**The Jell-O Brigade**



Jack Powers

**Chapter 1**

It started as a joke, a stoned joke we all laughed at and would have forgotten – except for Junior who couldn't let go of a challenge, any challenge. So he rolled it around in his head until it killed him.

We huddled beneath the ten-foot Association dinghy propped on wooden horses for winter storage. In a swirl of pot smoke, we brainstormed senior pranks as low-tide waves slapped against the seawall that held the dock’s parking lot from tumbling into the bay. Gray wooden docks hauled onto the gravelly lot for winter storage hung a few feet over the seawall’s edge. Around us, association members’ boats filled the parking lot like kids’ toys piled into a closet. (**~~Paragraph~~)**

Junior lit and passed the joints while gently prodding Jerry, Frizz, Lisa and me to come up with the greatest prank in Woodcove High School history. Smoke swirled around our heads trapped for passive hits by the blue tarp. Even though she was just passing the joint, Lisa was bound to get a buzz. This was her first appearance – and potentially first buzz – since the summer – Junior insisted she be there to plan our final big adventure.

“The class of 1973 must live,” Junior said, imitating the crackling voice of an old radio broadcast, “in infamy.”

 “I thought the bad guys lived in infamy,” I said. Junior relied on me to be the skeptic, especially with Frizz ready to enshrine every word that came out of his mouth.

“Shhh, **Davey!”** Junior put a finger to his mouth. “We’re on a roll.” I knew he was winking at me in the darkness although I couldn’t see it in the shadow of his hair.

Our roll consisted of a car in the cafeteria and a brick wall in front of the office doors. “Been done,” I said, taking a hit. I held the smoke in and grunted through tightened lungs, “Let’s think of something original.”

“And something that won’t get us arrested,” Lisa added. I put my arm around her shoulder as a show of solidarity, but also because I seized any excuse to make body contact with her.

Our Friday nights had turned into stone-athons and even though she and Junior were still going out, Lisa decided in September she couldn’t afford a B. Or maybe an A. Anything less than an A+ was a personal insult to her – a failure of will. The rest of us were going to any college foolish enough to let us in, but Junior and Lisa’d go to some howdy dow school all **brick and ivy**.

“Lisa. Davy,” Junior said with exaggerated patience. “We’re *brain*storming. You *must* respect the process.” He slipped into an impression of our English teacher, Mr. Corwin. “*Accept* all answers.” His hands reached out and bounced to the beat of the words. “Please kids, *do not* judge.” He started to laugh, blowing an otherwise perfect impression.

**The near-full October moon dyed the night a silvery white. Two hundred and fifty miles south in Washington, the Watergate burglars had been indicted, but the Nixon is not yet a crook. But under the dinghy, we were focused on pranks. Everything was bathed in the electric blue tint of the tarp draped over the boat and skirting the hard ground. The blue-gray cloud of pot smoke was broken only by our shadowy forms and the orange red tip of the joint.**

“We could call the radio station,” Frizz whispered through a lung full of smoke, “and cancel school.” He scratched his fingernails into his fuzzy brown ringlets and peeked over at Junior.

“You need a password,” I said reaching for the joint in Frizz’s hand.

“We could, like, let a pig or a cow or something loose in the halls,” Jerry said and lit a joint from his own stash.

“Class of ‘69,” I said.

“You’re not accepting, Davy!” Junior shouted in mock anger. He took the joint from me and turned it around. Before putting it backwards in his mouth, he said, “You’re judging!” and blew a shotgun blast of smoke out the end of the joint and directly into my face. His long brown hair, parted in the middle, swung back and forth as he leaned into me. I sucked in the stream of smoke. It kept coming, directly into my nose. My lungs were burning, searing, but still he blew. My mouth, my throat, my eyes filled with smoke until I raised my hands in surrender and fell back coughing, laughing, hacking, gasping for breath.

“Ow! Shit!” Junior yelled, banging his head on the boat and spitting the hot roach out from between his lips. “Shit. Shit. Shit,” he shouted as he wiped the sparks from his lips. “Shit, that burned me.”

I started to laugh and my coughing grew worse.

“I want you to know that hurt me more than it hurt you. Ow!” Junior licked the raw spot on his lip and lit another joint. “Now will you please respect the process?”

Lisa said nothing, but I could sense her attention flagging with our adolescent antics. A year ago, she would have been right in the middle of it. Had she really moved on that completely? She and Junior always being together seemed like the only guarantee in our world that was about to explode with graduation and college.

After that I kept my mouth shut at the long list of lame suggestions: covering the cars in the faculty parking lot with shaving cream, toilet papering the trees in the courtyard, throwing tires on the flagpole and, of course, streaking lunch.

“We could fill the pool with Jell-O,” I said, putting the roach of the joint between two match heads and snorting it.

“What?” Frizz asked, thinking I was making fun of his ideas again.

When I finished inhaling, I said it again through held-in breath, “We could fill the pool with Jell-O.”

That was the first of many moments that I’ve gone over and over. If I’d done this instead of that. If I’d said nothing instead of something. Something instead of nothing. That was back when I thought what I said and did had the power to change things.

Frizz shook his head scornfully. “You can’t fill a pool with Jell-O,” he said. “You need little bowls and a refrigerator-”

“I thought we were brainstorming,” I said and tried to wink at Junior. It was good he couldn’t see my weak attempt in the darkness. As usual my wink looked more like the tic of a comic madman.

Junior was staring at his index finger as he pointed it at me and chanted, “We could fill the pool with Jell-O! We could fill the pool with Jell-O!” He clenched his hands into fists and shook them to the beat. “We could fill the pool with Jell-O!” he shouted and Jerry and Frizz joined in. “We could fill the pool with Jell-O!”

He seemed to like the idea.

“Of course we’d need a lot of little bowls and refrigerators,” I said and ducked as Frizz tried to shove my head against the side of the boat. Junior dove over Frizz’s arm and drove me to the ground, grabbing me by the shoulders and shaking.

“Careful, he’s a genius!” Junior shouted. “You must be gentle with the genius, Frizz!” He was using some weird Vincent Price accent as he tapped my head against the ground. You had to watch a lot of old movies to get half of Junior’s jokes. “Gentle with the genius,” he said again and again as he shook my head.

“You’re damaging the genius’s brain!” I tried to shout but I was drowned out by stoned laughter, some of it my own. Even Lisa was laughing. Maybe the swirl of pot smoke was breaking her down.

“SHHHH!” Frizz pointed to an imaginary sound. “Did you hear something?” We listened to the darkness around us. Old Lady Miller’s hemlocks shielded us from her yard and the next closest house was a quarter mile down the seawall that curved around our little harbor. We heard nothing but the sound of low-tide waves licking the wall.

For a moment all was frozen: Junior’s raised profile dark against the tarp, his bangs falling on each side of his eyes, a hint of his nose and mouth visible in the blue/gray shadow; beside him Frizz crouching with a lit joint in his hand, his brown hair corkscrewing against the blue tarp background, his face dark except for a minute square of reflection in his left eye; Lisa to my right with her ear cocked to the world outside; and behind them all in deep shadow, Jerry sitting Indian-style with his head down, his uncombed red hair covering his face, a joint in his hand. No, the moment wasn’t frozen; it was cooled to set in an upside down, electric blue Jell-O mold with my best friends suspended like sliced bananas – a message from the future I couldn’t decipher. What I thought I saw was a weird pot-induced hallucination that made me wonder if Junior had given me a concussion or the pot was laced with PCP. I blinked my eyes and joked my way out of it.

“I thought I heard some asshole,” I whispered, “shouting, ‘He’s a genius.’”

"Seriously, I heard something," Frizz said for the thousandth time since he'd moved to town before ninth grade. “Junior, are you sure no one can hear us?”

“Maybe Old Lady Miller?” I said.

Frizz scoffed, apparently thinking I was serious. “She couldn't even hear us if we sat in her living room and used a megaphone.”

"No one's said anything yet.” Junior adjusted his legs to a lotus position. "Maybe they don't call the cops because they're all afraid it's their kid out here.” He chuckled to himself and we sat awkward and silent. He could be talking about any of our parents. We all lived on Markum Point: Junior and his mother across the cove; her boyfriend, Sam, in the big house on the tip of the point; and the rest of us in middle-sized houses a block or two from the water.

I couldn't see Junior’s expression, but there was a raw edge to his voice. His poker face was hard enough to read in the light.

"Is your mother going to marry Suppository Sam?” I asked, regretting it immediately when Junior stiffened.

"Your mother's getting married?” Frizz asked. I felt worse. I thought it was public knowledge. I felt Lisa tense up beside me. Junior took an extra beat to reply.

"I don't know. She's a big girl. She can make her own decisions...” He shifted into his best stern Ward-Cleaver-in-the-den. "But, I told her, 'Don't expect me to bail you out if it doesn't work. Don't come running to me.'“ He shook his finger and laughed. We sat quietly, again wondering whether to fake a laugh or ask him what the hell he was talking about. Finally, he looked up. "Private joke, I guess.”

Junior lit another joint and said softly, “The Woodcove Warrior’s brand new pool full of Jell-O. There’s a nice irony in that.”

Maybe double irony since we’d spent the last three years helping the swim team raise money to build the pool. Except for our Friday night meetings under the dinghy, we were serious swimmers: Junior the sprint star, Frizz the distance workhorse, Jerry the top diver and me the, well -- the second banana and star’s best friend. Lisa was the star of the girls’ team.

“It would take a lot of Jell-O.” Junior passed the joint to Jerry. “I mean, twenty-five meters long is what? Thirty yards? Twenty yards wide? Maybe an average of six feet deep.” He paused for a few seconds to run the numbers through his calculator of a brain. “Thirty-two thousand four hundred cubic feet? Does that sound right, Jerry?”

"Sure.” Jerry shrugged, not bothering to search for his pad and pen in the darkness. “Hey! Can we make it flavored?" he asked. "Like Wild Woodcove Raspberry or something?” When he started shrieking at his own joke in his high-pitched chuckle, we realized that he had been sitting there smoking two joints all by himself. I pinned him down, banging my head on one of the seats of the dinghy. Frizz ripped what was left of the joint from one hand. I grabbed the other.

"Ow!" Frizz yelled as the roach burned his fingers. "Dammit! The bogart smoked the whole thing.” He wiped the sparks from his lap while Jerry squealed.

"How much Jell-O does each box make?” Junior asked. He'd shifted into his supervisor's voice. He sounded like his father when he used to lead the Markum Point spring boat-launch. "A quart? A pint? Anyone know?” He took a deep hit off the joint I handed him.

"That's a lot of boxes of raspberry Jell-O," Jerry said and Frizz and I laughed. Junior was too focused on the problem.

He grabbed my shoulder, tilted his head and leaned in close to look me in the eyes. "How many gallons in a cubic yard?"

"Damn!" I said slapping my pockets. "Where’s my conversion chart?"

Junior laughed politely for a moment, but then he was back at it. "But roughly, what do you think? Twenty? That would be twenty-four thousand gallons."

"Let me see. Eight boxes for a gallon, roughly 39¢ a box, that's uh......” I pushed the buttons on an imaginary calculator.

"About $70,000.” Junior shook his head and scrunched up his lips. "There's got to be another way to make Jell-O."

"As long as it's raspberry," I said. A comic book picture of the pool filled with rubbery red Jell-O appeared in my head.

"Raspberry's fine.” He nodded and called for a vote. "Raspberry all right with everyone?"

When we started voting, I should have known we were in trouble. When we fantasized about breaking into the White House and leaving a note for Tricky Dick, we just laughed and forgot about it. But when Junior called for a vote, he was getting serious, trying to make us think we were involved in the planning. The votes were always about something trivial, like color. They were “pseudodemocratic facades in the despocracy that was our group friendship.” At least that’s what Jerry said one time. It sounded good. The truth was all our adventures were designed and supervised by Junior. We could vote on the day or our fake names, but even then he usually supplied the choices.

After we agreed on raspberry, talk turned to the other pranks we’d pulled off in the past. Frizz loved to go over and over them, exaggerating his own role and asking minutely detailed questions about the ones he’d missed before he’d moved to town. Eventually he asked me to tell the story of our first adventure in fifth grade, sneaking into the gym of Old Woodcove Elementary to play basketball on a chilly November Saturday.

Junior and Jerry and even Lisa jumped in with the details I’d forgotten. Junior claiming he’d planned it for months, scoping the route up a tree, over the cafeteria and through the boy’s locker room window. Jerry swearing he hit a hook shot from half-court. Frizz asking about Robby Carter who tossed around a few milk cartons and was banished from further adventures.

In high school the adventures escalated to more serious breaking and entering, but they always seemed innocent thanks to Junior’s insistence on taking nothing and leaving every place cleaner than we found it. When we broke into the old movie theater downtown for a private showing, we wore old suits he found at a thrift shop and called each other Spencer Tracy and Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn. (At least we called Lisa “Katharine Hepburn,” – and sometimes Frizz.) When Frizz turned the popcorn machine on, Junior insisted we clean it all up and leave five dollars for the kernels (“We’re adventurers, not thieves”), but he forgave Frizz since he was so pathetically sorry about it. When we pool-hopped from one end of town to the other (Junior said he read it in a book), he bought matching swim suits and gave us Olympic swimmer names. When we snuck into the library and borrowed books we always filled the cards out, filed them where they belonged and returned the books within two weeks.

They were all harmless if odd pranks planned to a T, just Junior being Junior. But a pool full of Jell-O seemed too ridiculous for even Junior to be serious about. It was crazy, sure – but fun crazy, not dead crazy. Even at the end, when I almost blew up the whole prank to get help for Junior, I never really thought that he would die.

**Chapter 2**

In the morning I sat on my bed and tried to sketch the picture I had made in my head of the pool full of Jell-O, but of course I couldn’t get it right. I thought it might make a good cartoon for the school paper, but it came out too dark, too vague. Put something in front of me and I can draw it, but as soon as I have to rely on memory or imagination, my lines all turn into shaky blurs. It’s like my eye and hand know how to draw but my brain doesn’t have a clue. Or maybe I just don’t have any talent for creating a world, only for copying it.

I even tried to use a ruler and two point perspective to construct an architectural-plan-looking pool, tinting the surface with a red pencil. But when I tried to add Junior and the gang swimming in the Jell-O like suspended fruit, the drawing fell apart.

I ended up closing my eyes and trying to recall the picture of Junior and Jerry and Frizz frozen in space under the dinghy. Keeping my eyes closed to keep the picture in my head, I sketched quickly with a black conte crayon on rough blue paper trying to capture the gestural slump of Frizz’s shoulder, the confident tilt of Junior’s head, the slope of Jerry’s crossed legs. When I opened my eyes, I could see a sketchy outline of that moment. I added dark shadows, obscuring the faces and rooting the bodies into the ground.

It wasn’t perfect but I felt I’d captured something of the experience. I gave the joint a pale orange head and took a light blue conte to pull the scene into focus with a line of the reflected light along the edge of Junior’s jaw and the outline of Jerry’s right leg and a tiny square in Frizz’s eye, but I ruined it. I lacked the skill to pull it off or maybe the scene resisted pulling together.

Monday before second period, Lisa was waiting for me in front of Mrs. Warren’s Physics classroom.

She was biting her lower lip so I knew something was up.

“I hate to keep coming off as the Mom,” she said and I was startled. That lip bite was very un-mom-like to me, and then for a moment, just the pink tip of her tongue slipped between her teeth. What would it be like to kiss those lips?

“The mom?”

“*Don’t do this. Don’t do that*. I know what it sounds like,” she said. “I can hear it as I say it and I think…” She trailed off. “Call it women’s intuition or whatever, this whole thing feels like a disaster waiting to happen.”

“The prank?” I whispered, feeling like Frizz for looking around before I said it. We moved into an alcove by the science office even though the halls had cleared as the bell rang. Physics would have to wait.

“Yes, the prank.” Lisa wiggled her head in irritation. “We haven’t done anything big in years,” she said. “And nothing ever this big. And Junior’s just off. And we’ve got more to lose with college admissions and – We’ve all worked too hard to screw up. It’s just dumb!”

When Lisa was excited her eyes would open wider at key moments and her nostrils would flare a little as if punctuating the music of her words. I was hearing her on a delay as I watched her. A beat late, I realized she’d stopped.

“I know, I know, I know.” I stalled for time. “You’ve been working hard. I know that. Don’t want mess it up. But Junior is getting in wherever he wants. And Frizz and Jerry and I will just go to any school dumb enough to –”

“Did you even hear what I just said?”

“Yes,” I said. “Junior’s off. Prank’s too big. College, college, college.” The last part came out harsher than I meant it. “I mean, I’m sorry. He’s not quite himself, but his dad died, his mom’s whatever with Sam, we’re all– ”

“You think this is a good idea?” She said it like a challenge, like my answer would determine whose side I was on – would be on – from here on in.

“Well, yes and no,” I said and she rolled her eyes. “Just listen: it would be an awesome prank, right? I mean they’d talk about it forever. But, but, but,” I said raising my hands before she could interrupt. “It’s kind of crazy. I mean, can it even be done? And if it can’t, we had fun thinking about it and no harm done.” I stopped while I was ahead, thinking I’d come up with a pretty good answer.

“You’re willing to take that risk?” She stared at me and shifted onto her left hip.

I thought she was going to put her right hand on the other hip to create that sexy window of a curve when –

“David!” she yelled, startling me out of my dream state. Was I becoming a complete pervert? I couldn’t even pay attention to something important.

“Sorry… Sorry I… uh. I.” I put up both hands like I was surrendering. “It’s not like we’re going to say, ‘Junior, this is a bad idea,’ and he’s going to say, ‘Oh yeah, good point,’ so… let’s be there, point out the flaws, steer it into the ground if we can.” I raised my eyebrows and dropped my hands into “maybe” shrug.

She seemed to be relaxing.

“How about I’ll be the dad?” I said. “You don’t have to be the mom. And if by some miracle Junior finds a way, we’ll be there to make sure everything works.”

I took her hand and massaged it a little trying not to get distracted by the softness of her fingers. “We can’t just leave him to Frizz and Jerry,” I added. “Right?”

“All right,” she said and turned the handhold into a handshake. “So we’re in this together?”

“Mom and dad,” I said. “The parental units.”

“How about Aunt Lisa and Uncle David?” she said and laughed.

“Yes! The cool aunt and uncle!” We said the last part almost in unison and held hands a little longer than a handshake.

Finally she pulled away.

“Women’s intuition?” I said.

“Well, yeah.” She cocked her head to see if I was being sarcastic.

“Isn’t that like an insult or something?” I said, smiling. “Like a term old dead white guys used meaning, ‘Women can’t think, they just feel’?”

“Women can think *and* feel,” she said, dead serious. “Sometimes I don’t think you do either one.”

“Sometimes.” I nodded my head. “How about most of the time?”

“Pardon my Eddy Haskelling, Mrs. O’Malley,” Junior said that night at dinner with my family, “but this Jell-O is delicious.” He held a shivering spoonful in the air as he spoke. My mother’s ivory skin blushed to a deep red and her pale blue eyes seemed to twinkle as she thanked him like a school girl on a date with the captain of the football team. Junior’s effect on older women was always a marvel to me. He had the same ability his father had to flatter you, while at the same time admitting it was ridiculous and making fun of himself for doing it. “Is it raspberry?” he asked and gave me a quick wink.

“Close.” Mother smiled, “Strawberry.”

“We only have Jell-O for dessert at out house,” Junior said. “And I’ve never had it with these bananas before.”

As my mother enthusiastically shared her banana in Jell-O technique, I stared at the pale yellow slices silently trapped by the shiny gelatin on my plate. The small black seeds in the middle looked like closed eyes or tiny dead ants. I thought maybe some pot remnants were breaking loose in my brain and took a quick bite to break the spell before the ants moved. I followed with a forkful of mashed potatoes and a bite of chicken before they too came alive before me.

Junior’s visits to our dinner table had become fairly regular since his mom was usually out somewhere with Sam. The dinners were strained affairs compared to the way we used to laugh when Lisa or Jerry and I would eat at Junior’s when his father was alive. But having Junior here sure beat eating with just my family.

“Do you need anything, Junior?” Granny asked, pretending she could still be helpful. She scanned his plate of Jell-O, lumpy mashed potatoes and overcooked chicken like she’d proudly made it herself. “Salt?” She reached over and patted Junior’s tan fingers with her pale, veined hand. “Uncross your knife and fork,” she said, “before it causes an argument.”

“Thanks,” Junior said. “I’m fine.” Accepting a Granny offer of help would lead to a long painful wait while she hobbled around the kitchen without her walker. “I don’t want you to pull a muscle, Granny,” Junior said. “We’re doing the three-legged race again at the Association picnic, right?”

 Granny turned red with laughter. “Your father used to say that,” she said and sighed. “God willin’, I’ll be there, Junior.” She knocked three times on the wooden table before returning to her butter-soaked and salt laden mashed potatoes.

“How’s school, Junior?” my father asked, taking a stab at being a replacement dad. He’d skipped his gin and tonic since Junior was over and even missed the last half of the evening news. His ruddy Irish skin still made him look like he’d had five Harps with a shot of whiskey. He smoothed his gray waves off his forehead. His “How’s school?” question would be followed by “How’s the swim team going to do this year?”, “How are the college applications going?” and then some fatherly advice.

“School’s going well,” Junior answered dabbing the milk at the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “I’m sure Davy’s told you that we’re in a few of the same classes again this year. And swimming starts next month.” His answers were a little better than my usual “Fine.” or “Nothing.”

“We just finished *The Great Gatsby* in English. Fortunately your brilliant son Davy was there to explain all the hard parts to me.” He smiled with such absolute delight at his transparent bullshit that everyone had to laugh.

“And the swim team? How does it look this year?” my father asked. Before I could say, “Good,” Junior went off on a detailed analysis of the weaknesses at middle distances and the lack of depth in diving. I realized as he spoke that he sounded just like his father. It dawned on me that my father was trying to be his father, that Sam was trying to be his father, and that Junior was trying to be his father, too.

 No one, of course, could be Mr. Walker.

Before Junior’s dad crashed his BMW into a tree, he and Mrs. Walker weren’t just the *center* of social life in Marcus Point, they *were* the social life. She was the “Little General” turning each spring boat launch weekend, fall dock cleanup, or mid-summer break-out-of-the-blahs Association picnic into a self-catered, activity-packed affair. They even organized a Polar Bear Plunge every New Year’s Day.

Junior Walker Sr. made them fun, invented songs for each occasion, dressed in some appropriately outlandish costume, teased the other parents into acting foolish, and left everyone laughing. Even before he sold his printing company for a huge profit in the middle of our tenth grade, he had the option to be wherever he wanted to be. Weekdays and summers he was often the only father on Markum Point. And Lisa, Jerry, Frizz and I were happy to be part of their family for barbecues on their back lawn or sailing picnics out to the islands or field trips into town.

When Mr. Walker hit that tree and died at the end of our sophomore year, the whole gang went into mourning, maybe all of Markum Point. He was the last person you would think could die. And every event, every day that summer and at some point everyday after, was haunted by his long shadow.

“That’s weird that we had Jell-O for dinner,” I said, falling back into the couch in the basement.

Junior and I’d escaped after dessert. It wasn’t much of a playroom, just Granny’s old couch, two stuffed chairs from a tag sale, a cheap record player and a black and white TV. The wood paneling glued to the cement walls was buckling and the fish netting covering the pipes was in tatters.

“Yeah!” Junior smiled and looked up from his air guitar. “It’s a sign.” He gave a short laugh and raised his eyebrows.

I found some old Gary Cooper cowboy movie on TV and Junior put on a Hendrix album and began to play air guitar in an undulating Hendrix imitation. Only Junior would think a Gary Cooper movie needed a Hendrix soundtrack.

A sign of what? I wondered but said, “Where’s Lisa, tonight?”

Junior shrugged and looked down at his fingers on the air frets. “Some big paper.” He dropped to his knees and pretended to play the air guitar with his teeth. “Big project. Big paper. Always something.”

“The Knicks are on a roll lately,” I said, trying to make a little sports talk to get back to the way things used to be.

“Yeah.” Junior lowered his air ax and gave his head a brief shake. He lip synced the words to the song, squinting his eyes and puckering his face in response to each guitar note coming from the stereo. It was hard to believe that he was the same kid who spent hours in his driveway making perfect Clyde-like behind-the-back passes while I worked on my Dick Barnett knee-kick jumper.

On the TV, Gary Cooper clenched his jaw in a close up and nodded his head. I couldn’t hear the dialogue but I knew he was going to have to shoot somebody and he didn’t want to do it.

“How’s your mom doing?” I asked.

“No problem,” he said pretending to hold out the final note of the song. “She’s fine, I guess,” he said before hitting the first note of the next song.

“Sorry about bringing up her engagement.”

He shrugged.

I sat back and watched the TV and tapped out the Buddy Miles drumbeats on my leg. Cooper drew his revolver from his holster with lightning quickness and fired, but it gave him no pleasure.

“Does Gary Cooper die in this one?” I asked.

Junior nodded his head while the fingers of his left hand took turns pressing against an invisible guitar neck and his right hand flicked an imaginary pick. I gave up. Maybe Lisa was right. Maybe there was something wrong with Junior. It seemed like years from the times we used to stay up all night and argue about whether Walt Frazier was better than Jerry West (I said Frazier, Junior said West) or whether Herman Hesse took LSD (Junior said it wasn’t invented yet, I said he must have taken something) or whether we could win the war in Vietnam (I said no and Junior said we shouldn’t but we could). I wasn't sure what to do with this sudden silence, but I figured maybe Junior just needed me to leave him alone.

At about eleven o’clock Junior yawned, called it a night and, after a round of hearty goodbyes to my parents, headed out the door for the short, cold walk to his empty house.

**Chapter 3**

I caught a ride after school from Junior that Friday afternoon. My mom needed to borrow my old red Bug. We pulled up the slight hill of Junior’s driveway in his yellow almost-new Bug convertible and parked next to Suppository Sam’s powder-blue Caddy. As we climbed out of the car, the storm door of Junior’s house opened revealing Junior’s mother and behind her, Sam-the-man himself. He gave us a big wave and loud hello.

“Hey big guy!” he shouted to Junior. “Daveeee!” he yelled and pointed both index fingers in the air. Mrs. Walker smiled at him like he was a mildly embarrassing older brother and greeted us with a little wave.

“We’re going shopping,” she said. Her brown hair was cut short and her blue eyes seemed to be almost twinkling again. “There’s chips and soda in the kitchen. We’ll be back with supper.” She gave Junior a quick peck on the cheek as she went by and then slipped into the Caddy as Sam held the big door for her. He closed it with a flourish and walked around the front of the car with a swagger. You could tell he was proud of the car. Its fins always shined with wax and the body was in perfect condition. The car was at least fifteen years old, but I knew asking him about it would get a long story. Junior seemed intent on not admiring any of Sam’s toys.

“Take your time,” Junior said and smiled thinly. “We’ll be fine.” I don’t know if he meant stay out and enjoy yourself or don’t bring Sam back any sooner than you have to.

Sam started the car with a roar, put it in gear and backed out of the driveway. The Caddy rocked to a stop in the street like a swaying cabin cruiser in rough surf. Junior’s mother gave us another little smile and wave. Sam grinned broadly and, pretending his hand was a pistol, took a parting shot at us. Junior aimed carefully and shot back. Sam shifted into drive, thundered down the street blowing leaves aside as he passed, braked and, with a lurch, turned at the corner onto Sound Beach and disappeared from view.

“He makes a quiet exit, doesn’t he?” Junior asked.

“Your mother seems better.”

“I guess,” Junior said, continuing to stare at the ghost of the car at the corner as if the image still burned in his retina. I stared too, hoping to see whatever it was he studied so intently. I looked at the yellow leaves on the road turning brown at the edges and the weathered old stones of the wall across Sound Beach Avenue that bordered the Markum Point Beach and the white caps in the gray water across the Sound. The on-and-off roar of Sam’s Caddy continued for what seemed like minutes before fading into the sound of the wind and the sea. Junior stared off wordlessly. I used to think I always knew what he was thinking, but now I didn’t have a clue.

“How many gallons do you think he gets to the mile?” I asked in an attempt at a wise guy tension release.

More silence. The stench of the tide told me it was just about all the way out. The seagulls were squawking and working hard for their lunch.

“Can you think of one adult,” Junior said at last, still looking at the last spot Sam and his mother had occupied, “that doesn’t have some kind of fatal flaw?”

I turned the question over in my head searching for the meaning of it. “Junior,” I said turning my palms up in surrender. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Seriously.” He turned and cocked his head. “Every adult we know has some serious defect. It makes you wonder if it’s some side effect of adulthood, some operation they perform in college when everyone’s passed out at the keg.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Okay, Sam’s too easy,” Junior said deciding to explain with examples. “He’s just an idiot. My mother seemed fine until she met Sam but now the mere fact that she’s willing to be seen with him in public exposes her flaw. Coach has heard his own pep talks for so long that he now believes that it’s all about ‘Pride, Desire and Sacrifice!’ Lisa’s Dad is a drunk. Her mom is, pardon the expression, a dingbat. Maybe that’s the only way to live with a drunk. Frizz’s parents are stuck in some situation comedy from 1955. Jerry’s parents with their opera and antiques are out of the 1800’s. Your parents aren’t as bad as you think but...” he paused. “Okay, maybe they’re not all fatally flawed but I still don’t want to grow up to be any of them. ”

“Whoa. Easy.” I put my hands up to stop the ranting. “Nobody’s perfect. Is that a news flash?”

“You are,” he said and, when he saw me blush, quickly added, “well, not perfect but you have no fatal flaws. And Lisa is. And me and Jerry. Well maybe not Jerry. And my parents were...” His voice faded and he looked back down the street.

“But now your mother’s flawed because she goes out with Sam?”

“Well, think about it.” He furrowed his eyebrows in scorn. “I know she’s lonely but does she have to settle for the first bozo to beep his horn at her?” He smiled but there was no mirth in it and the smile faded to a frown. He turned again to study the road and wall and water beyond.

I looked at the back of his head. A gust of wind swayed the brown hair on the nape of his neck. His tan had yellowed and his hair had darkened with the coming of fall.

“Low tide,” he said without turning.

“And your father?” It slipped out before I could close my mouth.

“He’s dead,” Junior whispered and was silent for a moment.

As I thought about shooting myself for bringing it up, Junior turned his head and a smile started in his eyes and spread down his cheeks into his lips. “If that’s not a fatal flaw, I don’t know what is.”

A laugh burst out of my nose and mouth. A spitting, nose-blowing explosion from the pit of my stomach. Junior followed with his own snorting laughter. We leaned into each other, holding each other’s shoulders for support until we gave up and slid slowly to the ground.

“That is sick!” I tried to say, but the words choked in my amazed laughter. Instead we both just continued snorting and gasping for breath. The sounds mingled and rose to the cold blue sky.

“That is the sickest, most tasteless joke I have ever heard,” I said when I finally caught my breath. We sat up breathing hard in unison and letting out the last few giggles. “I can’t believe you said that.”

Junior rubbed his neck and smiled a broad, happy, smile, making me realize how rare a lack of irony had become with him. “Neither can I.” That smile too soon faded as our breath returned to normal. “It just makes you wonder if growing up is all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Well, we don’t have to be like that.”

Junior shook his head. “That’s what I used to think.”

I wish now that I’d followed up with a few questions but what Junior’d said made a weird kind of sense to me at the time. Down deep I must have known something was wrong. Junior’d always had a suspicion of any adults besides his parents, but I’d never seen Junior so mad at his mother or seen him hate anyone like he hated Sam. I could understand it, in a way. All the fatal flaw stuff seemed a little dramatic, but I had more than a few doubts of my own about becoming an adult. Junior’s words hung in the air for a short moment before rising up and disappearing with a gust of swirling wind.

Jerry knocked on Junior’s kitchen door right at 8:00. We collected the joints we‘d rolled, put on our winter coats, crossed the yard and hopped up onto the seawall for the walk to the docks. Jerry was already giggling and, from the glassy look in his eye, he’d already smoked a joint on the way over. I was starting to worry about him. Junior and I were still sticking to the Friday-parties-only rule; we got high only on Fridays and only together. We’d made a pact years ago that we’d prove that everyone who smoked a joint didn’t have to end up like Lisa’s brother or Jerry’s.

The weather had warmed up in the last week to just cold rather than freezing, although, with Lisa there, I wouldn’t have minded a little close huddling. We walked behind the Bartons’ house next door to Junior’s and then followed the seawall as it curled through a marshy inlet full of snakes and rats that we used to catch when we were little. We heard one rat scurry along ahead of us and slip down the side to the marsh.

A dog howled somewhere down at the end of the Point. It sounded like the Christie’s old Bassett Hound.

“Do you think dogs talk to each other?” Jerry asked.

“Sure,” Junior agreed immediately while I considered the question.

“They say stuff like, ‘Get out of my yard,’” I said, “or ‘Your butt stinks.’”

“Or nice tail, baby. You want to come over to my dog house?” Junior said and laughed.

We always found ourselves in these kinds of conversations with Jerry, long after we should have grown out of it. He was always pointing to clouds that looked like toothbrushes, and dogs that looked like Edward G. Robinson, and boots that looked like they had eyes and nose and mouth. Even before drugs, perhaps from an accident during childbirth, Jerry had his own way of seeing things. And we were happy to go along with him until it was time for one of us to pull him back to reality again.

“No, I mean like really talk,” Jerry insisted. “And think and… and wonder about things?” I looked at him in the moonlight. With his shaggy hair, mouth hanging open and his big brown eyes, he looked like a big thinking, talking Irish setter himself.

“Why not?” Junior said. “Why should we be the only animals who think?”

We quickly decided that if dogs could think, why not the rest of the animal kingdom? We asked the rats the time of day, the answers to simple math problems and if there was life on other planets. (Junior said if they were really smart they might know things that people didn’t.) In an effort to speak their native language, we began to bark hello to the dogs and caw greetings to the gulls.

Jerry, I think, believed. He wasn't just joking around like Junior and me. I think that’s why he became a vegetarian. Not me; I figured if chickens could think, why not tomatoes? So I ate everything.

As we settled in under the dinghy, we continued to chitchat about the swim team and SAT’s and college. We used to think we'd all end up going to the same college, but it was clear that our little family was going to break up. Junior would go to Harvard or Yale or someplace. Lisa would go to Stanford like her father, and Jerry some engineering school like his father, and Frizz would go to some school near an Ivy so he could pretend he went there. And I’d probably go to a state school, with a good art program – at least I hoped so.

We talked about everything but the Jell-O. Junior waited until everyone was there. Jerry pulled out some hash he got from his brother and we smoked a little while we waited. I figured a two-hit limit would keep my wits about me. I wanted to be sharp with Lisa there.

"I spent a couple hours in the library reading about gelatin," Junior said after Frizz and Lisa arrived and settled in. She gave my leg a squeeze after sitting down to my left between Junior and me. Junior took a joint out of his cigarette pack and lit it with exaggerated ceremony. Lisa passed the joint without comment, so I passed it, too, as a sign of solidarity.

“Sounds pretty serious to me,” Lisa said, jabbing Junior verbally and sticking a sharp nail into my thigh.

Junior’s research could be like a history lesson. He told us about farmers making gelatin by boiling calves bones after treating them with acid, how somebody figured out a way to package it and make money, and how we could drain some of the pool, add boiling hot water mixed with gelatin and red food coloring, and then mix.

“You found that in the library?” Frizz asked.

“Actually I found it right here,” Junior said and pulled a box of Jell-O out of his pocket and read the Speed Set recipe:

DIRECTIONS: COMPLETELY DISSOLVE GELATIN IN 3/4 CUP BOILING WATER. COMBINE 1/2 CUP COLD WATER AND ICE CUBES TO MAKE 1-1/4 CUPS ICE AND WATER. ADD TO GELATIN, STIRRING UNTIL SLIGHTLY THICKENED. IF NECESSARY, REMOVE UNMELTED ICE. CHILL. SOFT SET AND READY TO EAT IN ABOUT 30 MINUTES.

