of scissors from the kitchen and cut the twine around the box. Then Mom gently opened it at the top. More boxes inside. She lifted one out.

"Bud," she said. Then the tears came. She croaked out a few syllables, then stopped trying to speak.

"They're your Christmas presents, son," Dad said, with a flattened voice that meant he too was trying to keep a croak at bay. "The ones you would've gotten. The ones we got for you the year you…the year you left."

Mom handed a box to Bud. Inside, a toy boat, a new steamship, a real beaut. He looked at it and frowned a bit. "This was for me? A Christmas present?"

My parents nodded.

"I don't understand. Why did you…if you gave me up for adoption…was I supposed to take these with me?"

"No. You see…" I was going to say something more, but I stopped there.

Dee, intrigued by the big box, tossed out clouds of tissue paper inside. She dug out two smaller boxes and handed them to Bud. Genevieve sniffed at the tissue thoughtfully. One held a tin spinning top, striped with primary colors; the third, a baseball and a mitt.

Dad shrugged. "I was hoping you'd learn to play, make Varsity like your old man."

"Did you play, Davey?" Bud asked.

"Uh, no," I mumbled. "Not much. I was pretty terrible."

A few more gifts. A knitted cap and scarf. A kaleidoscope. Two picture books.

Bud smiled at the array spread before him. "Are these mine to keep?"

"Of course, sweetheart," Mom said. "They belong to you. You…you should have opened them 25 years ago."

"I don't understand," Bud said again.

"Bud," Dad started. "We've been calling you Bud. Is it OK? I know those people, they called you Paul. Is it too strange for us to call you Bud?"

"I guess not."

Dad nodded, paused for a moment. "You see, Bud, those people, the Cherubins…they did adopt you, but not lawfully, not…the people they adopted you from, those men, we believe they worked for a place up in Ontario that was obtaining children—babies, little kids—illegally and well, basically selling them…for the money, without really caring where they came from."

A pause. Bud just stared at my parents.

“Bud,” I interjected, “those men with the puppy. They kidnapped you. Stole you away from us. Their being there, down by the lake then, that was a fluke.” Bud’s face crumpled. An unfamiliar term. “Kind of a freak accident. Maybe they were in Cleveland for another reason, maybe, I don’t know, to see someone they knew. But when they saw you, they took the opportunity. So they could make money. They lured you away with the cute dog and they took you to their car and they drove you all the way to Canada. And they took you to a place where you would be sold to someone who wanted a child. People who couldn’t have children…the Cherubins.”

“You didn’t give me up?” Bud asked my parents.

“No.” My mother was crying again. “We would never have done that.”

“I was taken.”

“Yes.”

“My name is Bud.”

“Your name,” my mother said, “is Bradley Joseph Zombrowski.”

“And you looked for me. And the police helped. And you couldn’t find me?”

I cleared my throat. “Those guys, they took you to Canada. They crossed the border. You were small, you would’ve been easy to hide. Once you left the country, the search became much more difficult.”

Bud frowned again. “Did…do you think Mama and Papa knew? Did they know that I was taken away from you? That I was a stolen child?”

Mom opened her mouth to speak, but Dad laid a hand on her shoulder. “We can’t answer that,” he said. “We don’t know for sure.”

“And all this time,” Bud’s eyes widened, “all this time, I had a mother, and a father, and a brother and sister and a niece.”

“Well, the niece came along much later,” Josie said. “But, yes, you have a whole family here.”

“And you want me to stay here in this house now?”

“Yes,” my mother said. “If you want. We would like it very much.”

Bud sighed and looked at the array of presents and people before him. It was a lot to pile on in one afternoon. “I think…if it’s OK, I want to stay with David. Could I do that?”

A beat.

“Well, sure,” I said slowly. “Of course you can.”

My mother straightened in her chair. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Please? I’d feel better staying with David.”

“It’ll be OK, Mom,” I said quietly.

“And can Genevieve come?”

“Sure, Bud,” I said. “I don’t know what the landlord will say about a dog, but she’s a good girl. We can give it a try.”

“She really doesn’t bark much at all, and she’s completely housetrained.”

“Well then, she’s one up on Josie here.”

Josie giggled. “Oh, shut up, Davey!”

“You sure you don’t want to stay here, Bud?” Mom asked, tears starting in her eyes again. “We have a room all made up for you.”

"I'll stay with David."

After dinner, the meal of ham and potatoes Bud didn't get 25 years earlier, he said goodbye to our parents and followed Genevieve and me into the car.

"They seem very nice," he said.

"They are, Bud."

"Do you think they're mad at me? You know, for not staying with them?"

I shrugged. "Honestly? They're probably disappointed. But I'm sure they understand, too. They're…well, they probably still feel kind of kicked in the head by all of this, the same as you. Let's give it some time."

I had, of course, continually briefed Adam on all the happenings in Ottawa. When we reached the apartment, he was waiting for us with beer and pretzels.

"Adam Weinstein," I pronounced ceremoniously, "this, at long last, is my brother, Bud Zombrowski."

"Bud," Adam murmured, as if seeing a legend come to life, like having Johnny Appleseed or the Abominable Snowman show up for a meatloaf dinner.

"Hello," Bud said uncertainly. "You are David's roommate?"

"Yes…we're friends. We share this apartment," Adam said. "Have for a long time."

"It's nice to meet you," Bud said, looking around the room.

"You, too," Adam said. "Please sit down. I've heard quite a bit about you."

"I don't know anything about you."

"Well," Adam said and shot me a faux-hurt look. "We've got plenty of time to get acquainted now."

We undertook a pleasant, innocuous half-hour or so of conversation, but I could feel the fatigue creeping up around my eyes. "Gentlemen, I am exhausted. I need to hit the hay." I shouldered Bud's lumpy green canvas duffle bag. "Let me show you where you'll be bedding down, partner."

"I don't mind sleeping on the couch," he said.

"Nonsense. We've got a room for you."

"I put an extra blanket in there for you," Adam told Bud. "If you need anything else, just let us know." Then he headed to our bedroom.

I placed Bud's bag in his room and made sure he knew where the bathroom was.

Bud looked around, mildly bewildered. "Where do you sleep, David?"

"In the other bedroom."

"Then where does Adam sleep?"

I hesitated a moment. "He'll sleep in the other bedroom…for the time being."

"This isn't fair. I shouldn't take his room."

"It'll be fine, Bud. You're not putting anybody out."

On Friday, after some coaxing, Bud left Genevieve in the apartment so I could show him the city. We rode the bus downtown to look at the buildings and out to the Indians' baseball stadium. Then we took a ride out to Euclid Beach Park. It was not open

that time of year, but at least we could look at the old-timey arch that led to the amusements. Last, I took him by the old house, and then we walked out toward the water.

"You know, when you went missing, Mom was sure you fell into the lake and drowned."

"This is the water I saw, what I was looking at, when those men came with the puppies?"

"Yup."

"It's pretty."

"We think so. When it warms up, I'll take you out on the beach."

"There's a beach?"

"Well, it's not Florida or California, but there's sand with water by it. That's a beach in my book."

"Great."

"We'll take a dip. And I've got some friends who can teach you to surf."

"Surf?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, the waves are not big, but hell, we're not very good anyway. And the water's a little—well, it's not the cleanest."

"OK, I guess."

"Believe it or not, it's fun." The wind was picking up, but the sky was clear and the sun warm for November. "I was wondering, Bud. Can you tell me about your folks…about the Cherubins?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, what was it like, growing up with them in Oshawa?"

"It was a nice neighborhood. Our neighbors were very nice. There was an old couple, the Malles, who lived in back of us. Then there were the Greens on one side, and the Gauberts on the other…"

"Yes, the Gauberts! I met Dominique a few weeks ago…in fact, very near where we're standing right now."

"You…met her? How?"

"Remember when I told you, earlier, how I met someone who told me they remembered you? That was her."

"I haven't seen her in a long time."

"She's here, in Cleveland. Staying with relatives. Do you want me to call her? Would you like to go visit her?"

"I don't know," Bud said quietly. "Maybe."

"Well, let me know." We walked a bit further. "And your folks? What about them?"

Mama Cherubin was kind, most of the time, Bud said. She bought him books and skates and warm clothes. She was a good cook who cranked out crepes and wonderful cassoulets and breads on the regular. She sang and played guitar. She didn't give him grief if he brought home poor marks on his report card.

"What do you mean when you say she was nice most of the time?" I asked.

Bud shrugged and kept his eyes on the water. "As long as I did what she asked of me. If I was disobedient, she had this switch she'd use. Lash me across my bottom."

“Geez. What about your dad?”

“Papa was…not so kind as Mama.”

“Christ.”

His old man smoked all the time and liked his drink—everything, red wine, beer, nearly any liquor he could get his hands on. It wasn’t too bad during the day, but sometimes, at night, he’d get shit-faced and knock his son around. And he didn’t bother with a switch. He’d smack or even hit with his fists if Bud didn’t obey. Or burn him with the end of his cigarettes.

