

NEVER LET YOU GO

a novel by

Lowry Pei

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CHAPTER ONE

One thing you can't help learning about life is that most of the time it puts up a lot of resistance, as if you were trying to write a passionate love letter with a pen dipped in molasses. And yet now and then the resistance decreases. One day during the January of my senior year in high school, the stuff things were made of unexpectedly softened and began to flow in unpredictable directions.

At the time when it started to happen, I was listening to Ray Charles and John Coltrane every chance I got, I liked to read Dostoyevsky late at night, and I felt as though my balls might crack from the pressure of unsatisfied desire. The girls I knew at school apparently thought that getting good grades meant I shouldn't have the same needs they and their boyfriends struggled over – but I made a hell of a confidant. I had had years of practice at that, with Toni Anastos, Claire Joseph – who'd once been my girlfriend – and more recently with Becca Shulman. I spent at least half an hour every evening on the phone with one or another of them, hearing about their love lives, philosophizing about the emotions and why people did what they did. No remark dropped in the halls – no gesture, even – was too insignificant to be analyzed at length, second- and third-guessed, squeezed ruthlessly for every drop of meaning in a way that would have thrilled Mr. Kearns, the AP English teacher, if only we'd been doing it to Shakespeare. Those were conversations I couldn't have with boys, other than my best friend Dal, because if I tried to have them, all I got were variations on "Didja get to second base?"

Dal's real name was Darryl, but that had last been heard some time in grade school. Even his parents called him Dal. He was a terrific ballplayer – when Dal was in Babe Ruth League he made the all-star team – and when you saw him playing baseball you seemed to see

exactly who he was. He was a center fielder, responsible for a great stretch of open space that he could somehow cover without seeming to make an effort. He never looked bored out there; he looked as intensely involved as the shortstop, but in a different way, as if the real game were one nine-inning-long thought he was maintaining by a perfect act of concentration from the first pitch to the last out. At times it seemed as though everyone else played inside Dal's idea. He looked pure to me – not just on the field. Maybe that was making too much of him, but maybe it wasn't. It's just that some people's role in the greater scheme of things is that nothing ugly, or vicious, or cruel is supposed to go on around them; there's something in them that puts ugliness to shame. And it's not that Dal was one of those armor-plated, invulnerable people, either – not that at all. He played it the riskiest way of all; he just was. Whereas my other friends had plenty of defenses, that let you know they thought they were living in a difficult world. Well, didn't all of us? All except Dal. A lot of the time, he didn't seem to be evaluating the world any more than a river evaluates the fields it's running through.

It was typical of Dal that when we were younger he could overlook the fact about me which was the curse of my existence: I was short. In the seventh grade I was four foot eleven, which made me the shortest kid, boy or girl, not just in my home room but in the entire seventh grade. People made jokes about stuffing me into lockers or even wastebaskets and now and then some gargantuan eighth-grader would try to do it, laughing in a horribly self-congratulatory way as if he were the very first dipshit ever to think it up. Of course these guys had about as much electrical activity in their brain as my cat does when she's asleep, so it was a red-letter day when they had any kind of an idea at all. The only things I had going for me were that I could run fast, I could talk fast (though talk is useless with your average thirteen-year-old hood), and if I could just manage to stay calm I had a certain talent for rendering myself invisible. It's one of the things I learned as a child that stood me in good stead later on.

It was typical, too, that they seldom tried stunts like that when Dal was around. Not that he was my bodyguard; it was just that even those clowns would have felt stupid doing something like that in front of him. I'm not sure they actually knew where the influence was coming from, but I did.

Dal wasn't crazy about talking on the phone, or I might have spent another hour talking to him every night, after I quit talking to Toni or Becca or Claire. We had something else we did instead. Every

once in a while I would get dressed and sneak out of my house at one in the morning, go down the block to my car which I would purposely have parked far away so my parents wouldn't hear it when I started it up, and drive to Dal's. Maybe they wouldn't have been waked up by the grinding starter of that old three-hundred-dollar Ford, but I wasn't taking any chances. I'd park on a sloping side street by his house, facing downhill; then I'd try to do my invisibility thing as I crossed his back yard, hoping not to see a light in the upstairs windows, and not to be reported by some neighbor as a prowler. Dal's room was like an afterthought to their house – a little room off the kitchen, far away from the rest of the family who were sleeping upstairs. I tapped on his window. No light went on, but he would wave his hand, and in a minute he would raise the window and silently climb out. We didn't speak until we were across the yard again and inside my car; even then we whispered as if someone might still hear us, and I let the car roll down the hill a block or two, without headlights, making just a faint sound of tires on asphalt, before I started it. Then we were gone, driving all night. We drove out of the city, straight out until the suburbs became country, out until the road we were on gave out, until we reached some place we'd never been and would never recognize in the daytime, listening to soul music on KATZ with the windows down if it was warm, smelling the rank plant smell of humid marshy bottoms where the organic life was so thick it reminded you of skunk. We had to be in motion, on the move; it was a need like the need to breathe. I felt I was suffocating in the wait to get out of St. Louis, out of the whole Midwest – to go East – somehow that was the direction – and begin what I thought of as another life. That was what we talked about much of the time, me in my malcontented, excitable way and Dal more calmly: a new life. If not about a new life then about girls, about love. We actually used the word. But then Dal and I had known each other a long time. We drove till we were on the verge of getting lost – or of passing some point of no return and simply keeping on going, no longer caring about being caught – and then we turned around and hoped we'd make it back before dawn. On the way back, if there was time and we had any money, we ate hamburgers at some 24-hour diner at five in the morning, and then we sneaked back home into our beds to sleep a couple of hours before we'd meet again at school. Somehow I wasn't tired the mornings after those nights.

Dal and I didn't know much about going East, except what we read in books – I'd been to New York just once to visit a cousin, and Dal had never been east of Zanesville, Ohio – but we knew we were

going there, somehow or other, into a part of the world that felt older, too big to master, a place of shrieking subways and other, scarier depths of city life, intimidating and yet, for us, lit up from within – not the yellow light in the window of home but exactly the opposite, a midnight blue neon over a door that opens for a moment to reveal a stairway down and lets three bars of restless music snake its way out onto the jittery sidewalk. In a way, we wanted to go East to be uncomfortable – at least I did – not for its own sake but because we believed that a certain kind of discomfort was a sign that you were in the vicinity of truth.

Dal and I didn't know much about love, either, but we knew this much: the authorities were not to be trusted. Whoever said they knew, didn't; and in particular whoever volunteered to tell others how they should feel, and what they should or shouldn't do about it, was cordially invited to stick their head in a bucket three times and pull it out twice. Our experience of love was too tentative, too unsuccessful to bear any impartial scrutiny; I never willingly discussed it with an adult. The loves I'd felt had mostly been unrequited, and Claire, my one real girlfriend, had dropped me for someone else. Dal, on the other hand, was surrounded – not that he was necessarily aware of it – by girls who were waiting for him to notice them. It seemed to me that without much effort he could have what I only dreamed about; but that didn't change the fact that he could never seem to find what he wanted. Dal had one thing in mind, true love, which he guarded the same way he guarded his vision of true baseball through an entire game.

Dal pointed out to me more than once that I was always falling in love with unattainable girls, and he, it seemed, was always in a situation exactly the opposite of mine: he was the unattainable, for various girls who wanted to go out with him, and even for most of those who did. I knew. Sometimes I knew more than I told him, because Toni or Claire would swear me to secrecy before they told me some girl's crush on Dal; but sometimes it was my job to tell. The girls were aware that we were best friends, and I could be used to pass the message; in the heat of the moment it never seemed to occur to them that the messenger might have feelings about the transaction. The worst was when Cathy Randolph, Claire's best friend at the time, decided in the tenth grade that life would not be worth living unless she could be kissed by Dal Carlton. I had been dreaming of her from afar for two or three months, fascinated by the nape of her neck as she read a book in the school library, or the unconscious flip of her hand

behind her at each step as she walked. I thought I detected in her a soul awaiting deeper recognition, disguised as a tenth-grade girl leading a tenth-grade life. Even my fantasies about her were choked with inarticulate devotion. When Claire asked me to hint to Dal that Cathy was interested, I wouldn't speak to either him or Claire for two days; by then I figured out that it wasn't Dal's fault, and Claire had apologized twice, and I was convinced I'd made a fool of myself – especially since Dal, when he finally discovered what the hell was up, only rolled his eyes and shook his head slightly. I thought there was no way he could ignore such an invitation – dreams of what I would do tortured me for several days – but he seemed to. If it was out of loyalty to me, it was more than I could have done for him. Maybe he just wasn't interested. Or maybe all he wanted was to let some time pass and look as though he'd had the idea himself; he did go out with her a couple of times the following summer, and I presume she got her wish, but she wasn't the girl for Dal. Why not, I never knew. That was before the midnight drives began, and besides I was going out with Claire at the time and didn't care anymore what Cathy Randolph did.

Not that he wouldn't have told me. Not much could be hidden between me and Dal; it was too late for that. I'd known him since the second grade, and we had been inseparable the whole time except for a period in fourth grade when I was his bitter enemy. I was jealous over something that happened at recess. Dal invented a game called Chaser that he played with a group of kids who were destined to become athletes; they wouldn't teach it to the rest of us because it was clear we'd never be fast or tricky enough to compete. All we saw was that they darted and bolted from place to place after one another in a fluid, bewildering way, their allegiances seeming to shift from second to second, pursuing some strategy as indecipherable as trying to pick up a tune by watching someone's fingers play it on the guitar. Dal had left me behind, and I hated him. If I could have caught him, I would have jumped up and down on his stomach. But he got bored with Chaser when Little League started up again, and after a while our friendship went back to normal.

When we were in the spring of the sixth grade, Dal and I went to a week-long camp that the school district put on every year for sixth-graders, someplace off in the woods not too far from St. Louis. I suppose they thought of it as a special treat to mark the end of grade school. I don't know what the girls were up to, but for the boys the real function of this camp, it seemed, was to learn to masturbate and swear. The education took place in the cabins when the organized activities

were over. By the time I left I knew every dirty word there was, I'd seen Mark Upton jerk off for a circle of admiring boys who were awed by the size of his penis (and hastily pull up his underpants to hide it when he came, but I didn't understand that at the time), and a few boys I didn't know from some other school had even tried to bugger each other, which looked more like a very humiliating form of wrestling than anything else. My own penis was small, like the rest of me, but I found I could do the same thing Mark Upton did, and enjoy it, a discovery that gave a whole new dimension to life.

I wasn't in a cabin with Dal at camp, so I didn't get to see how he reacted to all this. I have a feeling he didn't join in much, but none of it escaped him. He knew what was important to learn.

We had our own private version of that experience, later on; they say all boys do, but no one ever talks about it, that I know of. We must have been in the seventh or eighth grade; at any rate, Dal's penis was starting to grow and he had sprouted a few pubic hairs, by which I was very impressed. I remember we were at my house alone, looking at an art book full of nudes, and somehow ended up naked ourselves. That's the part I can't recall – how we got there, what excuse we made, what game we invented to cover that transition. But I'm sure that when we were naked, Dal's erect penis fascinated us both; it was big, and a pearly drop trembled on the tip of it. He lay down on the couch and closed his eyes and said, "Pretend you're a girl and you're touching it," and I did. I still remember the strangeness of the experience and the tentative pleasure it gave me, which, perhaps, was not too different from what I would have felt if I had been a girl in actuality, and I remember Dal with his eyes closed, absorbed in the power of his sensations, off into a world I couldn't share yet, only envy and try to imagine.

But we would never have mentioned that even to each other. Having been that innocent, that unselfconscious, was something no one could admit to at seventeen.

CHAPTER TWO

It was a Sunday afternoon, I was working on a physics problem set, and Dal called me and said, “Andy. Meet me by the tracks.” I thought he was going to ask me about a problem, since we were both taking physics and we both spent Sundays wrestling with the homework, usually together.

“Why not come over?” It would give me a few more minutes to work if he did. Not that I wasn’t ready to give in to distraction, but I had to finish the homework and every time I tried to figure out the escape velocity of a rocket leaving the moon’s gravitational field, I got a number I knew was about fifty times too large.

“It isn’t physics. I don’t want to talk about this at your house. Ten minutes. I mean it.” This was not the way Dal sounded; for once there was nothing relaxed about him.

“Okay, okay, I’ll be there.” What could be so important that we had to talk about it instantly?

I pulled on a jacket and went out into the late-January afternoon. It was one of the almost-spring days that somehow pop up in January or February in St. Louis as if they’ve lost their place in the year, a day when no one should be inside plugging numbers into formulas. I knew that the day after tomorrow it might be three degrees again, but at the moment it must have been fifty; the sky was full of restless clouds blowing quickly past, with gaps between them where the sun tempted me to take my jacket off. My dad was out in the front yard, wearing baggy corduroy pants and an old cardigan, poking under the bushes with a rake. No wonder students at Washington U. always assumed he was a professor – all that was missing was a pipe clenched in his teeth. “What’s up, Dad?”

"Hm?" he said distractedly. "Remarkable day, isn't it?" There was a wistful note in his voice that instantly made me impatient.

"I guess."

"You could always help. They're the same leaves you didn't rake up last fall." But he said it without conviction. "You never know, it might snow tomorrow."

"If I rake them now, you won't have an excuse to stand around the yard."

He gave a wry little smirk. "I could still supervise."

"Right, Dad. Look, I gotta go talk to Dal, have fun."

"See if you can make it back for dinner, okay?" he said, as if I never did.

"Okay, okay, don't worry."

He picked up a mat of damp leaves that crumbled as he carried it toward the bushel basket he was filling. Something about him bothered me that I didn't want to think about. As if I was supposed to fix it. The air smelled like distant rain and moist dirt; it was on the move, messing up my hair, blowing the dead oak and sycamore leaves that had escaped the leaf-burning of the fall, making them dance in circles on the sidewalk and in back yards, piling them up against the steps of brick front porches. I had lived in the neighborhood my whole life and knew its geography without having to think, even though some of the streets were cul-de-sacs and plain dead ends and some doubled back on themselves. Now, going to meet Dal, I crossed over an island in the middle of the street with a couple of big trees on it and a clump of bushes where smaller kids could hide in the course of their games. On the other side, I cut through a vacant lot to a street that dead-ended at a sudden slope, thick with trees and undergrowth; at the bottom of that were two tracks where the trolley cars ran.

Long ago, the trolley-car right-of-way had been fenced off with five-foot-high walls of pebbly biscuit-colored concrete on either side, but the concrete had long since begun to crack and come to pieces, and now there wasn't much to stop anyone from climbing down to the tracks. Dal and I had discovered them at the age of eight or nine, and had been forbidden to play there; it was said that a child had been hit by a trolley car and killed, not far from our neighborhood, years ago. That only made the place more attractive. There was no resisting the temptation to go there and put pennies on the tracks to be squashed twice their normal size – or crossed pins, artfully bent in a way Dal showed me, which a passing trolley would, with luck, turn into something resembling miniature scissors.

As I came down the street to where Dal would be waiting, I remembered an expedition he and I took down the trolley-car tracks when we were ten years old; along the way, Dal and I were telling a story of a magical region inhabited by trolls who lived in culverts, and wizards, some evil and some good, who drove their armored chariots swiftly down the tracks, propelled by a mysterious invisible power. They were bent on secret errands that could change the lives of everyone in the land between the crumbling walls, and our mission was to learn the mystery of their ways, to decipher the messages that were encoded in the ordinary-looking sticks and stones around us, and to save the inhabitants from the dark powers by working magic of our own. It was a long, heroic day, filled with feats of cunning, narrow escapes, sudden reverses, miraculous triumphs. Dal, as ever, took the part of the fearless one, while I was the schemer, the reader of omens and signs, who saw behind the veil of the ordinary; together we were invincible. Whenever Dal's imagination stopped for a rest, mine kept the story unbroken, and there were times when minutes passed without a word, so far into the land of story together that we knew the secret meanings of what we saw and did without having to say a thing. It was our pride never to check, afterwards, to see if we had been thinking the same thoughts. When we finally headed home, the world we had come from seemed so petty and small that I wondered how our families could bear it.

I was half in that world as I approached the dead end, where we had helped the walls to crumble by hitting them with rocks. Not far down the tracks I had held onto Dal's ankle with one hand and clung to a tree with the other as he dangled head-down over the entrance to a culvert, enticing a troll to come out where we could roll rocks down on his head. I had read heiroglyphics in twigs that said we were surrounded by invisible powers, some of which were secretly on our side; I had laid a piece of leather, cut from a found glove, on the tracks to be run over by the wizard's chariot and turned into a map that would guide our journey. Would I still know how to read it? But Dal hadn't called me up to play a game anyway. I knew where he wanted me to meet him. He was squatting on his heels in the undergrowth wearing an old baseball jacket and blue jeans, picking up acorns and throwing them at a pole across the tracks which held up the trolley wires; being Dal, he hit it. "Hi," I said, sitting down beside him in the crumbled remnants of last summer's weeds.

"Hi." He picked up another acorn and threw it, missed the pole and made a face, before he looked at me. Even then he only threw me a glance. "Dja finish the problem you were on?"

"Unh-uh. This is the toughest homework we've had. You'd better get to work on it, it's an S.O.B."

"Look at this," Dal said, and took a folded piece of paper out of his jacket pocket and handed it to me.

"What is it?"

"I found it in the garage when I was looking for some screws to fix my bike."

That didn't explain much. I unfolded the paper, which was pale blue and looked like letter paper, maybe something for writing thank-you notes. In what looked like a girl's handwriting, it said, "Sweetheart, I'm through with saying we shouldn't. L.," and I knew I was reading something that was never intended for me.

"Weird," I said. I tried to think which girl we knew could be L. "Who the hell leaves notes like this in the garage? Who is L., anyway?"

"I don't know," Dal said.

"You don't *know*?" What kind of sense did that make?

"It's not for me. I don't know that writing. That note's for somebody else."

"Like who?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," he said, throwing another acorn. "Any ideas?"

"A random love note appears in your garage, and you expect me to know who it's for? This is harder than physics." But I had an idea that Dal was only testing me.

"Do you think L.'s a girl or a boy?"

"Girl," I said. The backward slant of the handwriting said that clearly enough.

"Yeah. But it's some girl I don't know." I read it again. Whoever the note was for had been saying "we should," and L. had been saying "we shouldn't," and now she was through saying it. Assuming it was a she.

"You sure it's not for you? Somebody's always in love with you from afar."

"Oh, give me a break. How'd it get in our garage?"

"I don't know."

"Well, nobody but us ever goes in there."

"I know one thing – it's not a note for Katie. Even if a guy did write it after all." Katie was Dal's little sister, age fourteen and

scrawny. That almost made Dal smile, but not quite. He looked brooding, which was not a way I was used to seeing him. I had always thought of him as slightly like an Indian, except for his dark-blond hair, and now that was especially so.

"It's not for my mom either," he said.

"Wait a minute. You're saying it's for your dad?" Dal's father, a guy with gray hair and a gut, getting a note like that from somebody we didn't even know? "You've got to be kidding. You think he's . . . ?" It was too outrageous to say.

Dal ran his hands back through his hair and looked at the ground. "No."

"Dja show it to him?"

"No, he's out somewhere. In the car."

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know." That proved nothing. Dal threw another acorn.

"Last week they had a fight. I don't know what it was about but I know it was a fight. All of a sudden things got very quiet. I don't know how it works, but you can feel it all over the house even though you can't hear it. Katie noticed it too, I asked her."

Dal and I, too, were quiet for a while. I pulled up a stalk of the tall, weedy grass that grew there – some of it stayed green all winter – and chewed on its tough stem. His mother was English – she and his father had met during the war – and I could well imagine that when she got mad it wouldn't be loud but you'd feel it. I knew better than to try her patience. When my own parents had fights they always pretended nothing happened, as if that sudden, frustrated yelling had come from someone other than the three people who inhabited our house. Who said that? Blame it on the cat.

"Who says it has anything to do with anybody we know?" I said. "Maybe it just blew in there, or something."

"Yeah, and it just so happened to be lying on the floor right where the driver's door is when the car's in the garage."

I lay back, crushing dead stems under me, and looked up at the sky, a position in which we had spent hours since our childhood. The upper layer of clouds were light gray melting into white melting into blue, and you could see from their shape how the whole sky was swirling in a motion too slow to perceive. Dal's dad? Was such a thing really possible?