Jerry and Frizz smoked the joints and laughed the whole time Junior spoke, so it was more like a stoned history lesson – in the dark, under a row boat, in the freezing cold. But it was impressive none the less.

When Junior was done, Lisa stuck a fingernail again into my leg and broke her silence. "You’re making this sound easy,” she said to Junior. “It’s not.” She squeezed my leg and shifted to her knees ready to crawl out from beneath the boat. “I’ve got to go, but just for the record I want to say this is insane. First, it’s incredibly expensive.” She held up her hand and stuck out her thumb. "Second, you’ll need an army of people and equipment.” She stuck out her index finger. “Third, you’ll never get the water cold enough.” She straightened out her middle finger. “Fourth, it’ll probably ruin the pool.” She uncurled her ring finger. “And fifth, everyone’s going to get caught and thrown out of school.” She added her pinkie.

It sounded like an impressive argument to me as I admired the outline of her fingers against the blue tarp, but Junior just laughed. “But besides that?” he said. “Any other objections?”

“Junior, I’m serious.” Lisa shook her head slowly.

“Okay, good point, Lisa” he said. “I need you guys to be thinking like this,” he said turning to Jerry, Fizz and me, before turning back to Lisa. “But say I could I find a cheap, safe, doable way to pull it off without ruining the pool, will you help us?” Even in the darkness, I could see he’d put on his most charming smile.

“That I’d have to see,” Lisa said. “Gotta go.” She gave Junior a quick kiss, lifted the tarp and slipped out. “Good night, guys!” she called from outside.

“Good night, Lisa!” we called in unison like a first grade class.

Junior laughed. “We’ve still got some research to do,” he yelled. I watched the shadow of Lisa’s legs on the blue tarp as she walked along the side of the boat, then grabbed the joint from Frizz and took a big hit. “If we do it in February, it should be cold enough,” Junior said loud enough for Lisa to hear. “We’ll need a little luck with the weather!"

**Chapter 4**

Now it may seem like all I did that fall was smoke pot under the dinghy, stare at Lisa, and think about Jell-O, but actually my life was filled with boring school, more boring homework, incredibly boring dinners with Granny and my parents, and the relentless drudgery of college plans. College became the favorite topic in all conversations. What’s your reach school? Your safety? Your scores? I hated it.

My mother would ask me if I’d been thinking about it, but my father wouldn’t ask directly. Instead he’d write “College?” or “Future Plans?” on the message board by the phone in the kitchen or tell stories at dinner about a bright guy at work who’ll never be promoted because he didn’t go to college. I pretended to have no idea what he was getting at and he soon tired of the indirect approach.

That Saturday morning at breakfast I could feel him staring at me as I ate my cereal. He had something to say, but I wasn’t going to help. When he thought this long about how to bring something up, it was usually bad. It could be just irritating bad like, “When are you going to stop eating Trix and start eating grown up cereal?” or it could be seriously bad like, “You have a week to find a new job or you can’t use the car anymore.”

I ate quietly and waited. He glanced down at his paper and then back at me. When he looked up, I kept my eyes on my Trix. When he looked down I glanced at him and his paper. “Peace at Hand!” read the headline over a picture of a smiling Henry Kissinger. “Bombing Halted Above 20th Parallel,” read the next headline. I turned my head down just in time to avoid Dad’s lifted eyes. I was down to the five yellow balls of Trix I’d saved for last. I had a decision to make: I could try to keep my head down, put the bowl in the sink and run up the stairs or I could pour another bowl. I was still hungry, but the box was right in front of Dad.

I took the risk. With my head down, I reached for the box.

“David?” my father asked.

“’Peace at Hand?’ That’s good news.”

“David?” my father asked again.

“Yeah.” I filled my bowl like it was a complicated maneuver and reached for the milk carton.

“It’s almost the end of October. Your sister had a list of ten colleges by now.”

I stopped in mid-pour and set down the milk. The bowl of cereal was ruined. There were almost no yellow ones anyway, and they were sure to be soggy by the time I could eat them. I fingered the spoon and finally looked up at my father.

“Katie does everything way ahead of time.”

“And you always wait until the last minute.” He leaned back in his chair. “If you don’t make plans they have a way of getting made for you.” It sounded like a bumper sticker or the moral of some TV show. He pointed to the paper. “Maybe the military? It looks like you wouldn’t have to go to Vietnam.”

I ate a spoonful and said nothing. It was an empty threat. I knew he was lying. He hated being in the Army at the end of World War II so much that he wouldn’t even talk about it. And he wanted me in college.

“Have you thought about it at all?” he finally asked.

“Well...” I snuck a quick spoonful for courage. I guessed I couldn’t avoid this confrontation any longer. “I’m thinking about going to art school.”

“No,” was all he said. Now it was his turn to lower his eyes and feign interest in his breakfast.

“Yes,“ I said, stronger than I had intended.

“Davy, college is an investment. Art is a great hobby and you’re very good, but you’re going to need a job someday.”

“Artists have jobs.”

“I mean a good job.”

“Illustrator? Graphic designer?” I tried to think of another artist occupation that sounded like a real job. “Art director?” I scooped a few spoonfuls of Trix into my mouth, stood up and walked to the sink.

“It’s a hard way to make a living.” He tilted his head and stared at me.

“It’s a hard world out there!” I said in my almost-good JD impression.

My dad cracked a smile. “Maybe you could minor in art,” he suggested, “and major in business.”

“Maybe I could major in art and minor in business,” I said and smiled broadly.

“Let’s make a list of schools that have both.” He nodded his head in his best Mr. Brady impression as if we’d actually agreed to something. “Let’s do it before Thanksgiving.” He folded up his paper, put his plate in the sink and walked upstairs.

I went over to the message board by the phone and wrote “Art School.” But then I thought better of it and erased it. The best way to win a battle with my dad was to avoid confrontation and not let him pull rank.

After dinner that night I called Lisa to complain about my father and figure out what to do about the Jell-O. “Maybe we should just refuse to help,” I suggested. To get a little privacy, I’d untangled the kitchen phone’s cord, wrapped it around the corner and slid down the dining room wall to the floor.

“Can we?” she asked. “He’s already obsessed about it.” It was hard to talk to Lisa without seeing her; I paid too much attention to the words. “Not that we talk much anymore, anyway.” While she paused I tried to figure out what she meant. “We can’t stop him.”

“So we help?” Did she want me to insist we stop him or should I be arguing that we help him? I wanted to be on her side, but I wasn’t sure where that was.

The phone clicked from someone picking up the upstairs extension. “Davy,” my father asked in a gruff voice, “Are you on the phone?”

“Uh, Yes?” I said, trying not to be sarcastic.

“I need to make a call.”

“Hi, Mr. O’Malley,” Lisa said.

“Is that you, Lisa?” My father’s voice lightened. “How’s the college applications going?”

“Good, so far, Mr. O’Malley.”

“I’ll be off in a few minutes, Dad,” I said in a monotone, before he could ask her about school and swimming, or worse find out that Lisa had her applications all done.

 “Okay, Davy,” he said slipping back into his Joe Friday voice. “Bye, Lisa,” he said sounding like he’d broken into a smile. “Say hello to the folks.”

“Show him your drawings,” Lisa said after we heard the click of the upstairs’ phone. “Show him how hard you’re working, how good you are.”

“I’m not that good.”

“Oh, you are too.”

“What about the Jell-O,” I said to change the subject. I could picture her sitting up tall and earnest in her building-Davy’s-confidence pose.

“There’s so many things to go wrong,” she said and I felt bad imagining her shoulders slumping on the other end of the phone. “Finding a source for all that Jell-O, getting it to the pool, the weather....”

“Let’s wait. Maybe Junior doesn’t get lucky.”

“Junior’s always lucky.” She paused as if realizing as I did how that used to be true until his dad died. “Maybe you could talk to him. Get him to talk about his dad, too.”

“Yeah,” I said, “Like I could succeed where you couldn’t.” Her only response was the sound of her soft breathing into the phone. “I wonder what Mr. Walker would do if he was here?” Junior had told his dad about some of our adventures. His dad seemed to get a kick out of them.

“He’d make a joke of it,” Lisa said. “Make it seem so ridiculous that Junior laughs and gives it up.”

“Whenever he brings it up,” I smiled, imagining Mr. Walker saying it, “we insist on filling the whole school with Jell-O.

“Davy?” Granny called in her startled-from-sleep voice from her chair by the picture window. “Are you there?”

“Yes, Granny.” I took my mouth away from the receiver. “I’m here.”

Lisa laughed. “The whole family’s getting in on the act.”

“I’m glad somebody thinks they’re funny,” I said. She laughed again.

“How come you never ask me to dinner anymore?” Lisa asked.

“I didn’t know you wanted to-”

“Davy?” my mother called from the basement. “Are you in the kitchen?”

“I give up,” I said to Lisa, wedging the phone between my ear and shoulder and sliding up the wall to a standing position.

“Davy?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m on the phone.” I leaned back against the wall. “Lisa, I’ll see you Monday.”

“And you’ll talk to Junior?” Lisa used a little girl voice I hadn’t heard from her in a long time. It was not a voice I could say no to.

“Tomorrow. I’ll try.”

“Thanks.” Her voice now seemed so full of hope I wondered what I’d promised.

“I love you, Davy,” she said. The phone popped out from between my shoulder and ear and clattered across the floor.

“You do?” I said stupidly before I realized my thoughts were coming right out my mouth. I could only hope the dropped phone was too noisy and had bounced too far away.

“Lisa?” I said when I picked up the phone and put it back to my ear.

“Yes, I do,” she said.

“Well, uh... I love you, too,” I said.

“Good,” Lisa said and hung up.

I must have stared at the phone for a full minute before getting up and putting it back on the cradle. I pictured her lips as she said those words into the phone and imagined her placing the receiver back on her red princess phone with her long thin fingers, her pink nails with the perfect half moons, her tan knuckles, the little bone that popped out of her wrist. Before I got to her forearm, my mother called again.

“Davy! Can you turn off the back burner!”

“Yes, Mom!” I yelled, moving toward the stove. “Dad! I’m off the phone!”

I threw my coat on and went out the back door to hide on the back step and get some peace and quiet. I didn’t know what “Good” meant or “I love you,” Love has a lot of different meanings, but the phrase “I love you,” seemed to narrow it down. And the little girl voice was so far out of the past that I almost didn’t recognize it.

I thought Junior and Lisa, Jerry and Frizz and the whole Markum Point neighborhood were set, solid, dependable. The footing I had based my life on seemed to be giving way. Mr. Walker was dead. Lisa seemed to be shifting away from Junior and toward me; that was pulling me away from him too. And college loomed ahead ready to break everything apart.

Lisa’s voice lingered in my head as I looked up at the cold November moon. I closed my eyes and could see her the day she moved in, a knobby-kneed eight-year-old with red socks and black and white check slip-on sneakers. Her skinny ponytail tied by a red scrunchy fell like a limp paint brush. She stood behind the moving van in front of the house across the street wearing white T-shirt and black shorts as the movers brought out her red Sting Ray with black banana seat and red tassels coming out of the monkey bars.

“Why don’t you ask her if she wants to go for a bike ride?” my mother asked as she walked through our living room and caught me peeking through the blinds of our picture window.

I stepped back and pretended I was looking for something under the couch. “I don’t even know her.”

“No one does. She just moved here,” my mother said, cutting back through the room with a basket of clean laundry, “Mrs. Walker gave me the lowdown. Her name’s Lisa Conners. She came from Massachusetts and she’s your age.” She put down the basket and took a deep breath before carrying it upstairs. “There. Now you know her. Go say hello.”

I stalled. She was a stranger, and a girl. But it was the middle of August with nothing to do. Junior was off in California on vacation with his parents. Jerry was with his family in upstate New York. I was sitting around waiting for everybody to come home.

“If you’re bored, you could always help me with the laundry.” Mom knew how to drive me out of the house.

I wheeled my blue Barracuda out of the garage. It looked just like a Sting Ray, my parents insisted, but at a better price. That was my parents’ mantra; all during my childhood, everything we owned, every place we went, they insisted was just like the real thing but at a better price.

We rode back and forth a few times, passing each other somewhere in the middle of the block, saying nothing and pretending we weren’t even noticing each other. But when I rode up the little hill in the Ramsey’s yard and jumped off the curb, Lisa did the same thing the next lap. And when I laid a patch as I turned at the end of the street, Lisa did, too. And when I rode the length of the block doing a wheely, she rode the full block, turning at the end still in her wheely and rode the length again. “This is no ordinary girl,” I remember thinking to myself.

I immediately cranked up some speed, hopped up to a standing position on my banana seat and with my hands on the monkey bars as I passed her.

“What’s your name?” I said as I passed.

“Lisa,” she said, “What’s yours?”

“Davy,” I said on my next pass. I was sitting on the seat with my feet between my hands on the handlebars. Lisa was standing with one foot on the seat, the other high in the air behind her and her hands on the handlebars.

“You live over there?” I asked on the next lap. I was back standing on the seat, but this time I was straight up with no hands on the bars perfectly balanced as my bike rolled smoothly down the street. I’d seen Junior do this trick before but I’d never tried it myself. It seemed so easy. The hard part, he always said, was knowing when to stop.

“I live in the gray house,” I said when she nodded, “over there.” I attempted to point to my house, a three-bedroom Cape identical to hers in everything but color.

That’s when I crashed.

I guess I jerked my hand too much when I pointed or maybe I hit a pebble or something, but the front wheel turned sideways and the bike dropped and I followed. As crashes go, it wasn’t terrible, just embarrassing. My feet actually hit first, then my butt and then my right elbow. I left a lot of elbow skin on the road.

Lisa raced right over and jumped off her bike. “Are you okay?” she asked. She kneeled next to me on the pavement. “Lie back and let me to take a look at it,” she said, gently turning my arm. “I’m going to be a doctor.”

“I’m okay.” I clenched my teeth so I wouldn’t cry. I lay back and let her look at my elbow.

“Surface wound,” she said, “with a lot of sand in it. Let’s go to my house and clean it out.” She stood up, grabbed my other hand and helped me to my feet. “You’re going to have an ugly scab.” She pointed to an outline of pinker skin on her right knee. “This took a month to heal and it killed every time I bent it.”

By the time we had searched through all the moving boxes for first aid stuff, cleaned out the cut, compared scars and bruises, complimented each other on our bike riding technique and eaten popsicles, we were friends.

And when Junior and Jerry got back from their vacations at the end of that August, Lisa became one of the gang, determined to make it as one of the boys. If there were any doubts, they were erased when she thought of setting up a ramp down at the boatyard. For the last week of the summer, we rode our bikes up the ramp, over the seawall and into the water. Then we would haul them out of the water, hose off the seaweed and do it all over again. It was a great way to combine our two summer passions, the Sound and bicycles, and bring the summer to a fantastic end.

I never really thought of her as my girlfriend until she clearly wasn't. It was more like she was almost mine and then she was sort of ours and then she was definitely Junior's. They were a perfect couple. And at eight years old, I still thought I might be a priest when I grew up. My grandmother’s old Irish desire to have the village priest in the family combined with my own need for self-protection. Besides I always thought those black shirts and white collars looked cool.

**Chapter 5**

Sunday after dinner I went over to Junior's. I'd promised Lisa I would talk to him and I'd promised myself I would, too. It was more than just his obsession with the Jell-O – it was Lisa, too. I didn’t know what the leg and finger squeezings and “I love you’s meant, but I felt like I was doing something behind Junior's back and I didn’t like it. A second banana’s got to be straight with the boss of the bunch. I was hoping that would set a good precedent for the boss to be straight, too. But who’s ever seen a straight banana?

Over a year had passed and Junior’s kitchen still seemed empty without Mr. Walker, no one to fill the awkward silences and, despite Junior and my best efforts, no one to get a laugh out of Mrs. Walker. Her blue eyes had always seemed to be smiling at some inside joke, but now they seemed grayer, flatter, sadder. She finally excused herself and went upstairs, and Junior and I headed to the basement playroom. Molly followed us down, curled up in her chair by the middle of the Ping Pong table and began purring, and carefully cleaning her long gray hair with her tongue.

Molly had to be fourteen or fifteen years old, but she still looked like a queen with her thick gray Angora fur and her royal green eyes. And she still acted like Junior’s bodyguard and valet. She leaped onto Junior’s shoulders when he came home each day, and licked his hands as if she was cleaning her baby, and slept on his bed each night keeping an eye on things. Molly thought she was a dog in some ways, chasing away the dogs of the neighborhood and following us around the house and yard. But she had a cat’s suspicion of outsiders.

Lisa and Jerry and I had long ago been accepted into the family by her, but she kept her distance from Frizz for over a year before deciding he was trustworthy. And some people she never liked. She wouldn’t even sit on the same couch with Robby Carter. And she actually hissed at Lisa’s father. I guess she was a lot like Junior or Junior was a lot like her. Careful. Confident. Secretive.

Junior had just moved his bedroom to the room next to the playroom and he was transforming the playroom itself into some kind of hippy crash pad. He’d painted the wood paneling black, hung up day-glow posters of Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Janis Joplin.

“Check this out.” He flicked off the wall switch and turned on a black light mounted on the wall next to the stairs. It was dark enough outside for the full effect. Storm winds pushed the surf high on the seawall out the window and low dark clouds covered the sky.

“Can we see well enough to play?” I asked. The oranges and greens and purples from the posters glowed and anything white seemed to come alive in a purple-blue hue. The white stripes in my shirt almost made me jump back into the wall.

“The balls glow,” Junior said emptying three Ping Pong balls out of a box and juggling them in a circle like little moons. Above the blur of the balls, I could see his teeth in a crooked smile.

“Pretty weird.” I grabbed a paddle and noticed that Junior’d painted them a day-glow green.

Junior laughed, put the Allman Brothers’ “Tied to the Whipping Post” on and cranked the volume up loud. “Are you ready?” he shouted and slammed a serve right by me. I was feeling stoned without taking a hit.

"Remember when we used to have those Ping Pongathons?" I asked once I got my bearings and we had settled into a game. "Jerry and I vs. you and Lisa? We would play for hours."

"We were going to call The Guinness Book of World Records," Junior smiled as he served. "You know the world record is something like two weeks.” He shook his head. "We were exhausted after one afternoon."

"We were working up to it. Remember how your father would fill in when one of us had to go the bathroom?” This was my angle. Not too subtle, I knew, but it was the best I could think of.

"Yeah," Junior mumbled, putting my weak return into the orange day glow tape he’d put along the edge of the net. His poor play worried me. I used to have to battle to make it close, but lately the few times we played, I beat Junior almost as often as he beat me. His legendary concentration was gone. Gone, that is, except when he was talking about the Jell-O.

"Your father was a great guy." I waded in awkwardly. I had to shout to be heard above the music. "You must really miss him."

"Yeah," he said and scratched the side of his head with his paddle. "Did Lisa send you?"

"No!” That pissed me off. "I sent me! You don't think I can see how uptight you are? How quiet and tired? When was the last time we talked about anything besides Jell-O? I’m your best friend, Junior!"

"All right. Okay. I'm sorry.” He served again.

"It's only Jell-O, Jell-O, Jell-O!” I was still shouting. The lead guitars ringing out of the speakers seemed to speed up as I spoke faster. “You don't joke around. You won't talk about your father. You don't even make fun of Suppository Sam anymore.” It was hard to play well and talk at the same time. Junior's game seemed to improve. This was a challenge that appealed to him.

"He's dead," he said finally, slamming the ball sharply into the corner. "What do you want me to do about him?"

"Talk," I said. "I don't know. Try to figure it out. Do something besides ignore it!” The pace of our volley picked up as I slapped the ball harder with each sentence.

"He drove that road a thousand times.” His slam caught the white line along the corner of the table, but I returned it with a quick flick of my wrist.

"You said yourself he was driving faster," I said between serves. "Remember when he slid off the road coming back from skiing?”

Junior reached over the table to slap the ball to the other corner. "There were no skid marks, no other cars, no witnesses."

I rapped it hard right at his wrists. "Maybe there was an animal.” I rapped his return hard again. “Or he fell asleep.”

He got his paddle around to loft it high over the net. "He’d sold the business. I don’t think he knew what to do next," Junior said as the ball rose to a lazy peak.

Time slowed as I waited for the ball to fall. It seemed to freeze high up above the table in mid-rotation or maybe that was another pot remnant breaking loose. In the black light of the room I could see a small dark circle against the glowing white of the ball and the company name “Ace” written in the middle. The music froze, too, in a single wailing guitar note. This was it. Point and game, if I could stay patient and slam it to the corner of the table. I took a deep breath and blinked my eyes. The ball slowly began to move again in a smooth arc landing just inside the white line. "It was an accident, Junior,” I said and smashed the ball hard, too hard and too high, into the sliding doors behind him. "Accidents happen."

"It was no accident!" he yelled and slammed his paddle on the table. "It's like he did it on purpose." He turned and bent over to get the ball, then stood looking out the sliding glass doors of the basement.

The Walkers had the best view in the neighborhood. The back yard ended at the seawall. In the summer the sun would set behind the trees of Grass Island about a hundred yards out. But that night a storm raged in the harbor. The white foamy waves broke in high curls slapping over the seawall. You couldn't see the lights from the other houses along the cove at all, and Grass Island was a hazy silhouette in the reflected storm-cloud light. Junior stood still for a minute, then he started to toss the Ping Pong ball lightly in the air.

"Everything had to be different with him," Junior said. "He had to add his own twist to everything -- the highest swan dive, the weirdest outfit."

"You think he killed himself to add a little twist?"

"Maybe. No. I don't know.” Junior grabbed the ball out of the air and wrapped his fist around it. "He just always wanted me to do things different."

"Junior, come on!" I said. "You did everything he asked. You were the best."

"I just did what I was told."

"That's ridiculous! Look,” I said, searching for some way to understand this tangled logic, "if it makes you feel any better, you are the weirdest guy I know. Your whole life is one big twist. You are weirder than weird."

He smiled. "Thanks, Davy.” He turned and walked toward me. "I'm sorry," he said. "You're right. I've been really uptight lately. I need to relax and stop trying to control everything."

"I'm just worried, Junior," I said. "We've been friends a long time."

"I appreciate it." He put his hands on my shoulders. "I really love you, Davy.” He squeezed both hands into my shoulder and then pushed me away.

Shit, I thought. It was too weird. Everybody I talked to seem to be telling me they loved me. It made me nervous. Didn't Davy Crocket say that to Jim Bowie right before the last assault in *The Alamo*?

“Listen,” Junior said, “Sam asked me to come work with him at one of his factories. Why not come with me? It’ll be fun. And we could make some money.”

“You’re going to work with Suppository Sam?” I stepped back into the edge of the table looking for a crooked smile to tell me he was kidding.

“He keeps asking me,” Junior shook his head and grinned. “If he’s going to be my stepfather, I might as well learn what he does. Think about it, all right?” He put his palms up and made a just-think-about-it shrug. “And hey! Sam and my mom are going away next weekend. We can get the airband together and party under the blacklights. And no Jell-O!”

“Sure,” I said, still stunned by the Sam news.

“Maybe Lisa will make a return engagement to the band.”

“Lisa?” I said. It was all coming at me much too fast. This was my chance to talk about her. “You know Lisa and I have...” I said.

“I’ll fold up the Ping Pong table and set up another black light.” Junior said in a burst of energy, caught up in his plan-making. “We could set up the band over here and play out towards the water.”

“I’ve been seeing Lisa a lot lately,” I said again feebly, but he didn’t seem to hear me. I felt drugged, suddenly weak against Junior’s onslaught of energy.

“You think she’ll come?” he asked. “Do you want to ask her? It’ll be like an airband reunion.”

“Sure,” I mumbled and he continued to talk about the songs we could play and how Lisa and Frizz could both play bass or how Lisa could sing vocals and how we can put up another black light. I couldn’t seem to interrupt him.

“And no Jell-O,” he’d say every so often, “Just partying and the band, Okay?”

I left without bringing Lisa up again. I didn’t know how to say what I was thinking. I wasn’t even sure what I was thinking.

Halloween was that Tuesday and we didn’t go out together for the first time ever. Maybe it was time to admit that we were all too old. The costumes had always been another chance for a mini-adventure. Since we were nine or ten Junior’d get us all dressed up as characters from some book or movie or TV show. One year we were Davy Crockett and his friends. Another year we were all James Bond villains. As we got older the ideas got funnier and a little more twisted. When we were fourteen, Junior had us all dress up as clergy. Junior was a minister, I was a priest, Frizz was a Rabbi, Jerry was a shaman and Lisa was a priestess or something. That was around the time I realized I didn’t have enough faith or goodness to make it in the priesthood. And the young priest at our church was trying so hard to be relevant and cool that he made all priests look foolish. Granny seemed to take hope when she saw me, but my parents just shook their heads and said, “Aren’t you a little old for Halloween?” The next year when we dressed up as Jesus and the apostles (four apostles anyway) I’d forgotten all about the priesthood. When Granny looked at me and said, “It looks like there’s not going to be a priest in the family,” I laughed.

“You were holding out hope?”

“I was keeping my fingers crossed,” she said.

I laughed harder just thinking about telling the story to Junior and the others.

The next day and the rest of the week I spent my afternoons drawing Granny. The first quarter was ending and I had to fill the other half of my notebook for art class. Granny always sat very still in her chair by the picture window reading or when her eyes got tired, staring out the window at the neighborhood. She liked tent-like dresses with big colorful flowered prints. I always thought of them as frocks, although I’m not sure what frocks are. The fabric made for good drawing the way the flowers disappeared and reappeared in the folds. Her gray hair had a white swath down the middle and it at least started the day in a big bun. By afternoon, many of the hairs had worked their way loose and sparkled in the sunlight through the window. Frequently her blue-veined eyelids would grow heavy and drop down over her grey-blue eyes and her head would follow, slumping down onto her chest. So I always kept two drawings of Granny going at all times - one of her awake and watching, and one of sleeping peacefully.

It occurred to me as I sketched her over and over that in some ways it was unfair that I had a mother and a father and a grandmother and a sister at college even if I didn’t get along with them all the time and Junior just had his mother. I’d never felt sorry for Junior before, I mean except right when his father died and even then he made me forget about it quickly. I’d always thought of the benefits of being an only child: he didn’t have to share anything. and he’d always seemed like an little adult hanging out with his parents, while my parents always made me feel like a little kid.

I guess we were Junior’s siblings. Even his parents treated us like we were, having us over to dinner and taking us all out in Mrs. Walker’s Ford wagon. And when Mr. Walker died, we all mourned like he was a father. But the rest of us had our own fathers, too. And we had sisters or brothers or grandmothers.

Granny’d raise her head every so often as I drew those afternoons, slowly raise her heavy lids and say, “Davy? Are you still drawing?” But I didn’t get as irritated with her as I usually did.

“I’m still drawing, Granny,” I’d say and switch to my Granny awake drawing until she dozed off again.

**Chapter 6**

Junior promised we wouldn’t talk about the Jell-O during the airband reunion that next Friday, but he didn’t say we wouldn’t sing about it. We’d set up in Junior’s basement with the sliding glass doors for our audience and the yard and cove beyond. I say, “set up,” meaning I had a chair where the Ping Pong table had been with enough space around me for my air drums. Junior and Jerry stood closest to the window with their air guitars centered around an air mike. Frizz was to my right and a step further away from the window strumming on his air bass with an air sax hanging next to him on an air stand. Lisa had set up impromptu air keyboard at an angle to my left. Her air mike ran over the keyboard on a long invisible stand.

Lisa would take the bass whenever there were horns for Frizz to play and otherwise she would play keyboards. She’d been the band’s bassist before she decided to hit the books rather than the bones on Friday nights. Frizz had just moved in down the street. That’s probably why he became a member of the group so quickly. We needed a bassist; he needed friends.

Junior’d made a tape of tune-up snippets from a bunch of live albums. We were all ready when the last tune-up from the tape came on: Ravi Shankar playing his sitar on the *Bangladesh* album. In an airband ritual, Junior, Jerry, Frizz and I shouted along with Ravi as he interrupted his standing ovation to say in a wonderful deep Indian accent, “Tank you. If you enjoy da tune up dat much, I hope you enjoy da playing.”

Junior put on *Sergeant Pepper* next to get us on familiar ground. It was an album from our days with Lisa that we still played to occasionally. I don’t think Junior planned it, but during the chorus of the second song, “Strawberry Fields,” Frizz started singing, “Rasp-berry Jell-O for-ev-er.” We quickly joined him. "Rasp-berry Jell-O for-ev-er.”

Frizz, of all people, broke the remaining tension. Jell-O-izing the songs was so silly, so impossible to resist that Lisa and I just went with it. And though we usually were all pretty serious about our air band despite (or maybe because) of the absurdity of it, we were all in synch as one of us adlibbed new lyrics, they others followed the lead adding back up. As usual, Junior followed each chorus line with an inspired lead guitar break. He drove it hard, dropping to or dancing on his knees if the occasion demanded or pulling each sweet wail out of his air ax, registering each note on his face. It was like old times.

Jerry played rhythm guitar, laying a base for Junior's riffs, and for “Raspberry Fields,” tossing his head back and forth in a happy Paul McCartney rhythm. He could echo Junior’s lead or weave his own melody in and out, depending on the album. Jerry and Junior played back to back, or guitar face to guitar face shouting the vocals into the same air mike. Like diving, music seemed to make Jerry momentarily graceful.

Regardless of the album, I always played the air drums in a Charlie Watts, no-nonsense, poker-face style; none of those head shaking, wild drum solos for me. I prided myself on always hitting the air snare, air cymbal or air bass at the right time.

Frizz sometimes tried to worm his bass into Jerry and Junior’s stage tricks. But more often he played the cool bassist in the background. Lisa faked an effective keyboard putting her childhood piano lessons to good use. We followed the Beatles with a little Allman Brothers before taking a break. That gave Jerry a moment to realize that he wasn’t stoned.

“Let’s sneak a quick joint out by the seawall,” he said. With Junior’s mother upstairs, we’d been playing it straight.

Junior answered by opening the sliding door and stepping out into the blast of frozen winds off the bay. Frizz followed and I took a step toward them out of habit before realizing that I would leave Lisa alone if I left. If I stayed I’d miss a good buzz and be outside the happy stoned haze of the three of them when they returned. I looked at Lisa and shivered before walking over to the door and closing it.

“Too cold for me,” I said.

“Go if you want,” she said. “I’ll be okay.”

I shook my head and changed the subject before she started trying to convince me that I would be doing her a favor by leaving. “You’re playing a mean keyboard. Maybe it’s your natural instrument.”

When she laughed, lines like parentheses ran from her nose to her mouth. “I’m just glad I didn’t have to play tambourine.”

“Ah!” I said remembering a conversation that we’d had when I asked her to re-join us. “Your greatest fear: to be the token girl, playing tambourine.”

I turned to the glass and pressed my face against the window. I could just make out their shadowy figures in the moonlight, jumping up and down and slapping their arms to stay warm, and passing the orange tipped joint in a jagged circle. Lisa came up next to me and cupped her hands around her eyes and pushed her face against the glass.

“When you look at it from here,” I said, “it’s a pretty weird ritual.” I felt older. Or they seemed younger. I turned to find Lisa staring at me, her face inches away. I felt like I was seeing things from her perspective. “I’m always with them. Then it seems like the most logical thing in the world.”

“I mean it,” Lisa said. “Don’t stay for me.”

“I don’t feel like it tonight,” I lied. Or half-lied. Half of me wanted to be out there but the other half was happy to be right where I was. I –“

“Junior?” We started back at the sound of Mrs. Walker’s voice calling from the top of the stairs. “Junior?”

“He, um,” I said walking to the bottom of the stairs. “He just stepped outside for a minute.” She never came downstairs but I had to be ready to stall her just in case.

“Oh, Davy,” she said, smiling. “Can you just tell him I’m going out with Sam for a little while.”

“No problem, Mrs. Walker.”

“Thanks,” she started to close the door and stopped. “Oh, and tell him to stop peeing on the yard. Sam says it kills the grass.” She raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll tell him, Mrs. Walker.”

Junior, Frizz and Jerry came back inside arguing about the Green Berets.

“It would be great,” Junior said and Frizz nodded his head in agreement.

“Talk to him, Davy,” Jerry said. “He’s crazy.” They carried the chilly wind around them like thick sweaters.

“How could you be against the war and want to join the Green Berets?” Lisa asked for the thousandth time and shook her head. Junior used to even try to take out the album, *Ballad of the Green Berets* and play it for the airband. He’d sing along until our booing and hissing, and his own laughing, forced him to stop.

“Right on!” Jerry said. He had always been a pacifist, covering his notebooks with peace signs.

Junior smiled and took a deep breath before explaining for the millionth time, “It’s a dumb war and we shouldn’t be there,” he said. “All I’m saying is if we’re there, we might as well win it.”

“Yeah!” Frizz said, happy to be alone in his alignment with Junior.

“Think about it. We go into the Green Berets together,” Junior became excited like a little kid when he talked about it, “and do special missions behind enemy lines. Drop in parachutes, blow up ammo sites and headquarters. We end the war sooner!”

“Hell no! We won’t go!” Jerry chanted.

“Shh!” Friz said.

“Well it doesn’t matter now.” I shook my head at Junior’s idea of Vietnam as a great place to continue our adventures. “The war is practically over.” It was all a game to him. I didn’t know if I would have the courage to fight in the war or against it. I was glad that I wouldn’t have to find out.

Junior shrugged. “We’ll just have to do something else together like start a business that sells stuff to the rich and gives the money to the poor. A Robin Hood kind of thing.” That was something vague enough and liberal enough that we could all agree on it. Junior liked to argue, but in the end, he wanted us all on the same side.

“Let’s play," he said and put on a Stones album. As we took our places I told them the peeing in the yard story, and Frizz claimed he’d try to make up a song about it. But Junior did the first rewrite, singing “It’s only Jell-O mold, but I like it,” and pretending to lick the microphone as the Stones came on. The music and our concentration on serious air musicianship soon wiped out any split between the stoned and the unstoned.

Everyone was too busy trying to Jell-Oize every song to think about anything else. Some were more successful than others. The best from the Doors album that followed was Junior singing a spooky version of "Jell-O, I love you. Won't you tell me your name?” And Jerry later came up with a psychedelic “"Jell-O Daze, got a spell on you," to Jimi Hendrix.

The night ended with a great group sense of accomplishment at our own ability to be weird. Jerry said he was going to try to find the words to "The Easter Parade" and Jell-Oize them into "The Jell-O Brigade.” Frizz insisted that that’s what we should call the band.

We said good night to Junior and walked home together singing the songs we’d made up. After dropping Jerry at his house and Frizz next door at his, Lisa and I walked up Markum Point Lane to ours.

Lisa put an arm around my shoulder and we tried to huddle against the wind and walk at the same time. “Now I know why they write all those war songs,” she said. “With the right song, you can get people to do anything.”

“You think it’s a plot?” I said only half joking.

“No,” she said, “I just wish I thought this Jell-O prank was the lark everyone else thinks it is. I feel like the wet blanket.”

“No, I agree with you,” I said, having forgotten our reservations in the fun of the night. “I’ll talk to Jerry and Frizz about it.” Trying to extend the moment, I took smaller steps as we drew closer to our houses. “Maybe at school or somewhere away from the excitement, they’ll see how crazy it is.”

Finally, despite our snail’s pace, we arrived at Lisa’s door. “Thanks, David,” she said unwrapping herself from my shoulder. “I’m glad we’re together on this.” She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

“So am I,” I said and watched her walk into the house.

I knew it was a waste of time to talk to Frizz, but I had to tell Lisa I tried. I caught up with him coming out of Mr. Corwin’s fifth period English class and got his attention by acting secretive and pulling him into the alcove in front of the emergency exit.