“I’m so sorry, Bud.” Good Jesus, what were they asking this kid to do? My mind started to move in very uncomfortable directions.

“I don’t want you to think…it’s not like they were beating me all the time. They just…you see, my room could be any way I wanted it to be. Picked up or messy, they didn’t care. But the rest of the house needed to be spotless.”

I nodded. Mom liked things neat and had fussed at Josie and me as kids, and even Bud, though he didn’t remember it, for leaving messes around the house. But thank god, she wasn’t mental about it.

“Sometimes I would forget,” Bud continued. “I liked to go skating on the pond at the end of the street with the other children. I’d come in, take off my things, skates, and a hat, and gloves and a scarf and coat. They’d have bits of ice and snow on them, of course. I’d leave them behind. It would make a big puddle on the wooden floor, and that left stains. Things like that. And I can be absent-minded. So I left books left out. Food. And I forgot to close doors all the way, sometimes.”

"Oh god, oh Bud, I'm so sorry." I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"But they could be tender. Mama, she would hold me sometimes. Sing to me, stroke my back. Papa, he…" Bud stopped and looked around, then crossed his arms. "…he tried in his own way. He wanted me to know that he loved me."

"Bud…"

"I want to go back to the apartment now, David. I'm cold. And we need to get back to Genevieve."

We went to my parents house again for supper. Portions of our conversation that day were retold, but only the non-upsetting stuff, the book and cassoulet and guitar parts. The neighborhood full of tall maples and amber-lit windows and friendly families with children. And a retelling of the lineage of Genevieve, for good measure.

Again, Mom and Dad asked Bud to stay with them. Again, he opted to come home with me. We decided the next night would be a break for everyone.

On Saturday, I was obliged to bag the Demon Dave show. I hadn't had a chance to rehearse at all, or work up any bits with Molly and Meg. Instead, Happy let the girls handle the hosting responsibilities. I turned the show on for Bud reluctantly. I really didn't want to see if they did well without me—only if it was a trainwreck. Bud was duly impressed. He kept his eyes on the glittery girls who pranced across the set, and even paid attention to that night's awful movie selection.

"You're usually on this show?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"Yeah, I am. I've just been a little busy lately. But I'll be back at it next week."

Early Sunday evening, Kip called, wondering when I'd be returning his mother's car. I asked him if he wanted to come over and get it.

"Do I get to know now, what you were doing in Canada?" he asked.

"I'll show you," I said. This was bound to be public knowledge soon enough anyhow. And Kip was nice enough to lend me the car.

I tidied up a bit, moving several pairs of shoes into a bedroom, sweeping a pile of magazines off the coffee table and into one of the kitchen cupboards. Within the hour, Kip and Mike appeared at our door, bearing the unrequested gift of beer, two gleaming green six packs of Rolling Rock. I should have known better. If the Nordic superman and the graceless Mike started to get drunk and loud, it might send Bud into full-on frightened rabbit mode. I'd have to send them away. We needed food to soak up the alcohol.

I pulled Adam aside. "Do we have any food handy to serve? Something like an hors d'oeuvre?"

"An hors d'oeuvre? Look, the fridge is a ghost town just now. We've got milk, juice and a single TV dinner in the freezer. I think it's meatloaf with peas and mashed potatoes."

"That'll have to do."

"You want me to put a single frozen dinner in the middle of the coffee table?"

"No good, huh?"

"No."

"OK…OK, here's what you do. If you would. Please. Can you heat up the dinner and then take some saltines—I know there's a box of Krispies in there—and put a little bit of meatloaf and some mashed potato on each?"

"And the peas?"

"Fuck the peas."

Half an hour later, Adam emerged from the kitchen with the food. "A nosh," he said, as if he'd just thought of it. We feasted on saltines topped by lukewarm chunks of meatloaf and potato, with imbedded peas *garnis*.

I told the Kip and Mike the story, an abridged version, more or less what we had related to Bud two days before. They were respectfully silent throughout—they were younger than me, so neither one had remembered the story or been aware of it at the time. When I finished, Kip gave a low whistle. "Holy crap, Davey…this is a big fucking deal."

"It is."

"You gonna let somebody know about this…call the *Plain-Dealer*, or something?" Mike asked.

"Well, I work for a TV station, so…"

"Oh, right!" Mike made a dry fart noise. "I'm a dumbass."

Perhaps because it was a Sunday night, perhaps out of respect for the momentous events of the past few days, Kip and Mike behaved themselves that night, with one or two beers a piece and benign conversation lobbed back and forth. Bud took an instant liking to Kip, who was handsome and easy and came forth, fully formed, an instant friend, with no assumption of closeness or demands of any kind carried in on his back.

"We will definitely get you out on the beach this summer," Kip crowed to my brother. "We're gonna teach you to surf. You're gonna love it!"

Again, the important question, perhaps the only question that mattered to Bud. "Can Genevieve come?"

"Sure! We're gonna teach her too," Kip said.

At bedtime, Bud lingered in the door to his room. "David, do you think I could come sometime and watch you do your TV shows—Music Town and that movie thing?"

"Sure. You can come tomorrow, if you want. Music Town's on at 4 o'clock, but you can come spend the day, if you like."

"That'd be great."

"Fine. But Bud…Genevieve can't come."

Bud shadowed me at work that Monday and stood, just in back of the cameramen, during Music Town, shimmying to the seriously great tunes we were spinning that day: "Wooly Bully" by Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, "Shotgun" by Junior Walker and the All-Stars, "Tell Her No" by the Zombies, "Hang On, Sloopy" by the McCoys. I decided not to do the big reveal about Bud to my coworkers, at least for the day, and explained him away as a cousin who'd come from St. Louis for a visit.

We'd got to the request portion of the show and the song, "I Know I'll Never Find Another You" by The Seekers, when I noticed Bud had stopped shimmying. He stood perfectly still. When we broke for commercials, I went to him. His eyes were glazed, teary, and he had his arms crossed, hugging himself around his chest. "You OK, Bud?"

“Yeah, I’m fine.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, it’s just…that song.”

“I know. It’s kind of a folk-type tune. And impossible to dance to. But you know…requests. Got to keep the gang at home happy.”

Bud shrugged and tried to smile. “Yeah.”

“Look, we’ve got one more segment. Then we’re done.”

“OK.”

“We gotta do a little ‘Hey! Hey! You! You! Get offa my cloud.’ You dig The Rolling Stones?”

“I don’t know. Never heard of them.”

I shook my head. “Gotta fix that.”

We finished the show, and headed out into what was left of the early November daylight. “You got a little choked up by that Seekers song, didn’t you?” I said as we walked up the street.

“Seekers?”

“That one song! ‘I Know I’ll Never Find Another You.’”

“Yeah. It made me sad.”

“I guess it is a little sad.”

“It’s just that part about always somebody for each of us.” He looked at me. “Do you think that’s true?”

"Yeah, I guess. If you keep our eyes open. And, you know, don't keep chasing after something you can't have."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know. Like, I know a model here in town—she's a friend of mine, actually. And these guys send her flowers all the time. And they keep after her, call her, ask her out. But she's not interested."

"No?"

"And if those guys keep insisting, like, 'I must date a model! Nobody else is good enough,' then they're probably going to miss out on somebody else who's not a model, but might be perfectly pretty or at least interesting looking, and really nice and smart and fun. And that person might be just right for them. But they won't be able to see it."

"Why isn't she interested…your friend? Are the guys mean?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. They might be. She just…isn't interested."

"In any of them?"

"No. In this case, she just doesn't like men in general. For romantic stuff. She likes them OK for friends. Like, she likes me. I think she does anyway."

We turned the corner onto our street. "So, your friend likes other women," Bud said.

"Yes," I said quietly, and instinctively glanced around. Foot traffic on the road was sparse. "She does."

"Like you and Adam."

I stopped for a moment, and so did Bud. An older couple was approaching us, and I let them pass before responding. “What do you mean?”

“Women who like women, and men who like men. You and Adam are men and you like each other, like you said, for romantic stuff.”

I smiled. “Yes.”

“Yeah, that’s what I meant.”

“Does that bother you? Have you ever met any…you know…”

“I guess…maybe.”

“And you don’t mind that I’m that way?”

“I don’t mind.” He thought for a moment. “Do your friends know? Kip and Mike?”

“Yeah, they know. We’ve been friends for years. They figured it out.”

“And they didn’t mind?”

“Funny, but we just don’t talk about it all that much.”

“That does seem weird.”

I laughed. “Kip told me that we were all entitled to one big secret in our lives. So we all just…developed an understanding, I guess.”

Bud gave a small “hmm,” and we started walking again. Then, “But are you allowed to—do you and Adam walk down the street here in Cleveland, holding hands or kissing each other?”

I took another nervous look around. Nobody passing. “No, we’re not allowed to do that.”

“So you just act like friends, unless you’re alone?”

“Pretty much yeah.”

“Isn’t it hard to do that, like all the time?”

“Yes, it is.” I sighed. “But Adam and I have been together a long time. We figured out we were the right ones for each other. And we do what we have to so we can stay together.” We came to the front of our building, and I placed a hand on Bud’s shoulder. “You’ll find somebody, Bud.”