"So he gets the note," I said, falling into my old role in the game.

"Shit," Dal said. Not what he wanted to hear.

"Sorry."

"How? How could he get it?" Did he want to go on with this, or not?

"I don't know."

"Well, she couldn't very well stick it in our mailbox, so how did he get it?"

"I don't know, but forget that, he gets the note some damn way, he goes out and gets in the car, he's in a hurry and when he reaches in his pocket to get his car keys he doesn't notice that the note falls on the floor. There it is, you find it . . ." I felt the whole thing was falling together too well, I had gotten into deep water before I realized it.

"Shit," Dal said again.

There was a heavy silence. Such an idea had never crossed my mind. "You don't really think he'd do that, do you?"

"No," Dal said, inspecting the ground again. Dal's parents had been a fixture in my life ever since the second grade. His dad worked for Ralston Purina in some way that I didn't understand, smoked Chesterfields, had a pretty noticeable bulge around the middle. On summer weekends sometimes I'd see him with his shirt off mowing the lawn, his stomach out in front of him, hard and tanned, solid like something he'd use to move things out of his way. How anybody could be in love with that I couldn't imagine. There were pictures of him in their house as a young man, in uniform for various sports, with a body more or less like Dal's; since then he had thickened, he seemed to wear his body like a tough hide – the same as most adults.

"He could be anywhere, Dal. He could be at the hardware store, he could have gone to put air in the tires, who knows?"

Dal looked singularly unimpressed. "He could have gone out to buy thirty-seven cases of beer, but I'll bet he hasn't."

I felt disoriented – if Dal's father might have an affair, what couldn't happen? My own parents were not all that happy, I knew it but I wasn't supposed to say it out loud.

"I see what you mean about this being a little more important than physics." Given the known parameters, find the time at which Dal's father would attain escape velocity from the family. No one wanted the answer. But I couldn't help myself. "Is there, you know, anything else?"

"Aah – I don't know. My dad's been going out by himself in the evenings. I didn't really think about it till now. Like once a week, maybe twice. Something about meetings he has to go to for work. But he's never had meetings at night before."

"That could be anything," I said.

"Something doesn't feel right, Andy. I don't like the way they look at each other. I've felt it for weeks but I didn't want to admit it. He's watching her, she's watching him, they're trying to pretend they're not."

"Ugh," I said. I tried to think if I remembered seeing anything like that myself, recently, at Dal's house. No luck. But they were his parents, not mine. "It still doesn't prove a thing."

"I know that, for Christ's sake." Dal took the note back from me, unfolded it and read it over. "So what would you do?"

"If I found that? Watch him, I suppose, try to find out if it was true."

"Really?" Dal gave me a disbelieving look. "If it was your own father?"

That set me back for a moment. "I'd have to know for sure."

"Yeah? And what if it was true?"

"God knows."

"Well, I sure don't," Dal said. "I wish I'd never found this damn thing, it's driving me nuts. I suppose I could just show it to him."

"Do you think he'd tell you the truth about it?"

That made the cloud over Dal's face even darker, and I was afraid my mouth had gotten me in trouble once again, as it periodically did. "I hate this whole thing," he said, not looking at me, and abruptly got to his feet. I scrambled up too, followed him up the bank. "I hate it," he muttered again; I was kicking myself for thinking that Dal's dad would lie to him.

"Where are you going?" I said to his back.

"Home." He didn't look at me, making me feel guiltier still.

"I'll call you later, okay?"

I barely heard him mutter "okay" as he set off at a fast walk, his head down.

I walked back to my house a lot slower than Dal had gone; the day didn't seem half as beautiful as it had. In the time we'd been talking, the afternoon had turned the corner; the clouds were closer together now, and the light only had so much longer to last. The precarious warmth of the sun was lost, and I felt I was going home just in time, before it got too cold for the windbreaker I was wearing, back to January as it was supposed to be. I didn't envy Dal. Would he just ask his dad point-blank about the note? I knew I wouldn't if I were in his place, but it would be like Dal to go at something like that head-on; I was afraid for him. He didn't seem to know he could get hurt. No,

that wasn't true. It was already hurting him, but he didn't seem to have any thought that it could get worse.

At six-thirty, when I had finally finished the physics homework and dinner was almost on the table, the phone rang in the hall outside my room and I picked it up. "It's me," Dal said, and I felt that I must not have screwed up too badly.

"What's happening?"

"My dad came home about an hour ago. He says he's been over at a friend's house watching a golf tournament. It doesn't sound much like him." So did that mean Dal hadn't asked him about the note?

"He could have been, though, couldn't he?"

"I suppose," Dal said glumly.

"Did you show him the note?"

"I couldn't. You know something, Andy?"

"Tell me."

"He looks too happy. I think it could really be true."

CHAPTER THREE

That was when the watching began. From my point of view, it wasn't quite spying – not at first. All I thought we were trying to do was establish the truth. Every day, at school or on the phone, I would ask Dal what he saw: how his dad looked when he came home from work, what he said, how he sounded, when he went out and why. He kept going out in the evenings to things he called marketing meetings, and I was tempted to try to follow him, but there was no way to do it. If Dal called me the second he left the house, and I ran out, jumped in my car, and picked him up, it would already be too late to follow his dad; and I couldn't exactly hang around in front of Dal's house with the motor running.

Anyway, when I suggested it to Dal, he gave me a dark look and said, "This isn't a game of detective." He would have had opportunities to go through his dad's things and search for some evidence, but he refused to do that, too; if something dishonorable was going on, that was all the more reason for Dal to want to discover it in an honorable way. Or maybe not know it at all.

When we talked, Dal would seem to be keeping a lid on himself and then unpredictably something would burst out. He didn't look like himself to me; he got behind in his homework, he even missed soccer practice a few times and got in trouble with the coach. Soccer was what Dal played when it was too cold for baseball. So did I, but unlike Dal I didn't make the team; no coach was waiting for me to show up. Just as well, as far as I was concerned; winter soccer practice, running around in shorts in the cold, was too gung-ho for me.

At that time there seemed to be two separate strands to my life; between them, they took up every moment that wasn't devoted to school. The investigation of Dal's father, fascinating as it was, didn't

keep me from still spending time with Toni and Claire, mostly on the phone but sometimes at someone's house after school. We preferred Claire's because her parents got home late; we'd go there, a couple of afternoons a week, listen to music in her room, they would talk about boys or we'd go over the late news of other people's love affairs. Toni sometimes worked on weekends at her father's restaurant, Sorrento's, waiting on tables of Washington U. students who came in to consume vast quantities of pizza and beer, and she'd tell us about the ridiculous lines the frat boys would use as they tried to pick up girls. She seemed like the advance guard of our group, scouting out what life would be like in college. She was right for the job, sure of herself, in control. She had a reputation for being a little bit wild, although I wasn't sure it was true; it was just that you couldn't look at her, the snap in her dark eyes, the untamed curl of her black hair, or the way she moved through the halls always faster than the crowd, without guessing that she would break the rules. The guys she went out with seemed a little overmatched by her, and that made her impatient. She was ready to move on, too. Next to Toni, Claire seemed almost languid, but that was just because she was capable of slowing down now and then. I knew her in a whole different way because she had once been my girlfriend; I was still jealous of anyone she dated, still a little mad and hurt at being demoted to an innocuous neuter in her life, but I felt too close to her not to be friends with her. Or whatever we were. Permission to touch still existed between us, within certain limits. She liked me to give her piggyback rides and backrubs, she would casually lean on me if we were sitting next to each other, and when the three of us were together she'd call me her boyfriend sometimes, but always in a way that meant I wasn't. Like one day when some extra-large jock had asked her out, she said to Toni with a glance at me, "I don't know if I should go out with him or not, I'm not sure my boyfriend would approve." Now and then she would try to fix me up with someone she thought I'd like, but one of the two – me or the fixee – always seemed to be less than enthusiastic about the idea. "Well, what do you want, anyway?" she'd ask me impatiently, and I'd say, "Go look in the mirror," but it wasn't quite as simple as that, either. I had been dropped by Claire once, and maybe that was enough. Not that I wasn't attracted to her still. Her hair was brownish-blond, neither short nor long – practical-looking – I remembered very well running my hands through it, kissing her, even a few times touching her breasts. It had been something risky and tentative that we did with held breath, too excited and shy to look each other in the eye when it happened. But she had grown up a lot since

then; she was too old for those feelings – or wanted to be. She acted like she had forgotten we'd ever done that.

For the first time, we were all in the same class, AP English; Toni either loved or hated everything to distraction, so it was never hard to get an argument going about the books we read. AP English was where all of us ran into Becca Shulman; I had a vague memory of Becca from junior high, but at the beginning of high school her family had gone away for a year to Greece or some exotic place like that, and when she came back I almost didn't recognize her and I hadn't had a class with her since. Now she generally had something to say for herself in discussions, and somehow she melted into our little clump as we drifted out after class one day as if she was part of the scene. Before I realized it she and Claire had become friends – it seemed to happen from one week to the next – and then they were inseparable; sometimes Becca even slept over at Claire's house. I started getting phone calls where they'd be on two different extensions at the same house, both of them talking excitedly at once when I picked up the phone, trying to tell me something they claimed I absolutely had to hear, I'd die when I heard this, they promised – but they entertained each other so much that I could hardly figure out what they were saying for all the laughter and interruptions. After a while I didn't even try to get in a word of my own until they'd stop and demand to know why I wasn't saying anything. Toni was jealous of Becca at first; in a funny way, I thought she felt more or less the way I did when Claire broke up with me. But then it seemed as though she couldn't help being drawn, despite herself, into the gravitational field of their friendship. It rearranged our little solar system around a different sun. Now there would be four people hanging out together after school in Claire's room, retelling everything that had happened that week or that day. The one thing I didn't tell them was what was going on with Dal. Toni and Claire knew him, but not well enough for that; I couldn't turn his troubles into gossip, and they weren't getting any easier.

It was a Thursday night, it had been two and a half weeks since Dal found the note, and he and I were on the phone. He had called, which showed how much he needed to talk. The cord on the hall telephone barely reached into my room, so that once I had maneuvered the phone past the door and closed it, I had to sit on the floor with my back against my closet door in order to talk. I had sat like that for countless hours in the past few years; by this point I took for granted that conversation necessarily entailed a sore ass. "I wish I'd never seen that damn note," Dal said.

"Notice anything weird?" I said.

"Would you stop asking me that? Everything looks weird by now. Every time he gives my mom a look or says anything I have this picture of you going, 'Now, is he just trying to act normal, or what?' It's making me nuts. I can't even sit down and eat dinner with my own family without trying to figure out what the secret message is in every little stupid thing. 'Please pass the salt.' What does that mean? Is he saying 'please' because he feels awkward? Does he usually say 'please,' or not? I don't feel like I live here anymore. It's fucked up, it's not worth it, I'd like to forget the whole thing."

"Sorry," I said, feeling resentful. I didn't like it much when Dal sounded as though everything would have been okay if I'd just kept my nose out of his business.

"Only problem is, I can't." There was a silence, and I didn't know what to say. "He went to another meeting tonight."

"He did?"

"Yeah," Dal said. "Do you realize he's been doing this practically every week for two months?"

Dad's night out. Was he rationing himself, testing how much he could get away with? "Did your mom say anything when he went out?"

"I was up in my room when he left, I don't know. I came down to get some ice cream and she was in the kitchen cleaning up and I asked her where he was. 'Oh, he's got another of those meetings of his.' Sort of ho hum, life goes on. But you know how she is. It's hard to tell with her."

"Not for you."

"Shit, I'm sick of trying to guess people's secrets. Especially my own parents. Maybe you enjoy this kind of stuff, but I don't."

That stung me again. "Don't talk about it, then, if you don't want to."

There was another silence. I wasn't sure which way Dal was going to jump. Like playing soccer with him – I had played it with him since grade school, and yet when he dribbled the ball toward me, nine times out of ten he would still fake me out, get me leaning the wrong way, and go around me as if I were rooted to the spot. I wasn't used to him doing that to me in a conversation.

"She trusts him, I guess," Dal said. "But what if she can't and she doesn't know it? He's gotta be nuts to do this, if he is, 'cause boy, when she finds out – I just hope I'm not around."

"Me too." Crawl into a fallout shelter somewhere, read about it on your seismograph. That would not be a quiet fight.

"Maybe it's nothing. Maybe they're just meetings."

"Could be," I said, because I knew he wanted me to, but that still wouldn't explain the note.

"I gotta go read history, I'm still on the damn Congress of Vienna."

"Okay, see you tomorrow."

"So long."

Slowly I got up, feeling creaky in the joints, and put the phone back on the little table in the hall. My dad's voice drifted up from downstairs: " . . . if they start to show the rest of their slides from Hawaii, maybe you could tell them you just remembered we left the water running. Or the stove on."

"At least they have the capacity to leave St. Louis once in a while," my mom said. I knew she meant to sound light-hearted, but she didn't succeed. It was true that my dad was one of the world's great stick-in-the-muds, but was it his fault he had to work?

Silence, then the page of a newspaper being turned. The sound of what wasn't said weighed upon me.

The next morning between classes Dal stopped me in the hallway and said, "I saw something peculiar last night."

"What?"

"It's hard to describe. Something on his hand. I was downstairs in the kitchen when he came in. One thing for sure, he had a drink or two, but he wasn't drunk. The other is, he had this mark on his hand, roundish, kind of gray-blue. I said 'What's that?', he said 'We went out after the meeting for a beer.'"

"Yeah? What did it look like?" I was starting to have an idea. "Can you draw me a picture of it?"

"Jeez, I only got a glance at it."

"Try."

Dal put his notebook up against the wall and drew on its back an irregular shape with a couple of projections coming out of it; I was almost holding my breath, waiting to see if my guess would be right. It was close enough to be possible. "Look, could it have been like this?" I said, taking the notebook and the pencil, and I drew the head of a bull with two horns and little eyes glaring out from the middle and a ring hanging from its nose.

"Yes," Dal said, looking at me like I was Houdini.

"I know where he went," I said.

"You do? Where? How the hell do you know?"

"It's Toni's dad's place. Sorrento's, it's just on the other side of the tracks – you know where I mean, don't you?"

"Yeah, but – "

"They stamp everyone's hand there after they check their I.D. at the door. She used to stamp it on herself just for fun, to bug her father, I've seen it tons of times. So the next time he goes to one of those meetings – "

The bell rang. Dal was looking at me like he couldn't believe I really meant what he knew I was saying. "Talk to you later," I said. I ran down the hall to get to Latin before Rosch could mark me late.

I conferred upon the three of them – Toni, Claire, and Becca – the title of the Three Graces. I found a print of Botticelli's picture in a bookstore and labelled it with their names – three women dancing in a ring, wearing filmy flowing garments, with flowers in their hair. That made them like it; they took to calling each other "Grace." All statements could be answered with "My gracious!" and often were. But one thing the picture didn't tell you was where I fit in.

Next week, right on schedule, there was another meeting. This time it came on Wednesday night instead of Thursday. Maybe he couldn't wait any longer, I thought when Dal called me to say his dad had gone out.

We had spent a long time talking about whether we were going to follow him, now that we had a clue about where to go. Of course Dal didn't exactly want to. It wasn't his style to spy on anybody, much less his own father, but too many things had happened – not just the note and the meetings but too many looks and silences he couldn't interpret, too many times when his dad didn't seem to be there with them except in body. The doubt had been planted and there was no going back.

It was a cold night, but we'd thought a lot about how we were going to do this, and cold wouldn't stop us. We had spent a long time by the tracks planning what we'd wear and what our strategy would be, once we had decided we really were going to try to follow him to the restaurant. Of course there was no guarantee his dad would go back there, and possibly my fantasy of being arrested as a prowler might come true – which surely would look great on a college application – but that thought wasn't going to stop us now.

"He just left," Dal said.

"Let's go, then."

"Cool your jets, my mom'll think something's fishy if I leave two minutes after he does."

"Well, how long are you going to wait? What if he just goes there to meet her and leaves right away?"

"Ten minutes. Take it easy, all right?"

"I'll meet you at the tracks. Don't forget the gym bag."

"I know, I know. Would you stop reminding me of things?"

"Okay, see ya."

"Bye."

I put on an extra T-shirt and a warmer shirt, and then for ten minutes I watched the clock, unable to sit down, looking out the window as if there were anything to see there. I tried to figure out if I had made Dal do this, made him look for something he'd rather ignore. We could always be wrong. Maybe his dad really was boozing it up with a bunch of other corporate types, wouldn't that be a surprise. And they'd come out the door at about eleven going haw-haw-haw, goodnight, and we'd look at each other and say Well, holy shit. So it was the truth after all.

I put on a sweater and a jacket and stuck a black wool knit cap in my pocket and told my parents I was going to Dal's; I had my notebook and the physics book under my arm. They were in the living room, my dad in his usual chair, reading some difficult-looking book, and my mom poking at the fire in the fireplace. No music, no sound at all except the crunch of the poker against charred logs. It tended to be too quiet in my house, not that I liked the music they would play. "We've got to work on some problems we got today. They're really tough. It just helps if we do it together," I said, slowing down enough to make it look civil, but not quite stopping, as I passed through to deliver my alibi. His would be that he was coming to my house. It was too normal for them to bother to check.

"Be back by eleven," my dad said, and I said "uh-huh" though I had a feeling we wouldn't. I was out the door before they could ask me any questions.

As I went down my front walk I thought Dal was right: I did enjoy this. The neighborhood was quiet; people seldom drove through unless they lived there, because the streets were so confusing. The air was like sipping at something frozen; I was glad I had remembered my gloves. It was wonderful to be out on a school night, knowing I was not going to study physics, looking into the yellow-lit windows of houses I passed. I always liked seeing into other people's rooms that

way, like dioramas in a museum of ordinary life. So much more attractive from the outside. They always seemed particularly homey in the winter, when the dark felt darker: there was shelter, warm, lit up, lovingly arranged – and a hint of something else – a home for the dream I carried inside me, whatever it was. But when I looked more closely it always seemed that the dream had its own home and it was someplace I hadn't seen yet.

The trees along the tracks, unlit by any streetlamps, made a thick blackness that would have intimidated me if I hadn't been going there since I was a little kid; I let myself through a gap in the wall and down the slope toward the tracks. "Over here," Dal said quietly.

At first I couldn't see anything, but when my eyes got used to the dark I could make out a dim outline sitting on the ground, with his gym bag beside him. "Hi," I said, unzipping the bag and putting my books inside. I felt around to make sure the sweatshirts were there. "Are you ready?"

"Why not?" Dal sounded a little combative, on edge.

There was a zinging sound, from the invisible wire in the air above us, and I knew a trolley was coming. We stayed hunkered down on the bank as it came closer, rushing and clacking, and then suddenly flashed past, its lit windows passing us like another snatch of dream. The car was nearly empty, just a couple of heads in the windows, going to their unknown destinations. Even if they saw us, which they wouldn't, they would forget us in the next moment. Dal and I got up and picked our way down to the tracks and across them; in the distance I could see the streetcar disappear around a curve. It was quiet; as we worked our way up the opposite bank, trying not to trip over invisible branches and roots and vines, I could hear a few cars passing on the street.

We emerged from the dark leaves at the back of a gravel parking lot, and tried to look like two ordinary guys out for a walk, who just happened to have emerged from the bushes. Across the brightly lit street and a little to our left was Sorrento's, a low white stucco building with thin rectangular windows high up in the walls and a red-and-green neon sign out front. Look normal, I thought to myself, as we crossed the street. "You know, if he drives up right now, he'll see us and the whole thing will be blown."

"Damn, you're right."

We both sped up. "Don't hurry too much," Dal said. I tried to match my pace to his, to match his athlete's walk, which I never quite

could. He seemed completely at home in his body, even at a time like this.

The parking lot was pretty big, and we went up and down first one row and then another looking for Dal's dad's Impala; at one point, we both thought we saw it, but it turned out to be dark blue instead of black – it was hard to tell under the streetlamps. I thought Dal was relieved when we discovered it wasn't his. We worked our way through the main part of the parking lot without finding the car, then around in back of the building where a few more cars were parked, even though they weren't supposed to be, next to some smelly dumpsters. It wasn't there either. The only place left was a little driveway along the side of the building that led back out to the street. "No Parking" was painted on the wall there, too, but it was being ignored, and halfway to the street we found the car.