“Hey, check this out,” Frizz whispered and glanced over my shoulder. “Slap me five.” He held a quivering hand out palm up. “Shake your hand back and forth,” he instructed.

When I slapped his hand, he grabbed it in a shivering shake. “Jell-O Brigade handshakes,” he whispered. “Jerry and I came up with them.”

“Listen,” I said, deciding to plow ahead. “”This Jell-O thing’s getting crazy.”

“I know,” Frizz whispered and began to smile. “Junior’s a genius, isn’t he?”

“It was my idea,” I wanted to say in a sudden surge of competitiveness, but I pictured Lisa’s eyebrows and held myself back. “It’s pretty dangerous, don’t you think?”

 “It would be if I was planning it,” Frizz said. “Thank God, Junior’s in charge.”

“Is he?” I asked.

Frizz raised his nostrils in confusion. “Of course,” he said. He shook his head like maybe he’d misunderstood the question. “Listen, I’ve got to run.”

He held a trembling hand out and I slapped it.

“See you at lunch,” he said. I watched his curls bob as he ran down the hall and wondered what Frizz wouldn’t do if Junior asked him.

Jerry was harder to get alone. Every time I’d start to talk to him in the cafeteria, Junior or Frizz would show up and that was the end of anything I had to say. Talking to Jerry on the phone about anything important was too weird and frustrating. I needed to lock my eyes into his to ground him or I couldn’t be sure he was paying attention. I called Lisa to tell her Frizz’s reaction and she called me the next night. She called back the night after that and we soon fell into the habit of talking on the phone each night. I told her I felt guilty about it. She said Junior wasn’t talking to her anyway. He was working almost every night at Suppository Sam’s. And if I didn’t mind she needed somebody to talk to.

I finally caught up with Jerry on Friday after waiting for him to come out of Plummer’s Calculus class. We kept our voices down and looked both ways before we spoke.

"What do you think of this Jell-O thing?" I asked him after exchanging Jell-O Brigade handshakes and ducking into an empty classroom. "It's getting out of control."

"That's what I was thinking," Jerry said and I felt my heart rise in relief. “I think Junior’s getting stoned too much.”

“You think Junior’s getting stoned too much?”

“Yeah,” he said and nodded his head slowly. “Some people can’t handle it.” I didn’t know what to say, so he said, “Could you talk to him about it? He never listens to me.”

“Sure,” I said, like he listened to me.

"But I was playing around with the Jell-O figures,” he whispered, “and it's not so impossible. We won't need as much as we thought.” My heart dropped while my head was still spinning. "Wait! Did Junior tell you?” He looked around to make sure no one could hear. "He's got a source for the gelatin," he said and winked.

His wink was a more effective imitation of Junior’s in-the-know insider wink than my own pathetic attempts, but there was something oddly slow motion about it. His lid rose lazily, revealing a big, brown eye in kind of a yellowish, stoned glaze. He seemed suddenly older, suddenly a couple inches taller than me. It was as if my image of him had frozen in time, from years ago when we played in our yards. Random hairs sprouted on his chin and the hair on his head was a little long and wild, in kind of an absent-minded professor look. Or maybe an absent-minded professor on drugs. He slowly pulled his books to his chest and leaned toward me as if we were under water. "See you tonight," he drawled in a whisper, nodded secretively and waded off. I wish he’d tried to hug me and told me he loved me. Then I would have known to go right to the principal and turn us all in.

I drove home from school that day trying to figure it all out. Part of me agreed with Frizz. Junior had never failed at anything before: how could he not succeed at this? I wanted to believe in all the things I’d always believed in: Junior, the gang, our specialness. The doubts I was beginning to have would have been worth worrying about if it wasn’t Junior and it wasn’t us. But Lisa was always right about things, too. She had an uncommon sense of things I couldn’t ignore. So I decided to go along but watch for any sign that this time it was different. And I have to admit I was enjoying my new secret club meetings with Lisa.

**Chapter 7**

"Remember I said there were a bunch of things they use gelatin in?” Junior asked, after we’d settled in under the boat. Outside the sliver of white moon curled to a sharp point and icy winds whipped off the bay. It was getting too cold for this, but the location and the pot had become part of our tradition of secrecy. As we passed the joint around we seemed to seal our bond, pulling ourselves deeper and deeper into the conspiracy. I knew it was stupid, but I it still felt like we were doing something important. Even Lisa, in passing the joint, became part of the circle as it grew tighter and tighter.

"Photographic films and papers, dyes, ointments, cosmetics, even to make gum keep its flavor longer.” He recited the list in a sing song before pausing dramatically. "And suppositories."

"Suppository Sam." I shook my head.

"Suppository Sam," Junior repeated, smiling and nodding.

"What do you mean ‘Suppository Sam’?" Frizz asked.

"Junior's step-father-to-be.” I took a hit from the joint, let the smoke stream out my nose and pulled it in again through my mouth.

“Dipshit,” Frizz said and shoved me in the shoulder. “I know he’s Junior’s step-father-to-be.”

"So that's why you went to his factory.” As Lisa spoke, she seemed to realize the magnitude of Junior's obsession. "Is it part of your plan to get him, too?"

"No, I don't want to *get* him," Junior shrugged. "This isn't about him. And he's not such a bad guy. Really.” He paused. "We just need the gelatin."

"I still don't get it," Frizz said, coughing smoke into his hand. "What does Sam have to do with it?"

"His factory, or I should say his factories, make vitamin capsules and suppositories," Junior told him, “hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of suppositories every year. And every single one of them needs a little gelatin to make it set. And then unset when the time is right.” He paused to take a hit and then handed me the joint. "Sam is our source."

"We need an awful lot of gelatin," I protested. "What happened to the rule about stealing? ‘Adventurers, not thieves.’" I added air quotes no one could see in the dark.

"He's practically my father,” he said. “He probably will be by then. Didn't you ever take a little change off your father's dresser?”

"This is a lot of change, Junior."

"Not for this guy. This is chump change for Sam.” He shook his head. "I thought he was showing off his money. He's practically keeping it a secret. Sam needs two factories just for suppositories. He can't find a place big enough. He needs trucks to cart stuff back and forth. No one should become this rich off constipation." He acted like we were taking a moral stance.

"Timothy, this isn’t right.” Lisa went for the Junior’s formal name, but her protest was weak. She knew it was too late. He’d already done his homework, made the plans; the prank was rolling.

"It's a big time crime," I said. The joint in my hand had gone out.

"Grand larceny," Lisa added. Side by side, we nodded our heads in unison, but Junior took no notice.

"He probably won’t even know it’s gone and if he does, he won't turn me in," he said. Junior took the joint out of my hand and relit it. "The money is nothing to him, believe me. And he can't turn you guys in if he doesn't turn me in," he assured us. "Besides, I'm the one taking it, not you."

"Wow!" Frizz said under his breath. Jerry took the joint and sucked in a huge lungful. We looked at each other and then back at Junior.

"Junior...." I started.

"Davy, you can bail out any time you want,” he said too sharply and then softened. “We'll understand. It's a big project.” He took a hit. "Listen, if you don’t want to do it, don't!” The sharp edge was back in his voice. “I mean it. Drop out!” The rush from the prank seemed to be giving him an edgy high this time as if he'd scored a bad batch of speed.

"I wish I could," I said, more spooked than mad. I squinted to see Jerry’s and Frizz’s faces in the shadows to see if they were shocked by this sudden crack in Junior’s Mr. Perfect facade. But Jerry was fumbling in his pocket for another joint and Frizz was staring back as if there was something wrong with *me*.

"What’s that mean?” Junior leaned in close to my face. His expression was half irritation and half “Et tu, Bruté?”

"It means I wish I could. It means...” I couldn’t explain it any better. “It means this whole thing is too big, too... out of control. I wish I never thought of it. It means... I don’t know! I’m still here, aren’t I?” I took a full toke off the joint. "Go on.” I realized Lisa was holding my hand in the darkness. I didn't know how long she had been holding it or how I hadn't noticed before or if anyone else noticed. She was squeezing it so hard it hurt. But her hand was warm and I squeezed back. It seemed like my only link to sanity, the only comfort I would find on this freezing, cold night.

"Go ahead," I said to Junior, seeing no other real option. Lisa linked her fingers into mine. "What next?” I said. ”We hijack a truck?"

When I got home, my father was sitting in his red leather chair watching an old movie on TV. It was one they played every year before Christmas with James Stewart that Junior and I used to call *Get a Life*. James Stewart wishes he was dead and then sees all the things that go wrong because he wasn't there to fix them. I usually headed straight up to my room after a night of marinating in marijuana, but instead I plopped myself down on the couch. In my daze, I didn’t even think about how much my hair and coat must have reeked. Thank God my father couldn’t smell anything over the stink of his own pipe habit.

"Long night?" my father asked without turning his head away from the screen. James Stewart always reminded me of my dad. He was kind of an Irish Jimmy Stewart: long and lean with strands of graying hair that refused to stay combed and fell onto his forehead. My dad was sincere like him, too.

"What?" I said when I realized he'd asked me something. I was never much for asking Dad for advice, but the way everything was swirling around in my head, I needed to talk to somebody.

"I said, 'Long night?'“ He was staring at me with his head cocked slightly to the side.

'What?' actually answered his question pretty well.

“Something on your mind?"

"I don't know," I said. "I... You ever get in something over your head?"

"What do you mean?” He was leaning forward ignoring the movie, pushing his hair off his forehead.

"Just," I shrugged, "you ever feel like everything was moving too fast?"

"Yeah.” He nodded his head as he considered it. "I'm afraid it's sometimes a condition of adulthood, Davy.” He rubbed his hands together and tilted his head again. "I don't mean you can't do anything about it. It's just not uncommon.” He waited for me to explain, and when I didn’t, asked, “What's moving too fast?"

"Oh, it's a lot of things." Most of the things I couldn't tell him. "They're all piling up."

"Well, the first thing is to separate them.” My father settled back in his chair and crossed his leg. "Then you can pick them off one at a time."

He waited while I tried to figure out how to tell the story without telling the whole story. He leaned forward, toward me, and put both feet on the ground, but his eyes drifted back to the TV until he seemed to catch himself. "Start with one thing," he said.

"Okay," I agreed. I took a deep breath. "Junior. He's changing. I don't know... It's probably about his dad dying and his mom being with Sam and everything, but he's... He's not the same. I mean we've been friends forever and now it's like I don't know him."

He shook his head and pursed his lips. I couldn’t help thinking he was considering how Ward Cleaver would have handled it or Mr. Jimmy Stewart himself. And I felt mean for thinking that. "It's got to be tough on him,” my father said. “His dad was quite a character. He and his dad were always so close and they've both got that same..." he paused to find the right word, "charisma. And when your father dies...” He crossed and uncrossed his legs. "When your grandpa died, it took me two or three years to deal with it. And I was forty. How old was Junior, sixteen?"

"Yeah, but," I began, "It's more than that. How it happened. The way he died.” I hesitated, "Junior doesn't think it was an accident."

“Hmmph,” he grunted. "I can understand that.” My father nodded his head. "It was a strange accident. No witnesses and all. That's the way the brain works, you know. We want a reason for everything."

I stared at the TV and tried to think of what else I could say. Everything I thought of would give away too much. Junior’d be furious if he knew I was bringing an adult into it – any adult besides his father and it was too late for that. The movie was at the point where James Stewart realizes his brother is dead because Stewart wasn't there to save him from drowning when he was a kid.

"Davy, it's great that you care about him this much, that he's got a friend like you. But there’s only so much you can do for him. He probably should be seeing some professional to sort this out. His mother probably should too.” He shrugged. "For all we know they already have. Mom and I will think of a way to bring it up to Mrs. Walker.” He shifted awkwardly in his chair seeming to realize the inadequacy of his answer. "We will definitely talk to her, I promise."

I don't know what I expected him to say. How could he solve a problem that I’d never clearly described? I’d asked a generic question and he gave me a generic answer.

"Okay, what are the other things?" he asked.

"Oh, everything.” I realized I just wanted to get upstairs and go to sleep. He imagined my life as some Norman Rockwell painting or TV sitcom with corny titles to fit each problem: “The Big Zit,” “Girlfriend Trouble,” “The Missing Homework.” And I encouraged him to think that way because it made it easier to trust me, to let me to do what I wanted. "Senior year,” I said, “swimming, figuring out next year.” I couldn’t make him understand without telling him about the prank and the scene under the dinghy and Lisa and me. And that was all just too much to reveal. “It seems like we ought to know what we're doing and be able to wrap up senior year with some big shebang."

"I remember that feeling.” He laughed. "At the end of my senior year, Donny Harmon and I put a dozen gold fish in the Springfield High pool."

"Goldfish?" I said. "In the pool?"

"Yeah. Big ones," he nodded his head. “Carp, I think. We got them from the pond in Forrest Park."

"Wow!" I tried to make it an amazed wow at his confessed zaniness, but only managed a confused wow at the odd coincidence.

"Yeah.” He looked down at the floor. "We got away with it too.” He shifted back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. "I wonder what happened to Donny Harmon. He was in construction upstate the last I heard."

"Well, I've got to turn in." I stood up, stretched and yawned, figuring I got just the advice I asked for.

"Maybe that's part of it too," Dad said, "everybody heading in different directions soon, wondering where you'll all end up."

"Yeah," I said. "That's definitely part of it.” He seemed to feel like he’d helped me after that. And I think he was proud of himself for resisting the temptation to ask me about college applications. I was grateful for that, too, so I didn't want to rain on his parade. And I guess I wanted to believe that it was all innocent high school high jinx, too. "Good night," I said. "Thanks."

“Any time, Davy,” he said, eyes darting back to the movie. “Any time you want to talk.” He looked back at me and smiled his Dad smile.

I went up to my room and drew shoes. I opened my closet door scanned the wrinkled sneakers and old boots lined up in ragged rows and began sketching the outline of an old pair of Adidas from eighth grade. That was the year we snuck into the movie theater for a private showing. The pot seeped out of me. My head cleared. My heart slowed into steady rhythm. My hand copied the lines my eyes saw. I felt the clean, direct connection between eye and hand. No brain in the middle to muck things up with what I thought or what I knew or what I thought I knew.

Slowly the cracks, the frayed laces and worn pinkie toes took shape on the white page revealing the story of the sneakers like a chapter of my life. When I pulled back to see them fully formed on the page, it was like waking from a dream. Drawing was like that: going into a zone, connecting with something larger than myself, coming back as amazed as a stranger by the vignette on the page. With a gummy eraser, I drew the highlights and the reflected light until I heard my dad coming up the stairs and I flicked off my light and went to sleep.

The next week Junior gave me a ride home from school every day in an old Caddy of Sam’s that he’d taken to driving. My mother's car was in the shop, so I lent her my old Bug. In the morning Lisa gave me a ride in her little yellow Karmann Ghia, but in the afternoons the girls' team practiced late. It was the most time in months I'd spent with Junior without a rowboat over my head.

The three of us used to drive to school together junior year, and now in a strange way, we were together again. Mornings, Lisa and I talked about Junior and I tried to convince myself that there was nothing between her and me. Afternoons, Junior and I didn't talk at all, but I was haunted by guilt that the nothing between Lisa and me was turning into something.

The first couple of days, Junior and I cranked up the tunes and drove without speaking, occasionally doing an air riff or banging the dash to the beat, until we got to my house. I got out, said thanks, tapped the roof and went inside. That was it: no Jell-O, no Lisa, no swimming, no nothing.

On Thursday, we took another route home, by the train tracks – down the wooded, desolate road where Junior's father had the accident. I sat in silence. I thought maybe I was making the wrong assumption, until we came into the straightaway before the scene. In a trance, Junior floored it out of the curve, keeping his foot down hard all the way. Sam's old Cadillacs had lots of comfort and power, but swayed like a cabin cruiser. Before we hit the halfway point of the straightaway we were doing 70.

"What the hell are you doing?" I finally screamed, reaching over and turning off the tunes. "What the fuck…?"

Junior ignored me, then squeezed the brakes hard. At the last second, he turned just short of the curve. Just short of the tree that his father'd hit.

"You can take this corner pretty fast," he said quietly, pronouncing each word slowly, "without losing control."

"Shit!" I exhaled hard. "Shit!" I tried t catch my breath. "For a second I thought you'd finally lost it.” I tried to laugh, but was still too short of breath and it wasn’t funny. "And I don't appreciate you taking me with you.” Junior said nothing, driving fast still, but carefully, and turning his head away toward his side window. "I meant deal with your dad’s death, not recreate it."

"He wasn't drinking," Junior said, to himself more than to me. "I know he liked his cocktails, but he hadn't been drinking that day.” Junior spoke carefully as if turning each word over in his hand. "With the business sold it was almost as if..." He turned and looked at me for the first time. "It's almost as if he was bored.” He looked back out the window. "Or in that split second, he didn't care enough to turn away in time.” The wind hissed in the cracks of the old doors. The engine rumbled.

We were driving slowly then, or maybe it just seemed like slow motion. Junior's face turned away, the only sound was his breathing coming in short blasts, as he fought for control. I took a deep breath and tried to clear the post-adrenaline fatigue from my shoulders. I’d asked Junior to talk about his father and I guessed this was my chance. But what could I say?

"Do you drive this road a lot?" I asked, finally, lamely breaking the silence.

"It's on the way home.” He paused for a minute, maybe two. The blur of the trees was the only hint of the car’s speed. "We used to play a game when I was a kid," Junior said in a far away voice. "My dad would pretend he was a pilot or race car driver." His voice broke. "I was his navigator, telling him when to go... and stop... and turn."

"You okay?” I asked.

"Yeah," he said, "I'm just tired, real tired.” He looked exhausted -- aging before my eyes. All of a sudden he was 38, maybe 58 — not 18. I felt like I was aging him faster by forcing him to speak. Each word was such an effort. And spending all my time with his girl. What a best friend! No wonder he practiced driving into trees.

"If you ever want to talk,” I offered, "I'd be happy to uh...” I began again. "I mean if there's anything I can do...."

"Thanks Davy," he said, still looking away. "I appreciate it."

We rode in silence. I tried to think of some wise words to share, but I didn’t have any. It seemed like there was some parallel with the James Stewart movie, but I couldn’t quite grasp it. And there was something in what my father had said to learn from or to make fun of, but the idea stayed just out of reach.

At my driveway, I got out slowly, still hoping for the right words to pop into my head. Pausing before I closed the door, I ducked my head in the window and smiled.

"See you tomorrow?” I was trying not to make it sound like a question.

His pale face broke into a slight smile. "Yeah, you need a ride home?"

"Can we take the regular route?" I asked, relieved to see some color come back in his face.

"Sure.” I tapped the roof and stumbled to the house on my still shaking legs.

**Chapter 8**

Thanksgiving morning arrived gray and cold. The shore winds pulled the last few yellow leaves off the trees and rattled the windows closest to the water. Lisa and her parents joined us for dinner as part of my mom’s plan to become the new social director of Markum Point. Lisa’s brother, Phil, was off on one of his VW bus adventures to clean up his act. Somehow everyone in the neighborhood agreed to never talk about Phil’s problems with pot and acid and now maybe even heroin. We’d actually asked Junior and his mom and Sam first, but Sam was taking them to Le Chateau in the city in another transparent attempt to impress Junior. We might as well have left an open chair for Junior the way we talked about him all day.

“I haven’t seen much of Junior lately,” my father said. He seemed to be enjoying his role as the big guy at the head of the table, and his audience seemed larger jammed into our little dining room in mismatched chairs. “How’s he doing, Lisa?” He and Mr. Conners had already had a few gin and tonics with the hors d’oeuvres. Now they were working on a bottle of white wine.

“I don’t know,” Lisa said. After helping my mother and my sister Katie bring in the plates of turkey, mashed potatoes, stuffing, creamed onions, and cranberry sauce, Lisa had filled the last few glasses of milk and sat down across from me. My job was to sit next to Granny and keep her from uncrossing the knives for luck or trying to help in some more conventional way. “We’re kind of taking a breather,” Lisa added. I was so focused on how the muscles in her forearms turned as she shook out the napkin and put it on her lap that I didn’t hear what she said at first. “Sort of a trial to see what it’ll be like next year when we’re at different schools.”

“You broke up?” Lisa’s mother asked, saving me from blurting the words out myself. She nearly choked on her forkful of turkey. Both she and her husband had done some serious growing from the thin, Lisa-like figures they’d had when they moved in.

“No, Mom.” Lisa squinted and cringed like someone was scraping fingernails on a chalkboard. “Why does everything have to be so black and white?”

“It’s just as well, I guess,” Mrs. Conners said after swallowing her turkey and washing it down with half a glass of milk. “He’s a wonderful young man, but I always thought you were too young to go so steady. Don’t you think so, dear?” She turned to her husband who was sneaking a second helping of mashed potatoes before the plate had made a complete pass for firsts.

“What?” he said.

“I said don’t you think it’s good they broke up?”

“We didn’t break up, Mom; we’re just taking a break.” Lisa made some room on the table in front of her for the big turkey plate and passed the gravy to Katie. “We never really see each other much anyway between school and swimming and Junior’s new obsession with working at Sam’s. Now he’s got Frizz working there too.”

“Frizz?” I said almost choking on my own piece of turkey.

“Yeah, he starts this weekend,” Lisa said. “Didn’t Junior ask you?”

“He did, but .... I was trying to discourage him.”

“Discourage him from what, Davy?” my mom asked pausing on her way into the kitchen to refill the gravy bowl.

“Just from spending all his time there.” I picked my words carefully now that my mother’s antennae were up. “You know how Junior gets into everything so much, and with swimming starting next week and all.”

“Junior’s been working the night shifts on Friday and Saturdays,” Lisa continued.

“I’m impressed,” my father said. “That boy’s got amazing energy.”

“They’ll have plenty of spending money for college,” Lisa’s father added. “Hint. Hint.” He smiled at Lisa before returning to his dinner.

“Has Jerry joined them, too?” My mother briefly settled into her chair and took a quick bite of turkey before she spotted the next empty serving plate.

Lisa and I laughed at the thought of it.

“The only night shift Jerry could pull,” Lisa said, “would be in a mattress factory.”

My laughter petered out as I tried to absorb this new information. Lisa and Junior were taking a break? Frizz was working at Sam’s with Junior? I could feel my brain starting to steam. That weasel was trying to take my place the minute I turned my back! He’d always been trying to squeeze his way in.

But before I could work myself into a good self-righteous rage, it dawned on me that it might look to Junior like I was doing the exact same thing.

“Has he decided on Dartmouth or Yale?” my sister asked.

“Junior could go anywhere,” my father said.

 “That Junior’s a good boy,” Granny said. “A touch of the Blarney, but a good boy.”

“Junior, Junior, Junior,” I said before I could catch myself.

“What?” my father said, too loud for the suddenly silent table. All eyes turned toward me. Mr. Conners even stopped chewing.

“Junior’s a great guy,” I said, “and we all love him. But he’s not here. Let’s give him a break and leave him alone.”

More silence.

“It’s just that...” I tried again, but I just couldn’t explain it without sounding like I was just jealous. And I suddenly realized I was. I was jealous and at the same time I was glad I wasn’t Junior. All those expectations to live up to.

“You’re right,” Lisa said uncertainly. “Junior’s got so much pressure on him to be Mr. Perfect.” Her voice grew surer as she spoke. “And I also vote for talking about who’s here.” She turned to my sister. “Katie, tell us about college. What’s it really like?”

I tried to give Lisa a wink in thanks for saving me from having to explain something I couldn’t when I realized my mother was standing in the doorway to the kitchen and giving me her concerned look. When I stared back, she smiled and turned to join the others listening to Katie’s freshman year exploits, but I knew I was going to have to come up with some kind of explanation.

JD’s annual we’re-in-trouble-this-year-boys speech kicked off the first day of swim practice the Monday after Thanksgiving. It was full of Coach punching his fat fist into his palm as he paced back and forth along the side of the Woodcove High pool yelling “Opportunity!” and “Pride!” and “Sacrifice.”

I yelled, “Hallelujah!” and “Amen!” but Junior reached over and elbowed me in the ribs. He still loved these rituals even as he laughed at them. Maybe they reminded him of grammar school when his father was our Y coach running along the side of the pool and chanting absurd cheers to inspire, entertain, and distract us from our exhaustion. But JD was so serious.

”Sure it’s stupid,“ Junior whispered later as we waited at the end of the pool for our turn to dive in. “Everything’s stupid. Swimming’s stupid. Not swimming’s stupid.” He smiled like he’d made a joke. “It makes JD happy. We get to see him jump up and down.” He shrugged his shoulders as he moved to the front of the line and dove off in a soaring swan dive that arched high before smoothly sailing into the water, snapping flat just beneath the surface like a dolphin, and kicking into a sprint.

“Don’t anybody else try that!” JD yelled. “You’ll crack your head open!”

I followed with a short flat dive and tried to reach out with my cupped palms, and kick back with smooth strokes from my hips, and breathe and remember all the other mechanical advice JD had given me, and Mr. Walker before him, and wondering if any of the other swimmers were thinking of drowning.

For the last part of the workout, we had to divide the pool, and JD, in half to share with some members of the girls’ team who were in the last days of their season. Lisa and the other girls who’d qualified were getting ready for the All-New England meet and JD coached both teams. We didn’t mind. There was nothing like the sight of a group of well-shaped young ladies wearing tight bathing suits and breathing hard to break the monotony of a dull workout.

It gave us a chance to play Erection Patrol, one of our favorite games from the summer when the girls and boys practiced together on the AAU team. Our skimpy Speedo bathing suits stirred the hormones raging beneath the surface. When the girls got out of the pool, the wet suits clung to their bodies and the cold air caused a reaction, purely physiological, that drove the more unbalanced members of the boys’ team crazy.

"Erection Patrol," I whispered. Junior just smiled. I was always good at disconnecting my brain from my body. But the freshmen and some of the sophomores -- and Jerry and Frizz, still freshmen and sophomores at heart -- got caught echoing the sightings with reactions of their own. A good sighting would set off a mad dash for the pool. Jerry, always the deep thinker, actually had to be pushed into the pool as he reflected on the ramifications of this physical phenomena.

After practice I was exhausted as usual, pausing for a rest between putting on each sock when JD called me into the coaches’ office.

“You’ve got to relax more in the water.” He closed the door and sat down in front of me on the corner of the desk. “You’re too mechanical.”

“I know,” I said. “I try. I...”

He waved away my explanation. “’Relax’ is useless advice, I know. You’ve got the stroke; just don’t worry about what you do in the water.” He put one of his meaty hands on my shoulder and squeezed. “It’s out of the water you can help us the most.” He bobbed his head up and down. “I’m worried about Junior, for himself… and for the team. If you, and I, can keep Junior on track, we win.” His blue gray eyes stared intently into mine as he continued to nod slightly. “We’ve got fifteen, maybe eighteen solid swimmers, but Junior’s the point man.” I knew the hand on my shoulder was supposed to make me feel his sincerity, but it felt like a weighted clamp squeezing tight the intensity of his desire to win. “And maybe if he has a good year in the pool then everything else gets back in gear and he can move on.”

He could never understand how Junior swam and won so effortlessly. All that pride, desire, sacrifice stuff was how JD had willed his landlubber body to victory when he was a swimmer in high school. We won every year because JD coached all the little JD’s on the team to be better than they had a right to be, but Junior was on another plane. And with Mr. Walker gone, JD relied on me last year to keep Junior swimming hard and he wanted to know he could rely on me again this year. Like I had a clue what motivated Junior anymore.

We could swim in Jell-O, I could have suggested. Or make it a prank to win the States. “I’ll do my best,” I assured JD.

“He had more intensity when his dad was alive,” JD said easing his grip and looking out the office windows at the last few swimmers straggling out of the locker room. “His dad fueled that,” he said. “Mr. Walker might have been a little crazy, but boy could he get that crowd going.” He smiled and pulled his hand back. “Junior went through the motions last year. Who could blame him? But he was still better than any other swimmer in the state. Maybe if we can keep him going, keep him on track, maybe he can find that fire again.”

“Maybe, Coach,” I said.

“What’re we talking, ‘Maybe’!?” He clamped that big hand back on my shoulder. “No maybes, son. We’ve got an opportunity here to do something special. And we’re gonna do it!”

“Yes sir!” I tried to shout, but started coughing. I swallowed to clear my throat. “Yes, sir!” I said again.

Coach stood up, walked to the door and opened it. “Just keep an eye on him for me.” He waved to the last few swimmers leaving the locker room. “Let me know anything I need to know.”

I went back to struggling with my clothes. Part of me wanted to laugh at JD, to go to Junior and make fun of this latest motivational ploy, but I was too tired and the weight of his hand still clamped on my shoulder like the weight of his desire, like the ghost of Mr. Walker’s intensity, like all the expectations I didn’t think I could meet. I drove straight home instead and went to sleep.

In the cafeteria that Friday, Junior announced that his mother and Suppository Sam were getting married the day after Christmas.

"Suppository Dad?" I said, smiling.

Junior laughed and gave me a quick wink. "It loses something without alliteration."

"Diarrhea Dad?” A weak joke, I knew.

"Better, but not accurate.” Junior shook his head and grinned. "Keep working on it.” He was smiling, but less animated than usual with barely a presidential nod or a wink to the surrounding tables.

"Sam and my mom were pretty funny," he continued softly. We had to lean in close for a change to hear him above the cafeteria hum. "They want to get married at our house. They asked if that was okay with me.” He laughed and held up both palms toward us. "Sam didn't actually ask me for her hand or anything."

"That's nice," Lisa said. "They're trying to make you feel part of it."

“Stopped-up Step-dad?” Jerry said, looking up from his notebook scribbled with his account of our conversation.

“Jerry, go back to writing. We’ve moved on,” I said and then laughed like I was on the same time delay he was. “Stopped-up Step-dad?” Junior and Frizz joined the laughter. Jerry shrugged.

"They even asked me to go to Bermuda with them," Junior said, "on their honeymoon.” Everyone grinned at that. "I told them, 'Kids, kids, kids, don't you worry about me. I'll be fine.” He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Sam, you take the pretty little lady down to that tropical paradise and make her feel special.” He winked again for emphasis.

Looking back, everything seemed to be spinning out of control, but things always felt out of my control. At the time, Junior’s planning the prank and Lisa and my half assed attempts to stop it were still confusing, but exciting weekend diversions. The gang was breaking up a little and there were some cracks in Junior’s facade, but he was still Junior. In fact I was a little relieved that Junior seemed less perfect. It gave me a little more room.

Nothing terrible happened in our lives – well, except Junior’s dad dying. The things I thought of as terrible were just irritations: the constant scramble for gas money, the endless pile of homework, English essays and history papers, the meddling of my parents and often annoying grandmother, and the inescapable shadow of college applications.

On weekends I just wanted to get away from everything and helping Junior or Lisa did the trick, even if they did have opposite goals. The Friday night pot smoking was another good distraction. Pot was the perfect drug for swimmers. Beer could make us sappy and soft, but not pot. Pot was all about lung capacity; Junior and Frizz could practically suck down a whole joint in one breath and they could hold it in for almost two minutes. And a pot buzz was very relaxing, the perfect antidote to all the stress of swimming in and outs and endurance work. And plus, pot was so bad for our short-term memory that we forgot what we were talking about by the time we got to the third point of anything. Maybe forgetting was actually the first benefit.

The first week of December, I decided to prepare for my father’s next round of college nagging. I figured if I looked serious, if I was prepared, I might have a chance to convince him. Miss Frankovich helped me make slides of my artwork for a portfolio. I picked five schools that had good programs in both business and art, and sent away for applications I had no delusions about Ivy League or even any bumper sticker colleges; I just wanted to go to a school with a good art program. I’d throw my dad a bone and say I would minor in business. And if that didn’t work I could always lie. For a little while, I actually felt ahead of the game, even in control of things.

School nights, Lisa and I spent a lot of time at the town library doing homework, or more often she would study and I would fill the pages of my notebook with drawings of her long, slender hands and the bump of bone on her wrist and the veins and tendons on her thin arms or the arcing line of her neck and jaw and her hair falling across her face as she read. In magazines or movies I was always attracted to women with more curves than Lisa, bigger hips, butts, breasts. But with Lisa, I had learned to look more closely to see all the gentle curves. And I left a record of them on the margins of my old homework assignments and class notes and the inside covers of my notebooks.

I walked her to her front door one night in mid-December when she grabbed my hand and wouldn’t let go. I stared at her slender fingers tightly interlaced with mine, then looked to her face to find her eyes staring intently at me.

“What?” I said, confused by this change in our routine.

“I don’t know what we’re waiting for,” she said and grabbed my other hand. “Junior and I are over.” Her eyes seemed wet in the yellow front porch light. I’d never seen Lisa cry, even as an eight-year-old, but for a moment it seemed she might. Then she clenched her jaw and blinked and her eyes were clear again. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don’t mean to put this all on you.”

"It's okay,” I said, putting my arms around her, suddenly feeling like her porch light was a spotlight in the dark neighborhood. "It's okay.” She seemed small for once, maybe because of those almost-teary eyes.

"I'm sorry," she repeated softly.

I began rubbing her back to comfort her. She felt so soft along the gentle curve from her ribs to her waist to her hip. I massaged her spine with the palm of my hand and felt the lump of her bra strap. I felt a stirring within me and froze. What a time to lose control! Her mumbled words stopped, but we stood there, our arms around each other. I tried to pull my groin away from her, but she arched her body into mine. I tried to think of homework assignments or pictures of rotting vegetables. Nothing worked. I stopped massaging and stood there rigidly, hoping she wouldn't notice.

Her breathing seemed to halt and stutter. I thought she had begun crying and I hugged her close. "Erection Patrol," she said quietly into my shoulder and I realized it was laughter not tears. I tried to pull away, but she held me tight.

"Shit," I said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, David.” She put her hand on my neck and pulled my head close. "It's out of our control.” She held my face in her hands for a second and kissed me. I kissed her back, turning my head to the side and pressing my lips into hers. When she opened her mouth I slipped my tongue in and fenced it back and forth with hers. I’d never admitted to myself how much I wanted to do that.

"My parents are out for the night," she said when we came up for air.

"We can't." I searched for and failed to think of a good reason why not. “The astronauts are watching,” I said trying to make a joke of it. I nodded my head toward the three-quarter moon over the trees. In the dark blue craters I imagined Apollo 17 and its tiny crew working away.

“I think they’re busy.”

I turned to see Lisa’s face tilted to the sky. The porch light drew a thin yellow line along the edge of her profile, from her forehead, down over her dark brow, along her long, thin nose, highlighting the ridges above her lips, her lips themselves and the determined set of her chin.

 Lisa smiled as she turned her head back to me, admiring, I think, me admiring her. She took both of my hands in hers and started backing through the front door, and into the front hall.

"Lisa, we can't," I said as she kept walking into the dimly lit living room.

"Sure we can," she said. "Come on, David."

"No, I can't. I just don't feel right about it,” I said, pulling my hands away. "Junior's been my best friend for a long time."

"Junior doesn't care," she said and stopped. "Believe me.” She hesitated, turning her head away, toward the brick fireplace before continuing. "He doesn't even want to talk anymore, never mind hold me or kiss me. He's tired. He's busy. He's got a lot of things on his mind. He basically told me to start seeing somebody else."

"I'm sorry, Lisa. I didn't know." I wrapped the fingers of one of her hands into my palm and squeezed. "He’s slipping away, isn’t he?”

She put her arms around me and pulled me close. "Stay here and sit with me for awhile."

"I..." She felt so warm.

"Please, David." I went with her to the black leather couch and sat down. I was worrying about a friend who didn't care anymore. What was the point? How far should I go to protect a friend, a friendship? Lisa was my friend, too. And dammit, wasn't I my friend? Was I just rationalizing? I didn't know. I felt too good and she was too beautiful.