“I don’t know.”

“You will. You’ve just been…well, you haven’t been in the right place to really find someone, to meet new people. I’m gonna fix that.”

In the days that followed Bud’s return, my parents contacted the Cleveland PD, just to let them know, in case they were interested, that the mystery had been solved after 25 years. I fully expected the press to come knocking sometime soon, so I preemptively told Happy my abridged version of the Canadian odyssey. Our own news show covered it as an exclusive and from there, it was a short trip to a full-on media orgy.

It was an irresistible human interest story: a tow-headed tot goes missing, and a quarter of a century later, is returned home. But it was our job to make sure that access to Bud was limited. We did a short press conference at the police station where Dad and I did most of the talking. We made it clear that Bud would answer just a few general questions that day. We allowed no follow-up, one-on-one sitdowns. Mom and Dad had

no desire to dredge up all the old agony. I didn't want anyone dragging the ugliness of Bud's adoptive life out into the open.

The story got coverage from all the major Cleveland TV and radio stations, and others in Columbus, Cincinnati and Toledo. With the *Plain Dealer* leading the way, stories ran in newspapers across the state, and in regional ones like the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. There was even a brief spasm of national fame—a short piece in *The New York Times* and brief mention on *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* newscast.

The police followed up on my discoveries in Ottawa, questioned the same people I questioned, but it was all formality. They failed to uncover any usable lead about a specific shady house of adoption and figured it was likely that most of the people involved were dead or at least very old. The family hadn't expected any justice on that front. And we didn't get any.

The following month we celebrated Christmas in Cleveland for the first time in 25 years. Since they'd spent the holidays in Toledo or St. Louis each year, Mom hadn't decorated her own home in all that time. She went nuts at Higbee's and came home with boxes and bags of ornaments and garlands and all manner of festooning paraphernalia. Dad bought a nice, big tree and took a ton of photos of Josie and Dee and Bud decorating it, and some of Genevieve trying to undecorate it. Dad was still allergic to dogs, but he was willing to put up with a little sneezing and some tears—small things, considering.

I had asked if I could bring Adam to Christmas Eve dinner with me, or to open presents Christmas morning. My mother's mouth straightened.

"Oh David. You know, it's Bud's first Christmas back. I think we should focus on that, don't you?"

"Who says we're not going to focus on Bud? And he likes Adam."

"I just would prefer we didn't. Alright?"

"It's been 12 years, Mom. Isn't it time to accept this? I promise we won't touch each other."

"David, please."

In the end, Adam went to his parents' house for Christmas, which fell on a weekend that year.

Before dinner on Christmas Eve, we turned the radio to WWBA for their evening-long broadcast of carols and holiday music. I thought of the terrible Christmas Eve, how we waited, how we held our breath to listen. I remembered the children singing on the old Firestone radio, the staggered voices, and every song sad and still.

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.

Now, the songs were different. It was a deck-the-halls, Frosty the Snowman, silver bell kind of Christmas. And outside, it was different too—below freezing, with a breeze off the water that curled tiny snowflakes through the air. No grass showed. Four or five inches from a snowstorm days before still covered the ground and a thin layer of ice glazed the sidewalks. Strange to think—if there'd been a snowstorm, or even a heavy

rain, Bud probably wouldn't have gone out that day in 1940. And everybody's life might have turned out differently. Maybe. It was impossible to know.

Bud had come a long way in the seven weeks since his return. He talked easily with Mom, Dad and Josie now, though still very politely, and he took such joy in playing with Dee. Christmas Eve, he chased her around the living room and up and down the stairs. She shrieked and giggled. Right alongside, Genevieve barked and nipped lightly at Bud's ankles.

Somehow, against all odds, we were together again for Christmas. It was a beautiful thing. But I remembered the Old World. And we had lived in the New World for many years. This was something else—a Third World. We were still surveying the land, feeling for its edges, outlining the new rules and the new order of things. But I could not escape the creep of anxiety within me.

We could graft Bud back onto our lives, but we could never cover the scars.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Devil You Don't

(1966)

In February, Dad found Bud a part-time job working at a bakery in Euclid. Bud needed something to occupy his time, but he was hesitant at first. He'd been hired to work an early shift and Drewer's Bread and Pastries was three blocks from my parents' house, so it made no sense for him to live with Adam and me anymore. He had seemed far more comfortable at our apartment than at the house. It was a tough decision, but in the end, to my parents' delight, he decided to take the job, and try living with them.

"You can keep your key to our place," I told him. "And you can visit on weekends. If you want to see any of the Saturday shows, just let me know."

Bud said the biggest bright spot about being in Euclid was that he got to spend more time around Dee. Josie let him keep Genevieve at her house a lot of the time to give

Dad's allergies a break. Bud would come over to walk the dog and play with Dee, keep an eye on her when Josie and Muriel were puttering around their little rental.

There were changes going on all around that year. I finally bought a car. And not just some piece of shit. No, I had a little money, and I wanted something sweet. I got a great deal on a year-old Mustang 2+2 fastback, silver-blue and sleek as a marlin. Suddenly, Adam wanted to drive everywhere. And I obliged. I'd forgotten how much I liked driving. The trip to Ottawa in Mrs. Johanssen's car had brought that all back.

Kip's mother died just three days into the new year. This was a mercy—the old woman had been sick and in pain for too long. When I heard the news, I was sure Douggie would come back to Cleveland, sure that I'd be able to talk to him about Dee. But instead, Kip took Mrs. Johanssen's body to Naperville, Illinois, for her funeral and to be buried in a family plot in her hometown.

When he returned I asked Kip if he'd seen Douggie. He had, he said, and he'd dutifully pulled him aside to discuss Josie and the baby.

"And?" I demanded.

"Nothing. He just…shrugged," Kip said.

"Bastard," I said.

"I'm sorry, Davey. But Josie's better off. Douggie's not father material."

Kip's other life-altering event was the purchase of one of the new styles of wetsuits from a California surf shop in Redondo Beach.

“It’s called a Body Glove,” he explained to Adam and me one early spring night at the apartment. “It’s gonna keep me warm, let me stay in the water longer—and maybe start earlier in the year, or you know, end later.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t get one of these earlier,” I said.

“Naw, they were real bulky. Too uncomfortable.” He smiled broadly. “But this new suit will make me sleek as an otter in the water. And still let the ladies fully appreciate the finer points of my physique.”

“I’m sure they’ll thank you for it,” Adam smirked.

I looked at Kip. “I figured you’d be heading back to Malibu now that your mom is…now that you’re not taking care of her anymore.”

“I might,” Kip answered airily, “at some point. But for now, I’ve got a decent job. And Mom left me her house. If want to I sell it, I’m gonna need to fix it up first. You’ve never seen the inside, but it’s kind of messed up…and old.”

“And you’ve got the Bel Air,” I said. “Don’t forget that.”

“Oh yes, my honey of a ride. Not as nice as yours, Davey. But a honey nonetheless.”

When the weather got warm, we took Bud to the beach along with Josie and Dee and Genevieve. Kip was there, and Mike and Pete. They let Bud try on Kip’s wetsuit, but the size differential was too great. He looked like he’d climbed inside a wobbly tree trunk. It didn’t matter that much. It was one of those days—the waves weren’t great, but the water was warm (for Erie) and the sunlight was strong enough to dispel any chills

quickly. Bud took a couple of turns on a surfboard. He had about as much luck as I had my first time out, maybe a little less.

Finally he gave up and chased Dee around the sand. When he caught her, he'd tickle her, and she'd scream in delight. Genevieve capered alongside them for a while, then sought some shade under Josie's beach umbrella. My sister sat in her swimsuit, a striped towel over her shoulders, engrossed in a book, content to let Bud run around with Dee. I plopped myself down in the folding chair next to hers.

"What's got you so interested?"

She held up the book so I could see the cover. It was a white hardback with colorful pill capsules scattered all over, and "Valley of the Dolls" set in black and grey letters.

"Any good?"

Josie closed her book and smiled at me. "Let's see, it has sex and booze and pills and suicide and just generally bad behavior, so yes, I find it very dishy."

"Oooh!"

"However, it has no pirates or adventurers or bounty hunters in it, so I doubt you'd be very interested." She handed me the book.

"Not true! I like melodrama as much as the next guy." I opened the cover and started reading the inside jacket copy.

"I'm getting hungry. Are you hungry?" Josie covered her eyes with her hand and surveyed the beach in front of her. "Where's Bud and Dee?"

I looked up from the book. I didn't see them in the sand around us. I looked out toward the water, swiveled my head right and left to scan the area around us.

There. The feeling. Bud, all those years ago. Perfectly preserved. My stomach lurched, I stood quickly, konking my head against one of the spines of the beach umbrella.

Josie came out from under the umbrella, stood upright and looked down the beach to the right. Then she pointed. "Oh, there they are!"