"Bingo," I said.

"Shit." Dal just breathed the word, as if he hadn't really believed it would happen. "Now what?"

It was dark where the car was parked. The only light was streetlight dimly reflected off the dirty white of the building. "Let's put on the sweatshirts," I said. Dal unzipped the bag; in it were two black sweatshirts that we put on over our jackets. We were already wearing black pants and black socks – all part of our plan – and I took out my wool cap and pulled it down over my hair. Dal had one for himself in his bag – he needed it more than I did, his hair was lighter. If any cop saw us now, I thought, he'd arrest us on suspicion of something just for wearing these clothes.

The car was parked close up against a chain-link fence that divided Sorrento's from the yard of a house next door. There were some vines growing up the fence, and on the other side whoever owned the house had planted a row of evergreens, close together and taller than me, to make a barrier. "Come on," Dal said.

"Where?"

He moved off as if he knew what he was doing. In the back corner of the lot an abandoned-looking car was parked; Dal squeezed between it and the fence, and I edged after him. He pulled at the chain link and it swayed slightly. The upper part of the chain link had gotten detached from its pole somehow in the corner, and I could just see where Dal was making a gap we could slip through by pulling it away. He put the gym bag on the ground in a pile of fallen leaves and windblown trash, and kicked a few leaves over it. "What are you doing with that?" I said.

"We'll get it later. Go on, I'll hold the fence."

I put one leg over the part of the fence that was still attached, and squeezed myself through the gap that Dal was holding open for me, looking around the back yard I was emerging into and hoping no one would see me. There was a light on in what appeared to be the kitchen, diagonally across the yard, but I didn't think anyone in there would be likely to notice us. Behind me Dal was trying to get through the gap and keep it open at the same time. "Hold this thing, will you?" he hissed, and I turned around to help him. For a moment we both struggled to free his foot, and then he was through.

In a few quick and silent steps Dal got to where the evergreens started, with me almost stepping on his heels; he lowered himself to the ground and began to crawl between them and the fence. We squirmed along the base of the fence with the thick trunks of the evergreens at our elbows; I kept trying not to snap the dead twigs and small branches that were lying there. Dal stopped crawling forward and pulled aside the vines growing on the fence enough so that he could peer through; I tried the same, but my view was blocked by the back end of a car I thought was his dad's. "Move up a little," I whispered. "I can't see." He moved only slightly. I squeezed myself along until my head was about even with his knees, and peered out, down the driveway. No one was there. From inside Sorrento's there came the faint sound of jukebox. Dal turned on his side, which gave me a little more room. Through the material of my pants the ground was cold. This could be a long wait, I thought.

Under the thick branches of the evergreens the darkness was complete; I felt protected by it, and I got a feeling I remembered from childhood games – it came from being in a space that no one else had ever occupied, close to home and yet a pioneer. We had played serious hide-and-seek as kids, and I was the acknowledged champ. The only one who could find me when I made a real effort to hide was Dal.

I remembered playing sardines, that game where you hide and when someone finds you they hide with you, until everybody but one ends up crammed into the same hiding place, giggling and waiting for the last one to get there so they can all burst out laughing at his expression when he finally finds them. One day I started the game, and nobody but Dal ever found me; we sat in our hiding place for an hour quietly talking, planning an exploration of the vacant lot by his house, until we finally realized everyone else had given up and gone on to some other game. After that we never told where we had been; if we kept it a mystery, it was as though we had actually disappeared.

I was breathing the smells of evergreen needles, earth, dead leaves, blacktop, motor oil, distant garbage, and pizza exhaust; my hip was wedged against the trunk of one of the bushes and its solidity felt like a fortification. The feeling of Dal's sneakers pressing against my back reminded me of all the tight spots we'd been in together, in games, in stories. A few college types crossed the lit space at the end of the driveway that I could see through my peephole in the vines, going toward the front door of the restaurant; then jukebox sound got louder momentarily as they opened it. So when Dal's dad came out, that music would warn us to look. I was getting a cramp in my neck from watching; I put my head down on my arm and closed my eyes, resolved to listen.

Music swelled out, and I looked up; I heard voices, a woman laughing, but no one crossed the line of my vision. I could see Dal watching too and wondered what he was thinking, how he felt to know that his dad really was in there and what that might mean. "Can you see okay?" I whispered, just to hear his voice, but he only nodded. I had a feeling he had almost forgotten about me.

I felt pinned where I was, next to the earth, and yet with a little effort of the imagination I could feel myself flying. For a moment my heart pounded, for no reason, as if the beauty of a girl had overcome me with love, or as if I were being promised that this was about to happen again, as it had before – but who did the promising? Still I held that assurance to me, guarding it, like a glowing coal I would take with me to make fire. When we were thirteen, Dal made a wonderful discovery that he shared with no one but me: at the field house at Washington U., someone's BB gun had made a tiny hole in a frosted window of the girls' locker room, and if you came at the right time you could peer through it and watch them take off their clothes. It had been so exciting I could hardly bear it, to see the miracle of their casual and perfect nakedness, and to have it gradually dawn on me that someday I might be in the room with a girl, allowed to look at her, when she was like that. The frozen earth seemed to be draining the heat out of my body; even with my gloves on, my hands were getting cold.

Dal nudged me with his foot, and I looked up, through the vines, and saw two people coming into the light at the end of the driveway, one much bigger than the other, and it was Dal's dad and a woman I had never seen before. I forgot about being cold. For one instant they were perfectly visible under the light, glancing at each other as they came around the corner. She looked like she was in her twenties, small, wearing a coat with a high fur collar that framed her

face – she looked sharp and fox-like, with glittering eyes. They passed into the comparative darkness of the driveway, and as soon as they got there, Dal's dad put his hand on the back of her coat, behind the collar, and she turned toward him and then he kissed her, one arm around her lifting her up on tiptoe, and I saw his other hand slide inside the coat and touch her, it was obvious where. "Oh, *shit*," Dal said, under his breath but violently; I grabbed his ankle. "Be quiet," I whispered, but they were too engrossed in kissing to notice a thing. Dal's dad almost blocked her from our view, but I could see the woman's hand, small and delicate emerging from her coat sleeve, white against the dark material of his pants, touching him on the ass, pulling him against her, and then her hand slid in between the two of them. I realized where she must be touching him, but I couldn't believe it. I couldn't take my eyes off them, and I knew Dal couldn't look away either and I thought that maybe right from the beginning of this I'd made a horrible mistake. They came apart and as they got closer to the car I put my head down and tried to make myself as inconspicuous as possible, pulled my cap down and hid my hands under myself, listening as he unlocked the car door and the woman said, "I was afraid she'd change her mind at the last minute and stay home, and we wouldn't be able to after all." Was he going to come around to the driver's side, could he get in that way or was it too close to the fence? If he did, his feet would go right by us, six inches from our faces. But there were no footsteps approaching. The car's springs creaked; I figured he was sliding in from the passenger side, and then I heard the car door slam and the engine started up, loud, blotting out all other sound. The headlights came on and I squeezed my eyes shut as if that would make me invisible; he backed, I could hear him shifting gears, then slowly the Impala moved away from the fence, out of the space, around the corner of the building, and it was quiet again and we were alone there, and only after a few moments, when I whispered something to him and he didn't answer, did I realize what Dal was doing, as he lay on the ground next to me: he was crying.

CHAPTER FOUR

I was silent; I almost held my breath. I couldn't remember when I had last seen Dal cry, or if I ever had. He was making almost no sound; I wasn't sure if he was still being careful or if he just didn't want me to know. I knew better than to say anything; I made more of an effort to conceal myself than I had when we had been waiting for his dad to come out. After a minute it subsided; I knew because I heard him breathe out. I felt jangled inside, panicky, as if an alarm had gone off, a voice repeating *You never should have done this, you should have known, you didn't think.*

"I've got to get out of here," Dal said, not bothering to whisper. He began thrashing around, trying to squirm his way out from under the bushes, making what seemed like a great deal of noise as if it no longer mattered what happened. "Not so loud," I said.

"Fuck it," Dal said, "nobody's gonna know." He thrust his upper body between two trunks, pushed himself through the gap with his arms, extricated his legs, rolled out onto the lawn and up to his feet in one motion, and started off at a lope toward the street. I was half-expecting to see a light go on or hear a door open and somebody yell "Stop!", but nothing happened. I was frantically trying to claw my way out as Dal had done; if I had to back out, crawling, he'd be long gone by the time I got there. My body was stiff from not moving for that long in the cold, but finally I worked my legs free and got to my feet just in time to see him crossing the street; I went after him at a run as if something crucial depended on my catching him. He wasn't running full out, but he was gliding along deceptively fast, and he disappeared into the bushes without slowing down, as if it were daytime and he were running down a flight of stairs. I crashed after him, tripped over a low branch, and ended up on the ground next to the tracks, holding

my shoulder that had banged into something hard. Let him go then, if he was so crazy to get away. I lay there and swore quietly for a while, and then out of the dark I heard Dal say, "You all right?"

"I don't know. I guess." I worked my shoulder in various directions, trying to get the pain out of it. "Where are you?"

"Cross the tracks."

Slowly I got up and made my way across, making sure not to trip on the rails. "I can't see you." Down here, away from streetlights, the black clothing really worked.

"Here."

"Where?"

I felt his hand on my shin. "You're about to step on me, for Christ's sake."

"Sorry." I let myself down next to Dal, pulled my cap down over my ears, stuffed my hands in the pocket of my sweatshirt; above us, the crevice of sky showing between the treetops was faintly pink, lit by the lights of the city. Below, there was nothing but black. I wanted to apologize for everything that had happened since he found the note but I knew it would be hopelessly inadequate. Better to shut up before my mouth got me in further trouble.

I couldn't stop thinking about the way Dal's dad had touched that woman, L., whatever her name was, and the way she touched him. The unhesitating suddenness and directness of it, coming from her as much as him, shocked something deep inside me. It made me think of Claire and me: maybe she was more used to it by now, I thought jealously, but I couldn't believe she would ever want it to happen like that. And L. wasn't thirty-five or forty; she looked, for that moment under the light, like she might be just out of college. Twenty-three, twenty-four, and having an affair with Dal's dad? What the hell would make someone her age want to go feeling around somebody like him?

"I didn't really think it could be happening," Dal said. In the dark I couldn't see his face to guess at how he was doing by now. "How the fuck can he do this?"

"I don't know," I said. But secretly I knew that if I had a woman like L. wanting me that much I sure as hell wouldn't be able to say no.

"This is going to kill my mom," Dal said.

"Do you think she knows?"

"God, no." He sounded appalled even by the suggestion. "Not the way she's been acting. She doesn't think anything's the matter, do you realize that? She doesn't have a clue." He was silent for a moment;

I thought perhaps I heard in the trolley wire the faint sound of an approaching car. "I wish I didn't."

"Maybe we tried too hard to find out," I said, meaning, Maybe I made us try too hard. Down the tracks, in the distance, I could see the headlight of a trolley, but I couldn't hear it yet.

"It was too late as soon as I found that note," Dal said, which was his way of forgiving me. The trolley came racketing along toward us, faintly at first but rising to a swift crescendo as it clattered by. The lights inside the car were off, making it seem ghostly – the last trolley, on its way back to the car barn. I wished I could be the motorman, alone in the car, rushing and swaying down the track, no passengers to stop for, driving along through the night in the company of my own thoughts. He would never notice two kids in black clothes sitting next to the tracks. For a moment I was mesmerized by the red taillights dwindling away, unable to take my eyes off them until they had disappeared around the bend.

"Now what?" Dal said. "What am I supposed to do when I go home, walk in there and act like everything's normal?"

"I guess so."

"Which means I end up lying to her too."

"I know, but what's the alternative?"

There was a burning silence from Dal. "Shit," he said, biting the word off hard, and threw something that crashed into the brush across the tracks. "Right, how about if I go home and say 'Hi Mom, guess what, Dad's making it with somebody half your age.'"
His voice was bitter; it made me squirm inside. "I'll tell you one thing – I'm not going to be the one to tell her the news. He can have that job all for himself."

"He's earned it, I'd say."

"I don't want any of this to be happening," Dal said. I realized that we were going to have to fend for ourselves in this situation with no help from anyone, and even Dal didn't know how. He had always been the leader between us. Whenever I thought about nuclear war, Dal was the person I wanted to be with if I survived the blast; with him I might have a shot at making it.

"Dya think they all do it?" Dal said, unexpectedly.

"Do what?"

"Screw around."

"What, you mean all the parents?"

"Yeah."

"I'd be surprised if half of them even do it with each other," I said, though what did I know? Less than Dal – he was no longer a

virgin, and I of course was. What I had seen that night made me feel about twelve years old.

"What about yours?" Dal said.

"Mine? They don't even sleep in the same room. My mom claims it's because his snoring keeps her awake, but give me a break. Anyway, he has hair growing out of his ears, for Christ's sake."

"Doesn't mean they can't have sex."

"Well, if they do, they sure are good at hiding it."

"Maybe they do it with someone else, somewhere else, maybe that's what's really going on only no one ever tells you."

I thought about that for a minute. My dad was basically either at work or tired, except on weekends when he raked leaves and did projects and read the paper. My mom did have every afternoon to herself until I got home – she was out a lot, at the library – she never went out without her makeup on – what if . . . "Jesus, Dal."

"Well, my dad's not the only one, is he?"

"Can't be," I said, wanting to be loyal.

"Dya think they love each other?" he said.

"My parents?"

"Mm."

"I don't know, ask them."

"I'm asking you."

"Wait'll I figure out what love is myself."

"Come on, Andy, you've been in love before," he said. I was surprised he took my life that seriously; I didn't feel entitled to.

There was an invisible force field around the question of whether my parents loved each other, like the power that turns your legs to lead when you try to run in a dream, that wanted me to say Of they do, of course everything is fine the way it is, there are no surprises . . . "Whatever they do, they're not *in* love. I know that much." But I had never said it out loud, and now it seemed more real.

"Neither are mine," said Dal, and then gave a short, humorless laugh. "Shit, I guess that's pretty obvious by now, isn't it?" He paused. I was getting stiff again from sitting on the cold ground. "Well, maybe my dad is."

"Great," I said.

"Yeah, great. Congratulations, Dad."

We sat for a while; I could feel Dal pondering darkly next to me. If I tipped my head back and breathed out I could just see my breath against the sky. "Are you going to tell him what you saw?" Dal had

never shown him the note, but this was different – this was not guesswork.

“How’m I going to face them at all, is the question. I don’t know what I’m gonna do. What time is it?”

The luminous lozenges that marked the hours on my watch glowed brightly in the deep darkness by the tracks. “Eleven-thirty.”

“Gotta go back.”

“Yeah.”

We got up from the weedy bank and cautiously felt our way up the slope, through a gap in the wall, and emerged out onto the street. We walked along together in silence; there weren’t many lit-up windows left in the houses along our way, and those that we passed didn’t look the way they had. Now they seemed like reminders that home as Dal had imagined it just a few weeks or even hours before was no longer there for him, that when he walked in it would be to a whole different place. I was glad I didn’t have to do that – I couldn’t imagine what he must be feeling inside – and yet I guessed that mine wouldn’t look the same either. Dal and I parted with a mumbled “Goodnight,” and for a moment I watched him go his way, into and out of a pool of streetlight, head down, hands in his pockets, carrying the weight of something he didn’t want to know. I had never seen him that way before.

It wasn’t until I was leaving for school the next morning that I realized we had left the gym bag, with my physics book and my notebook in it, in the corner of the parking lot; I was too late to go get it before school, and I got in trouble for not having done the homework, but it seemed like nothing compared to the reason why. Conroy asked me something about index of refraction and I had no idea what he was talking about, and that of course led him to grill me on whether I’d read the chapter. He was basically a bastard about exposing people’s shortcomings, and I usually did my best not to have any in his class if I could help it. Too late this time. After he’d embarrassed me enough, he went on to discover that those who had read the chapter hadn’t understood it, so I didn’t stick out as much as I might have. Dal was sitting in the back corner looking like even if Conroy called on him he wouldn’t say anything. I had a feeling he hadn’t slept; he had looked wiped out earlier, in history, and he still did. All day I had been unable to get out of my mind the image of L.’s hand touching Dal’s dad down there as they kissed.

“How you doing?” I said to him after class.

"Enh. Conroy really unloaded on you."

"Yeah. I gotta go find that book, you know he's gonna be down on my case next time."

"Take mine, I'm not gonna read it." That was not like Dal; physics was probably his best subject.

"Dja get any sleep last night?"

"Maybe."

"Did you see your dad?" I asked, afraid I might be pushing him too far; I had to know. Dal only shook his head. He was handing me his physics book when Claire and Becca swept by in the crowded hall.

"Hey Andy! We're going to Claire's house later, wanna come?" Becca said, circling back. "I spent her life savings on records yesterday and we haven't even heard them all yet."

"Hi, Dal," Claire said.

"Hey."

"You know Becca, don't you?" Claire sounded proud of knowing her, which seemed like the way an introduction ought to sound.

"Hi," Becca said, giving a little wave from a distance of about three feet. Dal glanced up and mumbled something polite.

"Dal and Andy are like joined at the hip," Claire said, "they always have been."

"I thought he was all ours," Becca said. I couldn't tell if her smile was teasing or not.

"I am," I said, "the question is whether it works the other way around."

"Oh, of course it does, doesn't it, Grace?" Becca said, putting her arm through Claire's, leaning her head toward Claire so that her wavy dark hair trailed on Claire's shoulder. She almost seemed to be flirting with Claire, and I wondered if it was for Dal's benefit. Or could she be poking fun at something, someone, maybe at everybody?

"Dal, you want to come over?" Claire said, but it was clear the thought had only crossed her mind because they happened to find us together.

"No thanks. I gotta go. Later, Andy."

"I'll give you a call," I said to his back.

"Bye," Claire and Becca called together; he waved without looking.

"Well. *He's* in a good mood," Claire said tartly. "Meet us later, okay? Toni's coming over too. Like three-thirty?"

"All right."

They turned to go. "And if Dal stops being such a poop he can come too!" Claire called over her shoulder. But I knew that wasn't going to happen any time today.

When I got to Claire's house, the three of them were in her room blasting the music – it was Booker T. and the MG's. Becca liked that kind of music; she was the only girl I knew who listened to KATZ. Five thousand watts of soul power coming to you from across the big pond, as their DJ's would say, from East St. Louis, where everyone was black and probably knew a whole lot about having the blues. Toni and Becca were dancing, and Claire was lying across the bed; I joined her there. Everyone and everything always sat on her bed; it was so crowded with books, stuffed animals, records, clothes, coats, and extra pillows that it was impossible to lie down lengthwise. "Andy, how come I always have to tell you to take off your shoes?"

"Sorry."

"I can't figure out how to dance to this," Becca said, though she seemed to be doing a pretty good job to me. She and Toni were doing a slow jitterbug, Toni being the boy, twirling Becca expertly, their dark hair in motion. Toni's was blacker than Becca's; she was proud of how black it was.

"Here," Toni said, putting her arm around Becca's waist so the two of them were side by side. "Like this." She started into a routine like some girl singing group, step-together-step-kick. "Now let's have some arm action." Toni began snapping her fingers, ducking one shoulder, putting a little swoop into each step as they sashayed from side to side.

"You're too good," Becca said, "I look like a klutz next to you."

"No you don't." She beckoned to Claire and me. "Come on, you guys, don't just sit there like lumps." Claire got up and joined them. The music kept pulsing along, carrying the three of them with it, Toni and Claire's arm gestures getting more flamboyant, the swoop in their step getting lower – Becca, in the middle, was giggling – "Andy, don't be such a dud, come *on*."

"You're out of my league."

"It's not a contest, for crying out loud," Claire said, and I got up and hooked myself onto the line at her end, watching their feet and trying to follow, getting into the rhythm of it and starting to be carried away just as the song ended.