There was a flurry of hard kisses back and forth, bodies twisting and turning on the couch, tongues probing and necks arching in a passionate wrestling match, heavy breathing, mumbled yeses and each other’s names whispered in the shadows of her living room. And then relative silence, except for the sound of bodies turning and clothing rubbing against the leather of the couch. I remember it like I was looking down from above. Lisa on top of me, her shirt off, her bra unclasped but the straps hanging off her shoulder, her olive skin pale in the shadows, her neck and shoulders and white bra straps partly covered by strands of long black hair, my hand squeezed down the back of her pants.

I was face up, my head in the corner of the couch covered by her head, my shirt open, unbuttoned, one foot on the white shag. Her body was lying at an angle across mine and her hand reached down the front of my pants, arm twisted awkwardly at the wrist, groping blindly as my breath began to catch.

But that’s too easy to paint Lisa as the aggressor. Because with a deep breath I pushed up and, lips still attached, drove her to the other end of the couch, reaching with one hand for her breasts and the other slipping down the front of her pants, fumbling inside her underpants, twisting our bodies sideways on the couch, reaching down and trying to concentrate on everything: my fingers, and our lips and my chest against her breasts. And suddenly I imagined Junior and Lisa here on this very couch and I lost my balance and fell off the edge, one hand still in her pants and the other pinned beneath her breasts and ribs as she rolled over and I banged my head on the coffee table with a “Ooof!” and an “Ah, shit!”

I lay there, head on the floor, legs still wrapped in Lisa’s on the couch, trying to slow my breathing and my heart, feeling like an idiot. Junior never would have fallen off the couch. Junior would have been smooth and kept his balance and known to move the coffee table beforehand. As Lisa helped untangle our legs and my hand from her pants, she caught her own breath and laughed quietly.

“Wow,” she whispered, sliding down to the floor and pulling me up to sit against the couch beside her.

“I’m sorry.” I rubbed the sore spot on the side of my head, thinking that she was used to Junior and I was coming on more like Jerry Lewis.

“Sorry?” Lisa asked. “Don’t be sorry.” She reached over and massaged my head lightly. “You want some ice for that?”

“Ooh!” I winced when she touched the sore spot. “I’m sorry you-”

“Don’t! I mean it,” she said. “That was... unplanned, untamed, un.... It even ended with a bang.” I could see her lips curl into a smile in the shadows. “What more could I ask for?”

“It’s just that Junior...” What was I going to say? That Junior would have done better? That Junior haunted me like a yardstick I knew I’d never measure up to? That Junior should be there and not me? “Junior’s my best friend..... And you are too. And...” I shrugged and reached my right arm over her shoulder and pulled her close to me. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

We sat there for fifteen minutes and I tried not to think – just breathe deep and enjoy the warmth of her body next to mine. I closed my eyes and felt her shoulder curl against my chest and the tickle of her hair in my face and the hard bone of her knees pulled up against my stomach and listened to our breathing as it slowly synchronized into one deep inhale and exhale.

"I’ve thought about this for a long time," Lisa whispered breaking the wonderful silence. "Take your time. I'll wait.”

I said nothing, trying to recapture the mindless, thoughtless pleasure of sitting with her right there, right then, trying to hold off the future and all the complications I didn’t know how to deal with. But they all kept tumbling back.

"As long as you make the right decision.” Lisa laughed and looked at her watch. “And you make it fast."

I got home late that night. My parents were pretty ticked off. I was glad they yelled at me; they didn't know how much I deserved it.

“What’s going on with you lately?” my mother asked.

When I insisted nothing was going on with me, my father, in what I guess was a leap to my defense, said, “It’s senior year, hon.” With a knowing nod to me and a Ozzie Nelson rise of his eyebrows, he added, “It’s a tough time for a kid.”

“All the more reason to get home at a reasonable hour,” my mother insisted, with one last finger shake, “and get a good night’s sleep.” That was her answer to just about anything - a good night’s sleep. If that didn’t work, try a good healthy sandwich.

The night had been wonderful and horrible. I tried to rationalize, to tell myself that we’d kept most of our clothes on, that we could have gone further, as if there could be some halfway to my betrayal of Junior. So I ended up feeling neither virtuous nor satisfied. I rolled around all night, alternately kicking myself for doing what we did and kicking myself for what we didn't do. Around dawn, I decided to tell Junior. I wish I could say what convinced me was that it was the right thing to do, but it was more that I knew he would find out anyway; this was a secret that couldn’t be kept.

Over the next week I called him almost every day, but he would start talking about the Jell-O or working at Sam’s and he’d try to talk me into joining him. Or he wasn't home and I’d make small talk with his mom. Lisa would kiss me hello or goodbye when we saw each other if no one was around. And we would hold hands, but I avoided anything more. After a week I’d said nothing about it to Junior and then it was too late. Maybe I could explain fooling around with his girlfriend once, but how could I explain making a habit of seeing her every day?

**Chapter 9**

For the first time in years, the gang didn't all get together Christmas day. Maybe it just wasn’t official without a rowboat and a bag of weed. After opening presents with my parents in the morning, I spent the afternoon at Lisa's stuffing my face with her mother's clam dip and a host of other hors d'oeuvres and watching *Holiday Inn* on TV. We sat on the couch unlinking our hands whenever we heard one of her parents approach. Lisa’d agreed not to talk about anything to give me time to speak to Junior. I hadn’t shared with her the details of how unsuccessful I’d been. Maybe I was just stalling for time to clear up my own confusion, but she let me know with her presence that she hadn’t changed her mind and if her presence wasn’t enough she’d add a clasped hand, a hug, a quick kiss on the cheek. The mixture of pleasure and guilt I felt each time just confused me more. My body was all in for the relationship with Lisa, but my brain was befuddled.

The one time we were slow to unclasp, we looked up to see both her parents standing in the doorway. I opened my mouth to say I don’t know what, but Mrs. Conners saved me.

“We’re going to the Van Buren’s for a half hour. Cocktail party,” she said. “Do you two want to join us?”

“For cocktails?” I asked.

No.” She laughed. “A soda or something.”

Mr. Conners rocked back and forth next to her as if he’d been waiting all day for a cocktail.

“No, we’re good,” Lisa said. “We’re watching the movie.”

Mr. Conners was already backing out of the room, when Mrs. said, “Okay. We won’t be long. If Philip calls, stall him. We’ll be right back.”

As soon as the door slammed shut, Lisa said, “I talked to my mom. Or tried to…. about Junior,”

I must have looked startled, because she added, “I would have told you earlier, but you know, the … you and me and… You were going to…”

“No, no. I get it. I tried talking to my dad, too.”

“She started out like she was going to be helpful,” Lisa grabbed both my hands. I tried not to get distracted. “Then she said, ‘It’s too bad Mr. Walker’s not here.’”

“That is the problem!” I practically shouted.

“I know.” Lisa nodded, then sighed. “He seems to get more perfect everyday he’s gone.”

I laughed softly. “Has everybody forgotten he was like an impulsive kid half the time?”

“And then she went on and on about us breaking up. ‘It was a good thing.’ ‘Sometimes we have regrets.’ And then she said sometimes after you break up with someone, you can…” She raised her hands to make air quotes. “’See the cracks in their veneer.’”

I could only shake my head at that. Or maybe I was shaking my head at the whole fiasco.

“She asked what you guys thought and I said you were worried, but Frizz thinks Junior pees gold and Jerry… Well I didn’t tell her Jerry just seems stoned all the time now. I just said, ‘Jerry’s Jerry.’ She didn’t question that.”

“Hmmph.” I nodded. “Jerry does seem to be getting more Jerry lately.”

“She did say one thing, though, that might be worth trying.” She paused like she wasn’t sure she should say it. “Right after saying that about Mr. Walker, she asked if there were any adults that Junior might open up. I said no, but she got me thinking. Maybe Coach. Or maybe Mr. Corwin?”

Yeah,” I said. “That might be a good idea.” Actually it felt like a great idea. For the first time in a while I could feel something like hope rising in my chest. And I could see a rise of hope in Lisa’s eyes.

Our faces were inches away from each. Her eyes were wide and unblinking. Her lashes flicked up in a curl at the end. As my breath slowed, I thought, ‘Maybe that’s not hope.’ I mean I could move two inches and kiss her. And why not? I was a kid, for Christ’s sake. Where was I supposed to be getting all this self control? “Screw it!” I said out loud.

And just then the front door slammed open. “Did you even look at the invitation?” Mrs. Connors said sharply.

“I thought it was Christmas Day!” Mr. Conners sputtered.

“We’re back!” Lisa’s mom yelled. “The Van Buren’s party was yesterday!”

“Why don’t we have a cocktail party of our own right here?” Mr. Conners walked into the room, threw his coat on the chair and open the closet where they kept their booze.

“Help yourself,” Mrs. Conners said from the kitchen. She seemed to need a little distance.

“And when do I ever have any idea what’s on our social schedule,” Mr. Conners yelled as he poured himself a scotch. He paused as if just realizing we were sitting there in the front seat for the show. “Sorry,” he said.

“No problem.” I stood and pretended I needed to stretch. “I better head home anyway. The folks are probably wor–” I glanced at Lisa out of the corner of eye and turned away quickly. She was trying hard not to laugh and if we locked eyes we would have lost it.

“Merry Christmas to all,” I said as I grabbed my coat and hurried out the door.

“And to all a good night!” I heard Mr. Conners answer as I caught a blast of cold air on their front steps.

Lisa’d dropped her present off at Junior's in the morning, so I stopped at his house alone on my way home. We always bought each other a record or a tape. It was just the idea of a present, I guess. Jerry was leaving when I got there. It saved me a trip to his house. In the Christmas spirit, he offered to smoke a joint with me out by the seawall. I could see they both already had a shiny glaze to their eyes. Junior’s was subtle, but the rims of Jerry's eyes always got red red. I begged off, saying I had to head right home. We stood awkwardly in the hall. Jerry said something about Frizz's relatives visiting from Ohio and then he left.

The rest of the house was humming, getting ready for the wedding. Junior's mother smiled and waved from the kitchen. She came out and gave me a Christmas kiss on the cheek. She looked happy again, organizing again, planning the big day. This is the way she used to be, arranging picnics, and bridge games, and Salvation Army pick-ups. She used to take a cheery humming joy in making things work. After asking me if I had been good this year, she gave me a box of Christmas cookies for my parents and went back to the kitchen.

Despite all the right props, Junior looked tired and a little sad. He wore red and green, the tree was loaded with silvery ornaments and blinking lights, and Bing Crosby crooned in the background – singing "Silver Bells,” in his slow deep bass, “Silver bells. It’s Christmas time in the city.” But it all didn't work somehow. The green had too much blue, the lights blinked too slowly and the record was scratchy from age.

We exchanged gifts in the front hall. Junior gave me an old Moody Blues tape that replaced the one that had unraveled and jammed my cassette player. I gave him a Doors live album that had a tune-up routine we could use for the air band. The exchange felt so formal. We were shaking hands like strangers. Suddenly I could feel how hard it must all be for him - missing his dad at Christmas, his mom remarrying, all the weight of being perfect.

“You look tired,” I said and reluctant to let go of his hand, trying to make it comical.

He shrugged absently. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“This must feel weird.”

“What?” Junior said as if surprised by someone saying what he was really thinking. He pulled his hand back.

“The wedding. Your dad not being here at Christmas. It just must be weird.” I shrugged. “Remember how excited he would get? Like he was the kid?”

“Yeah.” He smiled sadly but then quickly pulled his guard back up. “Mom and Sam are pretty excited. It’s hard not to get caught up in it.”

“Listen,” I said, while I was on the subject of the truth. “I was over at Lisa’s today. I’ve been seeing a lot of her.”

“Yeah.” He shook his head. “She came over this morning. I meant to go over there, but,” he shrugged, “there’s a lot to do here.”

“I’ve been seeing a lot of her lately,” I said over-emphasizing the word.

“I know,” he said. “I appreciate you keeping her company. With this wedding thing and working at Sam’s, I’ve got too much going on.” He quickly changed the subject and the moment was gone. “I helped them find a caterer and the band. And it took forever to find the right tux.” It seemed like he should have been mad or sad or something, but he’d slipped back into his Perfect Junior mask and I didn’t know what he thought or knew.

His mom’s call from the kitchen interrupted him. "Listen,” I said, “I better go. Thanks for the tape,” and I reached out my hand and he grabbed it. “Merry Christmas, Junior.”

“Just a minute, Mom,” he yelled before turning back to me. He wrapped both his hands around mine and shook. "Merry Christmas, Davy boy," he said. His look was genuine and his hands were warm, but he seemed far away.

The night was cold and dark when I went out the door. I walked quickly around the block to my house. There wasn't a soul on the roads.

The wedding began just after one. It was small: thirty or forty people total. Junior invited Lisa, Jerry, Frizz and me, and the rest were a few close family friends. Twenty or so folding chairs set up in rows in the cleared-of-furniture living room faced a makeshift altar and the picture window behind it. A big, heated tent in the back yard covered buffet tables for fancy food, a small dance floor, and a three-man band.

Frizz said he’d be late, held up by some departing relative. So at first, it was just the four of us, Junior, Lisa, Jerry and I – just like old times.

It was like old times even for a moment with Junior and Lisa. When Junior came down stairs, Lisa walked over and straightened the bow tie of his tux. The deep red of her dress and black of her stockings matched perfectly with the red in his tie and paisley cummerbund and the shiny black of his tuxedo, like the days when we used to kid them about calling each other up before getting dressed each morning. Lisa leaned in close to say something. Junior laughed and she smiled at the pleasure of making him laugh. If she kicked up one heel it could have been an ad. The picture is etched into my mind. I could probably even draw it now if I wanted to torture myself.

In a moment it was over and she was by my side and giving my hand a quick reassuring squeeze. I squeezed back and she raised her eyebrows suggestively before Suppository Sam and his fourteen-year-old son from his first marriage walked in and Lisa gave me a nudge in the ribs. I’d never seen Sam Jr. before, never even knew he existed. Whatever his real name is was forgotten in the joy of calling him Sam Jr.. He was a stretched out version of Sam: skinnier and taller, longer nose on his long thin face and longer hair cork-screwed high in a ragged afro.

 After that there was no awkwardness between Lisa and Junior and I. It was as if we’d all agreed to pretend for the day that everything was like it used to be, or should be, or could be. During the service, Lisa, Jerry and I stood against the wall poking each other and nodded our heads at every funny or moving moment. None of us had ever been to a wedding before so it was all great, fresh entertainment.

The altar in front of the big living room window looking out onto the cove was surrounded by purple irises in front and a red and white carnation wreath in back, an evident compromise of their clashing tastes. You never think about someone's style, until it bumps up against someone else's.

The Christmas tree had been taken down, but the stockings still hung over the fireplace. Junior and Sam Jr. stood on either side of the bride and groom like mismatched bookends: Junior, an Esquire ad with his perfectly combed brown hair and tasteful tux, and Junior, in a light blue tuxedo that matched his dad's but looked like it had been through the washer and dryer with him in it.

Suppository Sam grinned like he was going to have an orgasm right there in his tuxedo. Next to him, Mrs. Walker smiled shyly; the look in her eyes an odd combination of sadness and hope. I'd never realized how much her face looked like Junior’s, except paler and smaller.

The rest of us stood shoulder to shoulder, half the crowd spilling into the dining room and front hall. The minister was the same one from Mr. Walker's funeral and the same people cried, led by my mother and Lisa’s mom. Junior's eyes were dry again and his face expressionless, like the good con man he was. Or maybe he was just numb.

 Afterward, the four of us grabbed plates of shrimp and ham and potatoes and salad and headed down to the basement. Playing Ping-Pong was weird as we tried to ignore the ghost of Junior's father haunting the stairway or sitting in the chair by the bar announcing the game. But Junior insisted we play and he seemed to be enjoying it more than anyone. Molly curled up, kneading her claws into the couch, and watched us. She looked younger. It must have seemed like the old days to her, too. After an hour Lisa had to go the bathroom and Junior's father's presence became too much. We put down the paddles and went outside.

We spent a lot of time that afternoon laughing and never mentioned Jell-O once. The sun shone. The wind blew warm off the water. The jazz trio played in the background. They didn't need all the heaters and plastic tarps they rented to keep the tent warm; you could stand outside in a shirt and sport coat.

Junior made a quick charming toast promising to give the lovebirds some space, but otherwise the four of us ignored the wedding rituals and the dancing. After a few minutes of polite mingling, we slipped out the back door where we searched for rocks on the low-tide sand outside the seawall, skimmed them on the water and reminisced. Junior was hot, skipping some six, even seven times. The best Lisa or I could do was five. Jerry's rocks kept hitting hard and sinking. (I don't think he smoked a joint all day; it must have thrown his timing off.)

When Frizz arrived, we didn't even say hello. He tried to join in quietly, skipping stones, but the silence was killing him.

"Your father loved to scare the shit out of me." He ran his hand nervously through his brown kinks. Jerry, Lisa and I froze and glanced at each other as we stood behind Junior and Frizz in the yard. No one had mentioned Mr. Walker all day. "One time we were out here throwing a Frisbee and the wind caught my throw. He yelled, 'I've got it!' and jumped over the wall going full speed. He gave out this pitiful scream and disappeared from view."

"I was sure he'd broken his neck. And it was my fault." Frizz pointed down to the outer ledge of the seawall three feet below. "I didn't know this beach was here. I thought it just dropped all the way to the rocks."

Junior rubbed his thumb on the surface of the flat rock in his hand and smiled. "He must have pulled that trick on every friend I brought home.”

I exhaled in relief.

"Did you hear a grunt?” I asked. "He grunted loud for me, like he was hitting the ground in pain and then groaned. He was chasing a baseball."

"He groaned," Frizz nodded his head uncertainly, "but I don't remember a grunt."

"I got the groan and the grunt." Jerry shook his hair as he laughed. The tangled locks seemed an inch or two longer than I remembered them. "He was chasing a football."

"I didn't get the grunt," Frizz complained, half-serious. "I feel cheated."

Junior looked off at the water. "Don't worry Frizz. He'd abandoned the grunt by the time you met him. He was trying to simplify his style."

"Did he ever do the car thing to you guys?" Frizz asked. "Something hits the windshield and he groans and slumps over the wheel as if he's been shot."

"Sure, a bunch of times," I said as Jerry and Lisa nodded. "I think that was his favorite."

Junior turned to us and laughed. "He’d practice that one on family vacations, one time landing on the horn, another time slumping toward the window. Then ask us which worked better. We'd score like Olympic judges. 9.8, 9.7, 8.2. He called my mother the Russian judge for her low scores. It used to make her so nervous when he did it, holding the wheel with his knees, driving through squinted eyes, trying for the perfect ten."

It's funny that Frizz, the last person to join the group, had become the keeper of its history. I guess it made him feel a part of us. He was always asking questions, or making us tell him a story, even sometimes correcting us if we gave a wrong detail or date. "Didn't that happen before Lisa moved to Woodcove?" he'd say. Each date and story was well organized in his mind. It was like he, more than anyone, wanted us to have the perfect lives we appeared to have. By association he’d have one, too.

"The Asshole Theory of your father's scared me even more, I think.” Frizz sat on the seawall and ate. The rest of us searched for more flat stones to skim while the water was calm. "It was before I really knew anybody and you threw a party for the swim teams. Everybody was dancing and singing. I was sitting in the corner watching the whole gang of you laughing and joking, wondering if you’d known each other since birth.

Your dad came over and started talking. 'You know, Frizz,' he said, 'there's no point in sitting over here pretending to be cool.' Before I could answer, he said, 'because we're all assholes anyway.' I was kind of stunned right there; my parents never swore. He pointed at me and said, 'You're an asshole.' He paused just long enough for me to feel uncomfortable, then he pointed at himself and said, 'And I'm an asshole.'"

Junior shook his head. "If he thought a party was boring, he’d pick out the biggest or stuffiest guy and hit him with the Asshole Theory. He loved to draw out the delay between 'You're an asshole' and '.... and I'm an asshole' to see how mad they would get. No matter how ticked off they were, that ‘And I'm an asshole' bit always confused the hell out of them."

“It took me a long time to figure out when he was kidding,” Frizz said.” He’d talk to me like I was an adult and he’d act like he was a kid.”

“He was always kidding,” I said.

“He was never kidding,” Junior said and we laughed at how both statements could be somehow true.

“Wait!” Frizz said. “Does that mean he thought I was the stuffiest guy at the party?” He smiled like it was a compliment.

““He just liked to shake things up,” Junior said. “‘You’ll never know where the line is’ he’d say, ‘unless you’re willing to step over it.’” A shadow briefly passed over his face for the only time all day before he hopped up, grabbed a perfectly flat white stone and flicked it across the calm black water.

As the sun set, we skimmed stones in silence, except for an occasional "ooh" or "ah.” I had a niner. Then Junior topped me with a perfect throw that skimmed ten times before sinking in the calm black water.

"I'm going to miss you guys next year," Junior said. "Everything's coming to an end."

We all agreed, quickly adding that nothing would change. We'd still get together. We'd still be best friends. I realized Junior would miss us as much as we'd miss him. We’d always talked of staying together, like college would be one more adventure, but there was no way. Maybe the Jell-O Brigade was Junior’s way of giving us all a big send off, a celebration of our friendship.

The wedding was our last real day together, our last day besides the Jell-O stuff. It was the last day, and the first day in a long time, that we just hung out and killed some time and had fun.

The weather turned cold overnight and the bay began to freeze. By Friday night a thin layer of ice covered the rowboat. It was much too cold to sit outside, but Junior insisted. It was the only safe place. Lisa and I bundled up in every piece of clothing we could squeeze on. Junior wouldn't even let us start a fire.

"Did the Patriots have a fire before ambushing the British?" he asked.

"I don't know. Was it cold?" I asked. "Did they need one?"

"You get my point!" he said. "People all over this neighborhood would love to nail us for this. If you'd rather risk a fire than get this thing done right,” he threw his hands out, palms up, “then go ahead.” He cocked his head in challenge.

The moonlight, ominously tinted blue by the tarp around us, outlined our black silhouettes like a two-tone color comic. The harsh, round moon hung above us like a spotlight or searchlight or single eye watching our every move. A chill of paranoia ran down my spine that I tried to shake loose.

“What are you talking about, Junior?” Had he been spending too much time with Frizz? Was paranoia contagious? “This is like that fatal flaw thing.” It was like a crack in the veneer.

“Shhh!” Frizz said and turned his head to listen for evidence that we’d been overheard. Lisa stuck a fingernail into my thigh. Oblivious, Jerry smoked his joint. I said nothing.

"Here's the plan," Junior started. "We've been driving trucks for Sam on Saturdays and filling in on the nightshift. They make the gelatin at one factory, mix it in boiling water in tank trucks, then cart it over to the other factory to make the suppositories.” He sat back and smiled. "It's made to order. I couldn't believe it the first time I saw it. The trucks even have hoses long enough to empty the gelatin into the pool!” Junior threw up his hands in triumph.

“Timothy,” Lisa said, “how’s this not going to ruin the pool?”

“I did a little experiment with Ricky Barton’s little plastic kiddy pool.” He smiled, obviously pleased with his thoroughness. “It took only an hour for the Jell-O to set in the cold weather last night. It took a little longer to heat back up with hot water, but it melted back to a sludgy liquid that I hosed down the drain. Then I power hosed the walls.” Junior shifted into his JD step-it-up voice. “Next summer Ricky’ll never guess that he’s swimming in the prototype for the greatest prank in Woodcove history!” He shouted the last few words like a politician on the campaign trail.

Frizz cheered on cue, ignoring the security threat, and Jerry joined him after a slight delay.

“Not only did the pool look like new,” Junior smiled for the punch line, “but the Jell-O tasted pretty darn good.”

“We’ll just leave the clean-up instructions at the scene, I guess,” Lisa said ignoring Frizz’s renewed laugh track.

"And what about the night watchman?" I asked.

"There isn’t one. And every Sunday night a crew comes in to clean the pool and..." I think Junior winked, but it was hard to see in the darkness.

"Yeah," I said, "and?"

"Frizz?" Junior asked like a game show host to his announcer. "And what about the pool crew?"

Frizz blew the smoke out of his lungs and paused, playing his importance for all it was worth. "My sister's boyfriend works for the pool company."

"Big Lou works?" I asked in mock surprise.

Frizz ignored me. "He says the school calls pretty regularly and cancels if there’s a meet or a special event.” He sat shoulder to shoulder with Junior as if he thought they were the new dynamic duo.

"Hello, L & L Pool? JD Wilson here," Junior said in a perfect imitation of Coach. “We’ve got a pool function Sunday. Cancel the cleaning.”

“So what if someone's using the pool?" Lisa asked.

"Sunday, February 18th, the pool is free.” Each escape route closed quickly before us. "And oddly enough, Frizz and I are working at Sam’s that weekend.” He chuckled softly as he looked around. "It will be nice to finally get this thing going."

"Yeah," I said, "I can't wait."

**Chapter 10**

Soon the swim practices blurred into every other swim practice I’d ever had. In the first few meets we hardly had to break a sweat or whatever it is we do under water. Even JD didn’t seem that worried until we met Shore Points High on the first Tuesday in January. Neighboring Shore Points was our biggest rival although no one on the present swim team had ever lost to them. In his pre-meet pep talk, JD reminded us that they always creamed us in football and would love to see us fall from our throne in swimming.

Jerry gave them little hope in the diving competition. His first few dives made his dominance clear and then he nailed a two and half with a full twist on his final jump that would have won the States. Something happened to him in the air that even he couldn’t explain. It just looked easy - slow motion twists and flips that uncoiled just in time for a knife-like entry into the water. Maybe it was the chlorine, but his eyes looked especially red-rimmed when he climbed out of the pool. He flashed the embarrassed grin he always had after his best dives that seemed to say, “Don’t ask me where that came from.”

Sam cheered wildly, usually at the wrong time like a football fanatic at a tennis match. Junior neither smiled nor made fun of him. Instead, he swam and won both freestyle sprints with a passionless grace and climbed out of the pool with a nod to JD. A body length seemed to be his selected margin of victory, no more, no less, regardless of the quality of the competition.

Frizz tried to do the same thing in the two hundred meters and nearly lost, kicking like a maniac to hold off a kid from Shore Points and win by a fingertip. He still tried to climb out of the pool nonchalantly and strut to the bleachers with a nod. Even JD had to laugh once he’d gotten over his near-heart attack. Frizz was a never an effortless-Junior-type swimmer and he was not going to win without a step-it-up JD effort. He gave himself more room in the 500.

I swam personal bests in both the one hundred and two hundred meter freestyles, getting fourth in each, my first individual points against a good team in my career at Woodcove. And I swam well enough in the freestyle relays for Junior to make his body length without too much effort on the anchor leg. JD gave me an “’Atta boy” and a quick one-handed, suffocating shoulder hug, and my parents offered to take me out for an ice cream, but I didn’t need any reward. Maybe it was the secret of low expectations. Or maybe I was just too worried about everything else to worry about swimming; I just swam.

After practice the next day, Junior was waiting for me in the parking lot by my rusty old red VW. I’d lent it to my mom again and she’d returned it, as she always did, vacuumed, waxed and full of gas. I really needed to lend it to her more often.

"Do you have a minute?" Junior asked. He looked tired, slumped against the front fender. Brown leaves blew in swirls around the nearly empty parking lot. Before the wedding I always saw him as a carbon copy of his dad, but now I couldn't help also seeing beneath the dark-haired, olive-skinned exterior, the pale, delicate face of his mom.

"Sure.” I opened the door. "Too cold out here. Come on in.” I slid behind the wheel and put a tape in, an old Hendrix tape we still listened to with the airband. Hendrix drew out the lyrics to wrap them around his guitar notes.

Purple haze, all in my brain

lately things just don't seem the same

Junior climbed in the other side and I turned the tunes up, but he turned it back down.

"I know you've been seeing a lot of Lisa," he began like he'd practiced it. He raised his hands to quiet me when I started to stutter an apology. "No, I think that's great. Really.” He turned to me and smiled. "I'm glad you're spending time with her.” He sounded like he was returning to his prepared speech. "I know I've been ignoring her. I've just been busy and..." he hesitated. "to tell you the truth, I don't know what to do with her anymore.”

Acting funny but I don't know why

S'cuse me while I kiss the sky.

When I started to explain, he began talking quickly, "It's just a temporary thing.” His script seemed to be breaking down. "All the things I used to do without thinking… now I can't think of what to do. It's...” He shrugged and tried to smile. “Awkward, I guess."

"Everything's awkward lately, Junior.” His guard was down. It seemed like the first sincere conversation I'd had with him in months. "You're not the only one who doesn't know what to do."

"Once we get the pool done and all the college stuff out of the way, I'll be back to my old self."

"Lisa and I are just friends, Junior,” I lied. “We’re just spending time together because you've been busy."

"No, Davy. It's more than that.” He turned and looked directly into my eyes. Our faces were no more than a foot apart in the little car. “I'm glad you're together. You're good for her, a lot better than I am. Quit selling yourself short and stop feeling guilty about it."

Purple haze all around.

Don't know if I'm coming up or down.

"I tried to tell you," I began, although I didn’t feel like I’d tried very hard. "I don't feel good about the whole thing."

"I know." He smiled that crooked smile of his. "You were calling me four or five times a week for a while. You tried to tell me Christmas Eve. I’m sorry. It was pretty cruel of me to let you sweat, but I needed time to think. Anyway," he winked, "she's better off with you."

"Junior.."

"Come on!" he interrupted. "It's not as if she's mine to give away anyway. She'd beat us both up if she heard us talking like that.” He stuck out his hand for me to shake it. "I'm happy to see you two together.” He was back to the script. Guard up; moment passed. “I mean it.”

"You’re glad she’s with me?” I shook his hand while shaking my head. “Junior, you're scaring me.” I tried to look him right in the eye, but he leaned over and turned up the tape deck. "You always had to win everything!" I yelled over the music. "I can't believe you'd let Lisa go this easy.” I reached over and turned the tape down.

"You can't win ‘em all," he said. I smiled, thinking he was mimicking what I used to say when I’d climb out of the pool after another loss.

"Sure you can," I said. That was his standard response.

"Well… not anymore.” He tapped the dashboard absently and looked at the floor.

"Sure you can.” I smiled, trying to recapture the humor. I didn’t know what else to say. "A hundred and twelve in a row," I said referring to Junior's streak of consecutive victories going back to sixth grade. "At least you can."

He looked at me and swallowed hard. "Everything comes to an end sometime.” A blast of cold wind shook the car and reached its icy fingers through the cracked black rubber around the windows.

"And then what?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Start a new streak," I said. That's what the old Junior would have said. We had changed places somehow. I was sorry I brought up the winning streak. He had started out so upbeat, putting a positive spin on Lisa and me and now...

"Yeah." He laughed weakly.

"Are you sure you're all right?” I turned the music back up. "I mean it's no big deal, right?” It was too late to minimize the streak now.

"Right," he said. “No biggie.” He was starting to look like an old man again. I didn't know what else to do, so I turned the music even louder.

"Things'll be better soon," he yelled over the music. "I'm a little stressed out, that’s all. It’ll all be over soon."

Am I happy or in mis-er-y?

He sat there another five minutes, listening to tunes and playing an occasional riff on his air guitar.

"You need a ride?" I asked at last.

"No, I'm fine," he said, grabbing the handle. "I've got one of Sam's Caddies."

He got out, but before he closed the door, he poked his head back in the car. "Take good care of her."

"I will," I said, spooked by the serious tone he couldn’t conceal. "Take care of yourself."

I drove home thinking about how far away Junior seemed to be getting, or I was getting, and about how every time things seemed to be getting better they immediately got worse. Our grand-goodbye-to-high-school prank seemed to be spinning out of control. Junior flirting with reenacting his dad’s accident. And now he’s giving his girlfriend away. The more I ran it through my head, the more confused I became. I tried to think of someone I could talk to help me figure it out. My father had already given me his advice: separate everything. But it all seemed to pile back up again. My mother was only into problems that could be solved by plenty of rest or a good sandwich. And I doubted J. D., as much as he might want to, could give me calm, unbiased advice with his state title streak on the line.

I realized I missed Junior's father, too. He was the only one I knew who could unwind this mess. I thought of calling one of those crisis centers anonymously, but what was I going to say? "I'm worried about my best friend. He's getting obsessed with filling a pool with Jell-O. He’s practicing driving into trees. And he just gave his girl friend away” They'd think I was nuts.

“Hello?” a gruff voice answered the phone. “Suicide hotline.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I held the phone cord in my hand and stared at the scuffed white walls along my basement stairs and the cheap paneling that started at the third-to-last step and turned right with the last two steps into the basement. I had stretched out the kitchen phone cord as far as it would go, sat on the top stair to the basement and closed the door behind me. What was I doing calling a suicide hotline? I knew I should have checked it out with Lisa first. Or tried talking to Junior again, laying out all my worst fears. But what was he going to say? 'Suicide? Yeah, sure. I’ve been researching the possibility.'?"

“Hello?” the voice said again before I could hang up. “It’s all right. Take your time.”

I pulled the phone from my ear, stood up, and started to open the basement door. The voice, now small and metallic, spoke from the black plastic phone in my outstretched hand: “The phone hasn’t rung all night. I’m happy just to hear somebody breathing.”

I put it back to my ear.

“Not that I want people to call,” the voice continued, louder again, “it’s just that I never realized how lonely a suicide hotline could be.” Short nasally breaths sounded like he was laughing. “Sorry. Not funny. My name’s Victor. How can I help you?”

“Listen,” I said, my voice gravelly as if I hadn’t spoken in months. “Thanks anyway, Victor, but I called by mistake.”

“You dialed the wrong number?”

”No,” I shook my head as I spoke, and then, remembering my father watching TV in the living room on the other side of the wall, I whispered, “I just don’t need a suicide hotline.”

“Well, what do you need?” he asked. “I’m flexible.”

“No, I uh...” He wasn’t going to let me go easily. “I have to-”

“Listen,” Victor said, “I don’t know you. You don’t know me. Lay out the problem, and let’s take a shot at it.”

“What problem?” I said, suddenly suspicious.

“I don’t know. Whatever it is that caused you to dial the phone.” He paused and took a nasally breath. “Sometimes it just helps to talk about things.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to figure out what I could tell him. The promise of anonymity made me feel like I could at least try. “Okay.”

“Just start at the beginning.”

“The beginning?” I took a deep breath, “My friend almost drove into a tree the other day, the same tree that killed his father last year.” The words flew out of me like birds flushed from dark brush. I had to remind myself to quiet them. “And everything seems to be coming to an end. His mom’s getting remarried. He’s obsessed with this big pra-” I caught myself, “project. And today, he gave his girlfriend away.”

“Wow!” Victor said in a slow, almost stoned tone. He blew a big breath into the phone. “Dead father. Remarrying mother. Reckless behavior. Break up with the girlfriend. That’s quite a list. And there’s nobody that your friend could talk to?”

“Who?” I asked. “His mom’s just as bummed out as he is. His new stepdad has no idea what’s going on. Same with the swim coach. And his dad’s dead.”

 “Has your friend tried to get help before?” Victor asked.

“What do you mean before?” I stared at the black plastic receiver like it had betrayed me somehow. Something wasn’t right. “And why do you say your friend like it’s some kind of code?” Junior would have had a plan before he called. He wouldn’t have just picked up a phone and started talking.

“I mean,” Victor said suddenly sounding defensive, “has your friend, or whatever you want to call him, spoken to anyone about this?”

“I don’t know.” I stood up, balancing on the top narrow stair to the basement. It was suddenly clear. “Wait! You think I’m talking about me, don’t you?” The sound seemed to boom an echo off the faded plaster walls. I whispered, “You think this is some kind of Anne-Landers-my-friend-is-depressed letter.”

“No,” Victor said. “I don’t know.” He began to speak quickly. “I never know when I talk to people. It was a possibility. I’m sorry.”

I wanted to hang up right then, slam the receiver down and stomp away. I turned back and forth in the narrow space of the stairway and sat down, the hard round earpiece glued to the side of my head.