In the distance, standing beyond a couple groups of sunbathers, two figures, tall and small, and another, dog-shaped. "Hey, Bud! Dee!" Josie hollered and waved an arm high. "C'mere and get some lunch! I packed sandwiches!"

Adam, Bud and I lingered on the beach late into the afternoon. Josie had taken Dee home for a nap and because she was afraid the little girl would get sunburnt if they stayed out any longer. Not long after the girls left, Kip and Mike picked up their surfboards and headed for Mike's rusty bucket of a station wagon. What little waves there were earlier had smoothed—not much surfing to be had. But we three stayed, seated side by side, butts in the sand. I guess I should say four. Genevieve sat by Bud, and stared, as we did, toward the water.

"I like this side of the lake," Bud said. "I like this beach. It makes me feel like I'm on vacation."

"But you lived right on a lake, didn't you?" Adam asked. "I mean, at least for a little while?"

I shot Adam a look of consternation. Bud was still fragile emotionally. I hated to bring up the day that his home and his father burned like so much kindling.

But Bud nodded, and his tone didn't change. "Yeah, it was nice. I had my own boat. Nothing fancy, just a wood fishing boat and some oars, but I liked it. Genevieve and me, we went out nearly every day when the weather held."

"Lots of wildlife out there too, I suppose."

"Oh yeah, deer and raccoons and ducks and geese and loons. You ever hear a loon? That lonely sound they make?"

"I saw 'A Place in the Sun' with Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor," Adam said. "That had loons in it, or at least, loon sounds. It is kind of a lonely sound, and, I don't know, warbly. A little scary, too."

"I guess." Bud was quiet for a moment, then he chuckled. "Oh yeah, and there were fish, of course. Mackerels and pike and trout. There was a legend that Maureen told me—Davey, you said you met Maureen, at the depot?"

"I did. Nice lady."

"Yeah, well, Maureen told me that there was this legend of a really big fish, like a freakishly big bull trout in Lake Champion."

Adam gaped. "How big?"

"She said five feet. Nobody'd seen it all the way out of the water."

"Wow," Adam said.

I smiled at Bud. "And of course, he had a name?"

“Big Spot. He had a great big orange spot on his back. People saw it—when he broke the top of the water. At least they said they did.”

“Big Spot,” I laughed. “Seems about right.”

“I never saw him,” Bud clarified.

“That’s OK. I’ve never seen Bessie.”

“Who’s Bessie?”

“Bessie’s more of a what. You ever hear of the Loch Ness Monster?”

“Sure. I read a book about Scotland when I was in school.”

“You know how Nessie is always said to look like a dinosaur? I don’t know…like a brontosaur, or something? Like that thing that Fred Flintstone uses for a crane at the beginning of The Flintstones cartoon?”

“I would say,” Adam said officiously, “Nessie resembles more of plesiosaur, one of the aquatic reptiles of the Jurassic Period.”

“Thank you, college boy,” I said. “I thought you studied art history.”

“Had to take two science courses.”

“OK, Bud, like a plesiosaur—long neck, big body, but instead of those kind of elephant feet, she has great big ol’ flippers. More like a turtle.”

“OK.”

“Well, we’ve had sightings in Lake Erie of a creature like the Loch Ness Monster, only over here, she’s called Bessie.”

“Wow, really?” Bud scanned the waves with newfound interest.

“Yep. Dad told me about her years ago. Said a guy saw her first in the 1700s near Sandusky. Then there were sightings near Toledo. And I’ve heard stories and read stuff about people seeing her in these waters.”

“Wow,” Bud said again. “I’d like to see her! You know, from here. Not if I was out in the water.”

“I’m good with her just staying a legend,” Adam said.

“Well, we’ll keep coming,” I told Bud, “and we’ll keep an eye out.

Just before lunchtime on a Tuesday in early August, I was working on the following day’s song line-up for Music Town. We had a guest band coming, too, and Cy Davis and I were in the studio talking logistics. Lorraine poked her head in a door at the far end of the room and called to me. “Davey?”

I came over. “Julie is looking for you. Your sister’s on the phone,” Lorraine said. “Apparently, she sounds pretty upset.”

“OK. Ask Julie to transfer it to my desk. Please.”

I headed to my desk and picked up my phone. Josie was making little strangled noises on the other end. “Josie? What’s wrong?”

“Davey…” she said, as if it were taking all of the air in her lungs to utter the word.

“Josie? Can you talk? What’s wrong?

“Bud…he’s done something…to Dee.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

"To Dee!" She was screaming now.

"Josie, you've got to calm down. I can't help you if you don't take a breath."

A rustle, a hand over the receiver. Some kind of groan on the other side. Then Josie talking slowly, painful phrases parceled out with great effort. "I had to go out. To get some medicine for Dee—"

"Is she sick?"

"No, it was just…antibiotic cream. That doesn't matter! It's Bud's day off…he was over…"

"OK."

"I asked him if he'd watch her. Just for…15 minutes or so. While I ran down a couple of blocks. To the drugstore."

"Is Dee hurt?"

Josie forced herself on. "I left and I got nearly all the way there, and then I realized I'd forgotten…the prescription. So I had to go back. I opened the door to my apartment and Bud had Dee on the couch…and her dress was turned up…and he had pulled her…panties down…and…"

"Oh my god…"

"He moved his hand away real quick, when he saw me. He tried to pull her panties up but…" Her voice trailed off in a crush of whimpers and gasps.

"Oh Jesus…what did you do?"

She exploded. "What the hell do you think I did? I ran over and hit him as hard as I could! I screamed at him! I threw him out! He ran away!"

"Is…is Dee OK?"

"She's red…down there." She started crying, gasping. "I think he penetrated her…with his fingers." A choking sound. She cleared her throat. "At least I didn't give him time to get his dick inside her…I mean, I don't think so."

"Are you OK?"

"No!"

"Did you call the police? Does anyone else know about this?"

"I haven't spoken to anyone else yet."

"Will you give me a chance to talk to him?"

"What the hell for, Davey?"

"He's our brother, Josie. He's been through a lot. Maybe he didn't know what he was doing. I'm sure he'll want to explain to—"

"I don't want a fucking explanation!"

"But—"

"And I don't want an apology! He's a child molester!"

I gasped at the word. But, of course he was.

"You're not gonna just go and fix this!"

"I know, I know. Just…will you please just give me an hour or two to find him? And not call the police—or Mom and Dad?"

"Christ! This will fucking kill them."

It's just killed us all, I thought.

I left work and headed to Adam's and my apartment first. It was as I expected. Bud had used his key and was laying on the couch, his right arm slung over his face. Genevieve was splayed on her side nearby, nose wrinkling, paws quivering, dreaming.

"Get up!" I rasped and batted at his arms. "Get the fuck up! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

My brother and his dog both sat up, bleary eyed but instantly alert, wary of the anger sheeting off me like water from a swimmer. "J-Josie told you what happened," Bud said.

"How could—"

"David, I'm so sorry." He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "I didn't…it's just…I tried not to, but I couldn't help it…It just happened."

"No! That kind of shit doesn't just happen! You don't just molest a little girl out of nowhere."

"I never touched Dee like that before. I promise!"

"I don't mean that. Tell me what started this. Were you doing this back in Ontario?"

He looked away from me. "I like children. I always have."

I clucked in disgust. "You can't—"

"I mean, I like being around children. They aren't mean, most of them, and it's easy to make them happy."

"*Were* you doing this kind of thing back in Ontario?"

"I had little cousins, on my father's side."

I forced myself to sit down in a chair beside the couch. I needed to stay calm. "And?"

"And I used to babysit for them…I was much older than they were…16, or so. Sometimes, Mama and Papa and Uncle Gerry and Aunt Hazel, they would go to the bar to drink and play cards, and I took care of my cousins, Hannah and Des. Hannah was six, and Des was four. We'd go to the park to run around with the dog. We'd watch TV. And we played inside games."

"Inside games." I remembered then something Ray had said, about how none of Jean-Marc's family members were willing to take Bud in after his parents passed away.

"Tickle games, wrestling. They liked to jump on me. And it just started like that, that weird feeling. My hand would accidentally brush against Hannah's little…breasts under her nightgown, and after a while, I did it on purpose."

My face started to burn.

"I'd be tucking her in at night," Bud continued, "and tickling her all over, and soon I'd be tickling and touching her everywhere. It made Hannah laugh. She always laughed. Both of them, were always laughing. They were so cute." Bud placed a hand on Genevieve's head and stroked the smooth fur.

"Bud, that doesn't make it OK…"

"I knew that it was wrong. I'm not stupid. But it was like I was watching myself do it. All the while…looking at myself…*this is something I shouldn't be doing…and this…and this. But it feels good. I'll do it this time, but next time, I won't…"* My brother wasn't looking at me now, but staring off past my shoulder, into some other room,

another house on some distant street. “Then one morning—I’d watched Hannah and Des the night before—my Aunt Hazel called my mother and told her she knew what I was doing. She said I wasn’t welcome there, at their house, anymore. She told my mother to get help for me, or she’d call the police.”

“Did you get help?”