"The Graces, ladies and gentlemen," I said, giving them a hand. "Take a bow, girls." Becca and Claire did; Toni curtsied with a simper

on her face, so out of character it made me laugh. A fast number came on and all of a sudden they were all three in motion. No wonder girls danced so much better than boys – they practiced. Just try to picture a bunch of boys in someone’s room dancing together. Not a chance. I lay with my head propped against the wall, watching the three of them fluidly switching partners, swirling through a whirlwind of turns and passing touches as if they read each other’s minds, and envied the freedom they shared with each other. I wouldn’t have given up the privilege of seeing it for most anything, and yet sometimes I thought I couldn’t stand it another minute.

The song ended, and Claire and Becca sat down on the bed, panting. “Time out,” Claire said, falling backwards so she was lying across the bed again, next to me.

“Come on, don’t wimp out now,” Toni said, but they didn’t get up. Becca had sat down between my outstretched feet because there was nowhere else to go. “Give us a break, Grace, we’re not in training for this,” she said – Toni had been taking jazz dance for years.

“My gracious,” Toni said, with a what-can-you-do look on her face. She put on a record and was off again, even better alone because now she had room to move. She raised her arms, extended her leg in front of her and slid down almost into a split, then popped up again and started dancing, making the rest of us whoop and whistle; Becca put the back of her hand to her forehead like someone fainting dead away and swooned backwards, falling on top of me, her head on my stomach. “Oof,” I said, but the contact thrilled me, and she didn’t move away; she adjusted herself to get comfortable and lay there watching Toni, raising one hand to snap her fingers. I did the same, not moving a muscle otherwise, hoping she’d stay where she was, though I didn’t know if it meant anything. It meant we were friends. I knew exactly how any other boy’s eyes would look if I said, “How’d you like to be on a bed with two girls in one of their rooms when their parents aren’t around?” That was wet dream stuff. But in real life it wasn’t. Becca was lying there half on top of me and Claire was next to me and it was something like being three floppy dogs – golden retrievers – lying in a heap in front of a fire. Neither one of them seemed to think anything unusual was going on. The music was still blasting and Toni looked like she ought to be on TV wearing a gold-spangled jump suit, snaking through every move she knew, pushing her hair back and making glamour-puss faces at us, cracking herself up and laughing so hard she almost had to stop dancing. Claire squealed like a thirteen-year-old and that made all of us laugh. Becca sat up and began clapping.

"Gracie! You're my idol!" The song came to an end, Toni threw her head back and extended her arms to the ceiling, we all yelled and clapped, she collapsed in a heap on the floor, giggling and out of breath. "Incredible," I said to no one in particular. Becca unclipped the big barrette that kept her hair back; holding the barrette in her teeth, she shook her hair out, gathered it together again with both hands, trying to pull rebellious strands into place, and with some difficulty fastened the barrette again. It seemed to me this exact routine happened twenty times a day; she and her hair were always having an argument over who would be in charge. I drew my knees up against me and put my sock feet against Becca's back, kneading it with my toes; I thought she might act ticklish, but instead she leaned back slightly, making the contact definite. The record was at the end of a side, making fidgeting noises.

"Put something else on," Claire said.

"You," said Toni, who was pushing her hair back and combing her fingers through it. "Something not so fast."

"Got any Miles Davis?" I said, but Claire only rolled her eyes at me. I knew she didn't.

"You can weird yourself out with that at home. I don't know what you get out of jazz, anyway," she said, getting up and rummaging through a pile of records on her dresser.

"You would if you'd listen to it."

"My dad listens to jazz," Becca said. "He likes Louis Armstrong and – now, who? Somebody else."

"Old-time stuff? Is it like Armstrong?"

"Don't ask – oh, I know, Duke Ellington."

"The guy must have taste."

"He thinks so."

"Hey, what's the matter with Dal, anyway?" Claire said. "How come he wouldn't come over?"

"Don't take it personally," I said.

"He doesn't want to hang around and gossip when he could be playing soccer," Toni said, which was true enough, and I hoped they'd leave it at that. I couldn't tell them the real reason.

Ray Charles's voice, coming without warning, shot through my heart and made my eyes close for an instant of their own accord.

"Not *that* slow, for God's sake," Toni said.

"Why not?" Claire sat down on the floor with her back against the bed and leaned her head back. "I like this record."

"So you can sit around and daydream about Kenny Hunsicker."

"Oh, sure, Grace. He wishes."

No one spoke; we each seemed to be in our own private space. I still had my feet against Becca's back, but I had stopped wiggling my toes. Toni was stretched out on her side on the floor, propping her head on her hand; she pulled toward her the book we were reading for English, opened it and turned a couple of pages, but didn't seem to be really reading. I closed my eyes again, remembering the way this song had seemed to say everything I felt when Claire broke up with me. Her plaything. And was I still – all of theirs? For a moment my whole attention was absorbed by the gentle pressure of Becca against the soles of my feet; then a flash of L. and Dal's dad in the parking lot curdled and spoiled my reverie, impossible to reconcile with this moment. I had to struggle for a few moments to shove that away, like trying to forget a piece of pornography that turned ugly after I'd read it. Ray Charles brought me back to where I had been, made me forget everything except wanting to sit up and put my arms around Becca. But what a damn fool I would probably make of myself if I did, and anyway I couldn't, in front of the others. That was not what any of this was about, I was sure, but I silently prayed she wouldn't move away.

If only you didn't need it so much, you idiot, you'd be able to get it, you know that's how it works.

"Just for a Thrill" came to an end; there was a moment of silence and the next song started with quiet blue piano chords and then Ray, so painful it was delicious.

"Can I borrow my boyfriend for a backrub?" Claire said.

"I'm still getting mine," said Becca; I wiggled my toes against her, grateful to her for refusing.

"Does anything ever happen in this story?" Toni said. "It makes me want to scream. All he's done in fifteen pages is sit around the Officer's Home and talk to this guy Captain Giles."

"It gets better," I said.

"Don't tell me you're doing homework," said Claire.

"We do have to write a paper about this for Monday, in case you've forgotten."

"Oh God, don't remind me," I groaned.

"Not to worry," Becca yawned, "if you just throw in alienation and rites of passage, Kearns eats it up."

"You still have to read the book," Toni muttered.

We were all quiet again. Ray Charles was still going on, but he was competing with nagging thoughts about homework. As if she read

my mind, Claire crawled over to Toni, closed her book, and said, "Would you stop reading that? It's making us all feel guilty."

"I'll bet everybody that applied to Wellesley is studying right this minute," Toni said.

Claire looked put-upon. "They've already got my grades, and anyway I only applied because my mom wanted me to. You know I'm not going to get in."

"Where are you going to go if you don't?" Becca said.

"Oh, I don't know – Sophie Newcomb, I guess. If they take me."

"Sophie Newcomb? What's that?"

"It's Tulane, only for girls."

"New Orleans, land of dreams," Toni said to herself, gesturing with one arm like a cabaret singer.

"So? What's wrong with that?" Claire said.

"Don't be so sensitive, nothing's wrong with it," Toni said. "You wouldn't catch me going to Wellesley, though. No boys." Toni had applied to Wisconsin, and Michigan, and the University of Illinois, and as a gesture to placate her parents, Washington U., but we all knew she was going somewhere away from home, even if they didn't. She opened her book again, but this time Claire took it away from her and said, "Enough already."

"Oh, all right." Toni sat up cross-legged and said, "Want to see something neat?"

"What?" said Claire.

"Sure," said Becca.

"Maybe Andy shouldn't look," she said, which guaranteed that she had my attention; she unbuttoned the top two buttons of her blouse and flashed us all a view of a fire-engine red bra.

"Woo-woo."

"Where'd you get it?"

I couldn't believe she was doing this with me in the room. "I'll bet there's something even neater underneath that," I said.

"Oh, Andy, don't be such a guy," Toni said, buttoning herself up.

"Hey, I am a guy, what do you expect?"

"But you're different, that's why we like you," Claire said. If one of the others had said that, it might not have pissed me off the way it did coming from Claire. I grabbed a stuffed bear that was next to me on the bed and jabbed it into the air. "What do you think I am, one of these?" Becca turned around, breaking the contact between us, and looked at me. "I do have feelings, you know."

"We trust you," Becca said. "It's not an insult."

"Well, if you trust me, trust me, and don't tell me not to be a guy," I muttered, putting the bear down.

"I didn't," she said quietly. Her gaze was steady, her eyes gray-blue; I felt a little sheepish.

"Sorry," I mumbled. She got up from the bed and started looking through a stack of records.

"Now can I please have my turn for a backrub?" said Claire, which I chose to take as her way of apologizing.

"Okay." She moved over and took Becca's place in front of me, and I began kneading her shoulders and her neck, feeling the tight muscles under my fingers. Secret tension inside Claire. There was something dark inside her that I couldn't name but I could recognize, the underground bond between us. "Am I doing it too hard?"

"No."

Sometimes when I was alone I felt I was dying of the unmet need to touch, and here she was throwing me a lifeline, how could I stay mad at her? Becca took off Ray Charles and put on the Shirelles.

Toni stood up and looked in the mirror. "Do you think I ought to grow my hair out?" she said. "Come here, okay, Becca?" They stood side by side at the mirror, and Toni took out Becca's barrette. "Now see, if it was as long as yours . . ." She kept on but I paid no attention; it was enough to touch Claire's neck and press my fingers into her back between her shoulder blades, feel the bumps of her spine, and watch the two of them murmuring to each other, touching and admiring each other's hair with their eyes on the mirror, completely engrossed in their dual image. Girls are so lucky, I thought, and I was lucky to be there with them, so taken for granted – no, trusted was the word – that all their girliness could come out. To be behind the scenes. All of a sudden I realized this was my dream, it was life like this that waited behind some yellow window that I might never find. I was dizzy with longing for the present moment, I wanted to hold it in an embrace forever, never let it slip away . . .

"You give the best backrubs," Claire said.

"Mm." I didn't want to talk, to break the spell. But it was already dissolving, Toni and Becca were talking about English now, the light was fading outside the windows, we would have to do homework. "I better get going," Toni said, gathering up her books.

"Yeah, me too," said Claire.

"Time has come, the walrus said," said Becca.

"Where's my coat?"

"Do you ever sleep on this bed, or do you just store your clothes here?"

Becca came up to me with her coat on, put one hand on my shoulder and extended the other arm in a way that meant "Dance with me," and I cooperated. We shifted from foot to foot in a slow two-step. She had the same look I'd seen in the hall earlier that day when she posed with Claire for me and Dal – secretly amused at something, perhaps herself – not serious, and yet not unserious either – she was a mystery, but the mystery seemed to have no malice in it.

"So are you okay now?" she said.

"Better than just okay."

We all clattered down the stairs together; Claire closed the door behind us and for a moment we stood on the porch pulling our gloves on. The light was reddish, angling low across the front yard, the shadows of tree branches throwing a tangled net over everything. Toni hurried off at her usual speed; she had to slow down to walk with any of the rest of us. Becca had left her bicycle on the front porch; she bumped it down the steps, and I thought she was going to get on and ride away, but instead she walked it down the sidewalk with me; we were going in the same direction. It was cold out and the wind was coming up; I turned my coat collar up. "Pretty wintry out here," I said.

"Yes," Becca said peacefully. "I love winter, don't you?"

She was wearing a white knit hat with a red pom-pom on top, white knit gloves, a leather coat with a collar of fake white fur; she looked utterly content with who and where she was. Then she gave me that look again, and bewilderment must have shown on my face, because the look turned into outright amusement at me. "You're a funny boy," she said. She took me by the coat sleeve with one hand, still holding her bike with the other, stopped me in my tracks, leaned toward me and without warning kissed me. Almost before I knew what was happening, before I could begin to respond, it was over: she leaned away from me, put her gloved fingers over my lips for a moment, got onto her bike and with a silent wave rode off. Only then, breathing in the cold air, did I realize that for one instant I had felt the flicker of her warm tongue against mine.

I must have stood there for two minutes after Becca turned the corner, the fact of the kiss sinking in, feeling again the gentle touch of scratchy wool against my lips, seeing the look she had given me at that moment and how open her eyes had been.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was still cold, but cold was just a physical attribute of the wonderment in which I walked the rest of the way home. "I love winter, don't you?" Those had been her words. I never had loved it before, but that might change.

I couldn't stop going back to the simple, incredible fact that she, Becca, had kissed me – not the other way around, which would have been astonishing enough. The more I relived the moment, the more it seemed that she had wanted to tell me something that couldn't and shouldn't be put into words – that that was why she had put her hand to my lips. My whole body was so alive I felt I wanted to jump over a house. I wanted to be alone and go over the whole afternoon again, second by second, without interruptions for dinner or homework or sleep. I wanted to tell Dal immediately. I wanted to keep it a secret. I wanted to get home and call Becca. Should I? What had she meant by it, anyway? What if she should laugh at me – quietly, even if she laughed at me she wouldn't do it cruelly – and say, "Oh, Andy, you're such a guy"? I should call Claire and ask her what it meant. She and Becca spent all their time together, she would know.

I leaned against a tree and closed my eyes and tried to block out everything but the look Becca had given me, until I heard footsteps coming along the sidewalk and got embarrassed at the thought of someone seeing me like that, opened my eyes and ran the rest of the way home, through the curving streets and up the brick alley and in the back gate by the garage.

I came in the back door, out of breath, and my mom was in the steamy kitchen impatiently poking at some broccoli with a fork. "Hi," I panted, unzipping my coat and pulling my gloves off.

"Hi, hon, something chase you home?"

"No, I just ran. Smells good."

"Where've you been?"

"Claire's. What are we having?"

"Pot roast."

I opened the refrigerator and looked in vain for a Dr. Pepper.

"We have any sodas?"

"It's practically dinnertime."

When I was halfway up the stairs her voice came after me.

"Andy?"

"Yeah?"

"I just remembered, Dal called about an hour ago."

Dal called. My stomach sank; at that moment, of all moments, I didn't want to be reminded of Dal's dad and L. and what they did in the dark. But I couldn't not call him back. I got the phone out of the hall, slid the cord under my door, made sure the door was latched, and sat down on the floor in front of my closet. The mirror on the closet door was at my back; for a moment I turned to glance at myself over my shoulder: I hadn't gotten any older or better-looking since the last time I checked. I dialed the phone.

"Hello?" he said tonelessly.

"Hi, it's me." There was a silence. Come on, Dal, I thought. Make a big effort. "What's up?"

"I gotta go upstairs, hold on a minute." He put down the phone with a clank and I heard him say "Mum, would you hang this up when I get upstairs?" When Dal mentioned his mother to me he called her "Mom," the same as I did mine, but when he spoke to her he called her "Mum," and I could hear the difference; it was the only trace, in Dal, of his mother's Britishness. But then you wouldn't notice she had an accent unless you tried hard to detect one.

"I got it!" he yelled, and I heard his mother hang up with a definite click. What if she should want to make a call, and pick it up, and overhear the wrong thing? Not to mention Katie; she had a fourteen-year-old's weird radar for anything she might care about. She could completely tune you out if you tried to get her off the phone, but if you whispered in the next room that she looked ridiculous when she put on eye makeup, she'd yell "I heard that!"

"Can you talk?" I said.

"Yeah, no one's up here." I could picture him sitting on the stairs to the attic, which was where people usually sat when they made phone calls on the second floor of Dal's house. If you wanted privacy your only choice was to climb into the bottom of the linen closet and

close the door after you – something Katie had actually been known to do. I wondered how his dad could manage to contact L.

“So what’s going on?”

“Andy, what am I supposed to do?” He’d asked me things like that before in the course of a game, but I had never heard him sound actually helpless.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t stand to know this and not say anything. I’m not going to be able to keep it a secret. I know I’m not. I got home last night, my mom came in my room to say goodnight to me, I asked her if my dad was back yet and she told me he was in bed. She was wearing this old pink bathrobe of hers, Andy, you should see it. She’s had it for about a hundred years – you know? – I kept thinking of that woman we saw him with. She says, ‘Why are you looking at me that way? Do I have toothpaste on my face?’ I made some stupid excuse. So she says goodnight and I’m lying there thinking about him being in bed next to her and what he’s been doing and how all the time she’s right next to him and she doesn’t know. And there’s Katie across the hall from them and she doesn’t know either. Every second they’re together is one big fucking lie and he’s asleep. I felt like I was going to explode and start yelling, I actually stuffed the pillow in my mouth to stop myself. It’s weird, but I think I would have told her if it hadn’t been for Katie. I don’t know what’s worse, thinking about my mom or her.”

He sounded like he still was barely keeping himself from starting to yell; I was sitting there with my eyes closed, hunched over the phone, thinking Why did we ever go there? “I’m sorry we ever found out,” I said.

He heaved an angry sigh. “Christ, it’s not your fault, it’s the truth.”

“No wonder you looked the way you did today.”

“This morning I came into the kitchen and there they were drinking coffee and talking about something and I couldn’t even look at them.”

“I’ll bet.”

“He’s my father, Andy,” Dal said, and then there was a long silence. If he couldn’t hold it in, if it came out and everyone knew, what then for his family, which I had always thought was just *there* – “He’s going to get home in a few minutes, I’ll have to eat dinner with them and I don’t know how I’m going to get through it.”

I wanted to go back in time, back to when Dal told me in the hall about the mark on his father's hand, and instead of having to show off how damn clever I was, look blank and say I didn't have a clue.

"Maybe you should tell your mom you don't feel so good," I said. "Anyway, you don't. It's the truth."

"I can't play sick every day," he muttered.

"Well, you've gotta get through dinner somehow."

"They're going to know something's wrong. Whatever I do is going to look fishy. I can't help it."

I knew he was right. Dal probably couldn't help it. There had always been a certain transparency about him; he wasn't cut out for hiding things, for deception except as part of a game. "Are you going to say it, then?" I didn't see how there could be any other choice left, for him, which terrified me just to think about.

"Which one am I going to tell?" Dal said, in a hopeless voice. "My mother, or my father? You tell me. Go ahead."

"Jesus. I don't know."

"Neither do I."

"Look, maybe if you can just not say anything, maybe he'll change his mind, maybe he'll stop seeing her . . ." Even while I said it I wasn't convincing myself.

"You think?" Dal said.

No, I didn't, but it was the only hope to cling to. "Well, he might. And then, you know, if it just ended, no one else would ever have to know about it." Except you, I didn't add. And anyway, how would Dal know that it had ended, even if it did? There were about ten things wrong with this picture, and I was sure he'd see that.

"If," Dal said.

"Yeah, if. I know." I willed him to believe it anyway, not to say the irrevocable thing today.

"Ohhh God," Dal groaned. "He just came in. I can hear him downstairs. I gotta go – Andy, I don't know what to do," and he hung up and I was left there on the floor of my room, powerless to help on what had to be the worst day of Dal's life.

I got up, turned off the light, peered out the window at the now dark street, as if there were some sort of answer to be found out there. From downstairs, my mother called, "Andy! We're going to eat in five minutes!"

It was one of the side effects of Dal's situation that ever since he'd found the note I couldn't help watching my own parents, trying to

find out what was going on in my home, as if for the first time. But it wasn't easy to tell. My father still left the house early every morning and went to the financial aid office at Washington U., where he had worked for years, and did whatever he did, which he hardly ever talked about except when someone in the office came up with a new manifestation of their weird personality. The few times I'd been to his office, it felt like time stopped in about 1938. The ceilings were cavernously high, the walls were green, and it was impossible to imagine spending half of your waking life there. All I knew for sure about his work was that it wasn't what he really wanted, which was to be the professor he looked like – and would have been, maybe, except he never went to grad school because he had a family to support. If not for me being born, maybe he would have been Mr. Chips with his salt-and-pepper moustache and his tweed jackets, earnestly going on about the Russo-Japanese War. I could picture him calling deserving scholarship students into his office and giving kindly advice about living up to their potential. But because they weren't his kid he might spare them the rest of it, the part I never wanted to hear, about how he hadn't lived up to his own.

My mother worked half-time for the school board, which, contrary to what Toni always claimed, did not give her the power to alter my report card and make it come up all A's. She was working on her Master's degree in French, one course at a time, so she spent a lot of afternoons in the library, as she had done now for several years. The books she brought home had the faintly acrid smell of volumes no one opens; I didn't understand how she could read them of her own free will. Whenever anyone asked what she planned to do with her degree she claimed that after she got her Master's she was going to go on for her Ph.D. and become a professor just in time to retire. I always wondered if my dad minded her saying that. She didn't look like a professor, though; she was too small, her hair was too curly, her lipstick was too fresh. Once, in the tenth grade, some guy told me my mom was cute, which really threw me for a loop. But maybe she was. Out of all my friends, the one she liked best was Toni. She didn't like Claire much, even when she was my girlfriend, which surprised me because Claire was a better student. Once she even told me I ought to ask Toni out instead, which just went to show she didn't have the first clue about what was possible.