“Listen,” Victor said. “Let’s give this guy a name. It is a guy, right? It’ll be less awkward and we’ll remove the doubt.”

“A name?” I jolted back and banged my head against the door.

“Yeah. Make one up,” Victor said. “Make one up for yourself too, if you want.”

Make up a name. Junior would have had fake names ready. Something based on some famous suicide therapist or Freud or somebody. “Sigmund,” I said.

“And for yourself?”

 I stared at the walls dented and marked by years of boxes and old furniture carried down the stairs. “Wally,” I said.

“Sigmund and Wally?” Victor asked. “Okay. Where were we? Help. Has Sigmund sought help?”

“Sigmund thinks he can handle anything.” Sigmund! I said to myself. What a stupid fake name. “Sigmund’s too busy trying to pull off this big project,” How could I explain it without giving up the prank? “This big senior year, final hurrah project. He seems to think about nothing else.” And how could I give up the prank without turning in everybody and everything we ever did together?

“Wally, are Sigmund’s grades slipping?” Victor asked. “Any other signs of things falling apart?”

“Not that anyone else can see. His swi-” I stopped myself again. Had I already said he was a swimmer? Who knew what Victor did with this information? “He’s an athlete and he’s still winning, but not like before.” It dawned on me that Junior wasn’t screwed up enough for anyone to worry about. He won his races. He got his A’s. He looked handsome. How could anything be wrong? Maybe I was exaggerating the whole thing. Junior wasn’t all I’d thought he was, but was he suicidal?

“Have you talked to anybody else about Sigmund, Wally?”

“Stop calling me Wally.” I felt like an idiot. Sigmund and Wally. The most pathetic fake names ever invented. “And stop calling him Sigmund!”

“But you said -”

“I know what I said. Just forget what I said.” I was starting to sound like I did need some help myself. “I made a mistake, Victor. I shouldn’t be wasting your time.” I stood up and leaned my head against the door. Peeling decals of emergency phone numbers stuck into my forehead.

“It’s not a waste,” Victor said quickly. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“I'm sorry I called. Maybe I'm wrong. My friend, I mean Sigmund.” I didn't know what to call Junior now. "Maybe Sigmund's fine. I'm just overreacting. Maybe he just broke up with his girlfriend and wanted me to know I could see her. You're probably pretty busy.” Victor’d said he wasn’t busy and I believed him. I pictured him lounging back in an old chair in an office full of overflowing ashtrays and playing cards worn from solitaire - his big belly sticking out between the popped off buttons of his Hawaiian shirt. I could see it like a cartoon in my head, but then I felt guilty for making fun of him, even to myself.

"No, wait," Victor was trying to stall me. "I want to talk to you, Wal - I mean ah...” He was working hard now. "I want to talk about Sigmund. You're right to be worried. There are a lot of clues here we shouldn’t ignore."

"No, I’m blowing this out of proportion. After all he didn’t hit the tree. I mean he turned in plenty of time.” I pushed open the basement door, walked over to the phone on the wall and once again moved the phone from my ear. “Thanks, but I've got to go.”

"Don't hang up!” Victor called, his voice small and metallic again. “Sigmund needs your help. I think I can help you both.” I felt another surge of paranoia. Why was he keeping me on the line? For a minute, I thought he was tracing my call. It was a ridiculous idea, I knew. If he wanted to, he would probably have done it already. I just wanted to hang up. "Or get him to someone who can,” Victor said. “If you can get Sigmund to talk, even about little things, it'll help him feel more in control."

"Victor,” I said bringing the phone back to my face, “the problem with Sigmund is that he's in too much control."

"Talk anyway. Try to get him to call me. Or talk to somebody he trusts. Or somebody with some training."

"Thanks, Victor. Let me think about it and I'll call you back."

"You promise?" he said, desperation creeping into his voice. "You promise you'll call before anything happens?"

I felt like I couldn't hang up the phone. Why did I care about this stranger on the other end? He had me calling him Victor, like I knew him, while I was making up names at my end. But there was something sad in his voice, something human. I couldn't just cut him off.

"Do you promise?" he asked again. “Better to be wrong by doing too much rather than too little.”

I took a deep breath. It was a mistake to call. I knew I’d never call him again, but to get him off the phone I’d have to lie to him, make him feel like he was doing his job. "Yeah, Victor," I said at last. "I promise."

I pushed the button down with my finger and stared at the receiver for a long time. The whole call made me feel like an idiot. Sigmund and Wally!

Junior would have come up with better names. He always thought of everything: dark clothing, contingency plans, coded signals and even cover stories. Usually I was Davy Ross from Port Lewis. I even had a phone number and address memorized from a real family named Ross who lived there. Sometimes Junior wanted all our names linked somehow, like one time we all had the last names of New York Yankees and another time, when we changed the letters on the movie theater sign downtown, we were all Hitchcock and Capra and Welles. Even when I called a suicide hot line for Junior, I ended up thinking about how he would have done a better job.

Junior had always known what he was doing. Why was I suddenly doubting his ability to pull it off? I was the problem, the one who was changing and messing up the equation. Maybe Junior just needed me to believe, to be who I’d always been. And Victor probably saw suicide everywhere. After all, he worked on a suicide hotline.

**Chapter 11**

The next Friday night Junior was his old self. I got to the boatyard late and he already had Jerry laughing so hard that he snorted smoke out his nose. Squeezed in between Junior and Lisa, Frizz actually giggled at the ribbing Junior was giving him about being from Ohio. "I bet they didn't have that in Chagrin Falls," Junior kept saying with what was supposed to be a Midwest twang and Frizz would laugh and tell some silly story about his old home town. And Junior was charming Lisa to the point where I felt hopelessly overmatched; Lisa didn’t help by gripping my hand suspiciously hard.

"We've got a couple of problems still," he said when the joints were sufficiently passing. "I still don't know where we're going to get enough ice. And my experiments to test how fast the Jell-O will melt and wash away are discouraging. Unless you flush it with hot water, it's pretty slow to liquefy at room temperature. It appears to need the 98.6° a suppository gets."

The discussion broke down into wild ideas for solving the problem and rationalizations for why it didn't matter anyway. Junior sat with a Cheshire grin.

"What is it?" I said at last.

"I've got one problem solved." The smile grew more crooked. "The W."

"What?"

"The W," he repeated, trying to sound nonchalant. "The black Woodcove W for the middle of the pool."

"Awesome!" Frizz yelled, buying it completely.

"What a cool idea!" Jerry added.

"Licorice Jell-O?" I asked, cocking an eyebrow. "Just standing up on it's own? Right in in the middle of all the other Jell-O?"

"Plexiglas frame," Junior said fighting not to break into a laugh.

"Don't be so negative, Davy," Frizz said, not noticing that Junior's straight face was already falling apart.

“He’s kidding, Frizz,” I said and gave him a little shove on the shoulder. He thought he knew Junior so well.

“No, he’s not,” Frizz said and shoved me back. “Are you, Junior?”

"Wrap it in Saran wrap?" Junior said, his smile turning into a laugh. "Build it cube by cube?"

"You asshole," Jerry laughed as he flicked the lit joint at Junior. Sparks flew off Junior's hand as he blocked it and the orange embers settled into our laps. Everyone jumped up to brush them off and we banged our heads on the dinghy.

"Shit!" I yelled and rubbed my head.

"What?" Frizz asked again and again. Junior rolled back and forth and laughed. Jerry rubbed his head and swore. Lisa shook her head beside me and smiled. It was a stupid joke, but at least he was fooling around again.

"Frizz, it’s a joke," I said. "You can't suspend a black Jell-O W in a pool of red Jell-O."

"Why not?"

Junior stopped in mid-laugh and started patting Frizz on the back. "Exactly Frizz. That's the type of thinking we need to see. 'Why not?'“ He shifted into his JFK – or was it RFK? "Some people ask 'Why?' Frizz asks 'Why not?' Who said that?" Junior asked.

"You did," I had to smile despite myself.

"That's right. I did, didn't I?” The planning session unraveled to easy talk about the swim team and school. About midnight, Junior, Lisa, and I walked home arm in arm in arm under the cold moon.

I didn’t talk to Lisa about the suicide hotline or about Junior’s giving her away. I didn’t know how to explain what I did and why I didn’t talk to her first. The best course seemed to be to forget about it. I told her I needed some time to myself to figure things out and she said she understood. For a few days I begged off on the study dates and the walks to the beach and even the telephone calls.

I sat in my room and tried to draw her from memory, but of course I couldn’t. I peeked through the window and drew her house across the street, the big gnarled dogwood in her yard and her yellow Karmann Ghia in her driveway. I found photographs: school pictures, shots from Association picnics, yellowing black and white newspaper pictures from swimming meets and Polaroids of the whole gang playing in the yard.

In my notebook, I sketched little replicas of all of them, sometimes two or three on a page like they were all looking at each other in some silent communication. It was reassuring to see us all together like it used to be. When I drew from a recent picture, placing it right next to an old one, I could clearly see the line connecting them – connecting us all to each other. I guess I was trying to return to the status quo of a few months before, but everyone else seemed to have moved on.

Notes began to appear on the message board by the kitchen phone again. “Pick schools?” “Begin applications?” “The Future is Now!”

“That’s just your father trying to be funny,” my mother said when she caught me erasing them one afternoon.

“The key word is ‘trying,’” I said.

“Very funny, dear,” she said. “But unless you get moving on this it’s going to get worse.”

“I know.” It was time to make my move on the college front. My plan had a better chance of working with my father early rather than late. The next morning after a long night of filling out applications I came down to breakfast holding them in my hand. My father didn’t even look up from his paper as I set them down on a safe corner of the kitchen table, poured my Trix and milk, and started eating. I waited patiently as my father dramatically turned the pages and shook his head.

He pointed to the front page headlines about more bombing in Vietnam and the continued stall of the peace talks. “If this war doesn’t end soon,” he said before folding up the front section and turning to the sports page, “you’ll have a chance to be in it.” It was a random shot. I fired back.

“Naw.” I shook my head. “I’m going to be in college.”

“College?” He looked up in genuine surprise that I brought up the subject, but he recovered in time to get in a return shot. “Don’t you have to actually apply?”

“Oooh! Ow!” I held my hands over my heart pretending I was wounded like we were in one of those stupid TV sitcoms my father aspired our lives to be. “Actually I’ve picked five,” I said, holding up the applications and continuing my death scene, “UCONN, Southern, URI, Ithaca and Syracuse. They all have art and business. I’ve got all the applications done. I just need the checks.” I pretended to pull the sword out of my chest and throw it back at him.

“Touché,” he said, and pretended to cover his own wound, but from his smile I knew he was taking credit for badgering me into it. I was willing to give it to him if he just said fine, where do I sign. But it must have seemed too easy; he smelled a rat. “Don’t you mean to say business and art?”

“Art and business. Business and art.” I shrugged my shoulders. “Same thing.”

“Well, usually you mention the major first and the minor second.”

“Dad!” I said. “We’ve talked about this.”

“So there shouldn’t be any disagreement.”

I drummed my fingers on the table and stared at the applications. Head to head, I knew he would win. I should be brave and honest, and lose.

“Davy,” he said, “I’m not paying three thousand dollars a year for you to draw pictures.”

“I’m not talking about drawing pictures.”

“Listen,” he said like he was making a great compromise, “I love to doodle myself sometimes. If you want to take an art course here and there, fine, but college is an investment. Art school, Davy, is a bad investment.” He chopped a hand in front of him for emphasis.

“Dad, that’s what I want to do.” I hated the desperate sound in my voice. “I’ve thought about it for a long time.” I couldn’t shake this ridiculous urge to tell the truth. “It would be easier for me, too, if I could go the business route and be happy just making money.” Even though it wasn’t going to do me any good. “But I can’t. That’s your life. I’m not you or Junior or anybody else.”

He slammed his paper down on the table, picked up his half-empty coffee cup and Wheaties bowl, scrapped the legs of the kitchen chair on the floor as he stood up, and walked to the sink. “I cannot justify spending hard-earned money on art school!” He dropped the dishes into the sink.

“I’ll take out a loan.”

He turned from the sink, raised both hands in anger and then lowered them slowly. “You have no collateral.”

It was going nowhere – at least nowhere I wanted to go. I drummed my fingers a little more. I fingered the applications remembering the little boxes I’d checked next to Art. I figured I could check the ones next to Business, too, and buy a little more time. He stood by the sink waiting for my surrender. I swallowed hard and gave it to him. “Fine,” I stalled, “I’ll major in business and minor in art.” I didn’t like lying but I had to lie. He didn’t have to see the final applications and maybe he'd change his mind if I got into the art schools, especially if I didn’t get into the business ones. “But if I do well, you’ve got to reconsider,” I added. And maybe I’d think of a better argument by then. “Promise?”

He stood tall at the sink, nodding like MacArthur accepting the Japanese surrender. “Promise,” he said, probably thinking he should throw me a bone. “Ask your mom to make out the application checks.”

I was feeling like I had things under control for a change. We won our next two swim meets. Junior even pushed his margin to a length and a half against Faircove. I had three thirds and even a second against a weak team from Black Rock High. When Junior called the next Sunday, I even hoped that something had gone wrong with the prank, giving us an excuse to cancel. But Junior had other bad news; his cat Molly had died in her sleep. She was seventeen.

"She seemed pretty healthy at the wedding," I said.

"No," Junior said. "She's been sick for a while."

"It must seem strange to not have her around," I said. "She's always been there."

"She has.” He paused long enough for me to hear the static on the line. "The reason I called is that I wanted to have a little funeral for her, in the backyard."

"I'll be there."

"Great," Junior said. "Seven tomorrow night. Could you wear a sport coat or something?"

When I arrived, Lisa was already there, looking somber in a dark dress. Frizz and Jerry arrived moments later in Frizz's truck. They wore suits and ties, making me feel underdressed in my sport coat and open shirt. Junior led us down to the basement. Molly was nestled in an old sweater of Junior's inside a Bloomingdales' box on the Ping-Pong table.

"She looks comfortable in there," I said, "like she's sleeping."

"It seemed appropriate. She was always a slave to fashion.” He smiled sadly. "She loved those ribbons at Christmas.” He gently put the lid on the box, opened the sliding doors and walked out into the yard.

A cold, clean wind blew off the cove, driving us into a tight huddle. From the smell in the air I knew there were ice chunks around the dock pilings and floating in the waves on the shore of Grass Island. Junior had set up four lanterns around a small, freshly dug grave. To shelter us from the wind he’d picked a corner of the yard made by the side of the house and a low sheltering row of hemlocks that we’d helped Mr. Walker plant when we were in eighth grade.

"The earth must be pretty hard for digging," I said to break the silence.

"Yeah," Junior said absently, then shifted to a priest-like voice, "Thanks for coming.” He held Molly's box as we stood in a tight circle around the grave. "As I explained on the phone, I want us to make up kind of a poem about Molly. Just tell a story or a memory you have of Molly and begin and end with 'I remember Molly.' Make sense?"

"Sure," we all agreed. Junior’s seriousness seemed to block out the cold for all of us.

"Okay," Junior said, "I'll start.

"I remember Molly," he said, "I remember when I was seven, Molly had kittens behind the couch in the living room. She would hiss when anyone but me came near. And I remember after we gave the kittens away, she stayed in my room for a week and wouldn't come out. I remember Molly."

I took a deep breath and said, "I remember Molly. I remember she used to sit in your lap and clean herself and when she was through she'd start cleaning you, running her rough tongue over your arm. I remember Molly."

"I remember Molly." Lisa looked at me and then at Junior. "I remember how Molly used to jump up on your shoulder when you would come home from school and she'd rub her chin against your head as you pet her. I remember Molly."

"I remember Molly," Jerry said. "Like I remember how Molly used to drool as she purred when you pet her under her chin. She'd purr like a jack hammer with streams of saliva dropping on your hand.” He smiled and when Junior prompted him by clearing his throat, quickly added, “I remember Molly."

"I remember Molly," Frizz said. "I remember how you always talked about Molly as if she were a person. 'Molly's been sick or Molly stayed out all night last night.' I knew you for six months before I found out Molly wasn't your sister. I remember Molly."

"I remember Molly.” Junior knelt down and lowered her closed box slowly into the grave. He broke up the soil into chunks with a small shovel, pushed it into the grave with his hands and tamped it lightly. He stood, lingering for a moment over the grave.

"Good-bye, Molly," he said softly and then turned to us. "Thanks, you guys.” He walked quickly into the house.

We stood awkwardly for a moment watching Junior close the sliding doors to the basement and disappear behind the curtains. The wind picked up to a howl blowing the few leaves on the ground in great circles. With shrugs and raised eyebrows, we left: Jerry and Frizz in Frizz’s truck, Lisa in her Karmann Ghia, and me, with my arms wrapped tight for warmth, walking.

**Chapter 12**

“A suicide hotline?” Lisa asked. We stood under a broken light in a corner of the hall outside the locker room doors. “Really?” I had bumped into her as I was leaving swim practice and she was coming from the school library. When I saw her I pulled her aside and just blurted it out.

“It was kind of on impulse,” I said, attempting to look at the tan cinder block walls. I’d spent the last two weeks trying to avoid staring at her, but my eyes seemed to be pulled back to her like magnetic north. Her black eyebrows arched slightly in concern. I floated into those warm blue irises. The tip of her tongue skirted across her lower lip nervously. I wanted to run my hand along the soft line of her jaw and tell her it was going to be all right even if it wasn’t. I was so in love with her it scared me.

I’d lost my train of thought. Junior. We were talking about Junior.

“He practically drove us into the tree that killed his father and then he met me after practice and told me he was glad I was going out with you.” I loved how she pushed out her lips when she was thinking. “It freaked me out.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” She opened her eyes wider and her bottom lip quivered almost imperceptibly.

“Why?” Because I was too spooked by it all: the fear in the car and the guilt when he asked me to take good care of her? “I should have,” I said. “I was just ...” I was just what? Avoiding her because I was in love with her? Feeling guilty every time I saw her? Stealing my best friend’s girl while he was falling apart? “I’m sorry. I had to do something,” I finally said, “but once I got on the phone I felt like an idiot. It just seemed like... I was sure I was wrong. But Molly’s funeral... Man, that sure seemed like some kind of rehearsal, didn't it?" I tried not to look at her.

"At least you were trying," she said. "I'm not doing anything.” She bit her lip and absently rubbed my wrist with her thumb. "You think he's bummed out enough to kill himself?"

"Lisa, you started me on this whole thing. I thought it was ridiculous, but harmless.” I tried to look away. I shouldn’t have told her anything. I felt like an idiot.

"But I was just thinking the prank was too much," she said, "a stoned joke that would finally get us all caught. You're right, though. He’s acting weird. I think he is. He probably should be."

The more I tried not to look at her, the more I could see her even without looking. What was wrong with me? My best friend might be suicidal and all I could do was fantasize about his girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend. Whatever she was.

"Okay.” She grabbed both my hands in hers. "What do we do?"

“I don’t know. “ Her slender, piano-player fingers looked so tan against my pale hands, still pink from the pool. When I looked up, the light behind her haloed around her head. Now I was turning her into a saint. And I felt like the opposite.

I suddenly thought about what a terrible priest I would have been. I would have disappointed Granny one way or another. A priest would know how to handle wanting something very badly that you've sworn to yourself not to touch or at least should have sworn not to touch. I wished I had a priest to talk to right then, someone sworn to secrecy, someone not involved that I could talk to anonymously in the dark. Even a nerd like Father Bill. For the first time in a long time, church seemed very appealing to me.

I thought of Junior insisting he come to confession with me when we were little and my parents still made me go every month. We would sit in the pew whispering, trying to figure out the system for penance. Junior became obsessed with it, picturing some kind of cheat sheet for priests taped to the wall in the dark confessional, each lie worth one “Hail Mary,” each fight with your sister equal to two “Our Fathers.” We confessed an identical list of sins to the same priest on the same night with a single variation. But we were never able to figure it out. There was no pattern; the same priest the same night would give two different penances. We would be disappointed each time as we knelt quietly at the altar using hand signals to compare penances.

"We have to work together.” Lisa pressed her hands around mine as if she were praying. "You can’t keep avoiding me."

"I'm not avoiding you," I began. I didn't mean to hurt her. "I just want to get this whole Jell-O thing over with. I want to see you. I..."

"It's okay," Lisa said softly. I glanced down at our hands, catching myself and looking toward the ground, passing the curve of her thigh into her knee. The light cast subtle shadows on the muscle of her calf. Her skin was so smooth, I thought. She must have shaved her legs this morning. I shook my head. There was no safe place to look.

"I’m falling in love with you, Lisa," I said, surprising myself. I was just thinking it; I didn't mean to say it aloud. "Or have fallen. Or have always been.” It seemed so easy to say it. "But I can't... We can't... It's like we're sacrificing Junior. That's what it feels like. We’re...” I shrugged. "I don't know how to help him. Maybe he's not suicidal, but he's definitely falling apart.” I pulled my hands away. "I'm sorry."

When I looked up there were tears in her eyes. Before I could stop myself, I put my arms around her. God, I was making a mess of this.

"Lisa, I...” This was great. Now I could feel my own eyes filling up with tears. "Lisa, I..."

"Shut up, Davy," she whispered and pulled me closer. I gave in to her warm body and hugged back.

After a few minutes of bliss, the locker room door opened. Two gawky basketball players walked by holding their gym bags. They raised their eyebrows and smirked. That's bliss, I thought as the two ignorant goons passed, ignorance is bliss. Now I knew what that meant.

When the taller one gave me a knowing wink, I snapped at him. “Leave us alone, you bonehead! You have no idea what’s going on!” This time they raised their eyebrows in surprise. “Let’s get out of here.” I grabbed Lisa’s hand and pulled her out the door.

We snaked around the scattered cars in the parking lot to my old VW sitting alone in the back by the abandoned football field. A cold January wind blew MacDonald’s bags and loose leaf papers across the pavement, where they caught here and there on a tire or curb. Six o’clock and it was already dark. Cones of light fell from lamps along the top of the brick wall around the gym settling into half circles on the ground. Beyond them we had only the stars in the moonless sky to guide us.

I quickly cranked up the engine and turned up the heat. “Let’s pretend this will throw out some warmth.”

“We need to make our own warmth in the meantime.” Lisa put her hands on my shoulders, pulling me close in an awkward hug around the stick shift. “We’re not abandoning him.”

I could only see the outline of her coat against the window and feel the warmth of her breath as she spoke.

“We’re thinking about Junior,” she said.

“We have needs, too.” I shifted my head to feel the smoothness of her cheek on mine.

“Exactly.” She turned her head so we were nose to nose. As my eyes adjusted to the light I could see the shadow her nose and brow cast against her cheek and her closed eyes. I turned my head and reached my lips out to kiss her.

“It’s not like... we can’t help Junior,” I said, punctuating with a kiss between each phrase, “at the same time we…”

“Um, hmm,” she said.

“It’s not like,” I said, “we have to think about him,” our kisses grew longer and more urgent, “twenty four hours a day.”

“Um, hmm,” she said again and then, “Shh.” She pushed closer and opened her mouth, leaving no room for any more words.

There was no space in that crowded car for an out-of-body viewing of our awkward angling around the clutch and the parking brake, of our passionate grasping through the layers of winter coats and sweaters beneath, of the banging against the steering wheel and the radio as we kissed, of the final escapes of giggling replacing the moans as Lisa, and then I, realized the impossibility of our quest.

I stopped moving with the top of my head pressed against the passenger window kneeling over Lisa in a crouch. She had turned her head sideways and slid down to make room on the seat to fit my knees on either side of her waist. My butt crunched into the knob of the glove box arching my back into awkward S.

“You don’t think this is going to work?” I joked to hide the weighted disappointment in my lungs.

She giggled through her nose and shook her head.

“How about the back?” I peeked over her shoulder at the narrow back seat.

“How about a house with heat and plenty of room?”

“Sure.” I jolted up in excitement and banged my head again against the roof. “You got one?”

“No.” Lisa slid her butt up the seat and I pushed myself off her and landed with a thud on the driver’s seat, “but my parents will go out someday. Maybe next week. We’ll make a plan.”

“Oh.” A deep breath failed to pull any hope or air back into my chest. I shifted around the stick and the steering wheel to sit upright. “Sorry this car is so dinky. I guess I need a Caddy”

“No,” Lisa said shaking her head. “It’s cute. And it’s good for kissing,” Lisa said. “And it’s a pretty good form of birth control.”

“A smoochmobile,” I said, trying to focus on the positive. Lisa’s laugh lightened some of the disappointment. When we stopped, it was quiet long enough to feel awkward. “I’m not sure if I’m ready to plan this.”

“We’ve got no choice, David,” Lisa said. “We need to make a plan if we’re going to make anything happen, for ourselves and for Junior.” She reached over and grabbed my hand.

"Lisa," I said, "I’m more the watching-things-happen-type than the making-things-happen-type."

"What are you talking about?” Lisa smiled. "I love modesty but this is ridiculous. You’re smart and talented. You care about people. Quit pretending you’re some nobody.”

I was too startled by her barrage of compliments to say anything.

She looked me in the eye and continued to massage the back of my hand. “You’re one of the best sprinters in the conference now and you’re a great artist and friend. It’s time to quit your second banana routine.”

“Okay,” I said more to stop her than to agree. The warmth filling my chest was a mixture of pride and love and something else. Hope, maybe. I hoped that someday I could be what she saw in me.

“Besides, you’re not going to do it alone. We'll do it together; no more secrets.” She took both my hands in hers and stared into my eyes. "Do you promise?"

"Yeah, I promise." It seemed lately, I was making a lot of promises that I had no idea if I could keep.

“Okay.” She scrunched up her eyebrows and bit her top lip. “There’s something I should tell you, too.” She hesitated. “Frizz asked me out.”

“What?” I felt like I’d been knocked back into the seat. “The little weasel. What did you say?”

“I said I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

“Not a good idea?” Confusion battled with an urge to kill Frizz. “Couldn’t you have been a little stronger than that?” I pushed my back into the driver’s side door and stared at her.

“You said you wanted to cool it for a while,” she said accusingly. “But don’t worry; I’m not interested.”

“Good,” was all I could say. We sat in silence until I could feel the hot air finally blasting out of the vents. “That little Junior-wanna-be. I’m going to kill him.”

She insisted it was nothing and over with anyway, until I agreed to let him live. We fell into making a rough plan: Lisa would talk to Junior’s mom and I would talk to JD. Lisa had faith that I would think of something to say to him. I hoped she was right.

The second big meet of the year was at home against Greenbriar the next day. They were third or second in the States the last few years and a good test of our ability to repeat. There was a good crowd squeezed around the pool and they cheered wildly as we started strong, getting first and third in the medley relay. Then Frizz and I went one, two in the 200 with personal bests. After Junior won the 50 Free, it looked like it might be a rout. During the diving Junior, Frizz and I stood behind the blocks slapping each other on the back as if it were over, when we heard a nasty bang and an awkward splash, followed by the hush of the crowd.

Before the words “diving” and “accident” could form in my head, Junior was gone, slicing through the crowd and into the water, followed by our trainer and the diving Greenbriar coach. By the time I reached the edge of the diving pool, Junior had resurfaced. A sputtering Jerry was hooked in Junior’s arm, his red hair dark and matted with the water and trailing a meandering stream of blood in his wake. Frizz and I each grabbed an armpit, dragged Jerry out of the water and laid him down beside the pool.

“Shit!” Jerry spit out a mouthful of the chlorinated water and pressed his hand against the back of his head.

“Everybody back!” JD’s voice echoed off the water while the trainer took charge. “Baxter! Go call an ambulance.” Except for Frizz and I, the crowd obeyed and stepped away in a whispering hum. I could see Lisa’s face in the second row of the crowd, concerned brows in a beautiful wrinkle before she caught me looking at her and opened her eyes wide in worry.

Junior pulled himself out of the pool to a sitting position, and dangled his legs in the water. “You okay?”

“I guess.” Jerry winced when he pressed the back of his head too hard.

“I hope I didn’t, you know…” Junior said. “You would have gotten yourself out. I overreacted.” He shrugged his shoulders. “All that lifeguard training.”

“No. No. It’s fine.” Jerry looked at JD with an embarrassed grin. “I just feel like an idiot. But I’m okay, Coach. I don’t need an ambulance.”

JD squatted down beside him, turned Jerry’s head to the side and spread apart the thick, red, wet mop to examine the gash on Jerry’s head. “You’re going to need a few stitches. And they should check for a concussion.”

“But I’ve got two dives left!” Jerry sat up quickly. “I can’t-”

“Not today, pal.” JD pushied Jerry gently back into a prone position.

”Just relax. There’ll be other dives.”

“But the points!” Jerry struggled up against JD’s hand.

“Forget the points,” JD said. “Lie down and relax. Besides I can’t let you bleed all over my pool.” He smiled as he pointed with a sweep of his hand at the thin stream of brown blood already half-absorbed into the pool water. Somebody threw me a towel and I put it under Jerry’s head to soften the hardness of the tile and soak up some of the blood still leaking out of his wound.

Soon we heard the wail of the ambulance and the EMTs rushed in, cleaned Jerry’s head, wrapped it in gauze and led him out to the ambulance. After a few awkward minutes, the meet resumed.

Greenbriar swept the diving and the meet settled into a competitive back and forth pace until, missing Jerry’s lost points, we were behind with just the 400 freestyle relay to go.

JD called me over with a whistle. “O’Malley!” he shouted too loudly. “We need a first and a third to win this thing. We haven’t had a third in this event all year. Junior says he’ll get the first. If I move you to anchor the second team, can you do it?”

“Maybe,” I said.

“Maybe? No maybes, remember?” He tapped me on the head with his clipboard. “Give it your best shot.”

“Yes sir!” I yelled, trying to sound like I meant it. Before I could say anything else that would ruin the effect, he lined us up in our lanes and the race began.

The air began to feel colder as I waited for my anchor lap. I tried to distract myself by cheering for my teammates, but the skin on my arms and legs formed goose bumps in purple blotches. I inhaled deeply to fight the shallow breaths and the rapid beats of my heart.

“Davy!” Junior called from two lanes over. “You want to go with me to get Jerry at the hospital?”

“What?” I glanced up to see him shaking his arms calmly and smiling.

“Sure,” I said. “I guess.”

The swimmers in front of us dove and we climbed on the blocks to get ready.

“I bet he’s fine,” Junior said and crouched into diving position. “He might even be back before we get dressed.” I realized what he was doing. He knew I’d swim better if I was thinking about something else. “Ten stitches tops,” he said and dove.

I followed suit a second later dead even with their second team anchor. I dove in thinking about Junior’s presence of mind. That’s why he was the captain, I guess. That’s why he was Junior, the top banana. And it worked. I swam thinking not about swimming, not even about Jerry, but about how Junior wanted me to think about Jerry to swim better. I even caught up their first team to finish second by a fingernail, and this time I agreed to let my parents take me out for ice cream.

 Junior was right about Jerry, too. By the time we got out of the shower, Jerry was back in the locker room with eight stitches and a shaved rectangle on the back of his head. Since we’d won, he was greeted like a returning hero. And he accepted the cheers with relief. As the color pumped into Jerry’s face, it seemed to drain from Junior’s. The team swarmed around Jerry, checking out his wound and filling him in about the victory, while Junior slumped down on a bench at the end of one of the rows of lockers. It was if the bill for all that energy and quick thinking came suddenly due. In motion he could still be the same old Junior, but at rest he looked like an old man.

I told Jerry and Junior to go ahead without me since my parents were serious about taking me to Friendly’s. Things were getting too complicated. The joint I knew Jerry would light up as soon as they got in the car would get me thinking and I didn’t want to think. An ice cream with my parents seemed like the return to mindless childhood I needed.

I was just pulling on my sneakers when Frizz appeared around the corner, shoes and socks in hand.

“Your parents taking you home, too?” he asked.

When I nodded, he plopped himself down next to me. “Nice swimming,” I said.

“Thanks,” he said. “You, too. Especially that relay anchor.”

I shrugged. “They weren’t that good.”

“That whole thing was amazing, wasn’t it?” he said.

“Amazingly stupid,” I said. “Jerry’s done that dive a hundred times. He just wasn’t paying attention.”

“No,” he said, “I mean Junior’s rescue. He was hitting the water while the rest of us were still figuring out what happened.”

“That’s our hero,” I said. “Jerry’s a lucky man.”

“I’ll say.” Frizz looked both ways and stuck his head out to look down the locker room aisle. He leaned close to me, slipping into conspiracy mode. “He’s lucky they didn’t test his blood at the hospital.”

“What are you talking about?”

He leaned back and smiled, enjoying his inside information. “Jerry was diving so much better stoned,” he whispered, “that he wanted to try a half a Quaalude.”

“What?” I said, standing up and shaking my head. “A half a Quaalude? What a moron!”

“Shh! Shh! Shh!” Frizz stood up and pushed me back to a sitting position. “Be quiet for God’s sake. Calm down. He’s fine.”

“He got lucky,” I said. “Our hero bailed him out. Boneheads!”

“What does that mean?” Frizz asked. Even his questions seemed to echo Junior now.

“It means we’ve got to stop pushing our luck,” I said. “Maybe Junior doesn’t want to have to be the hero all the time. Maybe we shouldn’t let him be.”

“Man! I can’t believe it.” Frizz dropped back to the bench and began to shake his head. “Everything worked out fine, but all you see is what’s wrong. That’s so typical of you.”

“What?”

“You are like, nego-man. A dark cloud. Everything’s coming apart all the time.”

“Shut up, Frizz!” I stood up and leaned my face into his. “Go put your shoes on somewhere else.” I pointed in the general direction of his locker. “Get out of here! And stay away from Lisa!”

“It’s a free country!” he whined as backpedaled and disappeared behind a row of lockers.

I paused at the coaches’ office door on my way out. JD was on the phone, probably calling the paper to give the details of our great triumph. He looked up and gave me a thumbs up and a smile. I smiled back weakly and nodded my chin. I could think of nothing to say to him about Junior. Everything had to look great from his point of view.

At Friendly’s I told my dad the truth about filling out both boxes on the college applications. It had been eating away at me. Maybe I was emboldened by my swimming success, but it seemed like I had to do the right thing when I could.

“I know,” is all he said at first and then smiled as I practically spit out my raspberry sherbet. He took a lick off his pistachio cone, put his arm around my mom and settled back into the booth seeming to enjoy the silence. “Your mom checked the applications when she put the checks in. You can’t run a business without double checking.” He nodded his head in silence to let the business shot land. “I admit I was pretty mad at first, but,” he tilted his head toward Mom, “your mom convinced me to back off.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I said. “And Dad.”

“I know it’s important to you,” he said. “Your mom talked to Miss Frankovich who thinks you’re pretty talented.” My mom nodded her head and smiled. “And I called the colleges and they’ll consider you for both majors. Let’s see what the schools say. Maybe you can do both. Maybe you could run a big art gallery.”

“This doesn’t mean I don’t think I’m right,” my dad added, leaning forward and pointing the top of his ice cream cone at me. “People change their minds. This might just be a phase you need to go though.”

“It’s not a phase, Dad.”

But he was on a roll. He’d worked a compromise out in his head and the best thing I could do was shut up and let him talk. “And there’s always an MBA or law school. Did you know Mr. Peters down the street went to art school and then got a law degree?”

“I didn’t know that.” I took a lick of raspberry and smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“If you can do both, you better get great grades in both.”

I nodded my head and thought things might work out yet. I ate the rest of that ice cream like a mindless five year old, nibbling on the crust, trying not to let the sticky purple drips fall on my shirt and not thinking about anything more complicated than where to find a napkin.

“So I never talked to JD,” I said to Lisa on the phone that night after I filled her on the locker room scene. “He wouldn’t know what to do. It seemed almost unfair to ask him – or at least a waste of time.” I sat in the dark on the dining room floor with the phone cord stretched tight. “What did Junior’s mom say?”