“My mother got scared and she made me see a doctor for a while. He was an old friend of Papa’s. We just talked. It didn’t help much. I was afraid…afraid to tell him everything.”

“You didn’t tell him about Hannah and Des?”

“No, I did.”

“Then what couldn’t you tell him?”

Bud just looked at me for a moment, then murmured, “Papa.”

And then I understood. “He did this sort of thing…to you, you mean.”

“He used to come into my room at night, after my mother had gone to sleep.”

“He molested you.”

“When he was drunk—and he was a lot—he would pull down my pajama bottoms and touch me. He used to rub me, he used to make me rub him, and …and put his thing in my mouth.”

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply, then exhaling slowly. “How old were you?”

“Young. As far back as I can remember.”

“Ah, Jesus.” I looked at my hands, realized they were clenched and sweating. “How long did this go on?”

"I guess…'til I was 12 or maybe 13. When my voice changed, when I grew hair…in places, then he stopped. I don't know why."

"You didn't tell your mother?"

Bud started to cry. "I couldn't. I loved Mama so much. I thought it would hurt her too badly. And…Papa said he'd drive me out to the country, someplace deep in the woods, and leave me, if I ever did that."

I shifted in my chair. "I don't understand. Why would you stay with your father, after your mother died? Go with him, all the way to a cabin in the middle of bumfuck nowhere? Why did you stay at all, when you were old enough to leave?"

"When she died, he was still there," Bud said, and wiped the wet from his cheek with the sides of his hands. "He was still my family. I didn't have anybody else."

"But, Bud—"

"I was afraid in Oshawa…of the streets and the people. Sometimes, people said mean things to me. Some of them called me stupid, told me I had a nasty drunk for a father. After Dominique and some of the other kids got older and left, I didn't have any friends. And I didn't know how to be on my own."

"So when he went to the cabin…"

"…I went too."

"Did you realize then that what he did was horribly wrong?" I asked. "That it hurt you?" Genevieve started to whimper, a rusty squeak that seemed to come from her boxy nose.

"Yes. But it was just…it had been a long time since it stopped. Then he was just sick…his liver ruined with the alcohol."

"You didn't hate him?"

"It's hard to explain. Part of me did. But another part of me…" Bud leaned forward. "You know that feeling you have, about family? Like whatever someone does, no matter how mean they are or how many times they say or do ugly things and you're ashamed, they'll still always be in your life, be a part of you, in your head? I don't know…because you shared memories, good ones and really bad ones. Because you lived in the same house, ate the same food, sat on the same furniture, saw the same things when you looked at your walls or out the window, every day, for years."

"Shared history," I murmured.

"Yes. I didn't love Papa. But we shared things."

"So you moved with him and you got a job."

"I liked the lake. So did Genevieve. And the people at the station and the stores—like Maureen—they were nice, not like the people I knew back in Oshawa. I didn't feel so afraid there."

"And then your father died."

"Yes." More whimpering from the dog.

"And you weren't able to…" Another click in my head. "…save him."

"No."

"In the cabin, the fire…"

"A cigarette. He was drunk and fell asleep. Ray told you that, didn't he?"

“Maureen did.”

“Everyone knew.”

“Bud…the fire…you didn’t…”

“It was a cigarette, David. And Genevieve and I were in the boat, and we watched the cabin burn. We watched him burn. There was nothing we could do. Even Ray said so.”

Genevieve was still squeaking and started to pad around the room. “She needs to go out,” Bud said. “I’ll take her.”

“You stay here,” I commanded. “I’ll take her.”

I attached the leather leash to the dog’s collar and made my way with her out the door and down the stairs. The day was bright and hot. I staggered, drunk on the awfulness of the last few hours. My eyes, dazzled by the early afternoon sun, saw everything overexposed, a ghost palette of white-yellows and tans and grays. In violent opposition, my head, heavy, too big for my shoulders, carried a slop of night-dark thoughts. If I tilted my head, I was certain the slop would seep out of an ear; if I wept, I’d cry tears of black bile.

I slogged up the block with Genevieve; she found a patch of grass to her liking and squatted. Then I started to pull her back to the apartment, but she balked and led me on a bit further, to another bit of grass near a tree to take care of a little more business. We returned, out perhaps 10 minutes, no more. The couch was vacated. Bud had left. No note, but his things were still in his room, and more importantly, I was holding the leash

attached to the precious Genevieve. He was gone again, but this time, I knew he wasn't gone for good.

I called Josie's place, but there was no answer.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

On the Beach

(1966)

When Adam returned home at around 5:30, I tried to piece the whole thing together for him. When I had finished, he looked away, shook his head, said nothing for a minute. Then simply: “Shouldn’t we be out looking for him?”

“Where? He can’t be gone that long. We’ve got Genevieve.”

“I hate to be blunt, but do you think he could hurt any more kids, while he’s out…wherever?”

“No. I can’t explain it, but…no.”

The phone rang, and Adam picked it up. His face went pale, and he handed me the receiver. “It’s the police.”

I took the phone. “Is this David Brown?”

“Y-yes.”

“Also known as David Zombrowski?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you the brother of Mr. Bradley Zombrowski?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Zombrowski, this is Officer Watkins of the Euclid Police. I’m afraid I have some bad news. We responded to a call placed at approximately 5:40 p.m. this evening. The call came from a Mr. Kip Johanssen. Do you know this individual?”

“Y-yes. He’s…” I cleared my throat. “He’s a friend of mine.”

“All right, sir. Mr. Johanssen reported to us that he and your brother had been swimming at Edgewater Beach late this afternoon. Apparently, they had been drinking and smoking some other intoxicant, likely a marijuana cigarette. At some point, they became separated, and your brother went too far out into the water. Mr. Johanssen was able to drag your brother to shore. We radioed in a call for an ambulance en route, and we arrived at the location at 6:05 p.m. All efforts were made to revive him, but he was already deceased. I’m sorry, sir.”

I clutched the receiver with both hands and held it so hard against my head that my temple ached. “Bud is dead?”

“Bud?”

“Bradley?”

“Yes, sir. I’m so sorry.

“Well, where is he? Where is he now? Have my parents been called?”

"Mr. Zombrowski's body has been transported to _____ Hospital. Mr. Johanssen asked that we call and notify you first, sir. He said he imagined that you would prefer to tell your parents, but if you want me to call them, I will."

"No, no, please…I-I'll tell them. Let me do it."

"Of course, Mr. Zombrowski."

"And officer? Do you know where Mr. Johanssen is?"

"He gave us a statement at the beach. We saw no evidence of foul play. He was free to go, but we told him we might have some more questions for him at a later point."

I put down the phone without saying anything more.

Within 20 minutes, Adam and I were walking into the main entrance of the hospital, then down to the basement and the impossibly clean white doors of the morgue: hushed voices, everyone kind-faced, quiet around those who least minded a disturbance.

They'd placed Bud in a dim room, illuminated gray-gold, the color of grief, the color of loss, what you got when you tried to keep one small flame lit to ward off the darkness, an obligatory, futile gesture of hope against the inevitable blackness of death. The same gray-gold, it occurred to me, that I had seen in Bud's room in the old house, just before my mother closed the door.

Inside, a stainless steel gurney stood, and on it, a body covered with a white sheet, just like the cop shows on TV. The morgue attendant lifted one end of the sheet for us. Here was Bud, the shell of him, smooth, a sculpture of purpled marble, hair slicked back. The chicken pox scar, a slip of the sculptor's knife, was just visible on his nose. I nodded

to the attendant and he left us alone with the body. Adam held me one long moment, then we each took a seat by the gurney, crying, wedded in silence.

After about 15 minutes, I stood up. Adam stayed with Bud, not willing just yet to leave him alone in such a place. I stepped into the hall to find a payphone, with every intention of calling my parents. But thoughts skittered around my head. Call or go in person? Or mitigate the news. I could call and tell them he was hurt, at the hospital. Tell them to sit tight until I found out more. Then I could call them back, or go out to the house and tell them he'd died. Was that way better? Was it worse?

Somewhere in there, as I swung my head to look down the hospital corridor for a phone, the slop that had filled my head all afternoon lurched into my stomach and just as suddenly, wished to lurch out again. I ran out a side door, up a short set of concrete steps, and vomited onto the grass.

I paused for a minute, arched over, C-shaped, my hands on my knees. When I was sure I was done, I straightened. In the waning daylight, I noticed Kip.

He was watching me from a picnic table set up outside the basement door I'd bolted out of. I approached him. He made no effort to move, just watched me come. "You OK?" he asked, ridiculously. His shirt and pants were wrinkled, and the fibers still gripped sand in places. His hair too was sculpted, slicked back like Bud's.

"What the fuck happened?"

The rims of Kip's eyes were rosy, but I knew he had not cried. "I'm so sorry, Davey," he said. The reek of whiskey and reefer smoke reached out to me. "Bud called my place…from a payphone on the street."

"What time?"

"Uh, I don't know…I guess, maybe 3 or so?"

"It's a Thursday. Why weren't you at work?"

"I didn't have a job today."