When my mom said she was going to get her Ph.D., my dad would say he was going to quit the financial aid office and go to the Naval War College and study von Clausewitz. I knew as little about

that as I did about his work, or French poets. He was in the war, like practically everyone's dad, and he would never talk about it.

There was only two years' difference between my parents, but there seemed to be a lot more. My father's hair had gotten almost all gray, sometime when I wasn't looking, and in August when he was playing softball with a bunch of his friends he had pulled a muscle in his leg running out a grounder and said he was getting too old for that kind of thing. I hated hearing him say that. My mom seemed to be going in the other direction, to compensate. Every once in a while she'd have what she called "glamour attacks," go out on a Saturday and come home in a new dress with a new hair style. But when my dad tried to tell her she looked nice, it only seemed to make her mad. Then she'd go cook dinner and bang pots extra loud.

Then we'd eat.

Then they'd read. My mom would take out something in French that neither of us could have read and go into it like closing the door of a room. He'd have the newspaper, and books about politics or, God forbid, World War II. It would be too damn quiet, and as soon as I could, I'd go out.

It seemed to me that when I saw him kiss my mom, he did it in an apologetic way, and I thought it was because they didn't even sleep together and here they were still stuck with each other, married. Apologizing for being tired when he got home from work, for reading the paper from front to back, for getting too old for that kind of thing. Or maybe I had it all wrong. But he seemed to duck his head every time in a way that said "Don't be mad at me." Once I saw it I couldn't stop seeing it, and it made me feel the way you do when you've already swallowed a bite of something and while it's on the way down you realize the smell of it kind of makes you sick.

I came downstairs, and as I passed through the dining room I stopped at the old upright piano no one ever played and picked out the melody of "Afro-Blue." It had taken me a while to get it right, listening to John Coltrane over and over and trying to sort out the tune from everything else he and his sidemen played. I had taken a couple of years of piano, in sixth and seventh grade, and hated it; now I would have started again, if I could have found someone to teach me how to play "Afro-Blue" or "I Got a Woman." But there were no lessons in stuff like that. Middle-aged white ladies in overheated apartments could never teach you to play one bar of Ray Charles doing "Georgia On My Mind." There was too much soul in it, too much funky

darkness and sex. I could just picture my last piano teacher's pancake-made-up face if she heard Ray singing "What'd I Say."

"Andy, it's on the table," my dad said from the kitchen. I took my place at the kitchen table. "Did you know the Hirsches want to build an addition?" my mom was saying to him. "It's half the size of their back yard. The zoning board's going to have a hearing."

"That's the first I heard of it. Who told you?" The Hirsches lived across the alley from us, and they had a barky little dog I wished would run away from home.

"She did," my mom said, meaning Mrs. Hirsch whom she couldn't stand, "you know how she is, she can never resist telling you how much money they're going to spend on something. I'm sure the Colemans are going to object. Or I will, if they don't beat me to it."

"It's their yard, let them build it," my dad said. "It wouldn't be the end of the world."

"Why should we have to look at some cracker-box thing over there, just because they feel like building it?"

My dad shrugged and pretended to be paying close attention to his knife and fork; my mom was always readier for an argument than he was. Surreptitiously I watched the two of them – he was wearing the same old tan cardigan sweater he put on every day after work – and thought that romance between them was inconceivable. Sometimes my dad farted so you couldn't help but notice, and he and my mom both pretended nothing had happened. How could he bear to be like that, and even more so, how could she bear to live with it? Unless they were just totally resigned and basically it was over for them. The life you could hear in Coltrane or Miles or Ray Charles had nothing to do with my parents, and if that was where it ended up, then what the hell was the point?

That was exactly why Dal and I were going East. But one of the things I didn't like to remember was that both my parents had gone East to college themselves.

My mom was saying something about how they should have the Bufords over for dinner – I knew them, he was a know-it-all windbag and she was quiet and pale and sort of pretty. When they came over, she was usually dressed like she'd had a glamour attack, too. I told my mom once I thought Mrs. Buford was plotting her escape, and she just smiled. But not like she thought it was funny.

I ate and excused myself as quickly as I could and went back up to my room. Homework was waiting for me – especially physics – but I

couldn't stop being nervously aware of the telephone out in the hall, crouching there, full of possibilities waiting to spring. There was a sensation in my heart that I recognized, a racing lightness but not a pleasant one, a sensation that would not settle down and I couldn't stop being aware of; it made me feel that I couldn't breathe all the way down into my lungs. Dal could call at any moment and say that the unthinkable had happened – or I could call Becca – if I dared. What made me think she wasn't dating somebody already? How could a girl as pretty as she was not be taken? If I knew what was good for me I wouldn't think at all – I wanted too much, my hopes were exorbitant and impossible. The last thing I was any good at was just letting something happen.

In the morning I had to leave extra-early so I could rescue my physics book from the parking lot of Sorrento's. It was a cold bright morning; some icicles glittered from the overhanging roof of the restaurant in a sun that seemed to have no warmth, only brilliance. The leaves on top of Dal's gym bag were frozen, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Part of me wanted to play hooky, take a walk back to my old grade school, and not have to worry, as I had been doing since the moment I woke up, about where I would see Becca first and what would happen then. It would be in the hall somewhere, and there would be plenty of spectators if I did anything squirrely and ridiculous, as was only too likely.

Coming down the hall toward English class, I was so nervous and preoccupied I bumped into a guy who was bent over taking a drink at a water fountain and made him squirt himself in the face; he whipped around and said, "Why don't you watch where the hell you're going, you dip!"

"Sorry." I kept moving, speeding up, almost bumped into someone else but got out of range of the first guy, turned the corner toward Kearns's room and there were Claire and Becca right in front of me, talking away. They didn't notice me behind them. I had an urge to pull Becca's hair but managed to suppress it at the last moment. "Boo," I said. They both turned, and the instant I actually was face to face with Becca I felt I could breathe right again. "Hi," they both said. "Did you finish the story?" Becca said, so much as if there were nothing out of the ordinary between us that the sensation rubbed off on me.

"Yeah, didn't you?"

"Do you think he's going to give a quiz on it?" Claire said. I was between Claire and Becca and as we clumped together outside the

door, waiting for the class before us to leave, I could feel Becca's shoulder against me. We all squeezed through the door, talking about what the ID's would be if he gave a quiz – Claire always knew the picky details. Becca put her books on the desk next to where I usually sat, acting as though she didn't notice she was taking the seat Ricky Malvin always occupied. If I could trade Ricky's company for hers I would be the luckiest guy on the planet; he always sat there with his legs sticking way out and this snide look on his face like everything was too obvious and boring for words – except when Kearns was talking. He claimed he wasn't a grade-grubber, but every time he got less than a 90 on a test he bitched and moaned, usually to me, that it was killing his chances of getting into a good college. Becca and I both sat down; Ricky wandered in a few seconds later and stood there indecisively with a baffled look, then slumped off to a seat across the room. The spot next to Claire where Becca usually sat was empty, and Kenny Hunsicker saw his chance and sat there; he was leaning over to talk to her, and she was looking impatient. At the last second, as the bell was ringing, Toni rushed in and just made it to her seat on time. Kearns perched himself on the front of his desk, which meant he wanted to seem like a regular guy, but didn't guarantee that we were going to get off without a quiz. "So," he said, and waited for the shuffling of books and notebooks to subside. "Are you all still becalmed in the Gulf of Siam? I certainly hope not, for your sakes. An outpouring of brilliance, otherwise known as a paper, is due Monday at this time, as I'm sure you are only too well aware." He glanced around the room, but no one responded. "You are aware of this, are you not?" There were a few grunts and grudging nods. "Now, would anyone like me to describe yet again the form this brilliance will take? No? Well then. Back to Mr. Conrad and his ship . . ." He looked around with the expression that meant he expected someone to say something. This is what professors will do to you in college, you can't just stare at them and expect to get A's, he would say if the wait got too long.

With Toni in the room, it seldom did. "I am so sick of reading descriptions of the ocean," she said. "And boats. Anchor chains and the main top mizzen whatever – I mean, come *on*. I'm sorry, but so what?"

"Ah," said Kearns, giving her his typically maddening noncommittal look. I stole a glance at Becca; just for a moment she met my eyes and seemed to flash me a secret message, and I thought, Please let me not be kidding myself.

I saw Dal in the hall outside history class, waiting till the last second, talking to no one. Something about him said Keep away, and even I felt a little hesitant to approach him. "I got the gym bag," I said to him. "It's in my locker. So's your physics book."

He gave me a look that suggested he might not give a damn if he ever saw his physics book again.

"What happened?" I said, keeping my voice down. He just shook his head. "Nothing," he said, and when I thought he was about to add something, the bell rang.

In physics, Dal sat in the back row with the same look he'd had the day before, or worse. Conroy must have seen it, and he never could leave anybody alone. He was drawing a diagram on the board, talking away with his back to the class – "... so this is the angle of incidence, and it is by definition equal to – " Hands went up in hopes of answering an easy question; sooner or later he was bound to get to the impossible ones. He turned quickly in his usual pouncing way. "Carlton," he said.

There was a short pause; I heard someone muttering the answer under his breath. Eyes went to Dal when he didn't reply at once; he could usually be counted on to know the answers, even to hard questions, and this one was simple. Dal was looking straight at Conroy, stone-faced. "I don't know," he said.

Conroy took a breath as if to say, Give me patience. "You have read the chapter, haven't you?"

The silence was complete. Into it Dal dropped the word "No."

"No," Conroy said, looking at the ceiling. "Maybe whatever Brecker had yesterday" – that was me – "is contagious." I was almost hoping he'd give me some more shit and lay off of Dal, because I'd read the chapter by then and it couldn't be too bad. Besides, couldn't he see there was something wrong, something besides just missed homework?

"Let me help you," Conroy said. "Open the book."

He and Dal stared at each other for a moment, and I was afraid anything might happen, anything at all. Conroy was famous for his temper. One time earlier in the year he got fed up with a kid who was talking to his neighbor, went up to him and told him to move to another desk across the room, and when the kid didn't move fast enough for Conroy he picked up all the kid's books and threw them in the general direction he wanted him to go. Papers flew everywhere, the kid spent five minutes crawling around on the floor picking them up

while Conroy went on with class. You idiot, I thought to Conroy, you don't know what you're messing with, you don't have a fucking clue.

Dal opened the physics book on the desk in front of him. "The answer you're looking for is on the second page of the chapter which was supposed to have been read for yesterday. Not the last page," Conroy said, pushing up his glasses with one of his stubby fingertips that were always stained and chewed up by the chemicals he worked with. "Not somewhere in the middle. The second page." He waited for Dal to find the page. "Let's try it again. The angle of incidence is equal to . . ."

There was an excruciating silence. Dal did not look up. No one moved a muscle, as if everyone in the room was as afraid as I was that Dal might jump out of his seat and ram the physics book straight down Conroy's throat. I wasn't sure if he was reading the page or not. Conroy's stare never wavered. I closed my eyes because I couldn't stand to watch, and heard Dal mutter, in a barely audible monotone, the words "angle of reflection."

"Thank you," Conroy said briskly, as if nothing had happened, and turned back to his diagram on the board. I looked back at Dal. "Fuck you," he mouthed silently and precisely to Conroy's back, and I thought I wouldn't want to turn my back on anyone who looked at me the way Dal looked at him.

I knew where Becca's locker was, and I managed to just happen to walk by at the end of the day and find her there putting her coat on. "Fancy meeting you here," she said.

"Amazing, isn't it." I felt awkward and tongue-tied for a moment; then I managed to say "I've got my car, do you want a ride home?"

"Sure."

We walked through the halls talking about the English book and the argument Toni had had with Mr. Kearns in class, but meanwhile I was asking myself who Becca really was, would I truly come to know her, would she let me get close to her, and each time I looked at her I wanted it to happen more. The whole thing made me incredibly jumpy, but it didn't seem to faze her at all; she sat in my old car and teased me about how bumpy it was as if there were nothing more familiar than riding home with me. It was like the way she had one day become part of our group almost before anyone knew what was happening, and now it seemed perhaps she had turned her attention to me.

I pulled up to the curb near her house. "Thanks, Andy," she said.

"Any time."

Becca was gathering up her books and papers, which had gotten mixed up with mine on the seat between us, and I pulled my courage together and said, "What are you doing tonight?" Then instantly I thought it was rude to ask that, even to hint that she might not have somewhere to go and someone to go with.

"I'm going to folk dancing, want to come?"

Ten thoughts shot through my mind – she wanted me to go with her, how wonderful, I dreaded folk dancing and had gone exactly once though it happened every Friday night at the high school, I was no good at learning steps, I'd make an idiot of myself in front of Becca and dozens of other people, it struck me as a disgustingly wholesome activity, I hated the kind of music they played – "Sure," I said.

Somehow Becca knew how to laugh at me in a way that made me better able to endure my own incompetence – or else I was already in love with her and that worked its magic. She so truly didn't care that I didn't know what I was doing that after a while I didn't either. She kept loyally trying to teach me the steps to dances she knew when she could have been doing them with other people who actually knew how. I stumbled through folk dancing somehow, all the way to the end; the last dance was a hora to "Hava Nagila," going round and round faster and faster until it was more a run than a dance.

It was good to come out into the air with coats open to the cold, after the exertion of dancing and the heat of the gym; inside, I had been holding Becca's hand as we raced in a circle, and as we came out it felt natural to take her hand again. All this was so unexpected that I almost seemed to have stepped into someone else's life. It seemed very quiet compared to the echoing gym; the voices of people saying goodnight dissipated in the air, the sounds of cars dwindled away down streets. "You want to just walk for a little bit?" I said.

"Sure."

All I wanted was an excuse to keep holding her hand that was warm in mine, to be with her and let that sink in, to get used to the gradual surmise that she wasn't going to take her hand or herself away. I had a feeling that Becca hardly ever did things she didn't want to. Maybe I was a far luckier person than I had dared to imagine just a day before. Or maybe I was getting ahead of myself as I always did,

assuming too much, hoping too much, charging toward a precipice under the illusion that I could fly.

We struck out across the field where Dal and the soccer team played in the afternoons; in the dark it seemed huge and slightly mysterious. As we got away from the high school and the streetlights, the stars became clearer in the night sky, tinier and colder. There seemed to be room in my awareness for only two things: Becca's hand in mine, and the night sky. I felt as though my feet barely existed; my body itself barely existed except for my hand in contact with hers. I looked at her; her head was slightly bowed, and she seemed lost in her own thoughts. She was wearing the same fuzzy white hat she had worn the day before; in the darkness it glowed and made the rest of her, in a dark blue wool coat, seem hidden by contrast.

"I used to play here a lot when I was a kid," Becca said. "We lived in a different place then, an apartment over that way" – she pointed more or less in the direction we were going – "this was the closest playground. My mom used to bring me here sometimes after school to run around. I remember how big the high school kids looked, I thought they were grownups."

"You mean we're not?"

She gave a little chuckle, and we walked on a few more yards in silence, diagonally across the soccer field; there were some trees on the other side, and then a street.

"The stars are pretty terrific from out here," I said, thinking how corny it was to bring that up, but true.

Becca looked up at the sky. "Did you ever think maybe you were the only person in the world?" she asked.

"Yes." But how could she possibly know that? "I did. I think I was in the sixth grade. What if everything around you was an illusion, and all that. Even other people."

"Who made the illusion?"

"Oh, I don't know, aliens or somebody. I must have read too much science fiction."

She didn't answer for a moment. I was trying to decide where we were going, and which of us was leading. "In my world there was just me. I used to wonder if I could change things by thinking hard enough about them – I mean, if I was imagining everything in the first place, then why couldn't I make it all different?"

"Why didn't I think of that?" I said.

"I spent a whole week trying to change the furniture in my room. I wanted a four-poster bed with curtains."

"So did it work?" I wondered what Becca's room looked like, if it was messy like Claire's, if it was frilly and sentimental.

"Only at night. In the morning it always looked the same as before."

"Ah."

"Then I tried to make my dad get rich, because I thought our apartment was too small."

"Wait, don't tell me, let me guess – a gentleman in a fur coat came to the door and handed him a check for a million dollars."

"Well, we did move to a house," Becca said.

"How about if you get to work on disarmament, then? Do you think you could get it done by the spring?"

She chuckled. "No problem, Andy."

We reached the far edge of the field. There were some benches there for players to sit on the sidelines; an abandoned sweatshirt was thrown over one of them. "Maybe anything can happen on Planet Becca," I said.

She didn't disagree; she let go of my hand and got up on one of the benches, ran along it and leapt over the gap to the next, her arms out to the sides and her coat flying. I thought of her playing here as a child, maybe exactly in this way.

"What made you decide you weren't the only person on earth?" Becca said over her shoulder.

"It was too lonely."

I got up on the bench; she turned and leapt back so she was facing me, coming toward me. "What about you?" I said.

"I fell in love with Peter Zimmerman in the seventh grade, and he wasn't interested in me at all. That was when I knew I wasn't really in charge."

We met in the middle of the bench, and I came up to her and laid my hands on the lapels of her wool coat, cautiously, as if the coat were an extension of her. I held the material between my fingers, keeping her close to me; she was not resisting, only looking at me with wide-open eyes that seemed to say "Well? What now?" My heart was beating hard and slowly, and I let go of her coat, put my hands on her cold cheeks, and kissed her; she kissed me back, calmly, without hesitation. It felt as though giving and receiving kisses was her natural state, as longing for them seemed to be mine. I slid one hand inside the warm tent of her coat, wrapped my arm around her without that thick wool in the way; she made a little contented sound in her throat. For a

second, as we kissed, I felt as though we might fall off; we both opened our eyes abruptly and got our balance.

I pulled back a little so I could look at her. "You fell in love with a boy and he wasn't interested? How is that possible?"

"I don't know," she said serenely.

CHAPTER SIX

I went home that night in a state of exaltation and amazement, filled with gratitude and desire and a hundred images of Becca; the first thing I did when I got in bed was to jerk off, trying to remember every kiss and the sensation of her breasts pressing against me when I held her, imagining myself taking off her clothes. Sperm shot me right in the eye when I came, hot and sticky. I wiped it off and turned on my side, arms around a pillow, and sank into thoughts of her. She was a different order of being from me; she could make something like this happen, where I would have been sure to screw up somehow, to do something incredibly awkward and uncool and dumb. A week ago – two days ago – I had been wondering if I was destined to be the lonely and horny confidant, forever tagging along, hearing about other people’s loves. The mascot, I called myself privately, when I felt sorry for myself. But forever had turned out to be a whole lot shorter than I feared.

There was one moment of consciousness, as I woke up, when I didn’t remember what had happened the night before; then it came flooding back, and I felt so happy I hardly dared to move. I curled myself around a pillow and lay there remembering the look she had given me just before she went in. Drawing me into a world of her making. I remembered her saying “We trust you” in Claire’s room but this look said something beyond that.

It was a gray and chilly day – which didn’t matter to me at all; all that mattered was that I was going to see her again that night. I might have spent the entire day simply waiting for that moment to come if Dal hadn’t called me up in the afternoon and asked me to come and work on the physics problems with him.

All the way to Dal's I was bursting with my news, wondering how to tell it, if I would manage to lead up to it somehow or just blurt it out. Overhead, the branches of trees were tangled and bold and black, drawing crazy squiggles, like out-of-control Chinese calligraphy, on the gray sky – it was the spaces between the bare branches that were really beautiful, I had found that out the previous winter. I wondered if Becca knew that, too. The branches were stark and sort of depressing if you looked at them by themselves, but if you looked at the shapes they made together then all of a sudden you saw fullness and roundness and something kind of lyrical. That was the type of thing you could only tell to carefully chosen people, because anyone else would look at you like you were nuts.

It was beginning to drizzle in a sleety sort of way, and I even liked that because it made me think of how warm and protected Becca and I would feel when I kissed her again – where would it happen? In my car, on her porch, at a movie? Luckily it wasn't too far to Dal's when the weather started to get bad.