“She’s heartbroken,” Lisa said. “All that new-found happiness crumpled in minutes. She was too sad to go into the details. She’s never gotten over it either.”

“Did you mention suicide or – “

“No. I couldn’t. As soon as I said ‘off’ and ‘not right,’ the tears started.” I listened to Lisa sigh. “Maybe we should be calling a hotline for her.”

“Marrying Sam might be enough evidence.”

She laughed and caught herself. “That’s just mean, Davy. Were our jokes always this dark?”

“Do you know any priests?” I asked. From where I sat slumped down on the wooden floor, I could just see Granny’s legs sitting in her usual spot in the living room.

“What?” Lisa asked.

 I stuck my finger through the coils of the phone cord and tried to picture Lisa’s legs instead. “Nothing. We just need someone we can talk to in confidence.”

“With confidence,” Lisa said.

“So I guess we try Mr. Corwin?” I asked. “He always reminded me of a priest. Or a monk. Or something.”

“David!” she said. “Someday your hair’s going to fall out too and you’ll be sorry.”

“Naw.” I laughed. “That's not what I meant. Besides I don’t have to worry; my Dad’s got plenty of hair.” When I pictured myself as an old man it was always with hair his color gray.

“It’s your Uncle Barney you need to look at, David. It comes from your mother’s side.”

“It does?” The picture of me as an old man crumbled.

“I think you’re right, though, about Mr. Corwin.”

“Is it guaranteed?”

“Is what guaranteed?”

“If my uncle’s bald, then I’ll be bald?” I tried to build a new picture of my future self but I couldn’t do it.

“David, we’re talking about something important here.”

“I know,” I said feeling the top of my head for thin spots. “I just never knew about the uncle thing.”

“Will you talk to him?” I was slow to react to the sound of irritation in her voice. “Will you talk to Mr. Corwin?”

“Sure I’ll talk to him.”

 “Good.” The silence echoed in the phone. “I’ve got to get back to the books.”

“I’ll let you know what happens.”

“Okay.” She laughed three short breaths into the phone. “I’ll still love you when your hair falls out.”

“Really?” I asked. “Do you mean that?” But she’d hung up.

**Chapter 13**

Talking to Mr. Corwin, our English teacher, was as close as we came to blowing the whole thing wide open, or getting some real help, depending on how you looked at it. Mr. Corwin knew us all pretty well. We’d had him the same period sophomore year and in different combinations since. That semester Lisa and I had him together sixth period. He was smart without being obnoxious about it, a little wiry guy with a black crown of thinning hair turning to gray at his big muttonchop sideburns.

Mr. Corwin told us we could call him Mike, but I could never get the hang of it. When the class got to really arguing about something, even if it wasn’t what he’d planned, Mr. Corwin would sit on the front corner of his desk with a big smile and encourage us with questions and laughs and compliments, whatever we needed to keep it going. He loved ideas and books, especially *Walden*, and he loved to argue.

In one class junior year, Junior announced, “You know, Mike, Thoreau was a hypocrite.” The rest of the class sat back to watch Mr. Corwin respond.

“A hypocrite?” Mr. Corwin turned very red and smoothed down the long strip of hair that covered the tiny bald spot on the top of his head, but he kept smiling. “Strong words, Junior. But how can you say that? He lived what he believed and suffered for his beliefs.”

“One night in jail?” Junior shook his head disgustedly, but I could tell from the tightened muscles of his cheeks that he was trying not to smile. Junior liked Thoreau, but I guess he liked arguing with Mr. Corwin more. “Then *his mother* bailed him out!” He spit out the word “mother” like we should all be ashamed to have one.

Mr. Corwin laughed softly and the class listened quietly. “He was a great thinker.” Mr. Corwin rubbed the leather patch on one of the elbows of his corduroy sport coat. "I went to the woods," he quoted in his best philosopher voice, "because I wish to live deliberately."

"The bluebird carries the sky on his back," Junior quoted back with a wink. The rest of us sat there wondering whether they were speaking in code.

“Touché, Junior," Mr. Corwin almost beamed. "He was a great observer of nature, too.”

“Observer of nature?” Junior laughed. “He didn’t get back to nature, Mike. He was less than a mile and a half from his mother's house.

"Just far enough away to be a great observer of people," Corwin countered before launching into his quote voice. "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes."

"Or new cookies.” Junior laughed, adding scornfully as the bell rang to end the period, “His mother brought him cookies every weekend. Seriously. It's a fact. *I'm going back to nature, Mommy*," he mimicked. "*Bring chocolate chip next week.”*

The class's laughter was led by Mr. Corwin. “Junior’s rule,” he said as everyone got up to leave, “if you want to be a great philosopher, get rid of your mother.”

He walked down the aisle to catch Junior before he left. “You used the bell like a pro. Good work.” He smiled broadly as he put a hand on Junior’s shoulder. “Do I get another chance tomorrow?” He laughed. “I think his mom did his laundry, too, but maybe we can get a little deeper into his ideas? I don’t think anyone else has read him as much as you have.”

A few days after Lisa and I met in my car, I waited by the door for Mr. Corwin’s class to clear out. Lisa gave me a wink and a quick arm squeeze before leaving. She had to run to Calculus, but I had the next period free and so did Corwin.

“What’s up, Dave?” he said when we were alone. He sat back on the corner of his desk and smiled.

“Well,” I began stumbling, realizing again I was launching without a plan. “I... ah... I’m worried about somebody and I thought you might be able to help.” I paused for a moment and then dove in. “It’s Junior. I don’t know if you’ve noticed but he’s really falling apart. He really changing. He’s...” Finally I just said it. “I think he’s really depressed.”

Mr. Corwin grunted thoughtfully, put his hand to his chin and pulled the skin to a point. “Well, we haven’t had a good argument in class lately.” He smiled briefly. “I have noticed he’s been different.” I felt my heart racing. He'd noticed too! “I’m not surprised, to be honest with you. When his father died he seemed to be taking it too well. And I understand his mother just remarried?”

“Yes!” I said, wondering why I hadn’t come to Mr. Corwin earlier.

He smiled again. “There aren’t many secrets at Woodcove High.” He picked a pen up off the desk and tapped it nervously on his thigh. “That’s a lot of trauma for anybody. It has to take its toll.”

“And they’re going to move out of the house,” I added. “And his cat died. And the pressure of his winning streak is getting to him.” With each word I felt more relieved at turning it all over to someone else. “It’s like he can’t see past it all. Like he can’t go on.” I spoke faster and faster as the burden of worrying rushed out of me. "He and Lisa aren’t seeing each other anymore. The gang’s heading in different directions next year. Everything’s changing.”

“You’ve all been very quiet lately.” Mr. Corwin folded his arms, nodded, and looked right into my eyes. For a second I thought he knew about the prank, too. “All the seniors look worried,” he continued. “It happens every year at this time. I know it’s frightening for you all. Of course it affects some people more than others, but...” He shook his head and leaned closer. “You should have seen the seniors a few years ago when the draft was cranking. Everything seemed to be coming to an end. I’m young enough to remember. But,” he added hopefully, “the end of high school’s a beginning, too.”

What was he talking about? “This is no typical senior depression,” I said.

“No. You’re right. Junior’s had a tough year, a tough couple of years. I’m surprised his mother never got him into some kind of therapy. Maybe she did, for all we know.” He stood up and put a hand on my shoulder. “Junior’s pretty lucky to have a friend like you looking out for him.”

“No. You don’t understand,” I said, putting my hands up and stepping away. He didn’t get it at all. I wanted him to understand so much that I heard what I wanted to hear. “Junior is in real danger here. He... I think,” I blurted out, “I'm afraid he’s thinking about suicide.”

“Suicide!” Mr. Corwin stepped back in surprise bumping into his desk. “Suicide?” He shook his head like he wasn’t sure what the word meant.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“I can’t picture Junior committing suicide. But,” he paused, “I can’t really understand anyone committing...” He sat back heavily on the desk. The color drained from his face, leaving him looking gray and old. He rubbed his right hand over his mouth and then down over his chin pulling it to a point again. “Of course you know him much better that I do. Has he talked about it?”

“Well, not exactly.” I felt like I needed to be able to quote Junior, to prove it somehow, like in court. It was all so vague: a bad feeling, a change only I could see. I better be right, now that I had brought a teacher into it. I paced back and forth in front of him and told him about the car ride by the tree and how he had practically given Lisa to me and about Molly’s weird funeral. I told him about everything but the prank, which I realized again was the big missing piece in my argument.

“Wow!” Mr. Corwin whispered when I finished. “Anything else?”

I hesitated for a second. “Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s plenty.” He stood up, walked to the board and picked up a piece of chalk which he rolled around in his hands as he spoke. “Dave, I don’t know much about suicide or depression,” he began, “except I know we need to get help. I need to bring this to the school psychologist.”

“What?” I slumped down on the desk behind me. I don’t know what I expected. It wasn’t like he could solve the problem right then and there. But I didn’t know the school psychologist. I knew her name was Mrs. Abrahms and she’d started in September. But that was all. “Who is she? Couldn’t we keep her out of it?”

“I have to, Dave.” Mr. Corwin walked over to me and leaned his face close to mine. “We need help from somebody who knows what she's doing. Junior does.” Our eyes were on the same level. His voice softened. “This is the right thing to do. Maybe it will turn out to be nothing, but we can’t take the chance.”

The relief I felt initially from telling Mr. Corwin was gone; I'd created a whole new problem: the school psychologist. She was an unknown I'd accidentally introduced into the equation. I'd seen her around the office; after four years at Woodcove High a new face was sure to stick out. She looked pleasant enough, short, decent figure, long black hair, usually in a fancy braid, fair skin, blue eyes - cute, in a mom sort of way. Mr. Corwin assured me we could trust her, but trust her to do what?

As I put my car in gear and started to pull out of the school parking lot, I decided I had to tell Junior. It would sabotage the whole idea of helping him, but I felt I owed it to him. We'd been friends too long to bring some stranger into our affairs and not have the guts to tell him first.

I drove slowly to his house. People were beeping at me on the Post Road for going the speed limit, so I turned off and took back roads. I had to get my thoughts together. What could I say? "How's things? Oh, by the way I told the school you're suicidal.”

Junior's house looked almost abandoned when I got there. Mrs. Walker was all but moved in to Sam's, but Junior insisted on living in their old house. When he went to college, they'd sell it. I’m sure the house held too many memories for Mrs. Walker. I rang the doorbell twice and waited. Finally, I tried the door and it was unlocked.

"Hello?” I called out as I walked into the front hall. "Junior?” I figured he must be downstairs in his bedroom. He had a great set-up even before Mrs. Walker remarried. With his room right off the playroom and the sliding doors to the back yard, it was like he had his own apartment. Now he had his own house.

The basement stairs creaked beneath my feet in the empty silence. It wasn't until I hit the last step that I could feel the bass line from the stereo in Junior's room. I knew he had his headphones on, but the hum of the bass always leaked out.

I knocked on the door and called out again, "Junior?” He must have had the music turned up pretty high. "Junior?" I screamed as I opened the door.

No answer.

Junior lay with his arms outstretched on the big bed he’d set on the floor in the middle of his room. His head was hidden by the two big, broken speakers that he used as bedside tables. His legs were crossed, and his two untied sneakers rocked to the music. A curling stream of smoke rose from behind the speakers. The thick scent of marijuana surprised me and I wondered when Junior had started getting high alone. I never thought of smoking without anyone to share the laughs.

Junior’d put up the pictures on the wall of this new bedroom exactly the way they were on his room upstairs, but they all looked different. I looked at them as if I’d never seen them before. The photos of friends and family and the posters of swimmers and rock stars fought for attention: Mark Spitz gold medals echoed in Jim Morrison's beads in the neighboring poster; A black and white photo of Jerry seemed to be diving into a psychedelic Jimi Hendrix; The Grateful Dead peered down on a grainy newspaper photo of Lisa touching in ahead of everyone in last year's States. The windows, open to pull out the smoke, also allowed the stench of low tide to seep in. On a bookcase by one window an old lava lamp sat, its bulb dim from constant use.

"*Riders on the storm*,” Junior sang out suddenly, startling me. His hands moved down to play an imaginary guitar that echoed the lyrics.

"Junior!" I yelled, suddenly feeling like I was spying.

He sat up and looked around, bewildered: his hair disheveled, his eyes red and unfocused, his mouth hanging open. When he saw it was me, he smiled and it was as if everything slid back together: the blood returned to his face, his eyes cleared and sharpened, his hair even seemed to fall back into place. I squinted my eyes closed and wondered if I had imagined his initial disarray and sudden refocusing, if it was just another pot remnant breaking loose in my brain.

He took the headphones off and let out the tinny sound of Jim Morrison singing the next line, "*Into this house we're born."*

"Davy!!” Still smiling, he pulled the headphone plug out of the jack. The room filled with loud music.

"*Into this world we're thrown*."

Junior lifted the joint in offering.

I shook my head; I was going to need all my brainpower for this.

"*Riders on the storm."*

"Junior, turn it down. I've got to tell you something important.”

I sat down on the bed next to him and began the story all out of order. “I talked Corwin and tried to talk to Coach, but he’s not – And it’s not just me. Lisa’s concerned. The prank is crazy and you’ve been weird, man. I’m afraid you’re – We’re afraid you’re… going to, I don’t know, off yourself or something… Anyway, Corwin’s going to the school psychologist just to make sure you’re all–“

 “I can’t believe you did this to me,” He interrupted. His shoulders sagged like he’d been deflated. He looked suddenly tired and old again.

“I didn’t do this to you.” I suddenly felt like Judas or Brutus. “I was worried. I’m trying to help.”

"By telling the school shrink I was depressed?” He jumped to his feet and paced back and forth. I'd never seen him so agitated. He shook his head and filled his cheeks with air as he took deep breaths like he was trying to regain control. His pace laps grew longer eventually taking him out the door and I followed him out to the playroom.

"No, I didn't tell her. Let me finish.” I picked up a paddle and tapped it nervously against the side of the Ping Pong table. I tried to talk faster. "I just told Mr. Corwin. I had to talk to someone. He said he had to tell her, some law or something. 'Just in case...,' he said.” Junior walked back and forth in front of the sliding glass doors. "I didn't mean to bring her into this."

His pacing slowed. "Just in case...," he said and shook his head. "Just in case of what?"

"Junior, you drove your car full speed at that tree. You pay no attention to Lisa.” I smacked the paddle against the Ping Pong table. "You don't talk to anybody anymore. You just talk about Jell-O in the goddamn pool."

Junior had stopped and was looking out the window without saying a word. I wasn't sure if he was listening.

"Listen, I only did it because I'm worried. We're worried," I added, wishing Lisa were there. "I didn't say anything about the Jell-O.” He was silent.

"Look at you, Junior! You’re like that guy in the book with the picture in his attic. You’ve got this perfect face you present to the world but inside, down here, you’re falling apart.”

Junior continued to take deep breaths and stare out at the cove with his back to me.

“You scared the hell out of me with that tree!” I shouted. “And with Lisa. And then Molly died. And your Dad.” I was starting to sound desperate, like I was shrieking. I looked out the window and tried to calm down. "It's got to add up, Junior.”

The winds were picking up in the bay, slashing white caps in the black sea. "It's got to take a toll on you.” A storm was blowing in from the right, a cold rain, not quite cold enough for snow. Out beyond the harbor, a garbage barge crept by pulled by an ancient tugboat. It moved slowly across the Sound, finally disappearing into the gray hills of Long Island before Junior finally moved.

He looked down at his hands. "You’re right," he said and took a deep breath. “Everything’s getting harder to keep together. I’ve been acting crazy.”

The relief I felt was cancelled out by the sight of Junior so deflated. He sat with his shoulders hunched over looking like a spent balloon. “Well, you’ve always been crazy.”

“Crazier?” he said, but didn’t enjoy the joke.

"Just talk to her," I said softly. It seemed like every time I tried to help Junior I made the burden heavier. "Maybe it’ll help."

"Help," he said absently. "Yeah, maybe it’ll help.” He ran his hand through his hair and scratched the back of his neck. "Listen, Davy, I know I've been acting pretty weird lately.” Junior looked down at his palms again. "But I’m no Dorian Gray. Weird's the only way to act sometimes.” He took a deep breath, looked up at me and began shaking his head. “I don’t know. Maybe it’ll help.” A smile started on one side of his mouth and spread to his whole face. I could see in his eyes that the gears were beginning to spin once again. He looked at the dead joint still in his hands. “Okay. What do we know about this shrink?"

"I think she came into Frizz's Psychology class to tell them about Freud or something. Maybe we should call him and see what he knows about her.” I could feel myself getting sucked into another scam. "Junior, don't try to con her."

"You know," Junior leaned close as he confided, "I never told anyone this, but right after my father died, my mother insisted I go to a psychiatrist in Port Lewis, Dr. Reinfeld. She was seeing him and I went one time to make her feel better.” He stopped for a second and started to purse his lips and scrunch his eyebrows. He was suddenly transformed into a cartoon-like doctor. "Vy are you here?" Junior asked in an Austrian accent, then confided, "He actually had a Brooklyn accent, but that doesn't work for the story."

"Well, heck, Doc.” He made a face like a buck-toothed farm boy. Junior loved to portray himself as a naive, country bumpkin. "Momma asked me."

"Vy did she ask you?"

"Well golly, Doc. She said you told her to."

"Vy do you think I told her to?"

"Egads, Doc. I don't know.

"Vy don't you know?"

He laughed, but I didn't join him. I suddenly realized how much he used humor to keep us away. All this talk of psychiatry had me analyzing everything.

Right after school the next Monday, I just happened to be walking by when Junior came out of the school psychologist's office. Actually, I had to go back and forth about ten times to just happen to be there. By the time I saw him, I had emptied almost everything out of my locker and then put it all back in. Mrs. Abrahms' office was one of many little rooms surrounding the secretaries' desks in the Guidance office. The senior lockers were right around the corner.

Mrs. Abrahms was smiling and talking to Junior at her office door, absently picking fluff off his sweater. I could see their lips move, but I couldn't hear anything over the pounding of the secretaries' typewriters and their blathering conversations. With classes over and few students around I guess they felt no need to be quiet.

Junior pointed to the pamphlets he was holding and said something. Then he smiled that crooked, charming smile of his. Her laughter carried across the room. Junior had handled it, as promised. You had to know him well to see the faint bags under his eyes, the paleness of his face, the strain "handling it" was taking.

She stood in the doorway watching him as he walked away, smiling like they were old friends just having shared a dinner full of laughs. She called to him just before he was out of earshot.

"Come back at the end of the week and see me," I heard her yell over the office noises. "After I talk to your mom.” She gave him a big smile. “Just to let me know how it's going."

He turned and waved, "Sure thing."

When Junior saw me, he winked and gave me a big wave with a slight Jell-O quiver. "Davy, fancy meeting you here,"

I waited until Mrs. Abrahms turned and closed the door to her office. Then I stuck my finger down my throat and pretended to throw up.

"You just bullshitted her brains out, didn't you?” I was really irritated at how delighted he seemed to be with himself.

He tried not to smile. "Davy.” He spoke quietly and led me out the office door. "We talked. I actually told her a lot. She's a pretty nice lady. And she's gonna call my mom. She said she has to, but she feels I'm coping well with a difficult situation."

"Sometimes," I shook my head and refused to return his smile, "you really make me sick. You're too smooth for your own good."

"And," he pointed to the pamphlets in his hands, "I got some interesting reading material.” The top pamphlet had a background in green and black of words and question marks, "Suicide? Depression? Drug Abuse?” The questions repeated, running off the page in all directions. "YOUR CARING," it said on the top in white block letters, "COULD SAVE A LIFE!"

"She doesn't think I'm neurotic.” He smiled, still trying to make me laugh. "Or psychotic either."

"Fuck you." I turned and walked away.

For a minute I was afraid he wasn't going to follow me, but he finally called out, "Davy, wait up!" and jogged after me. The halls were empty and his footsteps echoed strangely in the quiet. Everyone else was at practice or had already gone home.

"Listen, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make fun of it. It's just so weird. I appreciate your concern, but I'm all right.” He grabbed my shoulder and forced me to stop and look at him. "I'm not my father, Davy. He did these weird impulsive things. I'm different. I'm methodical. Figure out the system, and then beat it, that's me.” He smiled. “You know that.” He was so persuasive when he was on a roll. But I knew him too well. He wasn't all that logical; he was impulsive sometimes, too. And now he was trying to con me along with everybody else.

“Junior-" I started, but he cut me off.

"Davy, let me finish.” I saw his eyes were watering up. "My Dad loved to freak people out. I don't think he wanted to be understood. I do.” He looked over my shoulder. "Maybe this was his last impulse. His last wacky...whatever that went wrong. Or maybe it was just an accident. But he's dead; he's gone. I'm here and I'm different. Come on, you know that.” He clamped his hand on my shoulder and then pushed me away.

"Junior-"

"We've got a plan, an adventure, our last hurrah.” He crouched into a boxer's stance then opened his hands and took an easy swipe at my face. “The gang. The family. Probably our last adventure together.” I ducked and stepped back, but he came in weaving and slapping playfully.

"Junior-"

"Come on, Davy Boy, let's do what we do best.” I continued to back up until I hit the wall. I blocked his parry and caught him right on the cheek. The soft slap rung out in the hallway. "The greatest prank in Woodcove history," he said in a whisper. "No, the greatest in the state.” I blocked his attempt to flick his left hand through my guard. "No. The country!" he said louder. I ducked beneath his looping left. "The universe!" he shouted and I caught him with a open handed left and a right to the chin.

He pretended to crumble, staggering in slow motion to the floor. He always knew the best way to get me out of a bad mood; let me win. The sad thing was, it still worked.

"Fuck you?" Junior asked from the floor with a big smile. He got up and brushed himself off. We turned to walk to practice. He pursed his lips. "Pretty strong words. Vy do you feel so aggressive?"

And I let it go, not quite conned, but not willing to challenge him anymore, letting him be the leader I wanted him to be.

**Chapter 14**

"How's he doing?” Mr. Corwin asked me every day that week after class.

"Fine," I'd say, stalling him, kicking myself for bring him into it. Mrs. Abrahms sent me appointment slips, but I ignored them. It felt like Victor and the suicide hotline all over again. Maybe *I* was the crazy one here. I was afraid to talk to either one of them, afraid I'd tell it all. What if I was wrong? So I lied to them, avoided them and gave up on getting help.

I hid in my room and drew. I had a self-portrait due that week and I usually enjoyed staring into the mirror until I just saw lines and shapes and my hand, as if connected by a string, copied them onto the page. But this time my drawings were terrible: something grabbed at the string, my eyes couldn’t see the lines, my brain wouldn’t shut down.

I tried different mirrors and poses, tried full body portraits and just my head. I switched from pencils to pastels to watercolors and back. Nothing worked. I couldn’t seem to just relax and let my eye and hand do the work. The lines looked stiff and over-controlled. The colors were either jarringly mismatched or they turned to a murky brown. I felt like I was trying to draw with my left hand or with one eye – like I’d forgotten everything. Finally I threw my sketch pad in the corner and went to sleep.

“Let’s forget about it,” I said to Lisa when I went over to her house that Thursday night. We sat on her living room couch keeping an ear out for her mother. “We tried. There’s nothing we can do. He doesn’t want our help.”

“Sorry for wimping out,” she said. "I should have stayed with you to talk to Mr. Corwin For moral support. And gone with you to talk to Junior.”

We shut up with the sound of her mother coming down the stairs. Her footsteps stopped at the entrance to the living room.

“I’m going to pick up your dad. We’re going to stop for dinner at the Clam Bar,” Mrs. Conners said. “Are you kids going to be all right if I leave you here?”

We stared at her with identical dead-eyed, open-mouthed stares but she was too busy fumbling in her purse for the keys. I was sure the same thought was going through Lisa’s mind: we were going to have the house to ourselves, but we were in no condition to take advantage of it. I lacked the spark to even respond to Mrs. Conners, never mind make love to her daughter.

“We’ll be fine,” Lisa said.

“Okay.” Clutching the keys in her hand, Mrs. Conners opened the front door. “I’ll be back around 9:30,” she called over her shoulder. She stepped out of the door and slammed it shut.

I turned to Lisa and we both shook our heads slowly.

“There’ll be other nights,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said feeling like we were cursed by our betrayal of Junior, whether he saw it as a betrayal or not.

We listened to Mrs. Conners over-crank the ignition in a high-pitched whine well past the time the car had started, back it out of the driveway, and, with a heavy foot on the pedal, drive off.

After a minute, I picked up where I’d left off. “The more I try to separate everything, the more everything seems to pile up higher.” I hung my head down and stared at my fingers, feeling like I’d dropped something. “Maybe Junior is fine. Maybe it’s just the stress of pulling off our big plan, the big adventure, our last hurrah.”

Lisa bit her lip and said nothing.

“Blah, blah, blah,” I said too loud. Tilting my head and leaning in close to Lisa’s face, I whispered. “That’s what I sound like, don’t it?”

“No. I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know what to do either. We can’t help him if he won't let us.”

“We’re just making everything harder for him,” I said. “We can’t blow the prank because Junior’s acting weird. Maybe we’re making too big a deal out of this.”

“Once the Jell-O is over with,” she said, “maybe we can think of *something* to do.”

Down deep I must have had some hope that Lisa’d have an answer. I slumped back into the couch like a spent balloon. She curled her head into my shoulder and we sat in silence, a dispirited, hopeless silence. She looped her fingers into mine and we stared at the floor.

“We’ll keep an eye on him,” Lisa said at last. “If it turns out to be something, we’ll be right there with him.”

By Friday Mr. Corwin was tired of my quick answers and quicker escapes. “You have to stop ignoring Mrs. Abrahms’ passes,” he said at the end of class. “I’ll walk you over.” Before I could get away, he shepherded me out the door and down the hall to her office. I couldn’t *not* go without making a scene.

“Come in.” Mrs. Abrahms waved me into her little room stocked with posters of flowers, bookcases jammed with manuals and psychology texts, and a desk filled with stacks of testing manuals and framed pictures of her husband and kids. “Is it David or Dave or...?

Davy,” I said. Seeing no other choice, I went in.

“Please sit,” she said. She pulled a chair away from her desk and sat down right in front of me, knee-to-knee so I could feel a hint of her shins and the edge of her foot against mine. I avoided her eyes, looking instead at the flat bone of her knee through her tan nylons and smelling the musky scent she gave off – just a light smell of earthy perfume. When I looked up she was smiling a tentative, adult smile, smart but friendly, with laugh lines around her blue eyes, and little dimples in her cheeks. She was pretty good looking for somebody’s mom.

“I wanted to thank you for sending Junior to me,” she said after clearing her throat. “That was a brave thing to do. I just wanted to talk to you to see if there was anything else I should know.”

I shrugged and looked at Mr. Corwin, still standing in the doorway.

“I better be going,” he said apparently catching a look from Mrs. Abrahms that I missed. “I’ll see you in class tomorrow, Davy.”

I turned back to Mrs. Abrahms as the door closed with a soft click.

“Something scared you enough to go to Mr. Corwin,” she said. “I talked to Junior. He’s very charming, but it’s obvious he’s also under a lot of stress.”

I shrugged again and tried to return her adult smile.

“You know him a lot better that I do,” she said, turning her palms up and dropping them back to her lap. “I need your help.”

She took a deep breath when I said nothing. “I’m not the enemy,” she said.

But I couldn’t help thinking of her that way.

“Something’s going on here.” She leaned in and put a hand on my knee, tilting her head to the side, revealing the complicated braid that held her long black hair in a bun on top of her head. “I don’t know what it is, but… It’s almost like Junior’s handling everything too well.” She raised an eyebrow. “Do you know what I mean?”

I shrugged.

“It seems like there’s something else beneath the surface,” she added when I didn't respond. “I just want to help, Davy.” Instead of the relief I felt when Mr. Corwin seemed to know what was going on, I felt a chill this time. She seemed to know too much. Not just about the prank, but about everything. She was smart and kind and scary at the same time.

I stared at her hand and she pulled it back. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t mean to be a jerk. I asked for help and you’re helping, I guess.”

“I’m trying to.”

“Junior really liked you and Mr. Corwin says you’re great.” I felt like Junior, although I resisted the urge to attempt a wink.

”Thank you,” she smiled and raised one thin black eyebrow. “You’re almost as charming as Junior. Being cornered seems to bring it out in both of you.”

“Yeah. I’m almost as good as Junior in a lot of ways,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” I shook my head and took a deep breath. “That’s... It’s just that Junior’s going to do what Junior’s going to do. I shouldn’t have gone to Mr. Corwin unless I was certain. And I’m not.” I asked for help, but I obviously didn’t want it. Maybe I was afraid of it. Here was real help a foot away and I was pushing it off.

“But this isn’t something you can be certain about.”

“Look, I appreciate your trying to help,” I said, shifting back stiffly in the chair. Bringing adults into this was just too complicated. They always had their own ideas and I couldn’t see a way to walk across the minefield in front of me to get only the help I wanted for Junior. I couldn’t win. I couldn’t get help for Junior and didn’t know how to help him myself. “I think Junior needs somebody to talk to. I mean more than what a friend can do. And if you could keep seeing him, I guess, you know... I think it could help.” I felt weirded out and at the same time proud for doing just what Junior would have done, had done: lie and charm his way out of it. “You’re already helping,” I added when she waited for more.

She smiled and stared at me, expectantly.

I smiled back, knowing that if I opened my mouth again it was over, the whole story would come tumbling out in one big mess. I clenched my teeth and swallowed and smiled again. Her hair obscured the clock on the wall behind her. All I could see was a few numbers and the tail of the slowly ticking second hand. I tried to maintain eye contact without making it an obvious staring contest.

“You don’t think there’s anything else I should know,” she finally said and I knew I’d made it. “Or anything else I should talk to Junior about?”

Her phone rang then, forcing her to get up, turn around, reach across the piles of papers on her desk to answer it, and say, “Yes. I’ll be right there.” But the tension was gone already. The danger or opportunity was past. She thanked me, shook my hand, said it was nice to meet me at last, and escorted me by the parents waiting just outside her door.

“I hope you feel you can drop in anytime,” she said before turning to the couple waiting to see her. “And please come in when I send you a pass. I won’t send one unless it’s important!” She waved and gave me a big smile, almost as big as the one I’d seen her give to Junior.

We met once more in the usual spot. A slim crescent of moon was half-covered by clouds. The temperature had dropped thirty degrees in a week. Even the thick winter sweaters and coats and the winter hats pulled down over our ears couldn’t ward off the frigid winds blowing in off the water and whipping between the boats in dry dock.

“The weather is perfect!” Junior said and hesitated before kneeling down to follow Lisa, Frizz and Jerry crawling under the tarp. “Looks like it’s winking doesn’t it?” he said pointing up to the sliver of moon.

“More like a fingernail,” I said, folding my arms across my chest to stop the shivering.

“No. It’s a wink,” he said. “The eyelid’s covering it. You can just see a little of the yellow eye.”

“Okay,” I said. “If I agree can we get out of this wind?”

He bowed, ignoring any possible tension between us, and let me go in first.

We huddled closer than usual beneath the dinghy until we were stoned enough to forget the cold. Lisa just passed the joints (she even looked good in a wool hat and three layers of wool) but I smoked as much as anyone; there was no point in pretending to be in control anymore. The boat scene was getting monotonous: Junior working the crowd until we were stoned enough to do whatever he wanted; Frizz and Jerry laughing at the same bad jokes; Lisa and I huddling together and shivering.

“It’s freezing!” I finally shouted. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Oooh,” Junior said. “Excellent call to attention, my man.” He held out a quivering hand to slap me five. “Although a wee bit cranky.” He seemed to get calmer about the whole thing as I got edgier.

“I’m cold. I’m tired,” I complained, punching his hand reluctantly and then wrapping my gloved hand around Lisa’s mittened one. “Let’s just do it.”

“Okay, fair enough.” Junior nodded his head slowly in the glow of the joint Frizz was toking on. "I've got the ice thing figured out. As usual Sam bails us out.” Slipping into a Walter Cronkite imitation, he said in mock amazement, “That man *thinks* of everything. He's got an *ice* truck. They use big *chunks* of ice to speed up the *set*ting of the sup*pos*itories.”

“Why don’t we just fill the pool with suppositories,” I said attempting to be sarcastic.

“Excellent!” Frizz yelled, forgetting to be paranoid in his excitement. The joint went out, leaving only silhouettes of their dark figures against the blue tarp.

“That would be so cool,” Jerry said. “It would take like a million of them stacked in little–.”

“I was kidding!” I shouted although I was starting to picture it myself. The pool lights filtering through thousands and thousands of little brown gelatin eggs. "Junior, this whole thing is ridiculous!" I said.

"I know!" he said, coughing and laughing up the smoke. "It’s insane!” He passed the joint to Frizz and giggled like he hadn't laughed in years. "Wait! Give me that joint back, Frizz," he said and took another big hit. "That's why I think this is meant to be,” he said in a squeaky voice. “Because it's all ridiculous, yet it's all fallen into place."

"Sometimes you just need to know when to give up," I argued weakly.

"Sometimes you need to know when to keep going," he countered. "Face it, Davy: this was destined to happen.” He shifted to some weird Russian or German accent, "It is our *destiny*!” He burst into his mad giggling again and Jerry and Frizz joined him bumping against each other like kid’s weighted punching bags. When Lisa started laughing too, I pushed her away.

"Oh come on, David," she said. "Look at them bouncing around. Go with it. Remember?” She held up her hands in surrender. “It's stupid, but it is funny."

"Right," I said. I refused to enjoy it. "I've got to get home soon."

"Wait!” Junior said snapping quickly out of his laughter. "There's one last thing: our fake names.” We quieted down; this was usually one of the fun parts of Junior's adventures.

“Frizz is going to be Peter Cooper,” Junior began, “The first guy to put a patent on Jell-O.” Frizz grinned like he’d been selected for the Jell-O Hall of Fame. “Jerry, you’ll be Ras Berry. Lisa will be Jen Foods, holder of the current patent, and Davy, you’ll be Jay Mold.”

“Cool,” Jerry said. “Ras Berry.” He said it like it sounded like a real name to him. He tried in a Jamaican accent, "*Ras* Berry."

“And I’m going to be Oscar Jell.”

I groaned. “Oh, last name, first?”

“Yup! And first initial.”

“And your name was, like. shortened from Jellinski at Riker’s Island,” Frizz said and laughed, trying hard to be in on the joke.

“That’s Ellis Island, Frizz.” I shook my head.

“You know what I meant.”

“That’s it?” I asked, “After four months of research?” Everyone else, though, seemed happy with the names. Even Lisa seemed to be holding her head a little higher now that she was Jen Foods herself.

As usual Junior insisted that we call each other by the names, "for practice," he always said, "to make them sound natural.” And they did begin to feel normal in a surreal way. I smoked another joint or two and started to see the humor in the whole thing. Maybe it was the pot, or the late hour or the stress we were all under, but suddenly we couldn't say any of the names without laughing.

**Chapter 15**

The phone rang at 7:00 AM on Sunday February 18th.

“J day!” Junior sang when I picked it up. I had woken up early and sat next to the phone knowing he’d call. Junior was always pumped up with excitement when the day of an adventure finally arrived.

“Good morning,” I groaned. “How did you know Granny or my parents wouldn’t pick up the phone?”

“I just knew,” he bragged, too full of himself for this time of the morning. He must have just returned from his shift at Sam’s. “I *wish* Granny had answered. We should have brought her into this earlier. She could be the lookout.”

“Isn’t it a bit early?” I said, feeling like the wet blanket I was. I only wanted to get it over with.

“Making sure everybody’s ready before I grab a few Z’s.”

“I’m as ready as I’m gonna get,” I mumbled.

“Tank truck signs ready?” he asked and then repeated when I didn’t answer with enough enthusiasm.