"Since when do you not have a job during the week? In all the time I've known you—"

"I'm starting a new one on Monday. Jesus, Davey…"

"What did Bud say?"

"He was really upset, and he asked if I'd come and get him…so we could talk."

"Did he tell you I was home?"

"No, he just…said he needed to talk to somebody. We met at the coffee shop on 9th. I picked him up, then we took the Bel Air to Edgewater."

"What did he say was wrong?"

"In the car, he just kept saying 'I've done a bad thing' and 'Everybody will hate me.'"

"Why not talk at your house?"

"I wanted to be outside. We went to the beach."

"And you brought whiskey…and reefer."

"Well…sure."

"He said he didn't drink, Kip. To my knowledge, he never smoked."

"I just thought it might calm him down. He was really fucking agitated. I thought he'd take a couple pulls from the bottle, puff a little, and that would be it."

"What did he tell you, when you talked on the beach?"

"Just that he did something bad, and he was afraid that you'd never trust him again. He didn't want to lose his family…another family…again."

"But he never said what he did, specifically, to lose that trust."

"No…But he kept taking drinks and tokes on the reefer. I could tell, whatever it was, was really terrible." Kip paused a minute. "Then he said he was getting too warm, that he wanted to go in the water. It was hot as hell, so I said OK. We both took off our shirts and went in in our shorts."

"Did he seem…just completely gone?"

"I'm not saying we weren't drunk and high. We were."

"Weren't there other people around?"

"Some. But we were a bit away from them on the beach. And we were out further in the water than anybody else was."

"And, he just drowned?"

Kip looked down at the grass, yellowing in the midsummer heat. "I-I lost myself for a moment. Like I said, we were out pretty far, into the deeper water. And I just kind of got lost in the moment. Looking at the sky, at the clouds."

"And when you looked back at Bud…"

"He'd gone under…"

"You dragged him out."

"Yes, but—"

"Snapped to pretty quick, didn't you?"

“I was scared as shit, as soon as I realized what was going on.”

“So you somehow swam back to shore with him?”

“Yes…Christ, you sound like the cops…”

“Just answer the fucking question!”

“I got him back up on the sand. But he’d already…he had been under too long. He was gone.” Kip raised his eyes to me. “I’m sorry, Davey. I’m so sorry.”

Either out of fatigue or trauma or a phantom sense of self-preservation, I went numb then. I was glad. I still had to tell my parents. I didn’t want to blubber. “And just like that,” I said to Kip, “we’ve lost him again.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, and still he did not cry.

In the end, I went to my parents’ house and told them in person. Adam came too, at my insistence. We were all grieving, and in my grief, I needed him. Mom and Dad said nothing about it. Their minds were far beyond caring about such things.

It was after 9 when we got to the house to tell them the news, after 10 when we were all together, when Josie answered the summons. She left Dee with Muriel and came to the house. All of us, too stunned to cry. Too tired. But there would be no sleep tonight. I took Josie’s arm in the kitchen as we made coffee. “You OK?”

“No.”

“This happened…it all happened too fast. It all—”

"Too fast for what?" Josie's comment came, harsh and whip-quick, and she recoiled from me. "To send him away, so he could find other little kids to do this to? To get him *counseling*?" She ground the word disdainfully through her teeth.

"I…I don't know…"

"Do you think he'd ever be able to stop?"

"I don't know, Josie."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "I had a friend junior year at Ely. She had an uncle like Bud. She told me…they never stop."

"But this all just…this was just today…"

Josie said nothing. She tipped her chin up and glared at me.

"But…in an awful way…in a terrible way…it solved a problem, didn't it?" I grabbed Josie's arm again. "I need you to come outside…now."

"We're supposed to be getting coffee."

"We need to talk." We went out by the kitchen's back door. Josie took a seat on the steps leading down from the small, dark wooden porch landing. I stood over her. "I want to know something. I want you to tell me the truth."

"What?"

"Did you call Kip after you called me earlier today?"

She closed her eyes. "Davey, I—"

"Answer the question."

A beat. "Yes."

"And you told him…about Dee. About Bud."

"Yes."

"Jesus, Josie, why would you do that? Kip…did you want him to take Bud out and get him wasted. Did he drown him? Is that what he did?"

Josie stood up then. She faced me, her silhouette backlit by the weak yellow lamp mounted on a corner of the garage roof. "Why the hell did you have to bring him back?"

"He's my brother…he's your brother."

"That kid was gone a long time ago! Can't you see that? You could never get him back!"

"You didn't know him—"

"People don't stay the same, Davey. Things happen to them! They change! I'm sorry…what happened to Bud was horrible, and god only knows what his life was like with those people in Canada—"

"He told me about it," I said, and sunk down to sit on the top step. "It was hell."

Josie's mouth was still set, straight like my mother's, but her eyes softened slightly. She sighed.

"He got beat up," I said. "His dad made him touch him, he did terrible things to him. Jesus, he never had a chance."

She sat down again, beside me. "I lost it this morning. I didn't know what I wanted Kip to do."

I said nothing. I turned away from her.

"You try to be honest with me, Davey, so I'll be honest with you. In that moment, I wanted to hurt Bud. And I never wanted to see him again or let him anywhere near my daughter. If Mom knew…if Dad…what he did—"

I swiveled toward her, caught her by the arm. "You can't ever fucking tell them!"

"I won't!" She pulled back from my grasp. "But if they knew, how do you think they'd feel? What if someone had done that to me, or to you, when you were little?"

"You tell me, Josie. You have a child. One of your parents' children died today. They've lost him twice now. How do you think they feel?"

"I can't talk to you about this. You'll never understand."

"Just tell me why you called Kip."

She shook her head, exhaled sharply through her nose. Then she looked at me, unblinking. "Kip is Dee's father. That's why."

I stared back. "No, no, that's not…Douggie…you said he was the father."

"I never said that. You said it. Adam said it. Other people might have thought so."

"Oh god…"

"Kip had a right to know."

"So you called him. You wanted him to take care of things, to hurt Bud."

Josie stood. She was crying now. "I didn't know what I was doing. I don't know what I wanted. I just…Jesus, I was crazy. But I wouldn't break Mom and Dad's hearts—or yours—for anything in the world—"

"Don't say anything else," I said. "Go in. Go comfort your mother and father. Go help Adam. Get the goddamned coffee."

I remained seated outside in the dark, crouched on the porch step, crying quietly. I didn't think, couldn't think, that Josie had asked Kip to do the awful thing, get Bud drunk, take him out in the water, drown him—if not today, then someday soon. But she'd seen a man she barely knew, violating her daughter. Not suspected. Not wondered. Saw. Witnessed. Could I blame her for going nuts? If I was there, if I'd been holding a gun, or a baseball bat at the time, might I have used it? I remembered finding him on the couch in the apartment. I wanted to punch him. In the moment, I wanted to hurt him—even though I, much more than Josie, knew what Bud had been dealing with his entire life. We were reasonable people, but this was not a situation where reason held any sway. The instinct was to protect, to drive away the offender. But also to make sure such a thing could never happen again. And yes, to punish.

Which brought me to Kip. I'd seen the fist marks in the walls of his apartment, knew he drank too much. I'd never be able to prove it. He might not even know the truth himself.

As I sat, a mosquito flew by and landed on my left hand. I mashed it with the tips of my right, then flicked the tiny crumple away. With the small motion, I became aware of my surroundings again. I stopped and listened to the buzz of life around me, the whirr of insects, the mechanized wheeze of cars on the road, the light wind that riffled through the fine limbs of maples in our backyard and made the leaves flow like water.

It was a dark night, a new moon and a cloud-crowded sky that hid the stars. I breathed in the warm air, heavy with the promise of rain. The Third World was upon us. It was time to think about what that meant.

I was out a few more minutes before I heard the whine of the screen door behind me. It was Adam, coming to find me and bring me back inside, into the light.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Out There

We lost my little brother in the early evening of August 2, 1966.

Two days after, we held a day of viewing hours at Mortimer Funeral Home downtown. Mom and Dad had never returned to Sunday mass, never made peace with the Catholic Church, so on August 6, a Saturday, we held the funeral service also at the Home. Chic Mortimer had to move the gold accordion-folded divider and make a double-size room to accommodate the number of people who attended—a hundred, at least. Mom, Dad and I sat at the front—Josie, too, at the end of the row. She'd left Dee (and I'd left Genevieve) with Muriel for the day. Behind us, the extended family, Uncle Champ and Aunt Sylvia, my cousins Brock and Linda and their spouses, Aunt Pat and Uncle Bob, their daughter, LuAnn and her husband, Frank, and their two preternaturally well behaved young daughters, outfitted in lace dresses and what looked like Easter bonnets

and carrying little, boxy white wicker purses—and looking for all the world like Josie in her lacy confection on the day of my high school graduation.