Somehow I had managed not to think about the fact that I might see Dal's dad when I went into his house, and there he was, first thing, opening the door with a screwdriver in his hand. He appeared to have been fiddling with the lock. "How ya doin', Andy?" he said, as if this were no different from the other ten thousand times I'd been to their house. How could he look so normal? "I think Dal's upstairs. Or maybe in the kitchen. You guys working on something?"

"Physics."

"Have a ball," he said, and went down the basement stairs. His workshop was down there, along with a lot of other stuff Dal and I had played with over the years – a model train layout, now half torn up, a chemistry set, outgrown bikes. His dad had often been down there with us, with the radio on and a sawdusty Coke bottle beside him on the workbench, sawing and drilling wood, or muttering at some ancient appliance he was trying to bring back to life. For a moment I couldn't believe we'd actually seen him in that parking lot. But maybe now he was hanging around down there so he could hide and think about L. and not have to pretend that nothing was different.

Dal was sitting in the kitchen finishing something he was eating; his mother was there, too, leaning on the counter, reading a copy of *Time* magazine spread out there. The kitchen was wonderfully warm and fragrant, especially after being outdoors.

"Hey," Dal said with his mouth full.

"Hi, Andy," said his mom.

"What're you making?"

"Pies. They're almost done, but you are not going to eat them, either of you. I need to take one to the bake sale at the library, and the other is for dinner tonight."

"They smell incredible, what kind are they?"

"One apple and one cherry."

"There's ham," Dal said. "You could make a sandwich." I saw him glance at his mom for confirmation.

"Oh, forage away," she said, pushing back a strand of her blond hair and returning to her magazine. "I just bought two kinds of pickles, if anyone cares. You may even find potato chips, if you search hard enough."

"Thanks." Dal and I constantly ate at each other's houses, but I always had a feeling of needing permission from his mom.

I made a sandwich, Dal made another half for himself, the timer went off and Dal's mom took the pies out of the oven, we carried our sandwiches and books upstairs and resigned ourselves to doing physics. Dal's mom had a study upstairs which was where we always worked, a room where she read and paid the bills and kept various treasures, each of which had a story behind it; she was very organized, which may have had something to do with her being a librarian. She was part of the whole experience of the public library – the polished floors that smelled of wax, the round tables shared with strangers, the quiet broken mostly by the sound of the machine that baked your library card when you checked out a book so that it came back to you warm from its passage through officialdom. There in the middle of the second floor, the adult floor, would be Mrs. Carlton – among others – behind the desk, tall, efficient, looking like she probably knew everything but might not choose to tell. But there was one thing I was certain she didn't know.

We settled ourselves in our usual places for the long haul, side by side at the table where the gas and electric bills were filed in little metal holders, next to the blank envelopes and the brass box of stamps, the china dog that been there ever since I could remember, and a framed picture of Dal, age four, holding a baby I knew was Katie. It was practically impossible to get my mind on the first problem, which at first glance didn't seem like it should be too hard. You never knew, though; sometimes they tricked you and put one of the really nasty, sneaky ones first. But I kept thinking of how perfectly normal life seemed at the Carlton house, how picture perfect, and how it wasn't but nothing showed. Yet. If the truth came out . . . but it seemed as

though there was too much past here for that, too many family objects, too many armchairs and slipcovers and rugs holding down by sheer weight what was under the surface. I had the feeling that if it ever did erupt, the force it would take to break through might blow the top off the house.

And as if that wasn't enough, there was Becca. A humming, tingling sensation inside me, the need to tell. I leaned over and closed the door.

"You got a protractor?" Dal said.

"What for?"

"Well, can't we just draw a diagram of this thing and figure it out that way?"

"I guess, but d'ya think he'll take it?"

"What does he want? Trig?"

"Probably."

"Let's just get the answer," Dal said. I handed him my protractor and he took a piece of graph paper and began diagramming the problem. It was a situation involving reflection off a series of mirrors; he was drawing it to scale, working carefully and minutely. I remembered when we had done mechanical drawing in shop, he had been the best one at it in the whole class. And spent forever doing it.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Wait – before you do all this – look, all these angles have to be equal, right?"

"All which?"

"Here and here and here," I said, pointing to the rough sketch he'd already made. "So see, it's just logic, it's gotta work. They're practically giving us the answer."

"What? You're kidding."

"No."

"Oh come on, it can't be that easy."

"Yes it is, that's why it's problem one."

Dal looked dubiously at his sketch. "Do that again," he said.

I explained my line of reasoning again; it was easier to do the problem than it was to convince Dal that it could be solved painlessly. In his opinion, the authors of the physics book saw it as their job to lead us down blind alleys of fruitless reasoning, to saddle us with insoluble equations, and in general to ruin our weekends, but he finally had to admit that for once they had slipped. Besides, it was only the first problem, and there were fourteen more.

We divided up the problems and began each working on our own batch; according to us, this wasn't cheating, because once one of

us figured out a problem, the other couldn't use the solution until he really understood it. We spent a lot of time explaining answers to each other – if we even got them, working alone. I always felt smarter when I was talking with Dal – I had better ideas than at other times, I was more ingenious, I surprised myself. But I didn't surprise him; and I think it was Dal's believing I was that smart that made me smarter in the first place.

I got distracted thinking of his mother baking those pies, rolling out dough, making the house smell so delicious – a special treat for her family – it reminded me of the recurring scene in the Roadrunner cartoons where the coyote runs right off a cliff after the roadrunner, zooming along on thin air just as if he had solid ground under his feet, until all of a sudden, every time, he looks down, his eyes bug out, and he drops to a resounding crash on the desert floor a hundred feet below. Only Dal's mom was out there along with the stove, and the kitchen, and the whole house, and Katie who hadn't looked down yet either, and if his mom looked and it all went, it was going to be one hell of a crash and I had a feeling they weren't all going to peel themselves magically up off the ground and continue as before.

"Are you working or what?" Dal said, glancing up from a piece of paper he was covering with sketches of light rays passing through lenses.

"I'm thinking about your family."

"Don't," he said. "It's not good for you. I've figured that out."

"But how can you not?"

He thought for a second. "Head fake right and move to your left."

"What?"

"Overrun the ball, kick it sideways with your back foot, spin and pick it up two steps to the left. It almost always works if you're quick enough."

I inspected his face closely and he gave me what I thought of as his Indian look, a reserved and watchful gaze with something in it coiled and ready to move in any direction. Dal looked like that in the outfield, just before the batter made contact. Then one eyebrow flickered slightly as if he were suppressing a faint laugh.

"Right," I said slowly, not knowing what else to say. Dal went back to his problem, and I bent over mine again. He had always had certain mysterious talents that he couldn't explain, and now I guessed that I wasn't through discovering them.

We kept on working through the gray afternoon, as the weather got worse outside, the clouds thicker, and then I looked up and noticed it was nearly dark. Afternoon would become evening, and then the time would come when I could see Becca again. I had been deep into physics and thinking about her again made my heart race. I closed my eyes for a moment to see her better, and sighed.

"Hang in there, we're almost done," Dal said.

"I know."

"Look, it doesn't matter how big it is exactly, the question is what angle it subtends."

"From where?"

"What do you mean, from where? Are you paying any attention? This is it, let's just finish, for God's sake."

"I'm sorry, tell me that again."

"What is wrong with you?"

I threw back my head, took a deep breath while examining the ceiling, and looked over at Dal. "I went to folk dancing with Becca Shulman last night."

"Folk dancing? You told me that gave you hives."

"It was her idea."

"Yeah?" He must know what's coming, I thought, but still my heart was racing.

"Afterwards we went out to the practice field, and I must have kissed her for half an hour."

"Ooo," he said, with a rising and falling intonation and a slow nod of the head. "The Becca we ran into in the hall, right?"

"Yeah." It was amazing to me to think of him not even being sure who I meant, when for me she was unique in the world.

"Ve-rry nice. You hotshot," he said, hitting me on the upper arm with his fist, but not hard. "How'd you manage that?"

"I was over at Claire's, day before yesterday, with her and Toni and Becca, the way it always is, and – I don't know. I'm not sure what happened."

"What do you mean, you're not sure?"

"Well, it's like, it's peculiar – you'd know how it is if you ever hung around with that group – "

"Hey, it's you they're all hot for, not me."

"Yeah, right. Toni and Claire haven't even figured out that I'm a guy."

"Oh yeah? Even after Claire went out with you? You must have been a real loser on a date."

"Thanks a bunch," I said, hitting him back.

"Hey, I didn't hit you that hard."

"Tough. Anyway, the point is, I've been their mascot for at least a year, and then Becca came along and – she just noticed me, I guess. She did it. We were leaving Claire's, walking down the sidewalk, and all of a sudden . . . "

"What?"

"She kissed me."

"*She* kissed *you*? Just boom, like that?"

"No shit."

"That sure doesn't happen every day," Dal said.

"Not to me it doesn't. It would to you, except so many girls have a crush on you they have to stand in line."

"Come on, Ace, I wasn't out there making out with somebody for half an hour last night."

"I don't think I'd call it making *out* – "

"Yeah?" Dal said, looking amused. He leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. "Becca," he said to himself. "She looked pretty cute in the hall the other day. You dog, it's about time you got lucky."

"You're not kidding."

Physics was forgotten; I was lost in contemplation of how lucky I really was.

"So you like her," Dal said quietly, looking up at a picture on the wall. It wasn't a question; he didn't need to ask.

"God, do I."

"Andy."

"Yeah?"

"Don't fall in love with her right away, okay? Give it a couple of days."

"Okay," I said, but I had a feeling it was already too late for that.

We went back to the problem, something about a parabolic mirror and a real image of the Washington Monument, but Dal had to do most of the actual thinking. Now that I had said out loud what was going on between Becca and me, it was impossible to get her image out of my mind, and that didn't leave much room for the monument. By the time we were done it was completely dark out, and the study felt a little too snug – too many family pictures, too many mementoes – how would Dal's mom feel coming in here if she knew?

"I dare Conroy to give us any shit about this," Dal said.

"I thought you were going to strangle the guy yesterday."

"Justifiable homicide."

We both got up, stretched and yawned; I picked up my books.

"I guess I should get going."

"Wanna eat here? Or do you have to go home and call up Becca?"

"I'm going out with her tonight."

"You *are* a dog," Dal said, giving me a look which seemed to reappraise the situation. "So what time are you going out?"

"Around eight."

"Stick around. I'll ask my mom if it's okay."

"All right." It finally hit me that I'd be doing Dal a favor, putting some kind of buffer between him and his parents, helping him get through dinner. And of course he wouldn't want to say that out loud.

We traipsed downstairs and through the kitchen – his mother said it was fine if I ate with them and had she tempted me with the pies – and into Dal's room. It was a little room, but jammed with things that were pure Dal – sports equipment, pictures of airplanes – he wanted to be a pilot someday. We had a lot of the same books, though you wouldn't catch Dal reading *Notes from Underground*. One wall was half taken up by a poster of Bob Gibson in the act of delivering one of his unhittable pitches. He still had the same dinky kid-size desk his parents had gotten him in the seventh grade, which was why we didn't work on physics in his room, and on it sat the same radio he'd had then too. I flipped it on.

"So what's she like?" Dal said, flopping down on his bed. He threw some dirty clothes that were already there in the direction of his closet.

That was not an easy question. "She's really smart, she likes soul music, she . . ." Dal had told me not to fall in love with her right away, but everything I could come up with sounded like I had. She gives me this look that I can't explain which seems to change everything. I couldn't tell him that. "She dances a hell of a lot better than I do. She takes AP English. I think she's gonna be Kearns's pet student."

"Why?"

"She has him completely figured out. Also she likes the stuff."

"Think she'd like to write a few English papers for me?"

Writing was not Dal's favorite activity.

"Oh, sure."

Dal smiled to himself, hands behind head, looking up at the ceiling. I was straddling his desk chair, leaning on its back. "Now tell me what she's really like," he said.

I thought I knew, I thought I could feel what she was really like when we were together, but I couldn't come up with any words for it, so I said "I don't know how," and then I thought that maybe I really didn't know at all. That was a scary proposition. I knew Dal's advice was good, but that didn't necessarily mean I could take it. Anything could still happen, she could change her mind, it could have been a whim . . . I couldn't bear to think things like that. "Maybe you'll just have to get to know her," I said.

"I'll have to get to know somebody," Dal muttered. He hadn't had a serious girlfriend since the previous spring, and he wasn't very interested in any other kind.

"That shouldn't be too difficult. Anyway, what about Denise?" Denise Crevello was the kind of girl that even other girls would turn around to look at, and Dal had gone out with her, but he hadn't had much to say about it.

"Maybe," he said, in a dubious way.

"Maybe? Your standards are too high. What the hell do you want?" But I thought I knew.

"That is a damn good question," Dal said.

"Well, while you figure it out, why don't you just settle for Denise? About a million other guys would."

"Listen – you want to know something? Denise Crevello is incredibly good-looking, but she talks too much and it isn't very interesting. She wouldn't even stop talking during the movie, she kept whispering all these supposedly cute remarks to me about what was happening."

Only Dal, I thought. I could picture the whole scene: there was Denise, who could have half the guys at school eating out of her hand, trying to impress Dal, and the more she tried, the more he wasn't impressed, and the more he wasn't impressed, the more she tried. She'd probably never been in that situation before.

"Jesus, Dal, if she's that interested in you, maybe you could just live with these little imperfections."

"I know, I know, it's ridiculous. Maybe I will, who knows." He kept his eyes on the ceiling, not meeting mine, and lapsed into a discontented silence. I was trying to imagine how any guy in his right mind could possibly ignore Denise Crevello if she acted willing. The radio was playing "You've Really Got a Hold on Me." In the kitchen I

could hear his mother clanging around with pots and pans and telling Katie to set the table. Great, I thought, the real fun's about to begin, and in a moment Dal's mom knocked on the door and called us to dinner. Dal and I traded a look which said enough without words as we got up to go in.

Dal's family always ate at a round table in the kitchen that was meant for four people, but they were used to making room to squeeze me in. I had a regular place at the table, next to Dal, with Dal's dad on my left and Katie and his mom sort of across from me. When we sat down I thought maybe the whole point of my being there was for Dal to put something between himself and his dad.

"So how'd the physics go?" Mr. Carlton said, putting green beans on his plate.

"Enh," Dal said, without looking up.

I felt as though a gap ought to be filled. "It bites, but we did it."

"It bites, did you say?" said Dal's mom. "What exactly does it bite?" She was a stickler for the language.

Katie giggled. "Yeah, what *does* it bite, Andy?" she said, and I sat there thinking "it bites the big one" and how if I said that I'd really be in for it.

"It's just an expression, I don't think it means a whole lot," I said.

"Pass the potatoes?" said Dal's dad; his mother handed the dish to Dal, who handed it on to me without looking at me or his father.

"Don't you want some? I thought you liked them this way," Mr. Carlton said. I took a potato, but Dal didn't reply, so I passed the dish along. There was a silence while we all ate, sounds of knives and forks on dishes. Roast chicken. Dal's mom cooked a lot like mine – kind of plain, but lots of it.

"Kate, would you mind not leaning your entire weight on the table?" Mrs. Carlton said. Katie straightened up, with a saucy look at the ceiling that no one but me noticed. I began to feel that the lack of talk was getting oppressive.

"So, Dal," his dad said in what I thought was a transparent effort at a light and chummy manner, "what are your plans for this evening?"

"Dunno."

"Are you going out?"

"Probably." His dad gave a look that seemed to mean you couldn't expect conversation from teenagers, so why try?

"Mom, can you give me a ride to Lynette's house tonight?" Katie said.

"Lynette," Mrs. Carlton said in a hesitating way, as if trying to place the name.

"Lynette Miller, *you* know, Mom, the girl I met at tap class? She's having some kids over tonight, she doesn't live far from here, not really far, do you think you could give me a ride?"

"Some kids? Are they kids you know?"

"Mostly, I guess," Katie said, in an uncomfortable way. She reminded me of Dal – no good at lying.

"What grade are these kids in?" Mr. Carlton said.

"I don't know, they're in high school," Katie said. "What difference does it make?"

"I don't think you should go to a party with a bunch of twelfth-graders," he said.

"But Dad, that's not what they are."

"I thought you just said you didn't know."

Mrs. Carlton said, "Let's talk about it after dinner, Katie, all right?"

"It's not fair," Katie said, "Dal gets to do whatever he wants."

Mr. Carlton held up his left hand so he could tick things off on his spread fingers. "Dal is seventeen years old," index finger – "*I know* that," Katie muttered through her teeth, looking at her plate – "he always tells us where he's going," middle finger, "he has a specific time when he has to be home," ring finger. "There are rules for Dal too, Kate."

Katie said nothing; darkly, she stabbed a piece of chicken with her fork.

"We'll talk about it later, sweetie," Mrs. Carlton said, and I thought I saw her send her husband a meaningful glance. "I'm sure we can work something out."

I could feel Dal hunched over his plate next to me, trying to focus his attention entirely on his food, but I knew it wasn't working. Another silence settled over the table. Dal got up and got the milk and poured himself some more. The roast chicken seemed dry to me and I kept cutting it into smaller pieces. I couldn't believe his dad had the balls to sit there and talk about rules. Especially a rule about having to tell where you're going when you go out.

Dal's mom took a deliberate breath in a sort of teacherly way, as if saying to herself, Now let's just try this again. "You two spent a long

time on those problems, are they getting harder?" she said to me and Dal.

"Yeah," Dal said.

I waited for him to go on until I realized he wouldn't, and then I wished I'd spoken before it became obvious. "We're doing this chapter on optics, it's just kind of confusing. They're always putting in something tricky you don't see at first and then you have to go back and do the whole thing over again."

"Maybe what's tricky is physics," Dal's dad said, which irritated me. I wanted to ask him how long it had been since he tried to do one of these problem sets, but of course I couldn't.

"Maybe." I could feel Dal next to me, wound up too tight and holding himself in.

"We had a Botany professor at college who was always trying to trick us," Dal's mom said. "Eventually we learned that when he asked questions, whatever he seemed to be hinting at was invariably wrong. I'm not sure it was such an excellent teaching technique; it made us all horribly suspicious."

"Conroy just jumps on whoever doesn't know the stuff and really grinds it in," I said; I was beginning to feel it was my job to keep a conversation going – it didn't look like Dal's family could. "He loves to embarrass people – you know what he did the other day? He was giving back quizzes and he comes to one without a name on it and says 'Unidentified' and then he turns around and kind of slams it up on this hook that's above the blackboard, so the hook tears through the paper and it's hanging there with a big red '67' written at the top all through the class. Everyone knows 67 is a lousy grade, and everyone knows it's Carrie Belinsky's, because she's sitting there turning red, and at the end of class she has to go and take it down. She wasn't even tall enough to reach it, she had to get somebody to help her."

"He's a bastard," Dal growled.

"Dal," his father said in an admonitory tone.

Dal looked directly at him for the first time since dinner had started, and I could only bear to glance once at the expression on Dal's face. "What?"

The pause was just one moment too long, as he and his father stared at each other. "Not in front of your sister."

The silence returned; I speared a piece of chicken I didn't really want off my plate and ate it. When I looked up at Dal's mom, she was studying Dal with worry in her eye; he was eating salad, looking at nobody.

"May I be excused?" Katie said.

"Have you had any salad?" said Mrs. Carlton.

"Oh, Mom."

"Three bites."

"*Salad* bites," Katie said, and I thought a smile crossed Mrs. Carlton's face for an instant. She served Katie a tiny helping of salad, and Katie gobbled it and said, "*Now* may I be excused?"

"Me too," said Dal.

"Wait a minute, don't you want some pie?" his mom said, giving both of them a slightly hurt look. Dal saw it, I was sure, or felt it without looking. "I'll have it a little later, okay Mum?" he said, getting up. "I'm kind of full."

"Andy? Pie?"

"Oh – thanks, I'd really like to, but I've gotta go," I said lamely. I couldn't sit there with them if Dal was going to leave the table. I saw his mom's lips compress slightly in her look that meant I'd offended her and she was trying to hide it. She turned to Katie, who was getting up too, and said, "It's cherry, it's your favorite."