“Check,” I said realizing I didn’t have the energy to fight him.

“Excuse set with the parental units?”

“Check.”

“Excited?”

“No check.”

“You will be, Davy boy.” His cheerfulness would not be punctured. “When you see that red mass of J-E-L-L-O. See you at Sam’s at 5:30, Mr. Mold. ”

The school parking lot was black and empty at 6:00 on Sunday night when Junior and I pulled in with the tank trucks he’d filled with boiling red gelatin an hour before. No moon. A dark cover of clouds. All but one of the security lights high on the wall of the gym and pool were out, the wires cut by Junior for all I knew. And I didn’t want to know. The spray of the truck headlights caught the papers fluttering about in the wind, the black pavement and the shiny spots of ice in the pavement depressions.

“Keep them on,” Junior said over the CB when I flicked off my headlights. “We’re the pool company. We’re supposed to be here.” We parked side by side next to the pool doors, and got out. The simultaneous slamming of the truck doors must have pleased Junior; he liked a plan to go, not just smoothly, but sharply.

In our white overalls, white painter’s caps and the paper filter masks across our noses and mouths, courtesy of Sam’s painting and maintenance department, we looked like scientists from some grade B movie. Junior opened the doors that he’d wedged open earlier when he’d snuck in to open the drain. He pushed them back until they clicked in place as we’d done a hundred times during the summer when JD had our AAU team practice on too hot days and the air conditioning broke down. “The air conditioning only works in the winter,” JD used to joke, and if we were lucky, he’d be right tonight.

“They should be here any minute,” Junior said looking at his watch. He unlocked the pump handle and began to pull the hose from his truck. Sheets hung down on the sides of the fat, round tanks, weighted by rocks tied into the lower corners. Lisa and I had painted the name and logo of the pool company on the sheets and it looked good from a distance. Up close we were screwed anyway. As I grabbed the hose from my truck, Frizz, Jerry and Lisa pulled in with the two ice trucks. Right on time.

The hose unwound with a loud groan and the dull sweet smell of the gelatin hit me like an oar. I stumbled through the doors to hear Junior running around the pool to close the drain. “It’s too low!” he whispered in the blackness. I draped the hose, nozzle down, over the side of the pool and jogged carefully in the dark to where my already-adjusting eyes could see Junior’s white figure kneeling over the drain lever.

“How bad is it?” I asked. “We brought a little extra, didn’t we?”

Junior covered his mouth with his hand and paced back and forth in a little circle.

“Maybe we could run some water while we’re pumping the Jell-O in,” I suggested, wondering as I said it why I was worrying about it. My mother used to say that anything worth doing is worth doing well. I guess it lodged in my brain.

“It’ll be too cold,” Junior said, still pacing.

“For God’s sakes, Junior. We’re making Jell-O not soufflé.”

A laugh slipped out from the hand clamped over his mouth. “You’re right,” he said and laughed louder. “It’ll be fine.” He stood up and thrust his chest out. “Start the pumps and help Frizz and Jerry bring the ice in.” Their hazy white figures were already struggling with the ice bags through the doorway. Lisa looked tall and elegant walking behind them with a single bag of ice in her arms. “Thanks, Davy.”

Junior began to whistle the “The Easter Parade” as the steaming red juice sluiced out of the nozzle and mixed in a swirling whirlpool with the pool water. Frizz joined him substituting the words, “The Jell-O Brigade” softly and then returning to a whistle or trying out new words softly to himself. Junior turned on only the bank of lights over the deep end. “What do you think?” he asked, and when we all shrugged, said, “Light enough for us to see and dark enough not to be seen.” He smiled and winked, “Clearly anyway. The cops sometimes take a spin through the parking lot.”

We worked quietly toting ice and mixing equipment inside until Frizz dropped the sledgehammer with a loud clang against the door frame. We all froze.

Frizz’s eyes opened wide in paranoia. “Shit!” he whispered and looked around, leaning his ears out, listening for evidence of our discovery as he’d done a thousand times before under the boat at the docks. The memory of the metallic sound echoed in the silence. Lisa and Jerry stood frozen like they were holding their breath.

“New treatment!” Junior shouted in his official workman voice. “That ornery drain might need a little persuasion!” Then in a loud whisper, “Remember, you guys, we’re the pool guys. We're supposed to be here.”

Besides Junior and Frizz's whistling, we worked methodically in silence. Lisa and I worked side by side with hardly a glance at each other. I just tried to keep busy and not think. It was too late for thinking. We took turns carting ice, breaking it up with a sledgehammer and piling it against the wall by the side of the pool. Frizz got big points from Junior for thinking of the hammer at the last minute.

"Frizz, Frizz, Frizz," he kept repeating as if in awe, adding, "You know you have a real flair for this. Have you thought of Jell-O-ing pools for a living?"

The two tank trucks emptied in about an hour. The deep red of the liquid gelatin spread amoeba-like into the clear pool water, diluting to a pink along its edges, but spreading relentlessly from the corner where the hoses lay by the door in the shallow end of the pool. Each time I looked up from my work the red amoeba had rolled deeper and farther across the pool until, when the hose sputtered and coughed out the last few drops, the pool was a pinkish red except for a foot or two of clear water skimming the deep end.

"All right!" Junior called. "It's mixing time.” Junior turned the water recycler on high. Then he let everybody try their own ideas. Lisa and I dragged the pool with a net used for cleaning leaves out of an outdoor pool. Jerry and Frizz moved along the edges with long oars borrowed from the Woodcove regatta. Junior ran a machine he found at work that looked like a big blender.

The mixing was exhausting and everything was going too smoothly. I always got nervous we didn’t have at least a few little things go wrong. I was about to tell Lisa I was afraid we were saving up for a big catastrophe at the end when Jerry lightened the tension for us. Right after he complained loudly that he needed another joint, he backed into Frizz as they mixed with their oars along the edge of the pool and lost his balance. For a moment he flailed in slow motion, his arms flapping out in the air like a flightless bird.

Frizz tried to grab him and I leaned out too, although I was much too far away to reach him. Then Jerry fell out, into the red water and was gone. Frizz crouched down like he was going to dive in and save Jerry, but Jerry popped right up. He climbed quickly out of the pool, very embarrassed, judging by his slumping head and shoulders, but it was hard to see any blushing against his red, Jell-O-stained skin. Our laughing probably didn’t help either. He looked like a raspberry popsicle melting fast as the water drained off his once white overalls and ran back into the pool.

“Get him in the shower!” Junior yelled, between laughs. “Before it soaks in.”

I grabbed Jerry’s arm with a gloved hand and jogged with him quickly around the pool and into the locker room. “Don’t touch anything,” I said, turned on a shower, shoved him under it, and raced to my locker for soap. I soaked up the trail of Jell-O juice with a mop I found in the coaches’ office while Jerry peeled off his clothes and scrubbed his face. When he gave up after a few minutes, his face was still tinted a light red, too pink for sunburn, too uniform for make-up but it was better than a full raspberry red. He retained a slight popsicle look when he dressed in some old red sweats from his locker.

When we got back to the pool it looked pretty well mixed. Jerry and I helped Frizz shovel and sweep the ice into the pool, while Junior turned on the cold water and started mixing again.

For the last hour even Junior was quiet. Everyone worked together like a machine, like a single being. Slipping into sync, I forgot my worries and forgot myself and just became a part of the whole, like it used to be, all of us as one. Junior was the brain, and he and Lisa were the face, and Lisa and I were heart, and Frizz and Jerry and I were the hands and the legs. All of us were all it. All one.

The Jell-O was thoroughly mixed and getting thicker, but only time would tell if it would get thick enough. Junior turned off the heater and cranked up the air conditioner. It was about 15° outside so Frizz and I propped all the doors open on our way out. We needed to get the trucks back and clean before the late shift came on at twelve o’clock at Suppository Sam's factory just over the border in Port Lewis. Friz and Jerry drove the refrigerator trucks, Lisa and I drove one tanker and Junior drove the other.

"Calling Big Jelly. Calling Big Jelly. Come in, Big Jelly," Junior shouted on the truck radio. He must be feeling pretty good to break radio silence, I thought. Things had gone like clockwork.

"This is Big Jelly, Speed Set. Ten-four," Frizz answered, in the best trucker drawl he could muster.

"Copy, but I thought you were Iceman," Junior said. "Where's Big Jelly?"

"He's in my sights," Frizz said.

"Right here, Jell-O brain," I said at last, "attempting to maintain radio silence."

"Oooh. Good point, Jelly boy.” Junior laughed. "I deserve that raspberry," he said, figuring that if he couldn't make me laugh he would make me groan. "I guess I shouldn't have broken the mold on that."

Frizz laughed. I turned off my mike and smiled. With just the clean-up to go, everything had gone to plan.

"We've got clear sailing to the depot,” Junior twanged. "Follow me in the back way."

All I kept thinking was “We did it!” The greatest prank in Woodcove history. Our last great hurrah. Junior had pulled it off and I felt like a fool for doubting him. We were high on achievement and Junior was the highest of all.

We whistled and sang while hosing out the trucks and tucking the sheets and the red-stained uniforms into the incinerator. We began with "Whistle While You Work" and ran through every song we knew with a rousing finale of "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood.” I was so happy it was over, I could have hugged them all and told them I loved them, but I remembered the Alamo. I settled for squeezing Lisa's arm and giving her a kiss. I looked up to see Junior had stopped working and was staring at us with an almost wistful look in his eye, but maybe that was my imagination. Or twinge of guilt. When he caught me looking at him, he quickly smiled, pretended to tip his hat, and returned to work.

In under two hours, we were out the door and on our way to breakfast. Junior stayed to bridge the shifts and make sure we didn't miss anything. He would meet us later to celebrate. We had the whole night ahead of us with a list of excuses to our parents that would clear us until Monday morning.

By three o'clock we had worn out our welcome at the Country Diner so we went to meet Junior under the rowboat. The joints had hardly been lit when he pulled in, spraying pebbles into the water as he skidded to a stop.

"Yee Ha!" he yelled.

"Yee Ha!” Frizz answered.

"Oops," Junior said quietly, as he crawled in under the boat. "We've got to stay cool. But it suure doo feeel good!" he said in an exaggerated southern accent and laughed. "I can't believe it's over."

Our relief was like a drug. We laughed and joked about how scared we were and how silly we looked in those uniforms. We smoked joint after joint and exhaled all the worry and the fear.

“At the end the Jell-O was thick and mushy,” Junior said. “Davy’s mom told me that that’s when you can put fruit in it.”

"That’s what we should have done!" Frizz said, hopping up so fast he banged his head on the boat. “Put sliced bananas in it.”

"Or marshmallows," I added.

"No, whole oranges," Frizz said. “Or pineapples or something.”

"There's plenty of room for all of them," Lisa pointed out.

"Why not like basketballs?" Jerry shrieked a laugh, looking up from his notebook in which he’d announced he was going to record everything we said.

"Or footballs?" I added. "In the shape of a W?"

“We could put in balls and equipment for every sport,” Junior said. “Like a 3-D tribute to all the Woodcove teams.”

“Why just the jocks?” Lisa asked and laughed so hard at the picture in her head that she almost couldn’t get the words out. “Why not Bunsen burners and protractors and a few copies of Romeo and Juliet?”

“And saxophones,” I said, “and painting easels.”

"We should have left a note 'Makes 14,000 servings, one cubic foot each.'" Junior said.

"Ready to eat in six hours," added Frizz, before asking, "Do you think it would really make that many servings?"

“I’ll figure it out,” Jerry said, but he kept dropping his pencil and flashlight as he tried to do the math.

"I'm sure it's close enough," I said.

"Signed 'The Class of '73. Thanks for the memories.’” Junior added. "It must be beautiful shimmering in the moonlight."

"Do you think it's set yet?" Frizz asked.

"14,400 cubic feet!" Jerry yelled in triumph.

"What?" I asked.

"14," Jerry started and then he dropped the paper and his flashlight. He searched for it the darkness. "Oh, shit! Forget it."

"I hope it's set," said Junior. "It should be, if everything went according to the plan.” He paused for a minute to let all of us catch up to his next thought. “But," he hesitated, "there's only one way to find out."

"No," I said.

"I'm just thinking." Junior shrugged. "It's true, though. There is only one way to find out."

"It's set," I said firmly. "Believe me, it's set."

"But are you sure?” Junior asked.

"I'm sure.” Everyone sat back and watched Junior and me battle it out. How did I become the leader of the sanity party?

"I wish I was that sure," Junior said.

"No, Junior. We're not going back."

"Timothy!" Lisa scolded. "It's crazy. Don't even think about it."

“We did it, Junior!” I said. “Isn’t that enough?”

"I was just wondering," he said. "I just thought somebody else might be wondering, too. It's early, you know. We could be there and back in under an hour."

"It's set!" I said. "We'll just have to wait for the pictures."

"It's just a shame," Junior said, "to go to all this trouble and never see the finished product....in person.... for a minute."

"It does seem like a shame," Frizz agreed.

"Yeah." Jerry added, his lungs full of smoke.

"Well, I'm not going back," I said.

"Me, neither," Lisa added emphatically. "We would have to be idiots to go back there after pulling it off so cleanly!"

Within five minutes we were all in Junior's Caddy, heading back to see the shimmering Jell-O.

**Chapter 16**

When Junior flicked off the Caddy’s lights we couldn’t see a thing. The night was blacker than before if that’s possible. For a minute we sat in silence. I couldn’t even hear the others breathing above the sound of my own heart beat banging in my ears. Junior opened the door and we stumbled out of the car and through the open doors of the pool as our eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. I lay face down by the side of the pool, almost gagged on the tart, glue-like scent and reached out to see if the Jell-O was set. It felt firm. I pushed hard with the palm of my hand and it gave a little but didn’t break.

“Ta da!” Junior called out dramatically, turning on all the pool lights and nearly blinding me.

“Ow shit!” I screamed, rolling away from the pool and squeezing my eyes shut. The sudden flash of red burned on the inside of my eyelids. I heard Lisa and Jerry groaning, too.

“This is really stupid, “ Lisa said.

“Turn them off, Junior!” I shouted.

“Just open your eyes and look,” Junior said. “It's beautiful!”

The red on my eyelids faded to a dark purple, but I kept them shut as if that would deny the stupidity of coming back here at all – never mind turning the lights on. I wasn’t the only one with my eyes closed because Junior said it again.

“Just open your eyes, you guys!” he insisted. “It’s beautiful.” He sounded like he was hypnotized, – like beautiful wasn’t adequate to describe it.

I opened them a crack and saw the air shimmering with a pinkish red glow. The Jell-O filtered the lights in the sides of the pool, creating half circles of vibrant red by the edges and deep purples in the center of the shiny, smooth pool. The surface was solid and smooth, perfectly set as if it had been chilling in the refrigerator.

“Dig in!” Frizz yelled.

“This is perfect!” Junior repeated over and over as he walked around the pool. “Perfect!”

Jerry reached under the layers of winter clothes, pulled out a crumpled joint, stuck it in his mouth, and began searching for a match.

I pulled a pack out of my coat pocket, walked over and lit it for him. He took a big hit and handed it to me. It seemed like everyone was suddenly drunk with success, with Jell-O, like we could do whatever we wanted. Even Frizz had forgotten his paranoia.

“Jerry! Davy! Not in here!” Lisa yelled. Feeling guilty I handed it back to Jerry.

“Why not, man?” Jerry asked. “It’s so perfect. We’ve got to celebrate.”

“Junior?” she asked. “Tell them, Junior. Not in here.”

“What?” Junior asked, still staring with a wide-eyed smile at the pool.

“Tell them, no joints.”

“Oh yeah, right,” he said. “We don’t need any reefer now, guys. Just look!” He held out both hands toward the pool and laughed. “This is perfect, all by itself.” Jerry shook his head in disappointment and put the joint away. I shrugged my shoulders and walked over to Lisa. I thought she was making too big a deal out of it, but I still felt like I’d let her down, somehow. Jerry walked over and stood next to Junior, looking at him and then at the pool and then back and forth as if trying to catch the same buzz that Junior had.

“Holy shit!” Junior laughed and put a hand on Jerry’s shoulder and his other hand on Frizz’s when Frizz joined them.

“Holy shit!” Frizz repeated.

“It’s like ice!” Junior said. “Red ice. Maybe we could play a little hockey.” He laughed again and squeezed the shoulders of Jerry and Frizz on either side of him. “Doesn’t it look like you could slide the length of the pool on the surface of it?”

“Looks like it, but you couldn’t,” Lisa said, while Frizz and Jerry nodded their heads like they were considering it. “Too sticky.”

“Half the pool?” Junior said.

“It couldn’t support your weight.” I instinctively stepped closer to Lisa as I spoke. “This is stupid, Junior. You’re kidding, right?”

Junior knelt down at the edge of the pool and Jerry and Frizz knelt too, like bookends. He pushed hard with the flat of his hand. “Come here. Feel this. It’s pretty strong.” Junior leaned into it with both hands and it held.

“Yeah, but look at this.” I kneeled and jabbed with my fingers sharply. My hand sunk in up to the knuckles. Still I was surprised by how firm it was.

“It’s all in the angle of the dive,” Junior insisted.

“You ruined it!” Frizz cried as if I’d taken a key to the paint of his parent’s new Beemer. I pulled my hand out and it bounced back to hide the break. After a moment of quivering you could hardly see the dark, thin scar.

“Sorry,” I said to Frizz. “But Junior’s going to ruin it with this crazy idea of his.”

I was interrupted by Jerry’s laugh or squeal or whatever you call that *ee ee ee ee* of his. He was kneeling by the pool jabbing his fingers in and pulling them, jabbing in, pulling out, his laughter growing with each jab. “It catches you!” he said. “It’s so thick, it catches you!”

“It’s just your hand,” I said, trying to stop Jerry from going to the logical next step, but his squeal had Lisa laughing and then Junior, followed finally by Frizz in a kind of confused laugh. So I joined them.

We kneeled by the pool, knifing our hands in and pulling out, watching the Jell-O jiggle, close the hole and settle quickly to stillness like an echo absorbed by soft earth. It was hypnotizing.

Jerry had begun to make airplane noises when Junior finally snapped us out it. “Guys! Focus! We got a bet here. And we don’t have lot of time.”

He began peeling off his parka. “I say I can slide half the pool. Anybody up for a bet?”

“It sticks,” Lisa said again, kneeling next to me. She rubbed her hand along the surface. “Look at this.”

“It doesn’t stick that much.” Junior seemed irritated by her skepticism. He repeated her experiment. “All right. A quarter of the pool. With a good run, I could slide a quarter of the pool. Any bets?”

He wasn’t usually a betting man, but I chalked it up to his excitement.

“Junior, let’s go.” Lisa said.

“Junior,” I said, “You’re going to land flat on your face in a big belly flop.” I didn’t know why I was bothering. The wheels in his head were already pinning full speed.

“Wait!” Frizz yelled, all sense of safety and paranoia gone now. “How come you get all the fun?”

Jerry started laughing again as if he read Frizz’s mind.

“Let’s bet on who can go farthest,” Frizz said, and pulled off his coat.

Jerry began undressing beside him.

“All right. Get it over with and let’s get out of here,” I said, if only to slow down Jerry before he’d stripped to his underwear.

“We’ll have to come running in from outdoors to get up enough speed.” Junior walked along the side of the pool as he formulated his plan. “So we’ll come in the shallow end and...” He stopped at a point about a quarter of the way down the long side of the pool. “I’ll slide to about here.”

“Junior, you are such an idiot,” Lisa reminded him, “You promised we'd be out of here in ten minutes.” I stood beside her as a show of support.

“What?” he said, turning from his calculations. “Right. Let’s just try this and then we’re out of here. It’ll only take a minute.” He looked at Jerry and Frizz, both starting to shiver by the edge of the pool. “Well? Gentleman? Do I hear five dollars? No. One dollar.” He held up his index finger. “

 “A dollar,” Frizz said. “Let’s do it.” Then he smiled broadly like he thought he’d just figured out some inside joke.

“Sure,” Jerry said, looking less certain.

Junior ignored him and turned to Lisa and me. “Side bets?”

“A buck?” I asked, taking a step toward him and shrugging. He was doing it, whatever I said. “On Frizz,” I said just to see Junior’s reaction. I didn’t think the stunt was dangerous, I just thought hanging out there was.

“How about you, Lisa?”

“Junior,” she said, sounding tired and old. “Do whatever you’ve got to do and let’s go.”

“All right, all right.” They jogged out the door by the shallow end and disappeared into the darkness. “Everybody ready?” Junior’s disembodied voice called from the parking lot.

“Just hurry up!” I yelled.

“This is stupid,” Lisa said. “Somebody should stop him.”

“Frizz is coming fir–“ Junior yelled, but before he could finish, Frizz ran through the door, launched in a almost perfectly flat dive and landed with an “Oomph.” He struggled to catch his breath. It was like cement. The Jell-O surface barely jiggled.

“That sucker is set,” I said. “Come on! Roll over here and get out. I’ll mark your spot.”

I stood by the edge and tried not to laugh at the crumbs of red Jell-O in Frizz’s eyes and nose.

“All clear!” I yelled and Jerry appeared in the doorway, his long legs loping and that competitive fire in his eyes. He launched himself higher then Frizz, hoping his arc would take him farther, but damn if he didn’t land in the exact same spot. But with a loud thud and “Ohhh!” like he’d belly flopped on the gym floor.

“You okay, man?” I said and he tried to shake his head “Yes.” And then he shook his head “No.”

That just made Frizz laugh.

“Not too late to reconsider!” Lisa shouted in the unlikely event Junior wasn’t already on his way. But she knew him better than I did. He was going to milk this – if not for the win, he’d go for the biggest laugh.

“One!” he counted.

“We should go out there, David!” she shouted, moving beside me and wrapping her hand around my upper arm.

“Two!” I could picture him smiling out there enjoying torturing us. “Three!” he yelled and came running at full speed through the doors.

He jumped off right at the edge of the pool, but instead of diving low and out, he jumped up in a high swan dive to a rounded arc, and then down, pointing his arms perfectly in front of him. But instead of stopping like our finger thrusts, he sliced through the surface like a knife and disappeared into the Jell-O. I expected to see a dolphin- kick beneath the surface like he always did and then see him swim to the middle of the pool, pop his head up and say, “Polo!” or “You win. Here’s your dollar.” But this wasn’t water; it was Jell-O and his body just sank into the redness.

We stood there waiting for him to jump up. But nothing happened. Adrenaline surged through my brain and pounding heart, but I couldn’t move. Lisa stood next to me, hand still wrapped around my arm, frozen except for the sound of her halting breaths. We were shocked, stunned into silence. This joke was too weird.

Finally Lisa began to scream, “Junior! Junior!” and I lurched forward, broken free of my trance.

Jerry began to swear and cry, “Oh shit. Oh shit.”

I ran over to a spot near where Junior went in. It didn’t seem like too much time had elapsed because the Jell-O was still quivering. I leaned close and made out a dark shape at the bottom of the pool. It wasn’t moving or at least it didn’t look like it was. He must have landed n his head. I jumped in, feet first, but short of Junior. When I was in just past my waist, I stopped sinking. I had landed too flat-footed instead of knifing through like Junior. The density of the Jell-O slowed and then stopped my descent until I was stuck, wobbling in the cold, disgusting blob. I grabbed big chunks of the Jell-O-ey mass and threw them over my shoulder.

I could hear Lisa shrieking behind me, “Get him, David! Get him.”

Jerry stood next to her at the edge of the pool still chanting, “Oh shit! Oh shit!”

Frizz was running back and forth. “Should I call somebody?” he asked. “Should I call the police?”

I kept digging. “Yes! Yes! Call somebody! Anybody!”

“Use Coach’s phone,” Lisa yelled and jumped in beside me and started digging.

I worked my feet furiously, to break up the dense Jell-O and threw big chunks out of the hole I was making. If I grabbed them too hard they fell apart in my hand, crumbling and falling in the way. Lisa began widening the hole and clearing away the Jell-O. But it was slow going. When we reached the bottom of the pool, we started toward Junior, clearing a small tunnel to his body. It seemed like hours before I reached through the red mass for his hand. At the last minute it seemed like his hand jerked toward me, reaching out, brushing against my fingertips, then falling away. I grabbed it and began to pull.

His hand was soft and cold, Its color matched the red of the Jell-O. I realized then that he was dead and stopped. When I pressed my face to the wall of Jell-O between us, I could see his face, turned sideways on the bottom of the pool. It looked like he was smiling with one eye closed in a permanent wink. Maybe I saw that later in a dream, but that’s the way I remember it. Suddenly I was furious at Junior for the whole thing, for the prank, for making us come back, for diving in, and for dying.

I don’t remember much after that. I know I was pulling furiously. Lisa said she was afraid I was going to take his arm off. I remember her screaming, “Oh God! Oh God!” when she realized he was dead. Somehow we dragged or pushed him over to the open hole we’d dug. Lisa tried mouth-to-mouth and CPR, but it was too late; he’d already suffocated in the airless gelatin. I remember Jerry crying and mumbling, and Frizz running out the door and returning and then running out again to find a phone.

But the whole time I could only see that face, glowing eerily in the red Jell-O, grinning madly at one last prank. And then I started crying and couldn’t stop. I pulled him into my arms and hugged him. He was freezing cold and pink with red Jell-O crumbs all over him. I rocked him back and forth; I couldn’t stop crying.

When we got him out of the pool, I stood up and wrapped my arms around Lisa. I kissed her hair and reached over to Jerry. Tears still streamed down his face. The three of us stood over Junior’s body, with our arms around each other, and listened to the sounds of sirens in the distance.

**Chapter 17**

At first I felt like I was dead, too, walking around in a zombie trance, answering questions, following directions, staring into the fog. I got up each morning, went to school, came home, ate, did homework and went to sleep. In the back of my mind the questions wound around and round: what the hell happened? why couldn’t I stop it? why didn’t I stop it?

No one asked me the last two questions, although it was in their eyes, but the first one came from every angle. JD caught me by my locker one day. (We’d all been kicked off the swim team immediately.) He demanded an explanation. What could I say? It wasn’t supposed to turn out this way? The food coloring wasn’t supposed to stain the walls of the pool? (They gave it five coats of paint and it still had a pink tint.) The cold from the Jell-O wasn’t supposed to put a crack in the pool wall? The sludge wasn’t supposed to destroy the drainage system? It wasn’t supposed to kill the star of the team, my best friend?

In the police station, in the principal’s office and finally around the kitchen table, I told them everything. We stole the gelatin and the trucks. We broke into the pool. We lied to everybody and smoked pot like it was oxygen. We stood by and watched Junior die. We didn’t stop it.

The funeral was a blur of black suits and dresses, more questions and tears, organ music and fresh soil in the hard February ground. And then I was alone again.

After the investigation they suspended us and I stopped going out at all, staying in my room and drawing or trying to sleep. I'd wake up shaking from night terrors or day terrors – not convoluted nightmares, but exact re-enactments, reliving everything exactly as it happened again and again. I paced the narrow space between my bed and my desk. And drew again. I lay back in bed fevered with rage, then frozen from guilt and grief. I wrapped myself in blankets and then threw them off in tangled bunches. Running around and around in my head was the question: had I saved the prank and killed Junior?

And then I became furious at him. A hot gaseous rage stormed out of my chest. That bastard! How could he do this? He couldn’t have planned it all along. I couldn’t believe that. What kind of demented bastard would plan to kill himself and make his best friends watch?

 What the hell *was* he doing? What *was* he thinking? Did he just decide to jump up rather than out when he hit the edge of the pool? Was it a last minute impulse? A prank upon a prank? Except he hit his head too hard on the bottom?

He knew how shallow the pool was there. Didn’t he care enough to be more careful? To pull himself back? How could he have died of suffocation? He could hold his breath for two minutes! Why didn’t I run to him sooner? jump in quicker? leap out farther? dig faster?

And then it turned back on me: I’d known something was wrong. I let it happen. Case closed.

I was probably asking the same questions that Junior had been asking about his father. There was some dark humor there that they both would have laughed at, but it just emptied my lungs, leaving me gasping for air. By getting the joke I was one with them. How could we ever know what really happened? How could we not feel responsible? Maybe it all just collapsed on Junior when he ran toward that shimmering sea of Jell-O, all the questions, the guilt, the pressure of being Junior.

I tried to picture where he was. My little kid picture of heaven didn’t hold up for me anymore. But where was Junior then? What came next? Nothing? A blackness? A hole? It seemed like there must be something of Junior somewhere, besides in our memories. Maybe when you died you lived in that moment forever, like some ghost haunting the last spot of your life. That gave me the shivers: Junior suspended in the cold, sticky Jell-O or haunting the Woodcove High pool forever. Maybe you moved on to some other life. Maybe Junior was now a cow or a bug or a cat.

I tried to picture him somewhere with his dad and Molly, but that was a fairy tale I couldn’t believe anymore. He was dead and he was gone. That was the end. And maybe the end was a good thing: no pressure to perform; no circle of questions; no pain and guilt; no nothing. Not even blackness, just the cool, white nothing of a new piece of paper.

It was just about the time I couldn’t draw anymore that the drawings started to save me. When I realized each boot I drew was dark and hopeless, each tree leafless and dead, each face I drew, even my own, smiled crookedly like Junior’s and had the same dark nothing in the eyes. I realized that drawing anything as it really was was impossible. The things I used to draw transformed by the love I felt for them were now mutated by hate and despair. Every line was tainted by whatever storm raged through my brain as I drew. Each mouth ached to open in a Munch-like scream. Each hand wrinkled in decay. Each shoe sagged under the weight of its own hopelessness.

I could no longer draw because... Because why should I draw the same thing over and over? Why draw when each crisp line, each sculpted block of shading rendered a world, not of order, but of greater chaos? Why draw when instead of joy or escape each new piece of paper pulled me closer to the same desperate spot. When I could no longer draw, I could only look at the drawings I’d already drawn, lay them before me and see the progression. The first drawings from right after the Jell-O were weird, but lucid – hard gestural lines that caught something of the object and its context. But the lines gradually grew more gnarled and the shading more grotesque. The objects themselves mutated into dark abstractions that had more to do with me than with themselves.

I took out a new sketch pad and a box of ragged, worn pastels, turned to a clean piece of paper, perfect in its textured whiteness and began to draw what was in my head without any pretense of representing anything. I drew without looking up from the page, letting one line lead to the next, one shape lead to another, one color lead impulsively to a new one. I turned the page and drew and turned that page and drew. I tore the paper off the pastels, wore them down to little nubs and crushed the nubs into the paper. I worked through the darker colors, through my favorite colors, through the bright colors, and through the colors I’d never touched until on the last page, the paper and the pastels ran out together.

I closed the sketchpad, took a deep breath and I decided where I wasn’t going, who I wasn’t following, what I wasn’t going to do. When you’re in it, you don’t see the whole whirlpool. You’re too busy flailing against the weight of the swirling suction, trying to grip the soft sides and pull yourself up or at least slow your descent. You don’t look down out of fear. You don’t look up at the light. The hope. The place you want to be. Or you ought to want to be. It’s not until you’re down deep, when the light’s too hard to see anyway that you drop your gaze and see the dark hole in the center and by then it looks inviting. A warm destination. A dark bedroom. Finally, a place to rest.

The drawings gave me the chance to step back and see, to both be in the whirlpool and to see myself there. And in stepping back, I could stay back a little longer each time until I was no longer there at all. So in the end it was an accident of pencil and paper that I didn’t follow Junior and his father down into the abyss. Whether they planned their journey or let it happen, I’ll never know. Whether anyone plans anything, I’ll always wonder.

When I did go downstairs, I felt like the Elephant Man with some terrible disfigurement that everyone wanted to look at but no one wanted to talk about. When I sat at the kitchen table, I could feel Mom and Dad and Granny staring at me, but if I looked up they’d look away or ask some stupid question about the food or the weather. Usually, I didn’t look up, I kept my head low, my eyes on my Trix or my meatloaf – eating, breathing, trying not to think.

Occasionally my mom would sit beside me and try to tell me she knew what I was feeling, how much it hurt when her older brother died in a car accident when she was young, how I might feel a little better if I talked about it. But she wasn’t there when her brother died. She didn’t let it happen. Or my dad would come to my room and talk about a friend he’d had in college who’d committed suicide. He’d always felt like there was something he should have said or done. He’d always wondered why. “We’ll never know,” he said. “We’ll never know.”

“Why didn’t you come to me, Davy?” they wanted to know.

“I tried to,” I mumbled, “but not very hard.” Or “I wanted to, but I didn’t know what to say.” Or “I should have. I should have.”

“You’ve got to get out of the house, Davy,” my mother would say. “You can’t sit around here blaming yourself.”

“Some fresh air will do you good, Davy, ” Granny would add. I knew she was probably busy saying prayers for me and keeping her fingers crossed.

“Davy! Davy! Davy!” I could hear them say it. I could hear Junior say it. I could hear Mr. Corwin and Mrs. Abrahms say it. It was the name of a two year old! How could I be surprised nobody took me seriously when I called myself Davy? Talk about weak fake names. I was asking not to be taken seriously; I didn’t even take myself seriously.

Out the front window of my room I could see Lisa’s house, framed like an old picture: a gray, gnarled, leafless dogwood in the front yard against the red shingles and black door, her yellow Karmann Ghia parked next to her Dad’s old green Buick in the driveway. The window shades drawn. The porch light on all night – sometimes all day. Each morning I saw her mom and dad come out the door, heard the squeak of the car doors and the groan of the shocks when they climbed in and felt the window rattle when the car roared down the street to take Mr. Conner to the train station. Later, her mom would return, sometimes with groceries or other bags. Each evening, I watched the ritual in opposite order. But I never saw Lisa.

Out my side window I could see half the roof of Jerry’s house across Sound View Lane and the grassy marsh behind his yard. The sea grass waved gently at high tide and stood tall and still amid the sweet, salty stench of low tide. What I could see of the house seemed empty.

“You can’t stay in you room forever,” my father said at breakfast one day in early March.

“We’re all going out to dinner on Saturday for your birthday,” my mother said with a quick peek at my father. I could tell they had planned this together. “You pick the place.”

Either I was ready or just too tired to fight. “The Clam Bar,” I said, “but no cake and no singing.”

I didn’t realize that food had lost its taste. Suddenly it was back. My parents let me order three orders of shrimp cocktail and I cleaned my plate of fried clams and baked potato and even the limp green beans and carrots that came with dinner. My parents were delighted, talking about the food, and birthdays past, and plans for college next year. I’d said I wanted to change my major to business and now my father was insisting I start out taking art courses.

Surprisingly enough, it was Granny that said something I could use. My parents went over to look at the dessert cart and I stayed with Granny at our table in the corner, contemplating having two desserts. She had knocked the salt shaker over and was carefully sweeping the spilt white grains off the green table cloth and into her blue veined hands.

“You know, Davy, the man upstairs is in charge,” she said sweeping the last few crystals into her palm. “Your friend Junior was so smart, such a charmer, that I don’t think he ever learned that.” She nodded her head twice and threw the salt over her left shoulder.

I looked at the light shining on the loose strands of her gray hair and the earnest look in her pale blue eyes and tried not to laugh at her pagan Irish Catholic explanation. My parents return to the table saved me from replying, but her words didn’t go away.

I sat in my room that night and tried to picture her man upstairs, but couldn’t. I had some serious doubts about anybody being in charge, but I knew *I* sure wasn’t. There was some relief in giving up that illusion. That was something Junior and his dad couldn’t do. They always had to be in charge. Maybe the pressure of that, of being perfect, became too much. In a way it might have been the *idea* of Junior that ended up killing him. Even Junior may have loved that idea more than he loved himself.

He had been like a saint or a hero to me, more than a best friend. It seemed like he could outsmart everyone, not in a wise guy way, but in a wise, diligent way. It was his willingness to work hard, to see to the crazy details that made the impossible, possible, and I got to help in some small part.