Beyond these, a host of faces, most familiar, women with hats, men wearing neckties. Adam and his parents sat a few rows back. My mother's bridge group, some of my dad's employees. The Clark family, Happy, his wife Denise, Meg and Molly. Cy Davis. Lorraine. Mac Bennison. Margo Thompson. Near the window, Jeffrey Hines with his wife. Daisy Grant and her friends. I saw no trace of Kip, or Mike, or Pete. I didn't expect to.

Near the back, another figure towered, even seated. The tall nun, Sister Mary Michael, and the red-headed Mary Elizabeth had come and were chatting solemnly, heads bent toward one another. For reasons I couldn't explain well, it comforted me to see those last two. I think it had to do with them being such big fans. It might have sounded conceited, but I didn't mean it that way. It was just comforting to think maybe I helped bring some joy, some fun into somebody else's life. Maybe that was a kind of tribute to Bud. It was something he'd had precious little of.

The officiating priest conducted a short service. Father Mike, a lifelong friend of my parents', had passed away years ago, but sometime over the years, he had introduced them to Father Gregory, his replacement at the parish. Mom and Dad had turned to him now, to conduct not a mass, but a service at Mortimer's, permissible because Bud had been baptized into the Catholic Church as a baby. Father Greg had kindly agreed, but because he didn't know Bud—and didn't know my parents well—talked now in what he

saw as universal truths, offering up what pretty much every priest offered up at a funeral: The world is unbelievably shitty, but everything will be OK after you die. Hang in there.

I guess I shouldn't have been too critical. Too much of Bud's life was lived away from us, too much of what we knew about him was shrouded, an occult history, some of it known to me, but most of it lost forever. What could Father Greg do but speak in terms of potential and possibility? He went on about ticking clocks and seizing the day and finding the good where you could because God knows how much time any of us had on Earth. He rhapsodized about my family's remarkable strength and resiliency.

Once again, the weight pressed us down. Once more under the cartoon anvil, could my parents hear this man and his platitudes? They were bent slightly in their seats, weeping and holding hands. With her other hand, Mom reached for Josie, who blanched, just for a heartbeat, before reciprocating. I sat on the other side of my dad, one arm around his shoulder. My other hand held a small program that had been printed up by the funeral home. Centered on the front were the words, "Funeral Service in Celebration of the Life of Bradley Joseph Zombrowski," along with the dates of his birth and death, and "Mortimer Funeral Home, Cleveland, Ohio." I gripped the ivory paper, wishing to vacate the celebration, wishing instead I was anywhere else, doing nothing else but holding Adam.

"Before we go back out into this warm summer day, before we leave for the cemetery and the final rite of committal," Father Greg intoned, "may we find warmth in our love for our brother, Bradley Joseph, and in our love for each other; may it ease our sorrow and bolster our faith. We hope to meet him again in heaven, when the great

mystery of Christ will be revealed and the peace of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit will be ours for all eternity. Amen."

Six men—Uncle Champ, Uncle Bob, cousin Brock, Frank, three of my dad's closest friends from work—rose from their seats, walked to the front and stood, flanking the casket. The pall bearers walked the dark wood casket out of the cool, dim room, and into the frank August sunlight. There was a hearse parked on the street in front of the building, this a newer model Cadillac than the one we'd ridden to the beach party. Following the hearse, a line of cars motored slowly out to the cemetery. We had a police escort, so we floated through red lights. On the street, people offered up somber looks and a few reverent nods.

It was a shady cemetery, and the trees helped keep the grass lush and green despite the relentless August heat. A dark blue canopy had been set up next to the grave site. Family members took seats on the wooden folding chairs underneath. We waited as the casket emerged from the back of the hearse, and the pallbearers carried it over to us. They placed it on the metal apparatus that would lower it into the freshly dug grave. Their work completed, the six men retreated to the corners of the canopy and folded their arms in front of them.

Father Greg spoke some more about God, life's grand bingo game and the big jackpot in the sky. I wondered why Mom and Dad bothered with all the hoodoo, the priest with the cassock, the prayers, the incense. But deep inside, I knew. It was just like the guilt I'd felt about Bud all these years, about the guilt I'd feel forever. It was part of who we were, part of the things we did to feel like ourselves in the world. When it really

mattered, we all fell back on our rituals. I realized then how I clung to the guilt, how feeling bad about my brother was elemental, now, to my nature. Whether he was near or far, living or dead.

Father Greg dangled the chain on an ornate silver censer and sprinkled musky incense on the casket, then offered up one last prayer as it was lowered into the ground. After we watched the casket disappear into the hole, after nearly everyone else had taken my mother's hand, my father's hand, hugged Josie, placed a hand on my shoulder, after car doors were shut and cars were driven away, my mother looked at me. There was grief there, yes, but there was also such uncertainty. She didn't know the whole story, but the central question had not changed: Should we have left the past alone?

I was still on leave from work the next week, and I made it my business to catch up with Kip. That spring, he'd vacated the old dump he had shared with Douggie; I learned from Mike that he was fixing up his old lady's house. When I knocked, he came to the back door, frowned at me through the screen, then pushed it open to let me in. The tang of freshly cut wood tickled my nose as I entered the kitchen. In the center of the room, two sawhorses stood with a slim, beveled board between them, and the floor was crowded with paint spattered drop cloths. Part of the doorframe for a small pantry had been removed.

Kip leaned against the dark wood kitchen table and crossed his arms. I leaned against the counter, near the sink, and did the same. He took an open Stroh's can from the

table and sipped, but didn't offer me one. Then he sighed. "Davey, I don't know what else I can tell you, so if you've come to beat the shit out of me or accuse me of—"

"Josie told me."

"Told you what?"

"That you were the one who knocked her up. And all that time, I was looking for Douggie and you were telling me you'll talk to him—telling me you did talk to him, at your mother's funeral. And here, all along, it was you."

"I wasn't sure it was me, at first."

"My sister didn't fuck around, Kip."

"I know…I don't mean…but there was a lot I didn't know about her at the time. I couldn't be 100 percent certain."

"And that fight. The one you had with Douggie just before he left."

"Yeah…"

"He found out, didn't he? And I'll make another bet—those two hadn't messed around. At least, they hadn't fucked. So he knew it couldn't be him."

"Yeah. At least that's what he claimed."

"And you guys beat the shit out of each other."

Kip wiped some sweat from his upper lip with the edge of his hand. "He was pissed. We had a bad fight. He left. Didn't come back."

"And you didn't have the balls to tell me. Or come clean with my folks. Take responsibility."

“I don’t think…that would’ve done any good. It’s not like we were going to get married or anything. She was 17, for Christ’s sake!”

“Exactly…” I said, and looked down at the filthy dropcloths pooled at my feet. “Exactly.”

“Are you looking for some kind of explanation?”

I didn’t need one. Over the last few days, Josie and I had talked for hours. Over one long walk, she told me about that winter of ‘62. How she’d come down to Douggie’s apartment one Friday afternoon in January to surprise him. The construction business was slow in Cleveland in the winter, and she was hoping he’d be there. But he wasn’t—he’d agreed to take the Bel Air and drive his mother to a doctor’s appointment.

But Kip was home. He invited her in. He gave her a beer, and they laughed and talked and spun the vinyl, Jackie Wilson and The Ventures and “Baby, Oh, Baby” by The Shells. He only let her stay an hour or so, then shooed her off home, but not before he told her that she should stop by anytime she felt like it, even if Douggie wasn’t home. For instance, he mentioned, Douggie would not be there on Sunday because he was going to basketball game with a friend from work. Then Kip gave her a piece of Doublemint gum to chew on the way home, so Mom wouldn’t smell the beer on her breath.

He was tall and good-looking, she was young and cute. The math wasn’t difficult.

In that afternoon, her appreciation for Kip’s good looks raged into a full-on crush. So that Sunday she lied to Mom and told her that she was going to Muriel’s to work on a science project. And she went to Kip’s, and they danced, and they drank beer from bottles, and they did the inadvisable, which led to the unthinkable.

“How many times?” I asked.

“What? I don’t…what does it matter?”

“How many times?”

We met…uh, maybe four times after that, I guess?”

“Four.”

“When I found out she was pregnant, I wanted her to…you know, to not have the baby,” Kip said softly, and took another sip of beer.

“Have an abortion.”

“Yeah, I mean, I gave her money.”

“You did? How much?”

“Three hundred. Had to call in a lot of favors.”

“Well shit, Kip…it was the least you could do. The very least.”

“I’m glad she kept the cash, if she was going to have the baby after all. She told me she used it to buy the crib and diapers and stuff like that.” He raised his eyes to mine. “I know you think I’m a piece of shit for what happened. But I’ve tried to step up. I’ve given her money. I’m still giving her money when I can.”

“That why you haven’t shoved off to California? I mean the real reason?”

“Yeah, kinda. That, and this fucking house.” He looked around the room, then smiled sheepishly at me.

I didn’t smile. “I know I’m never going to be able to prove what happened with Bud that night.”

“I’ve told you the truth, Davey. I didn’t…hold him under the water, or talk him into suicide, or whatever the hell you think happened. He was upset, he was hurting, we were drunk and high…” Kip set the beer bottle down on the table behind him.