"Oh – well, all right," Katie said, sitting down again, and I silently thanked her for that. Dal and I went into his room and closed the door and I began gathering up my books. He sat on the side of the bed, elbows on his knees, looking at the floor. The radio was still on. "Get the picture?" he muttered in an undertone his parents wouldn't hear.

"Yes." I was going through our papers, separating Dal's from mine. "When did it get like this?" I hadn't eaten dinner at their house since Dal found the note.

"It's been getting worse," he said.

"Maybe you can eat over at my house tomorrow."

"Good plan."

"Well – see ya."

"Okay."

I was just about to go out the door, feeling bad about leaving Dal there to stew alone, when he said, "Hey, Andy? At least don't tell Becca you're in love with her. I mean it."

I could feel myself turning red. "Okay, okay." He knew me too well. I stumbled through the kitchen in a state of awkwardness and embarrassment, mumbling a goodnight to Dal's family; only after I got to the front hall and was putting my coat on did I register that I had caught his parents and Katie in the middle of an uncomfortable

moment, with Katie on the verge of tears. “But it’s not *fair*,” I heard her wail, just as I closed the door behind me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It had stopped raining while we were eating dinner, and now a few stars were beginning to show through in the night sky. The cold air felt good; it took away the taste of where I had just been. For the first time, I was glad to get away from Dal's house, and I could understand why Katie seemed so desperate to go out. Though with her it was probably just that some boy she had a crush on was going to be at the party.

I felt bad for Dal's mom and her efforts at a pleasant family dinner; she hadn't had a prayer. And if it went more or less like this night after night, she had to know that something was wrong – didn't she? But probably she thought it was something the matter with Dal. That was the way it would have to look if you didn't know the secret.

How the hell did his dad hide it, just sit there, act like Big Dad, tell Dal and Katie what the rules were? He had a fucking nerve, I thought.

At home I spent a few nervous minutes trying to figure out what to wear, and combing my hair, until I couldn't stand it anymore; my body felt like a house with a bird inside it flying crazily around crashing into the windows. What if she changed her mind? I'm sorry, Andy, I don't know what came over me, I woke up this morning and I felt kind of funny about last night, I really like you as a friend but I guess I don't see you, you know, like that . . . don't think that way, I ordered myself, but already I was picturing myself wandering off into the night feeling about six inches tall. I threw my coat on, said goodnight to my parents who were actually talking about going to a movie for once, made sure I knew which one it was so Becca and I wouldn't run into them there, and ran out of the house. I had nerve-racking visions of my car refusing to start, but the old Ford came

through as usual and I got to Becca's a couple of minutes before I had said I would. Then I thought maybe I should wait until the exact moment came before I rang the bell, but I couldn't bear to sit still. I bounded up onto the porch and jabbed the doorbell, hoping some scary parent wouldn't answer the door.

There was barking from inside the house and a male voice said, "Dobie! Be quiet!" Then there were footsteps, and the door was snatched open, and her father said "Hi." He had curly hair, kind of a lot of it, and he was wearing a turtleneck sweater that had a hole in it. A large sheepdog was right behind him, panting at me.

"Hi, I'm Andy Brecker."

"Have you come to collect Becca?" he said, with a look that suggested this was a kind of joke, though on whom I couldn't tell. I felt even more awkward. "Go 'way, Dobie, go lie down."

"I guess you could put it that way," I said.

He said "Come on in," and I followed him into his living room because I wasn't sure what else to do. "Becca'll be ready in a second – or several seconds – one never knows." The living room was big, with heavy, dark woodwork; a low divider with square columns separated it from the hallway. It was kind of shabby and very lived-in-looking; there was a couch in a bay window that looked as though its springs had given up long ago, a big library table covered with books and magazines and newspapers in messy piles, a desk with a bright desk lamp on it and a swivel chair, a fireplace without a fire, flanked by bookcases. On one wall was a large painting that I couldn't figure out except that it wasn't hung quite straight. But the main thing I noticed was the music that was playing from an old console hi-fi in the corner. It was jazz – saxophone, very high and very fast – someone I'd never heard before. It sure wasn't Louis Armstrong. "Have a seat," Mr. Shulman said, flinging himself down in his desk chair and leaning back with a creak. I perched myself on the edge of a big peeling leather armchair. "If you don't mind my asking," I said, "what is this record?"

"This? It's Charlie Parker. It's, um – 'Yardbird Suite.' I think. I can never keep the titles straight. You know jazz at all?" he said, in a tone that suggested he didn't expect a yes.

"Yeah – I listen to Miles and John Coltrane a lot."

"Well well," he said, with a what-have-we-here look on his face.

"Hey Beck!" he yelled.

"What?" she called faintly, from upstairs.

"It's about time you brought home a jazz fan!"

I heard her laugh, which made me smile involuntarily, and she called "Is that Andy?"

"No, it's the Vice President!"

I heard a door open. "What?" Becca said from above, more distinctly.

"It's Andy," her father said, with a mischievous look on his face.

"Tell him I'll be right there." The door closed again.

"Her Majesty will descend any hour now," Mr. Shulman said. "You ever heard Bird before? I mean, Charlie Parker?"

"No. It's really kind of – " I got stuck, at a loss for words.

"Yeah," he said, nodding, when I didn't go on, as if I'd said something. Was he making fun of me?

"Becca told me you listened to Louis Armstrong."

"Well – sometimes. It depends what mood I'm in. So you like Miles Davis, huh? And Coltrane?"

"Yeah, do you?"

"My copy of 'Kind of Blue' is worn flat."

"How about 'Standard Coltrane'?" I said, barely believing my ears. Was there really such a father as this?

"Oh, you like that ballad stuff, huh? Do you know 'Soultrane'?"

"No."

"Pick it up, you'll like it."

Becca came down the stairs at a run, her dark hair free of its barrette and floating around her shoulders, and the look she sent me as she came into the living room made me feel like I must have become a different person from the Andy I had seen in the mirror back home. "Daddy, are you boring him with your music?"

"Boring him? This is the first guy you've gone out with who has the taste to know something about it. Have you ever heard 'Miles Ahead,' the Miles and Gil Evans record?" he said to me.

"Bill Evans?"

"No, Gil, he's a composer, it's – "

"Dad," Becca said.

"I could play it for you sometime."

"Sounds great," I said vaguely, not sure if he really meant it.

"Yeah, but not right now," said Becca. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, sweetheart," her father said, putting his feet up on a pulled-out drawer of his desk and reaching for a book. "Bundle up, it's supposed to get cold out there."

Becca made a "tsk" sound with her tongue and looked up at the ceiling momentarily. "He used to make me wear my gloves on a string

through the sleeves of my coat," she said to me as we went out into the hall. "I mean, in the tenth grade, can you believe that?"

"So this year you've lost how many pairs?" Mr. Shulman said over his shoulder.

"Eight hundred, Daddy," Becca said sweetly, putting her coat on. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight. Be back by twelve!"

She closed the door behind us and heaved a little sigh of satisfaction at being out of the house. It seemed very peaceful on the front porch. "Hi," she said to me, in the quiet.

"Hi." We started down the steps and she took my hand in a perfectly natural way.

"So which movie do you want to go to?"

All through the movie I was distracted by having Becca beside me, holding her hand, having my arm around her at times, trying to interpret every movement she made, every readjustment of her position, wondering if it meant something like maybe I should take my arm away. But I found out all that guesswork wasn't necessary when she took it away for me; I was about to feel hurt and worried, but she held my hand and whispered "It was giving me a stiff neck" and went back to watching the movie. How could she be so calm?

Afterwards we went to Howard Johnson's and sat in a booth for a long time, eating french fries and drinking orange freezes. I told her about how sometimes I came there late at night by myself and tried to write poems on the back of placemats.

"Really? Can I read some of them?"

It made me self-conscious just to think of. "Most of them are no good."

"Oh, I bet. I'll let you read some of mine, they're really terrible. We'll trade, what do you say?"

"Okay," I said, trying to think what I could stand to have her read.

"Did you write Claire love poems when you went out with her?"

What might Claire have said about me? I could feel myself getting red. It hadn't occurred to me to worry that Claire knew all sorts of embarrassing things about me. "No – well, I tried to – but she broke up with me before I ever got one finished. Has she been telling you things about me?" I was sure she had some juicy stories about my

inexperience, my inexcusable naivete, that she could have told Becca any time in the past couple of months.

"A little. She likes you a lot," Becca said.

"She had a funny way of showing it."

She made that "tsk" sound again. "Personally, I'm glad she broke up with you," she said, straightening the dishes in front of her as if for the first time she felt shy.

"So am I, now." Watch out, I thought, be careful, don't make a fool of yourself.

We were both quiet for a moment, not looking at each other. My orange freeze was gone; I drank some water.

"It was good you stayed friends afterwards," Becca said. "Most people don't."

"It's not so easy."

"I know," she said, and I wondered what ex-boyfriends she had who were or were not her friends. They should all stay a million miles away from her. "It's hard when you split up with somebody and they don't want to," Becca said, "and you have to hurt their feelings so much. It's horrible. No one ever wants to do that. But of course the other person never sees it that way." She combed her hair back with her fingers and drank the last of her orange freeze, looked up at me with serious eyes.

"Did that happen to you?" I said, because it was so clear that it must have.

She nodded. "I went out with this boy Jeff Solomon all last year, do you know him?"

"No, I don't think so." I remembered the name but I couldn't attach a face to it; now I felt I had to find out who he was. Was she still close to him somehow?

"He was a senior last year. We broke up last spring."

So she'd been going out with someone older – that instantly made me wonder if I could compete. "Did you decide to break up, or did he?"

"I did. We used to be – pretty serious, but then I started feeling like it wasn't right for me, and I couldn't lie to myself about it. I couldn't explain it, but I knew it was true. I didn't feel like me anymore when I was with him, and after a while I just couldn't. I think he hates me now."

I sat for a moment thinking how I'd feel if I thought there was someone somewhere every day, every minute, hating me. It was impossible for me to imagine hating Becca no matter what might

happen. "But what could you do?" I said, glad that she'd broken up with him, that she'd discovered he was wrong for her. If he really did hate her, didn't that only prove she was right?

"I know," she said. "I tried to tell him over and over how it felt, but he kept wanting to know why, and I never knew what to say to him. There wasn't a why. I just knew it was the truth. I think he thought I did it on purpose to hurt him, that's what bothers me about it the most. But that was never what I wanted to do."

She almost seemed to be pleading her case for someone's judgment – could it be she wanted mine? "Well, you had to do it, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Maybe hanging around with Claire and still being friends meant I was a wimp, and if I had any balls I'd have done it Jeff Solomon's way.

"This is pretty cheery, isn't it?" Becca said.

"Yeah. Want to go?"

"Sure."

On the way home Becca sat with her shoulder against mine as I drove, and I held her hand when I wasn't shifting gears. The conversation had made me feel a little scared of whether I could live up to her. She must have had a lot of boyfriends, I thought, but I didn't want to know about it. After a while the sensation of her next to me like that, and seeming content to be there, blanked out all my thoughts in the pure expectation of kissing her again.

We pulled up in front of her house; I snuck a glance at my watch – it was nearly twelve. Why hadn't I gotten here sooner? I turned off the lights and the engine, and in the quiet we sat for a moment saying nothing. I felt shy for a second, as if I hadn't just been kissing her the day before. Becca was a little slumped down in the seat of the car, her knees almost touching the dashboard and raised up high by the transmission hump that her feet were on, and she let her head fall back onto the mouse-colored upholstery, closed her eyes for a moment, then rolled her head toward me and looked at me with a quietly teasing look; it made something fizz and sparkle inside me. I put my arm around her and kissed her, and she put up her hand and touched the back of my neck, inside my coat collar. I wanted to turn toward her more, but the steering wheel was in the way and my feet were tangled up with the pedals. We kept kissing, and I was very aware of my hand at her waist, wanting to slide that hand inside her

coat and touch her breasts but sure that this was too public a place for that and anyway, would she let me? The more we kissed, the more I wanted her; my penis was hard as it could be and I could feel it straining against my pants, trying to get out, though it was unthinkable that that should actually happen.

After a while we stopped kissing and held each other; I got my feet untangled and managed to turn so we were more face to face and I could really hold her to me. I wanted her body next to mine more than anything on earth. It was getting cold in the car but I barely noticed it; over her shoulder, when I opened my eyes, I could see the front porch of her house with the porch light on, and I dreaded the moment when she'd have to go in.

"Becca," I whispered.

"Yes."

I remembered Dal's advice, I knew he was right, but I had to say something or I felt as if I would burst. "Becca, I'm –"

She laid a finger on my lips, this time without a glove, and I was silent, my eyes closed, feeling her touch. Then there were two fingers on my lips, and then her hand moved off to the side and touched my cheek, and I kissed her.

"What time is it?" she said. My heart sank.

"Ten after twelve."

"Oh, damn," she said. "I've got to get inside, my parents go nuts if I'm out too late." Let them tough it out, I thought, kissing her again, but Becca pulled back. "I have to, Andy," she said. "I don't want to, you know that, don't you?"

"I can't let you go," I said, and then thought how dumb and melodramatic that sounded.

"No?" she said, her hand on my cheek. For a moment I was swallowed up in the look she was giving me. "Well then, be quiet and come with me."

"What are you going to do?"

"Shh," she said, severely, and pulled herself away from me and opened her door. I got out too, and together we went up the front walk and tiptoed up the front steps and across the porch. Becca took out her key and quietly opened the door of her house; inside, it was dim and silent. She stepped in and motioned me in after her; I was almost holding my breath. She signed for me to stay where I was and closed the door, a little louder than necessary, I thought.

"Beck? Is that you?" a voice said from upstairs. It had to be her mother's.

"No, Mom, it's Einstein."

"Did you have a nice evening?"

"Fine."

"Well, don't forget to turn the lights off."

"Mom? I want to listen to some records, do you mind?"

"Not too loud, sweetie. Goodnight."

"Goodnight." I could hear a door close upstairs. I hadn't moved an inch; now Becca crooked her finger at me and then put it to her lips, and as silently as possible I followed her into the living room. The only light came from the desk lamp in the corner. Becca dropped her coat on a chair and pointed to the couch, and I took off my coat and sat down on it, sinking into it so that I wondered if I'd be able to get up; Becca went through a stack of records that were on the floor next to the hi-fi until she found one and put it on. It was the same Shirelles record we'd been listening to over at Claire's. She sat down next to me and in a moment we were kissing again, but she whispered "Wait a minute."

"For what?"

She turned herself so she was kneeling next to me on the couch, facing me, so that when I held her we were body to body, her breasts pressing against me softly. We kissed, and the more we kissed, the more she was half-lying in my arms; I caressed her back and her side through the silky material of her blouse, and then I was unable not to touch her breast, afraid that she'd stop me and maybe be offended, but she didn't try to prevent me. We went on kissing, and my hand travelled over her, cautiously, down her back, touching her ribs, feeling the soft swell of her breast through the crinkly material of her bra; I lingered there as long as I dared, letting that touch become real. She turned herself slightly under my hand so that I could caress both of her breasts, and when I understood that she was doing it on purpose my heart beat even harder than it had been. Maybe anything was possible, maybe everything was possible – but then, what about her parents upstairs, what if one of them should come down for some reason, there wasn't even a door between the living room and the bottom of the stairs . . . the record ended, and the house was silent except for our breathing. I heard nothing from upstairs. Was she going to put another record on? There was a thump from somewhere, and I looked up, expecting to hear footsteps at any moment. "That's Dobie," Becca whispered. "It's all right."

We sank back into an embrace; I kept caressing her and the more I did, the more I wanted her. It felt as though she wanted me just as much, and finally I gave in to my wildest hopes and began to

unbutton the top button of her blouse, filled with desire and apprehension. Before I could undo the second button, she put her hand over mine and gently moved my fingers away. "Not now," she whispered.

Frustration rose up inside me at being thwarted but at the same time her touch and what she had said took it away. She kissed me tenderly. Not now. Meaning someday yes? Then she lay down so that her head was on my lap, and I sat gazing at her, falling into her look when she opened her eyes to meet mine, caressing her hair and her face, my other hand covering her breast that pressed gently up against my palm every time she breathed. It seemed to me she was letting me see her in her natural state. I felt as though I could stay there all night, exactly like that, and I knew that I had fallen in love with her despite Dal's advice or even my own, and what I wanted most of all was to say the words to her but I didn't dare. Except for that, there was no need to speak, no rush in any direction, even the throbbing desire in my hard penis felt like something that could just continue without changing, caught up like everything else in this trance that we had created.

We had been there for an unknown time when she took my hand that was on her breast and brought it to her mouth and put a kiss in my palm and whispered, "What time is it?"

I looked at my watch. "One-thirty."

"I'd better go upstairs before someone wakes up and wonders if I'm still down here."

"All right."

Reluctantly, we got ourselves up off the couch; my body objected to having to give up touching her. I put my coat on and we tiptoed to the door as quietly as we could; I held her again, kissed her one more time while her arms went around me inside my coat. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her that I loved her.

"When can I see you again?" I whispered.

"Soon," she said. "I'll see you at Claire's, won't I?"

"I mean like this."

"I know what you mean," she said, with a mischievous look, and gave me a kiss that said she meant it, too. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Becca opened the door carefully, inch by inch, just wide enough for me to slip out. Then the porch light clicked off, and I was going down the steps, trying to be quiet, suppressing the desire to sing, to yell, to climb on the porch railing and jump over the bushes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sunday night Dal ate dinner at my house, as we had planned, and told me his dad had been out all afternoon. Ostensibly he had gone off with a friend to play handball at a gym somewhere, but who could say? Good excuse for another kind of exercise, I thought.

Dal looked a lot more comfortable at our house than at his own. When my dad asked him about school, he told the story about how Conroy put the screws to him when he hadn't done his homework, though I had to be the one to point out that Conroy was lucky to escape with his life. After that, he and my dad got off on a discussion of how Dal's Babe Ruth team had done the summer before. Talking to Dal seemed to wake my dad up. My dad knew things about baseball like what the infield fly rule was, stuff Dal would know that I never bothered to understand, and of course my mother didn't care about baseball at all. But she paid attention because of Dal. He should move in, I thought a little jealously. Maybe while I was busy being bored with my parents, they were bored with me too.

We were in my room after dinner and Dal said, "Let's go for a drive tonight, what do you say?"

"Tonight? I don't know, I'm kind of tired and I've still gotta copy this English paper over."

"Well, get it done and go to bed, okay? Come on, Andy, I'm goin' nuts over there, I have to get out. I need to talk to you."

It wasn't often that either Dal or I had to make a direct appeal to our friendship, and once made, it couldn't be refused. "Okay," I said, thinking what the hell, I'll sleep tomorrow night.

One of the tricky parts of these nights was that of course I couldn't set my alarm to wake me up at one-thirty in the morning; I

was torn between wanting to fall asleep and thinking I should stay awake to make sure I didn't let Dal down. The trick was to go to sleep but trust myself to wake up – doubt was not allowed, doubt would cause failure to come through as promised, but thinking about that could cause doubt . . . still, once I was in bed with the light off, the pull of sleep was irresistible; I had no choice but to rely on some underground part of myself, and it didn't betray me: when I awoke it was twenty of two.

I dressed in the dark as quickly and silently as I could, skipped the stair which I knew would creak on the way down, remembered to hold the storm door so it wouldn't make a noise when it closed. I felt something cold and wet on my face and realized it was beginning to snow. There was nothing visible on the ground yet, but big flakes were spinning down out of a sky which looked not black but a faintly lit-up gray, the night sky of snow-light that meant this was no fluke. Even as I walked to my car I could begin to see a faint dusting of snow lightening lawns and the tops of bushes. The quiet of snow was already starting to settle in, and it made me very nervous to grind the motor of the Ford and wait for it to catch; it seemed to possess an unreal loudness, like a car in a movie, but nobody's lights popped on. With my foot on the clutch, I watched my parents' window stay dark; then I eased down the block as gradually and discreetly as I could, running the wipers to brush snow off the windshield. I didn't turn the headlights on until I reached the end of the block; it seemed magical and secret to cruise slowly along in the dark, as if time had stopped for everyone else on my street, leaving nothing in motion but me and the falling snow.