It wasn’t just that Junior was smarter, more handsome and more charming than the rest of us. He worked harder, he thought more, he focused everything he had on whatever we needed to do. He focused us all. The things we did weren’t great, earth-shattering feats; they were kid things: sneaking into a movie theater, taking our swim teams to national events and winning, slipping his VW convertible into the front of the Memorial Day parade and having the crowds salute us.

We thought the rules didn’t apply to Junior and by extension to us. I don’t think Junior did either. We thought loss and grief couldn’t affect him. It did. We thought his brains and charisma, and our loyalty could overcome anything. It couldn’t. The idea of being perfect might have been Junior’s fatal flaw.

**Chapter 18**

Between the suspension and winter vacation, it was the middle of March before I returned to school. I felt like a ghost and everyone treated me like one, too. I’d made up all my work – I had nothing else to do – but even the teachers wouldn’t call on me. Our table in the cafeteria stayed empty. I never saw Frizz, and when Lisa and I would see each other in class or across the road, we’d look down or walk away. Jerry was in a stoned daze that made him seem even more distant; there was no need to look away. The faint pot smell that trailed behind him made me nauseous, flashing me back, reminding me of all the things I could have done differently.

I walked with my head down, avoided eye contact, kept moving to dodge any well-meaning conversations. I had my books packed, and was up and out of every class the moment the bell rang. During lunch or study I hid in the library, behind the bookcases by the window that overlooked the parking lot, protected by the enforced silence.

On Thursday, Mr. Corwin timed his lecture to end at the bell with him between me and the door. I kept my head down and attempted to get up, but he put a hand on my shoulder to keep me from leaving.

“I just want to say that I’m sorry,” he said, his voice catching with sudden emotion. “I should have done more.”

I looked up to see his eyes damp with sorrow and and maybe helplessness. “It’s okay,” I mumbled. “I...” I hesitated, wanting to let him know somehow that it wasn’t his fault. “I never told you everything.”

“Well, I should have seen it.” He stepped back to let me go. “Sorry,” he said again.

I stood up and reached a hand out to him, patting him awkwardly on the shoulder. “Thanks.”

Mrs. Abrahms, I didn’t feel as forgiving towards. She was supposed to be the expert. I ignored her passes until she caught me in the hall outside Mr. Corwin's’ class a few days later.

“We need to talk,” she said.

“I don’t think so.” I continued walking fast.

“Please.” She surprised me with her desperation and her determination to keep up with me in the crowded hall. “We can talk here or in my office.”

I glanced at the flexing muscles of her calves as she walked quickly next to me in a short navy blue skirt. “I ran track in college,” she said. “I will keep up with you.”

I slowed and then stopped, shaking my head. “Okay. Fine. Your office, but I can’t be too late for class.”

Her office seemed more disheveled this time, files piled higher on the desk and obscuring her family picture, books spilling off the bookcase shelves and onto the floor. She cleared off one chair for me to sit on and sat again directly across from me, knees touching knees.

“I need to tell you I’m sorry,” she said.

“Thanks.” I soaked it with as much sarcasm as I could muster.

“I feel very bad.” She put a hand on my knee. “I hope you’re not taking on too much of this yourself.”

“No,” I said, squinting my eyes and staring into hers, “there’s plenty of blame to go around.”

“I sent him a dozen passes.” She dropped her hand off my knee. “When I saw him in the hall he assured me he’d be in the next day.” She turned her hands over and shrugged. “I believed him.”

At the time I enjoyed watching her squirm. I ignored somehow my own lack of cooperation. It seemed like she should have read between the lines.

“He could be very convincing,” she added and sat back in her chair. “But I should have known better.” The phone rang and she ignored it. When it stopped, we sat in silence, staring at each other until my eyes dropped. I studied her knees in front of me, the flat triangle of her patella, the line where her calf met her shin bone, the muscles of her thighs flattened by the chair before disappearing into her skirt. They looked like Lisa’s knees. I could imagine Lisa in an office like this someday. Maybe she’d become a psychiatrist trying to help some teenage boy find his way through trouble.

I looked up and shrugged. “I guess you did the best you could.” I wondered why all the sudden it was my job to comfort these guilt-ridden adults.

“Thank you.” She put her hand on my knee again and squeezed. “And you did the best you could, too. Do you believe that?”

All I could muster was “I’m trying.”

I slowly became aware again of the world around me. The papers were full of Watergate and the end of the Vietnam war. I had a vague memory of a cease fire being signed in January, but I was stunned when all the troops were withdrawn on March twenty-ninth. The Vietnam war over! We’d been fighting there for as long as I could remember.

The next day the swim team finished tenth in the States. I don’t want to equate the importance of the two events but both reversed long-term trends. Woodcove had won eight of the last nine state titles, five in a row and hadn’t finished out the top three in the fifteen years that JD was coach. I watched JD walk down the hall the next day, accepting condolences and slapping swimmers on the back and telling them not to worry, they did their best, wait ‘til next year. He smiled and looked like he meant it.

On impulse I went over, stuck out my hand and said I was sorry, real sorry. And he shook it. He didn’t say anything, but he nodded his head and smiled a weary smile and I returned one and walked away. That was it. No great revelation. No dramatic reunion. Maybe not even any forgiveness. Maybe just a recognition that it sucked for both of us. But I felt a little better. Giving up my need to blame every adult I should have leveled with seemed to lighten my load a little.

When Haldeman and Ehrlichman resigned at the end of April I didn’t feel any of the glee I would have felt six months earlier. I had joined Junior in hating Nixon and his henchmen. If he was still here, we would have thrown a party for the occasion and rooted on Nixon’s fall.

A few weeks later my afternoons became filled with watching the Watergate hearings on TV and my evenings with catching the parts I missed replayed on PBS. I sat with a sketchpad in my dad’s big chair, watched the show and drew the witnesses and the senators as they leaned into the microphone to ask a question or clarify a statement. I drew with a black charcoal pencil face after face: Dean and McCord, Sloan and Stans. Young faces; old faces. Chagrined faces; outraged faces. Sam Ervin, Lowell Weicker, Howard Baker. As the hearings slipped into the summer: Mitchell, and Haldeman, and Erhlichman. All the questioners and answerers and liars and truth-tellers and grandstanding politicians and second and third and fourth bananas.

And I listened to the story unfold: what was done and why, what was hidden and how, who said what and who knew it when. A parade of men, wearing the same dark suits and striped ties, but individuals with varying degrees of guilt and regret, pain and remorse, denial and acceptance.

I began to feel an unwanted kinship with this paranoid gang who thought they knew better than everyone else and thought the laws didn’t apply to them, who did what they were told and later regretted it, who rubbed their eyes with their hands and wished they could go back and do it differently. They deserved to be punished. Maybe they weren’t the only ones.

I found myself haunting some of our old spots. Spring was finally penetrating my brain. In the boatyard a few people had pulled the tarps off their boats and begun to scrap barnacles off the bottoms. The sea grass was turning a deep green in the surf behind Junior’s house where I went to skim a few stones. All the furniture was gone when I peeked in the window of his room. The school pool was under repair but I couldn’t bring myself to go back there anyway. The team had finished the season in the old Y pool.

Out the front window of my room Lisa’s pink dogwood began to bloom, the curtains and windows opened, and on weekends her father cut the lawn and her mother worked in the flower garden. And sometimes I would see Lisa helping her mom or getting into her car and driving away. It was like looking at a life I used to know. Or watching a movie of a book I’d read and loved except they didn’t get the movie quite right.

One warm summer-like weekday afternoon in mid-May when the boatyard was deserted, I climbed underneath the rowboat and spied the tip of an unsmoked joint hanging off the ledge of the upside down boat seat. A few days before I’d swept up a pile of roaches, empty match packs and half burned matches scattered around the ground under the boat and thrown them in the garbage. But a whole joint! We’d gotten very careless at the end. At first I just shook my head at our recklessness. I could picture Jerry sticking it up on the ledge of the seat while searching his pockets for a match and then being too stoned to remember where he put it. The paper was stiff with age, but it was still good and the smell of it brought back the good memories from our many stoned nights together before it all went astray.

I stood up in an awkward squat so I could check the other seats for forgotten contraband and found a pack of matches wedged in the corner of the little seat in the front of the boat. They must have been lost in another stoned lapse although I laughed thinking of Jerry losing the matches while searching for the lost joint. Maybe it was that nostalgic laughter that led me to put the two together; after a moment of looking at the joint in one hand and the matches in the other, I lit the joint and took a deep toke. It felt hot and raw in my throat and lungs.

The second hit made me cough in a rough-throated gasp that felt like it pulled off the first layer of skin. I covered my mouth in a sudden burst of paranoia. I thought I heard footsteps. Then nothing. I listened to the waves hit the seawall and felt foolishly like Frizz. The third hit was smaller, taking it easy on my throat, but the fourth I pulled in and held, waiting for the warm and goofy feeling we shared on those Friday nights. Instead I felt a little dizzy, a buzzing in my ear and a returned paranoia that seemed to prickle the skin and hair on my arms and neck. I listened again to the waves and a sea gull calling in the distance and the returned caw.

I exhaled, looking at the orange tip spreading down the faded white rolling paper, leaving gray ash in its wake. What a strange invention, I thought, to roll up leaves and light them, pulling the smoke from the burning embers into your lungs. Who was the first one to think of this idea? I took one more deep hit, but it only made my skin more edgy and my mind start to swirl.

I coughed again and threw the joint on the ground. The gray smoke rose in a thin straight ribbon that slowly flattened out and rolled back and forth before colliding with the ceiling of the boat seat. It seemed alive, swimming along the seat like a school of spawning salmon until disappearing at the edge into the shadowy shell of the boat.

The sunlight streaming through the blue tarp gave the air a lighter tint than the moonlight used to, more like the artificial blue of a slushy or blueberry popsicle. And the tarp hung taut like a trap. Suddenly Junior’s absence felt like a weight on my chest and shoulders. Suddenly I was the one suspended in electric blue Jell-O.

I felt a surge of panic and crawled quickly through the tarp, trying not to make any noise. When I stood up, my head spun for a moment and I had to close my eyes against the bright sun and press my hands against the bottoms of the boats on either side of me for balance. I stumbled out to the parking lot using my hands as crutches on the boats to discover Lisa sitting on the seawall and gazing out to sea. I blinked my eyes open and shut and shook my head, thinking she was some kind of weird hallucination.

Her long black hair ruffled in the breeze coming off the cove. Her skin already looked tan against the white sleeveless shirt she wore above her faded black jeans. I hadn’t heard her walk by although that might have been the noise I’d heard before. By the way she was calmly watching the water, I knew she hadn’t noticed me. I resisted the urge to crawl back under the boat, took a deep breath, opened my mouth to say hello, and chickened out.

 The tendons and muscles in her forearms and biceps rippled subtly as she leaned back on her arms and slender hands planted on the hard dirt behind her. She arched her back and squinted at the bright sky. The more beautiful she looked, the more impossible it seemed to ever talk to her again. Had our fling, or whatever it was, distracted us from Junior? Had it nudged him a little farther over the edge? Whatever made me think I deserved her?

I shook my head and began walking backwards on tiptoes. I was about ten feet from Old Lady Miller’s hemlocks and the dirt driveway to the road when I stepped on a twig, cracking it loudly, startling myself as much as I startled her.

Lisa turned and put her hand to her chest. “David!”

“Sorry,” I mumbled. My head throbbed from the sunlight. “I didn’t see you there.” What an obvious lie. “I --”

“I didn’t know anyone was here,” she said before I could finish. The sun was dropping down from the sky above her. The yellow light reflected off the point where her collarbone met the curve of her shoulder. I felt my heart pound for the first time in months.

“Sorry,” I mumbled again. “I was just–” What was I doing? I didn’t even know myself. I was just wandering around and trying to... Make sense of it? Pick up the pieces? “I was just leaving,” I said.

“Me, too.” She got up from the seawall and smiled as she brushed the pebbles off her jeans. “I don’t know why I’m here. I--” she hesitated. “I’ve got a lot of homework.”

“Are you... okay?” I asked.

“Yeah.” She sighed as she walked toward me and smiled sadly. “Trying to keep busy. Trying to get on with things. Trying not to think.”

“Sounds familiar,” I rasped. My throat was raw from the pot. I felt like I hadn’t spoken aloud in a long time.

“Yeah.” She frowned and walked past me, continuing down the dirt path to the road. I had to hurry to catch up.

We’re not okay! a voice screamed in my head. Let’s stop pretending! I almost grabbed her by the arm and screamed, “How could he do this to us? How could we do this to him?” But I didn’t. I walked along beside her in silence, took deep breaths to clear my brain as we passed the stone wall around the beach and Junior’s street, and turned down our own road. When we reached our driveways, I mumbled a goodbye and walked up to my front door. I turned then, but she was already in her house. The glare from the sun made me wince and look away. I couldn’t tell if she was looking out her window.

Two days later, Lisa dropped a picture in my mailbox. A smiling eight or nine-year-old me peeked around the front tire of my old blue Barracuda while pulling a wheely in my driveway. She had written “King of the Wheelies” on the bottom and “Found this in my drawer - L” on the back. I stood in the living room looking out the window at her house like I did that first day she moved in, but her car was gone, the house quiet.

I went out to the garage, sat on Dad’s wheelbarrow and stared at the flat tires of my rusty old bike crammed into a corner behind the lawn mower. It was cobwebbed and dirty, the tires worn smooth, the grips on the monkey bars cracked and the banana seat torn, but the blue frame looked good as new. I remembered how cool our bikes looked when we clipped baseball cards to the spokes or put crepe paper on them for the Fourth of July parade and how my parents made me scrub every inch of it after I brought it home caked with mud and seaweed after riding it off the ramp we’d set up at the boatyard that summer Lisa moved in across the street.

We were eight, riding up the jerrybuilt ramp and launching with our bikes into the air for a brief moment of exhilarating freedom and then crashing into the water next to the docks. We landed with scream and a great jolting splash, slowing as we sank in the water but sinking deep enough to feel the rubber tires bounce off the slushy bottom before swimming with a side stroke to the docks, the other arm dragging our bikes in our wakes.

The ramp had been Lisa’s idea but Junior and Jerry seized on it, building and rebuilding the ramp out of cast-aside two by fours and a big sheet of plywood, tweaking the length and angle to give our flight a longer and higher arc. Each jump we tried to stand tall on the pedals or push the bike out and hold our feet out behind us for a second. But the two of them were the craziest, holding a wheely through the jump and landing on their butts or standing on the seat and jumping away from the bike on impact. Our jumps and the rebuilding of the ramp were done with a frenzy fueled by our knowledge that our parents would forbid this once they knew. This would be our only day of bike flying.

“I think we can do back flips,” Jerry said, after a few hours, “if we angle the ramp a little higher.” He’d already discovered the grace he displayed in the air that disappeared the moment he hit the ground, was already wowing the coaches with back and front flips off the board at the Y.

“If you can do it, I can do it,” Junior said, yanking the nails out of the ramp to rebuild it one more time before the tide went too far out.

“A back flip?” I asked feeling no sense of grace in the air myself. “You guys are nuts.”

“I think I’ll just watch,” Lisa said and laughed at the two of them frantically pulling out nails and searching for longer boards.

By the time they were ready the sun had set a little further in the late-August sky and the water had dropped half a foot along the rocks of the seawall. Jerry backed his bike across the parking lot as Junior banged in the last few nails and tested the ramp by kicking it and then jumping on it with both feet.

“Ready?” Jerry called.

“Ready!” Junior answered waving the hammer over his head like a green flag.

We stood on the edge of the seawall and watched Jerry furiously pedal the wheels of his dirty orange Stingray. He rolled up the ramp smoothly, flew almost straight up in the air and lay back in a smooth curve, hanging upside down momentarily before completing the circle and hitting the water with a “Yee Ha!”

We watched the dark water for what seemed like a minute until the foam of the splash had disappeared and the circle of waves stopped slapping against the wall. Jerry poked his wet red head out of the water. “My wheels got stuck in the muck.” He screeched a laugh. He reached his free hand out in a side stroke and dragged his bike to the dock.

Junior hopped on his bike and raced to the other end of the parking lot. I ran down the walkway to the dock to help Jerry get his bike out.

“Ready?” Junior called.

“Not yet,” I yelled and grabbed Jerry’s handlebars and yanked it onto the docks. “Look at your wheels,” I said as Jerry pulled himself onto the dock.

“Wow!” He opened his eyes wide and raised his eyebrows as he stared at the two flat tires, the broken spokes and back bent rim.

“Ready?” Junior called again.

“Not yet!” I yelled again.

“I felt some rocks,” Jerry said. “But I didn’t realize I hit that hard.”

“Lisa,” I said, “Tell Junior he’s got to see this. I think the tide’s too low.”

Lisa called to him, but he wouldn’t come. “I’ll see it later!” he yelled.

“The tide’s too low, Junior,” I shouted.

“It will be,” he yelled back, “if we keep talking.”

Lisa looked at me and shrugged. I ran up the walkway to the parking lot.

“Is Jerry out of the way?” he yelled.

“Yeah, but there’s rocks on the bottom and ...”

“Watch out! Here I come!” Junior hollered. I got to the top of the walkway just in time to see him glide into the ramp and launch into the air. His arc was almost as smooth as Jerry’s, but he pushed it too hard and over rotated. He still tried to call out, “Yee Ha!” like he planned to land on his back with his black bike flailing in front of him. The end of the “Ha! was sucked into the splash of dark sea.

When he didn’t surface right away, I jumped off the seawall, landing hard on the rocks and mud of the bottom. I swam over to where he went under but he was gone. I dove, squinting my eyes into the salty water and reaching out with my arms. I came up again and took a deep breath to redive when I heard Jerry and Lisa laughing on the dock, Jerry’s screech nearly drowning out “Ssss ssss sss,” of Lisa’s breathy laugh. I turned to see Junior hugging the dock pole with one hand and his bike with the other.

“I rode it under the water,” he said.

“You did not,” I said.

“It was mostly downhill.” He smiled his cockeyed smile. Jerry and Lisa laughed some more.

“You jerk!” I said and swam over and pulled myself onto the dock.

**Chapter 19**

I pulled the bike out into the center of my garage, and thought about how stupid it was to blame it on Mr. Walker’s accident or anything I did or didn’t do, anything anybody did or didn’t do. Junior would have launched a swan dive into a pool of Jell-O when he was eight if he’d found one. I pulled an old air pump off the shelf and was surprised to feel the tires grow firm with new air. Junior was never one to listen to anyone else, except maybe to hear how great he was. When he got an idea in his head we went along with him because we didn’t have any other choice.

I wheeled the bike out to the driveway and filled a bucket with soap and water. The dust and spider webs rinsed right off. The grime in the wheels and gears needed a couple rounds of brushing. But the frame shined up fast, and with a little oil, the chain turned smoothly. Junior was going to do what Junior was going to do. It was time to stop deluding myself that I had any influence.

When I climbed on the bike and pedaled down the road I felt like a clown in the circus; it was way too small. I could ride slowly with my knees pushed way out to avoid the monkey bars or with my butt off the seat, pointing high in the air and my head and arms leaning too far over the front wheel. And either my weight was all wrong for wheelies or I had forgotten how to pull one.

I turned around at the end of Markum Point Lane by Jerry’s house and looked up to see Lisa getting out of her Karmann Ghia and laughing, hiding her mouth with her hand but the Ssss ssss escaping through her fingers. When I rode closer, she shouted, “The wheely king returns!” and smiled the broadest smile she’d probably smiled in months. I could feel my own face stretching my own dormant smile muscles. She stood with the car door open, one bent blue-jean leg still propped on the door frame with the shore breeze bouncing her black hair off her white shirt and I felt the fog lift a little.

“Where’s the wheely queen?” I asked. “Or don’t you have it anymore?”

We pulled her bike out of the basement, cleaned it, filled the tires, and rode up and down the block until it was clear that our wheely days were over. After that, we began riding to school together and talking on the phone and even, after a few weeks, sitting at our old table in the cafeteria at lunch.

Miss Frankovich asked me to help her two days a week with her freshmen art class. She said they were drawing from life and getting discouraged, and it would help me make up for all the assignments I owed her. I was drawing in my class with her, but that was it and the drawings were half-finished and terrible. I didn’t think she’d really flunk me, but, just in case, I agreed. She assured me that I knew what they needed to learn and if I looked through my old sketchpads I’d remember what they were going through. “Just find one good line,” she’d said. “Help them to see how they’re getting better.”

So, reluctantly at first, I found myself walking around her class every Tuesday and Thursday looking over the shoulders of pimply-faced ninth graders and offering encouragement. “Nice line in the neck and shoulder,” I’d say or, “Look at your drawing from last week and you’ll see your improvement.” Many of the kids seemed to respond and I enjoyed it, soon expanding my help to every day. I began to offer advice - showing them how to hide their mistakes in the shadows or how to block out the page first with light lines to make sure everything would fit. Some of the kids began call me over when they were stuck or particularly proud of a drawing.

Mrs. Frankovich encouraged me to give demonstrations, and I realized as I talked and drew in front of the class how my own drawing had improved. I began to draw on my own again. After class we would talk about the kids who were doing well and the kids who weren’t. Some kids, she said, are like dogs and some are like cats; some are so eager for help you had to push them away a little, teach them to be more independent. Others need to be allowed to come to you at their own pace. The trick was learning to read who was who.

One day, Brian, one of the boys who still resisted my help or anyone else’s, raised his hand and called, “Mr. O’Malley?” I resisted the urge to look over my shoulder for my father.

The other kids continued to draw as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, but I looked at Miss Frankovich and we burst into laughter. I tried to stop quickly, to not embarrass Brian. I raced over to help him and told him, “Call me Dave.” But after that I could see myself as Brian saw me, as the other kids in the class saw me. And that brief moment of eye contact with Mrs Frankovich was more like brain contact with her, too; I could see how she saw me differently, too. I wasn’t one of those kids anymore.

Maybe my dad would think teaching art would be a dependable enough way to make a living. I could do my own work, too, like Miss Frankovich. That that would be my compromise offer when my application responses came back. Of course, I had to be accepted somewhere first.

One day in the middle of May, I looked up from my hot lunch of grilled cheese and tomato soup to see Jerry sitting across from Lisa and me. He was scribbling in his notebook as if it wasn’t the first time in months he sat there. The few kids that still sat at the tables surrounding quietly watched.

“There’s nothing to write,” I said. “We haven’t said anything yet.”

“The date. The time. I’m setting the scene,” he said and then wrote down what we’d said. I took a bite of my sandwich and looked at Lisa.

“Hello, Jerry,” she said and smiled. Without a word we decided to see what he’d do if we didn’t say anything for him to write. We sipped our soup and smiled. He smiled back. I took another bite of my sandwich. He smiled again and wrote. From what I could make out of his upside scrawl, it said, “Davy smiled. Lisa smiled. Davy took a bite of his sandwich.”

Lunch continued quietly, like old times, but of course not like old times. Junior’s chair sat empty. He would have won any silence contest. And Frizz’s chair sat empty, too, Frizz copying Junior as usual in his weird way. Despite their empty presence we stayed quiet until the bell.

Jerry stood up, put away his notebook and said, “Those were the most pathetic attempts at wheelies I’ve ever seen.”

Caught, all Lisa and I could do was laugh.

“See you tomorrow, Jerry,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “See you tomorrow.”

We started hanging out together, just the three of us. Driving to school together, studying together, spending our weekend nights together watching old movies and eating McDonald’s or Kentucky Fried Chicken. Not that anybody else wanted anything to do with us. And not that we had anything to say to anyone else.

Mostly we talked about old times, telling the stories that Frizz used to make us retell and finally talking about the Jell-O prank itself, what we did and could have/should have done.

“That,” Jerry said one night in my basement, “was like as scared as I’ve ever been.” “Box of Rain” from *American Beauty* played in the background. Granny and my parents were upstairs watching TV. “That and that time we were playing chicken with the trains. Maybe this was scarier. At least with the train I could get it together enough to jump out of the way.”

“I thought Junior pulled you out of the way.” Without thinking about it I tapped out the song’s drumbeats on my legs draped over the chair. Jerry mimicked the guitar strum with his right hand and Lisa picked out the bass on the chair beside me.

“Naw,” he said as the song came to an end. “I always let you guys tell it that way, cause it was a better story. Junior’s scream like snapped me into action, but he stood there as frozen as I was with his arm reaching out.”

“Well, he saved you that time you hit your head on the board.” I stopped drumming with this new revelation. Lisa stopped, too, and leaned toward Jerry.

“You think so?” Jerry asked. “I don’t know. Maybe. I never lost consciousness. I shoved him away when he first dove in; I was so mad for blowing such an easy dive. I was way too high.”

“Huhh!” I tried to absorb these different versions of the myths of Junior. “You’re kidding me! He never saved your life at all?”

But Jerry’s attention was already slipping away as he skipped through songs on the album to get to his favorite. “I don’t know,” he said, picking the beginning notes of “Truckin.” Then he shrieked a laugh and yelled over the start of the lyrics, “But he sure made it more interesting.”

"*Truckin,*’” Jerry sang along with the record, "*got my chips cashed in*.” And I tapped out the rhythm with my fingers in the air. "*Keep truckin’ - like the doodah man*.” Lisa plunked out the bass part. "*Together - more or less in line.*” I didn’t know what else to say to him, so I was glad to be saved by the music. "*Just keep truckin o-oo-on.*"

We decided to call Frizz. His parents said he wasn’t home. I called again the next day and again. Lisa called. Jerry called. Each time the response was same: “He’s not home.” He seemed to disappear between classes at school, but finally I caught him in the hall coming out of chemistry.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he insisted when I invited him to join Lisa, Jerry and me at my house sometime. “I want to forget it.” He tried to walk around me.

“Your parents keep saying you’re not home.” I stepped in front of him, blocking his path. “They don’t want you to see us?” I gave him a playful shove in the shoulder. He knocked my hand away with a hard slap.

“No. I don’t want to see you.” His eyes were red-rimmed and teary. “Let’s forget about it.” He tried to force his way by me, but the wave of students squeezing by pinned us against the lockers that lined the hall.

“Pretend it never happened?” I didn’t let him get around me.

“Yes.” He stopped pushing and squinted at me with a dark, hateful stare.

“It did happen!” I stepped back. “Come on. Let’s talk about it.”

“No!” He turned and started walking in the other direction weaving through the swell of students. I followed him and he picked up his pace. “Just forget it, will you?” he shouted over his shoulder and slipped into the crowd coming out of the bio lab. I dove into the crowd behind him, but got caught in the middle of the wave. I could see him come out the other side and walk swiftly down the hall.

“And stop calling me!” he yelled without turning his head. “I don’t want to talk to any of you!”

As I watched Frizz run away down that hall, I could see it from his perspective. I could feel the urge to run. He was like a picture of myself that I knew wasn’t quite right, that I had to erase and redraw, erase and redraw until I came up with something that I could live with. I didn’t know how Frizz could live with running away, maybe because Junior only filled a few years of his life while he filled all of mine.

Lisa, Jerry and I spent all of our free time together, working, talking or just hanging out. If we weren’t getting better, at least we were looking better. Granny said she was glad to see a little color come back into my face. I was glad to see a little of the white come back into Jerry’s eyes. And it seemed to me that Lisa grew more beautiful every day. We’d agreed to hold off any romance until we had our heads together; each day I was a little more ready for that day to arrive.

The college acceptances came back with Lisa going as planned to Stanford, Jerry to MIT in a surprise to anyone but him. Apparently he got 800s on his SATs. I decided to go to Syracuse and major in art. High school became a formality, something to fill our days, which we then crossed happily off the calendar. We skipped the prom and the parties, and Lisa declined to speak at graduation. It probably would have been she and Junior speaking if things had been different.

 At the graduation ceremony every speaker mentioned Junior, how shocked they still were, how tough things must have been for him and how crazy things may seem for all of us sometimes. They all spoke of the future and how this was just a beginning. I hardly heard a word. I wanted it over. The worst moment was when they called out the graduates in alphabetical order. Junior’s name should have been right there, right between Emily Wales and Evan Young. I thought of it in the R’s and listened with growing apprehension through the S’s, the T’s and the U’s. I didn’t think it would bother me, but it did. The bastard, he should have been there.

**Chapter 20**

On August twenty-seventh, the day before I was set to leave for Syracuse, Jerry, Lisa and I wandered around the neighborhood. We walked the seawall around the point, swam at the beach at high tide, took our old bikes out and made a few pathetic attempts at doing wheelies. After dinner we found ourselves down at the docks, looking for some way to say goodbye without saying goodbye and mark our launch into college, where ever that might lead us.

“Smoke a joint?” Jerry asked.

Lisa and I shook our heads.

“Bike ramp?” Jerry raised an eyebrow in optimism.

Lisa and I shook our heads again. I had to admire how hard he was working.

“Good start,” I said. “We’re brainstorming right?”

“Swim out to Grass Island?” he asked.

I smiled and shook my head. Lisa sat down on the seawall and dangled her legs over the side.

“I feel like we should do something.” She was staring over at Junior’s old house, now sold and soon to be lived in by a family from Chicago. The sliding doors to the basement were yellowy-orange in the reflection of the sinking sun.

I sat down next to her, took her hand and looked at her long, tan fingers laced through mine. She looked out on the cove as I admired her silhouette. Jerry stood behind us and drummed on the Association dinghy, recently pulled out of the water and propped upside down on wooden horses so someone could repair a leak in the seam of the bow.

“Fingernail moon,” Lisa said, squeezing my hand and nodding to the bottom crescent of yellow moon just visible in the sky over Grass Island.

“Winking moon,” I said. “Junior swore one time it looked like a single eye almost closed in a wink.”

“Where’s the other eye?” Jerry asked. “Looks like a boat to me.”

“It’s closed, I guess.” I got up, walked over to the old dinghy and tapped out a few beats on its belly. It sat like a dead fish with a blue chalk circle marking the wound in its hull.

“We never really said goodbye to him,” Lisa said.

“I know.” I banged out a rhythm to answer Jerry’s and stopped. “I don’t remember the funeral. We should give him one of our own, you know, like the one he gave Molly.”

Jerry let out a sudden shriek of laughter. “Let’s do it!” he yelled, drumming a hand on the bottom of the boat as he laughed. “Give him our own funeral and bury the boat, too!”

Lisa turned to me and laughed, and it was unanimous.

Before we could think about it too much, we agreed to run home, grab a few symbolic mementos and meet back at the dock in twenty minutes.

The boat was heavier than I thought, dropping with a thud off the sawhorses and demanding a coordinated grunting effort that streaked dirt across our T-shirts and shorts. The three of us turned it over, dragged it to the wall and pushed it off the edge. It fell into the water with a fat splat, splashing our feet. I ran down the ramp, onto the dock and grabbed it with an oar before it floated away.

Water immediately trickled through the crack in the hull. We balanced ourselves carefully on the seats, and I rowed us out a couple hundred yards. For a moment the paddling slowed to a steady woosh and the water trickling into the foot of the boat eased and I looked up to see Junior’ house as if for the first time. It could have been anyone’s house. Soon would be someone else’s. And I realized that’s what Junior never got. Things happen. Things change. There’s a whole future out there full of heartache and promise. He didn’t kill himself; he just lived carelessly enough to let himself die. I don’t think he could see beyond this little world we had here, a beautiful little fragile world that couldn’t survive if we wanted it to. And he wanted it to with every force of his being.

The cool water was now sloshing against my ankles; we had to move fast. Lisa stood up and without a word skimmed a stone toward Junior’s back yard. It skipped seven times before sinking well short of the seawall. I pulled out an old eight-track tape of the Doors, *Strange Days*, - a favorite of Junior’s - held it flat and flicked it in the same direction. It jumped off the water three times and sank.

Jerry threw a Ping Pong paddle: four skips. After a big wind-up that left the boat rocking precariously, he threw the little white ball after it, but it caught in the wind and sailed right back to us, floating like a little duck beside the boat. I handed Lisa a license plate from Junior’s VW that I’d snagged from his garage and she winged it like a Frisbee. It caught the surface of the water at the perfect angle, bouncing eight times before lying flat for a moment, then sinking.

“Wow!” Jerry said. “Like who would have thought a license plate would skim like that?”

“I’ve got something else,” I said, pulling a crushed box of raspberry Jell-O out of my pocket. “Don’t think it’ll skim very well.”

“I guess it wasn’t an original idea.” Lisa laughed as she pulled a flattened box out of her sweater. “At least we all have the same sick sense of humor.”

“Or desperation,” I said.

“I could only find lime.” Jerry shrieked his high-pitched excuse for a laugh and stood up next to Lisa and me.

“One!” we yelled and cocked our hands to throw in unison. The boat continued to sink, rocking beneath us as water sloshed over the sides. “Two!” The water slapped against our calves. “Three!” The boxes arced toward shore, landing without skimming, flatly on the surface. They floated within a few feet of each other, disappearing behind each wave then rising up with the next swell.

“One last thing.” I reached down to the bottom of the boat with my elbows bent, my palms up. I pretended to lift something long and flat and awkwardly throw it into the water.

“What was that?” Jerry asked.

I gave him my best dumb-question look. “Junior’s air guitar,” I said, although from his smile I think he knew. “But I’m keeping my air drums. Might need them at college.” Then I dove in. It seemed like the right dramatic moment. I dog-paddled in place to watch them dive. Jerry followed me with an attempted flip, but the boat was too far underwater to give him any spring. He landed loudly on his back. Lisa dove out flat and low, the way Junior should have. She skimmed the surface before knifing just beneath the water.

We swam in silence toward Junior’s yard, turning over to swim in long smooth backstrokes and look at the darkening sky. At the seawall we pulled ourselves up to sitting positions, dangled our legs over the edge and let the seawater seep out of our clothes. As if on cue we all stood up at the same time, almost bumping heads.

Jerry pulled a damp joint out of his T-shirt pocket. “Anybody want to smoke a farewell doobie?”

“Shit,” I said and without thinking I shoved him right off the seawall. Fortunately the tide was still high enough to break his fall.

“I guess not.” Jerry laughed and held up the sopping wet joint coming apart at the seam. His wet hair, long and stringy, swung back and forth as he laughed. He flicked the pot leaves and soaking paper into the water. The leaves sank. But the white square of rolling paper floated like the slowly sinking boxes of Jell-O rising up and down with the waves between us and the boat.

I reached down to help Jerry up the wall and he yanked me in. I made sure to land on him and knock him back under water.

“Asshole!” I laughed and shook my head.

He jumped up and shoveled a wave of water at me.

I splashed him back with both hands until Lisa called out, “Look!” Jerry and I scrambled up the seawall just in time to see the tip of the boat shining faintly in the twilight before it sank for good.

“That was pretty stupid,” Jerry said and laughed.

“I know,” I said. “Stupid seems pretty appropriate right now.”

“We had to do something.” Lisa put an arm around me. “Do you think we could salvage the boat?”

“What would a new one cost?” Jerry asked.

“I don’t know. Six-hundred dollars?” I guessed. “Two-hundred a piece.” I turned to Jerry. “We don’t need Junior to do the math.”

He laughed without a shriek. “A nice round number.” We watched the ripples from the rowboat spread out and then disappear into the incoming waves.

“Bye, Junior,” I said.

“Goodbye, Timothy.” Lisa waved to the spot where the boat went under.

“Take it easy, buddy,” Jerry called and his hand quivered in one last Jell-O wave.

“So long, you bastard,” I added. Lisa elbowed me in the ribs. “What? He knows I love him.”

Lights started to twinkle on in the houses in Markham Points as twilight settled on the cove. For a moment the day hung in that in between – the sky still blue enough for day and the trees and land already settling into night. I felt a weird ache of nostalgia for the very moment I was in.

I fell back on the grass and stared up at the moon. Lisa dropped down on one side of me and nestled into my arm. Jerry fell on the other. Maybe they were thinking of fingernails or boats, but that thin sliver of moon shining in the darkening blue sky was a single yellow eye for me, closed in permanent wink.