“And will you take responsibility for that? For giving him liquor and dope?”

“Don’t you think I feel like shit about it? But what about him? What about what he did?”

“So you drown him like some stray cat—”

“I didn’t!”

“You knew! You knew what he did. To your daughter. I know Josie told you all about it! Stop lying!”

Kip crossed his arms on his chest in a kind of self-hug, and in that moment looked eerily like Bud. “I’m not a killer,” he said quietly. “I was angry. I was hurt. But I’m not a killer. I couldn’t do that…”

“This is useless. A fucking useless conversation with fucking useless person who just lives to get drunk and get high.”

“What do you think? My life’s some great party?”

“Girls in your bed, out on the beach all the time.”

“Fuck you! My mother just died! I have a brother I never see anymore, and a daughter I can’t be a father to. Your family, you think you have a corner on suffering. That nobody but the great TV star and his—”

I was across the room in a second. I drove my fist into his mouth—that mouth that just kept running off, seeping bullshit and lies, too easy. Kip’s head jerked to the side a

bit, then he came back at me, swept his right arm around and clocked me in the side of my head. I reeled for a moment, then launched myself into his midsection, dropping a shoulder into his stomach. We crashed against the kitchen table and then onto the floor, partly tangled in the pile of canvas drop cloths. I fell on top of Kip and started pummeling his sides with my fists, trying to get as many punches in before he could retaliate. We were more or less the same size, Kip maybe a little taller, but he was also more fit than I was. All those days of construction work and surfing had given him muscles and agility I couldn't match. He got his arms up under me and launched me over onto my back. "Get the fuck off of me, you queer! Goddamn it, you want someone to fuck, go find your wife, Weinstein!"

I was breathing hard. I backed off. "Don't…come around…my sister again. Or Dee."

Kip came over and laid one more good punch on my face, near my left eye. Then he pulled me to my feet and shoved me toward the back door. "Now get the fuck out of here!" he said, and went into the other room, leaving me alone in the kitchen.

I moved with great difficulty and grabbed the screen door handle, hoping my wounds—the ones I could see—would heal before I took the trip to Music Town or Hell once more.

Adam and I stood on the edge of the lake at Edgewater Beach. It was a late Sunday afternoon in mid-October, and the breeze was stiff, curling up whitecaps on the water and scooting clouds across the sky. We were trying to come to a decision, each in

our minds, a negotiation conducted in silence. I wanted to see the sun set on the water that evening, and before it dipped below the horizon, I wanted us to make up our minds. I knew what I wanted to do, what Adam wanted, but I just wanted to be sure it was right to do it.

The fish bowl had only gotten smaller over the years. We wanted to move, but not to another place in Cleveland, or even elsewhere in Ohio. We wanted to go west, to California.

Four years ago, Daisy Grant had started bringing us missives from that brave new outpost. ONE magazines were delivered to her house in proverbial plain brown wrappers. She'd read them, collect a few issues and drop them off for us every few months. In those pages, articles and short stories, book reviews, editorials by and about people who thought a lot like Adam and me. Some were far more radical—some apparently, were Communists. But they were all free, at least within the confines of that bound bit of paper, at the cost of a quarter, to share their lives and beliefs and ideas as homosexuals (or homophiles, as they preferred to be called). In California, specifically in Los Angeles, where ONE was published by an organization of the same name, we thought we might have a chance to live closer to our true selves.

Not that L.A. was some kind of gay utopia. I didn't kid myself. People were still getting hassled by police and the rest of the citizenry. Guys got beat up, women were accused of all kinds of immoral behavior. I thought back to those race demonstrations at Euclid Beach Park all those years ago. What I'd once been aware of only on a very small scale was now nearing a national crisis. Violence raked the South, rocked the North.

Nearly every day, another story, another march, another shooting, another riot, somebody somewhere taking a stand, drawing a line. Voices joined in song, in speeches, a thousand ways to say 'Enough.' Someday soon the hoses might be turned on us. And it might take a real, unified uprising for homosexuals to claim their rightful place in the world. It might take a whole lot more than that.

But, as it stood at the time, there were places in Los Angeles where we might not feel like bugs under a microscope, at least not all the time—apartment buildings to live in and bars to go have a drink and stores to shop in, where Adam and I might even be able to hold hands and get away with it.

That was an awfully big deal, but even that was just a part of the allure. There was also the small matter of my career. Music Town and the Movie Inferno were steady work, but I was eager for new challenges. I wasn't alone. Already several popular Cleveland TV stars had lit out for the west coast—Tim Conway in '61, and Ghoulardi himself, Ernie Anderson, sometime over the past summer. Why couldn't I give it a try? Adam would have no trouble getting a job—hell, he could probably even get a gig on a movie set if he wanted to. He'd been doing well enough at Channel 5, but he too felt a sameness to his days there and he'd grown weary of it.

That weariness—we both felt it. We needed a change, the new energy cranked up by the unfamiliar, the need to pay close attention again, make new friends, see new places. Of course, all that newness made me a little anxious that it might put a strain on Adam's and my relationship. It was LA, after all. It was a town of beautiful hopefuls—

would-be stars, actors, dancers, singers, models, desperate fools of every variety. But I couldn't keep Adam out of fear or a lack of other options, for either of us.

I had to admit some guilt for leaving the family, but I didn't think my being there or not being there was going to affect my parents' situation all that much. Mom and Dad lived very quietly now. Dad was going to retire at the end of the year, and they spoke of moving elsewhere in Cleveland. Someplace smaller, simpler. They took joy in watching Dee grow, babysitting her when Josie went out, but not much else. Josie was dating a guy named Arthur, nice enough, a dental school student who might make her happy and give her a good life. Maybe they'd get married. Maybe she'd even give my parents another grandchild. Maybe I'd get free teeth cleanings when I visited.

Adam's parents had talked about moving to Miami to live near Mrs. Weinstein's sister, but Mr. Weinstein wasn't quite ready to give up the camera shop. They'd probably be in Cleveland for a few more years, but not forever.

Leaving our friends in Cleveland was much less of a consideration. We weren't on the beach much anymore, which means we didn't see Kip, and by extension, Pete or Mike or god knows, Douggie. We still socialized with Daisy on occasion, but she became less and less available. She'd received an offer with the Ford Agency in New York City—not to model, she was getting too old for that—but to scout for new talent. She'd be gone after Christmas. I'd miss the people at station, and I hoped that they'd miss me. But I didn't think it would be that hard for Happy to replace me. He could start by giving Meg and Molly the reins to Movie Inferno. They'd do just fine on their own. And Music Town could probably benefit from new blood.

I looked at Adam. He was staring down at the sand as we ambled down the beach, lost in his own thoughts. Then I gazed out toward the water. A huge barge loaded down with square iron shipping cartons was lumbering over the water, headed east. Further on, another, smaller boat sped in the opposite direction.

Could I leave Bud behind? I thought of him many times a day, and had started dreaming of him at night. That September, when the heat and cloying humidity had lingered, I woke one night covered in sweat. In my sleep, I saw Bud, far out in the lake. I could see his head and just the top of his shoulders sticking up out of the water, his fine blond hair slicked back from his face. He wasn't flailing or panicked. He was looking around, as if he'd reached a restaurant later than the appointed time and was scanning the room for his dinner partner. First he swiveled his hear, then treading water, turned a full circle. *Bessie?* he said. Just that one word. The next moment, the waters boiled, flushing white beside him. A giant leathery brown flipper breeched and made contact, catching him under his arms. In a single motion, it pulled him under. He went, without a sound, without a struggle. As if he was expecting her. As if he'd called her, and she had come, like a midtown taxi, like a car ride with a friend.

Bud would journey with us to California. I'd see him again and again, lingering in a shadowy corner or keeping vigil in some gray-gold room. But he was no longer contained by walls. Now that his spirit could run free, he was unbound from any limitations. I might see him anywhere, anytime, on a sun-bright afternoon, or in the throes of some torrid night, weaving between the tall palms roadside on Sunset, tripping

across the floor of some lonely red-rock canyon, or out on a wide beach watching the big waves storm the shore.

The sun was nearing the horizon as Adam and I continued walking. I looked down the shoreline. There on the sand, just a short distance ahead, a small boy with baby chick hair and a blue shirt moved alone. He held a small toy boat close to his body, and walked lightly, but with purpose, heading in the same direction as Adam and me. I smiled in recognition as we followed. He, like us, was bound for stranger waters.

--THE END--

BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth (Betsy) Allen holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from The Ohio State University (1984) and a master's degree in English from George Mason University (2013); she is currently an MFA candidate (creative writing/fiction) at GMU. In past years, Allen has worked as a marketing communications specialist, public relations manager, and a freelance writer and editor. She is the author of several short stories published in various genre anthologies, including *Twisted Yarns* and *Southern Haunts 3*. She is also the co-author (with her brother Ben Small) of the graphic novel trilogy, *The End of Gath*. At home in Alexandria, Virginia, Allen lives with her husband and two rarely cooperative dogs. In her spare time, she frets about her two grown children and her grandson.