I parked downhill from Dal's, as usual, and as I crossed his back yard it was beginning to look white, to be evened out and transformed. Outside his window I waited a moment in silence before I tapped; behind that protected corner of his house, there was no wind, and the snowflakes eddied down however they wished, not so much falling as alighting – on my face, on his brick windowsill. I tapped on Dal's window. In a moment, he tapped back. I was in no hurry as I waited for him to get his clothes on, silently thanking him for getting me out of bed and into this night, thinking of Becca – how could I be bored when there was always Becca to think of? I wished she were there, that the two of us could somehow wander off into this snow-night together. Dal cautiously raised his window and then climbed out feet first; he felt around with one foot for the outside spigot that he always balanced on when he climbed in and out. Precariously, he held onto the sill with

one hand and reached up with the other to close the window not quite all the way, leaving a crack to open it again when we got back; then he jumped down. As we crossed the back yard, I realized my footprints approaching and our two sets going away would have told the whole story to anyone who bothered to look.

We got in the car and I let it roll down the sloping street, lights off. Neither of us spoke. A little snow was beginning to show on the street and the sidewalks. At the bottom of the hill, a couple of blocks from his house, I started the engine and put the headlights on, and then we turned the corner and were away.

"I was starting to think you weren't coming," Dal said.

"I've always showed up, haven't I?"

I turned on the radio and the heater, and for a moment the sign the Ford had on it in the used car lot crossed my mind: "\$300 with a fiddle and a furnace," and a dumb drawing of a hillbilly with a scraggly beard leaning on a Model T. "What the heck does that mean?" I said to my dad, and he said, "It means the radio and heater work."

"We picked the right night," I said to Dal.

"Yeah." The snow was coming steadily, reliably, swimming toward us in the headlights; this would be a real snow, not one of those feeble attempts that melt away and let the bare ground show through before the day is half over. We drove parallel to the trolley tracks, turned uphill along the edge of Washington U., then west, the way we always went. Dal fiddled with the radio until he got the faraway DJ who murmuringly called himself "the man who walks and talks at midnight."

"What else happened with Becca last night?" Dal said. I had already drawn him a sketchy outline of the evening.

"What kind of what else?" Mood music came to us a little faint and crackly over the miles, making me wish Becca were there instead, sitting close to me, her hand in mine, destination what? We wouldn't need a destination; we would be one. The memory of caressing her breasts through her clothes, of beginning to unbutton her blouse, made my hands on the steering wheel feel weak and tingly for a moment.

"Did you follow orders?"

"What?"

"Did you tell her you were in love with her?"

"No – well – I would've, except she stopped me when I was about to."

"God, you're hopeless. Anyway, it sticks out all over you, how the hell could she miss it?"

Dal had his hands in the pockets of his old leather jacket, and its turned-up collar was almost up to his ears as he sat slumped down in the seat with his feet up on the glove compartment. "Couldn't you be at least a little hard to get for once?"

That surprised me coming from Dal. "This isn't a game," I said. We agreed on that, didn't we?

"Yeah," he said. "But you could get hurt."

"What am I gonna do, pretend I don't give a damn? 'Oh, me and you? Hey – I can take it or leave it.' Sure. I'd have to be out of my mind to let her think that." I leaned forward over the steering wheel, watching the snow come at me and the headlights making two pathways through it into the night.

"Take it easy," Dal said.

"You don't understand," I said. But it was my own fault. I hadn't found a way to tell Dal what had passed wordlessly between Becca and me, through looks, through touch. She took a risk too, I wanted to say, she took it first. But then there was some snide other voice – not Dal's, he wouldn't say it out loud, but I couldn't help imagining he might think it: It's easy for her, too easy, all she has to do is flirt with you a little and you fall for her in nothing flat, she's one of those people who get what they want and she knows it . . . I found myself driving ten miles an hour over the limit and made an effort to slow down. "I just trust her, Dal. I don't care if it's crazy, I don't care if it's not good strategy, I don't give a fuck about any of that."

"I didn't say it was crazy," Dal said quietly. "If I could trade places with you, I would."

We rode for a while in silence, watching the snow swirl down. We were in the suburbs by now; off the main road we were on, private-looking streets curled back into the land of big houses. It was hard to imagine Dal wanting to trade places with me, or anyone; I always admired his ability not to dwell on should have or could have or if only but just to keep on going ahead, and anyway, I always wanted to be more like him. Being the more fortunate one made me uncomfortable.

"How old did she look to you?" Dal said, taking his feet off the glove compartment and sitting up straighter.

"Who?"

"That woman with my dad."

I thought back to that moment in the parking lot of Sorrento's when they passed under the light on the corner of the building. "Twenty-four, twenty-three, I don't know – not very old." I had an

unwilling flash of imagining the two of them naked; did Mr. Carlton's gut get in the way when he went to put it to her?

"Yeah. She must be in love with him," Dal said. I knew what he meant – nothing else could account for it. But it repelled me to put Dal's dad and L. in the same category with me and Becca; I didn't want to talk about that. "Are things different between him and your mom?" I said.

"You were there, what do you think?"

"He didn't have much to say for himself. But you were in such a foul mood it shut everybody up."

"I couldn't help it."

"Your mom's worried about you, I could tell."

"I know, but what am I going to do? Have some brain surgeon take out the little piece of brain that knows what he's up to? I can't tell her, and it's for damn sure I can't sit there and act like everything's just wonderful." He sat staring ahead and brooding. "A big help I am."

"Jesus, Dal, give yourself a break, it's not your fault you can't fix this."

We passed a shopping center, its parking lot evenly white, not one tire track disturbing its perfection, the lights above it casting bright circles below them, illuminating crowds of falling flakes. There was a long hill beyond that, and I wondered if the Ford's old tires would have trouble with it, but we made it with no problem. We were coming to the outer suburbs, and in not too long, if we kept going, we would reach actual country.

"I was looking at some of those old pictures in my mom's study," Dal said, unexpectedly. "You know the ones I mean? I'm so used to them being there I never pay attention to them, but the other day I was in there and I started looking at them – I mean really looking – they go way back, you know?"

I gave him a glance to say "go on." The houses were newer now, the trees in the subdivisions smaller, the side streets farther apart.

"There's one that must be from when they first met, he's got his uniform on and she looks about twenty, it must be in England. You can't believe how young she looks, Andy, even though she's wearing this really dumb-looking dress. I mean, she's not that much older than we are. He looks a little older, but not much. They're standing in front of a restaurant or something. The thing about it is, they are absolutely, totally in love. It tears you up inside when you really see it. I swear it does. You take a look at it sometime. You really should, you're in love

with Becca, you look at this picture and tell me if you don't recognize the feeling."

Dal sounded so intent on what he was saying I almost thought he had the picture in his pocket and was about to pull it out and hand it to me. "I will," I said.

"I guess it happened really fast, they met, boom, they fell in love, they got married – my mom says everything happened faster during the war. And you can see it, Andy," he said, with a peculiar note of insistence in his voice, as if he was bent on making me agree with him right this second, picture or no picture.

"I believe you." Confused memories of my mother telling me about how she and my dad got together, how they got engaged while he was on a week's leave, not seeing him for a long time, and then . . . I thought maybe she was trying to tell me she found herself marrying a man she didn't really know. I hadn't wanted to hear it.

"And now look," Dal said.

"Yeah."

"Both of them," Dal said. He was silent for a moment. "Not just my dad. It seems like those were just different people in that picture."

I wanted to find some way to make it better, but the best I could do was to say, "It doesn't have to turn out this way, does it?"

"Suppose it was you," Dal said, catching me by surprise. "Suppose in five years you and Becca get married, and twenty years from now you're still married to her, what do you think it'll feel like?"

"How the hell should I know?" I said; I felt attacked. It was like he was rubbing my nose in how inexperienced I was. "Since when am I the authority on any of this?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but do you think you'd still be in love with her?"

I don't have to answer this, I thought, but as I drove on into the night I couldn't help but try to imagine all that time passing, and being with her . . . I couldn't even imagine what it would be like to live with someone, to be alone with that other person every single day; I couldn't imagine what it would be like to make love to her even once. "Yes," I said, not because I knew anything but because I refused to say anything else.

Dal was quiet for a while. "That's why I'd like to trade places with you," he said. "Even if you're wrong."

"What makes you so sure I am?"

"I'm not, damn it. I'm not trying to give you a hard time – "

"Well, you're doing a pretty good job."

"I'm talking about my parents, Andy, I mean, if they were that in love and it ends up like this . . ."

Well, at least they were in love once, I thought, it's better than nothing, but that didn't satisfy me and I knew it wouldn't cut any ice with Dal. "Maybe there's more to it than meets the eye," I said.

"To what?"

"Their marriage."

"There'd better be," he said, sounding totally unconvinced.

"That's what I keep thinking about my parents."

"They don't look so bad off," Dal said. "They seem fine to me."

"Oh yeah? Do they look like anything exciting ever happens? I'm serious, can you picture yourself sitting there every night reading the paper and talking about politics and going to bed at ten? Come on. Their life is so boring they've forgotten what the word means."

"Do they have fights? Mine do."

"Yeah, but mostly it's stiff upper lip time."

"Hey, you want to see stiff upper lip, take a look at my mom. She invented it. You know what I keep wondering?"

"What?"

"I keep wondering if it's been like this for ages, and the only difference is I finally noticed. She's so good at not letting anything show, and it never crossed my mind he'd do something like this – I mean, what if it's been all wrong for years and I never knew it?"

"You would've."

"I'm not so sure."

"He's never gone out to meetings at night before, has he?"

"No, but he's always gone on lots of business trips," Dal said, and we both fell silent. A bleak prospect opened out before my mind's eye – a life of chronic deception, sneaking around, wanting something you weren't supposed to have, those pictures hanging at home to remind you of something lost a long time ago . . . what the hell would be the point of a life like that?

"So which shell is the pea under, then?" I said, not expecting an answer. "Where's the real thing? Who's got it?"

There were rolling snowy hills on either side of the road, and nearly all the houses had been left behind. "I don't know who's got it," Dal said. "Maybe no one. Maybe you do."

Me? I looked over at him, but he didn't meet my eyes. He couldn't mean it, but what did he mean? There were things about Dal I still didn't understand, after all these years.

"Hey, turn here," he said, "let's go up on the hill."

CHAPTER NINE

We were just coming up to the turnoff for one of our favorite spots when he spoke, and I took the suggestion automatically. The road led up a hill to a monastery and a school; from up there you could see St. Louis in the distance and half the county spread out around you. It was a place to go on summer nights to lie on the grass with your girlfriend and neck and wonder what the monks would think if they could see you – or so Dal told me; I had never gone there for that particular purpose. There were two or three inches of snow on the road now, and I wondered what would happen when we came to the steep part, but it was a challenge and why not? We made it past the first couple of turns in the road, but then it began to angle upwards more, and the tires began to slip. “I don’t think we’re going to make this,” I said, putting the car in second gear and trying to take it slowly and gradually. “These tires aren’t the greatest.”

“We can always walk,” Dal said.

“I think we’re gonna have to.” The wheels kept spinning and then catching for a moment and then spinning again, and I was afraid I might start to slip sideways and end up in the ditch. “Let’s just settle for this.”

“Okay with me.”

I stopped where I was and turned to look behind me. “It’s not going to be so easy to get out of here,” I said, thinking about turning the car around. What if we got stuck out here in the middle of the night?

“Oh, we can do it. I’ll drive back,” Dal said.

We set off up the hill, hands in pockets, jackets zipped tight. I mostly kept my head down against the snow; out here, away from the city, it seemed to be coming down harder. Now and then I would look

up and catch glimpses through trees of the lights on distant roads. My feet were cold because I was wearing regular shoes and snow was getting inside them, but I didn't care a whole lot; it seemed important to get to the top, as if that was the real goal of this whole expedition.

The road emerged from trees into an open space that stretched away from us, still uphill, to where the buildings sat barely visible a couple of hundred yards away. A handful of lights burned here and there among them, but closer to us there was no light except the faint gray luminescence which came from the open sky and, it seemed, the snow itself. Here and there in the landscape we looked out over, streetlights burned, but there were no lights in the scattered houses. We kept walking until we were in the middle of the open, away from the trees, our footprints the only imperfection in acres of snow. The lights of St. Louis seemed like someplace left behind; over the city there was a faint pink glow, but we could see, now, how much more world there was around it. Under that glow everyone we knew was sleeping – Becca, for one – I wondered what she looked like at that moment, asleep, how her hair looked against the pillowcase and the sheets; I tried to imagine the sound of her warm sleeping breath. The night around us was silent except when wind would sigh in the trees and once, a solitary car passed on the road below and dwindled into the distance; it seemed that each new moment's fresh layer of snow imperceptibly took away more sound, so that quietness itself was settling on us from the sky. The monks, who got up at dawn, were surely sleeping now; the school children, and the children's parents, were home in bed; it seemed as though within the whole circle of the horizon the only human beings awake to experience this moment were me and Dal. "This is it," I said to him, but he didn't answer.

Beauty invaded me, and sadness and a certain dread – I couldn't help thinking of the monks in their solitary, womanless cells; how could anyone choose that, fling themselves upon unhappiness and deprivation as if upon a lover? Did they know something terrifying, some awful secret that made such an act possible, did they pray to an unutterable despair?

The thought of Becca came again, this time the two of us up on that bench by the practice field, holding each other, my arm around her inside her coat – that private space we shared, and the way she was so willingly next to me; it seemed to me she knew as I knew, though words couldn't say it, what there was to be treasured in life, what was precious and hard to come by and what might be lost. I could remember for a moment exactly how it felt; and some things can only

be real, I thought. If I did not know this – what she told me without speaking – then I did not know anything, or there was nothing that really mattered to be known.

The wind gusted, and I realized the cold was working its way into me; I had to move. I stamped my feet, trying to get the blood going, did a little jig on the spot, hunched my neck down into my collar. Dal was staring off at St. Louis on the horizon; “I’m freezing too,” he said.

“Wanna go?”

“Okay.”

We made our way back downhill to the car almost at a trot; the thought of getting warm made the outside seem colder than it had on the hilltop. We jumped in, slammed the doors, I started the engine and turned on the heater; we sat hunched over the vents, warming our fingers. My ears hurt for a moment as they thawed out. “How about if I drive?” said Dal.

I thought for a moment; it was wonderful to drive gliding along down a beam of snowflakes, but I didn’t relish the thought of having to turn around on that hill in the snow and maybe getting stuck. “All right.”

We got out and traded places; Dal took off the emergency brake and looked behind him. The road was narrow and it looked steeper going down than it had coming up. He let the car roll back and turned the wheel so that he came sideways to the road, but it wouldn’t quite stop when he wanted it to, and I could feel us sliding slightly backwards. “Damn,” Dal muttered to himself, turning the front wheels downhill and giving it some gas, but the back wheels spun and I had visions of a very long walk home. I started to open the door, thinking I’d jump out and try to keep the back end from going in the ditch, but just then the tires caught, the Ford fishtailed out into the middle of the road, and we were headed downhill, half-steering and half-sliding. “Hang on,” said Dal; he seemed to be enjoying himself. I wasn’t sure I was; I couldn’t help madly braking on the floorboards with my right foot as I felt the car slip. Dal made the first turn, tried to slow down but started to slide, let up on the brake, and I was sure we were going too fast to make the second; he was delicately correcting the steering wheel, almost with his fingertips, as if this were all a delightful game, and I said “Holy shit, Dal,” convinced that we were headed for the ditch on the inside of the curve, but we shot over where I thought there would be nothing under the wheels and then straightened out, gathering speed down the hill but at least there were no more curves,

and Dal didn't touch the brake until we hit the level part at the bottom so we slid halfway out into the main road. "Well, it's a good thing nobody was coming," he said cheerfully, and turned back toward the city.

I let out the breath I seemed to have been holding all the way down the hill. "Boy," I said, "I don't know how you did that."

"Hey, I couldn't wreck your car, could I? I had to make it." That reminded me of one time years ago when he borrowed my bicycle and came back a couple of hours later with torn pants and a scraped leg and said he had an accident on it – hit some gravel and crashed. "But I held it up while I was sliding toward the curb so it wouldn't hit the curb and get messed up," Dal said. That was the sort of thing that convinced me Dal was not like anyone else I knew – no one else could even think at a time like that, much less do anything about it.

Dal drove faster than I did, and tonight I felt him pushing it, refusing to slow down for the snow, staying right on the edge of losing control. We were on a curvy two-lane road, lined with plenty of trees and telephone poles to run into if we should leave it, and even though I tried not to show anything, I found myself bracing my feet against the dashboard. I knew better than he did that the Ford was no sports car; it could go pretty fast, but its steering felt wobbly and loose to me, and the faster it went, the less I trusted it. It didn't seem to give Dal any trouble; he drove in a graceful rhythm of sweeping curves, never slowing down as much as I would have to make a turn, never braking unless he had to. It was like watching him play baseball, or maybe like being in his pocket while he did it; he had me under the spell of his ability and I couldn't protest, but I wasn't sure that he had the same power over the road or the snow. I was finally beginning to relax and believe that we lived a charmed life when we came around a curve and instead of straightening out it curved more, and Dal cut the wheel and made the corner but we began to spin. "Oh Jesus," I said involuntarily, almost a prayer if only I believed in prayer, and the car slid down the road in a stately, impossible, petrifying rotation, facing the trees by the side of the road momentarily and then for one crazy instant sliding straight backwards, and still turning past that, Dal spinning the steering wheel for all he was worth, until all of a sudden the tires found traction on something and we jerked to a stop, sideways to the road and still on it. The car rocked on its springs and idled quietly as if nothing had happened while I let my head fall back on the seat and exhaled and felt my heart pounding.

"Wow," Dal said, running his hands back over his hair. "Fuck. That was incredible."

"That was insane."

"That curve caught me by surprise."

"No shit, now would you slow down? What the hell's going on with you?"

"I never actually spun out before," Dal said, sounding pleased with himself.

"Neither have I, and I don't think I ever want to do it again."

"Hey, it's an adventure – you'll never forget it, will you?"

"Christ, Dal, if this is your idea of fun, I'm driving."

"All right, all right, I'll cool it, I promise."

He set off again, more slowly; a car passed us going the other way and I thought if it had come a couple of minutes earlier we all could have been dead by now. "If you get us killed I'll never speak to you again," I said, and Dal gave me a wry smile.

But he did seem more cautious – and happier all of a sudden, like what he had really needed out of the night was a chance to almost wreck my car. He tuned the radio and Booker T. came out. I thought of the last time Ray Charles had come to St. Louis; white suburban kids had been there in droves, the squarest-looking girls in party dresses elbow to elbow with the black kids from Soldan High or Vashon, staring up at him open-mouthed as he sang "Georgia On My Mind," and maybe they didn't scream out loud ecstatically the way the black girls did but inside you could see something very similar was happening. I closed my eyes, let myself drift on the music, trusting Dal to pilot us there in one piece.

When I looked up again we were much closer to home.

"How you doing?" Dal said to me. "You asleep?"

"No."

"I was just thinking, when we go to college this'll probably never happen again."

"It could, we'll be back for vacations."

"Yeah, but it won't be the same."

I knew he was right about that; and how would it be to come back here from away, from East, the new part of our lives begun?

"If you get into RIT, are you still gonna go?" I said. I hadn't been able to get used to Dal's choice of a college.

"I guess so."

"You really want to be an engineer that much? You want to take all those science courses? You'll have to learn calculus."

"I bet it's more fun than trig," Dal said. "Besides, if I can survive Conroy, I can survive anything."

"Well, it's your life," I said. But it pained me to think of Dal's being so different from mine, of him setting off in a direction I wouldn't want to go.

We turned and drove along the edge of the Washington U. campus, past the stadium – we both knew the spot where a kid could squeeze through the fence and sneak into a football game for free – and the field house where we had once breathlessly spied on those naked girls, and Suicide Hill, the steepest hill in our neighborhood, the one kids always dared each other to go down on sleds. There would be kids out there tomorrow, looking apprehensively down from the top, getting their nerve up, same as always.

"Remember how we used to bail out just before we hit that ditch at the bottom?" I said.

"Yeah, or how about the time you didn't?"

"That was nuts. I really thought I could fly over it."

"Seems to me you did but the sled didn't."

Dal turned and we drove along parallel to the tracks, almost home; but he surprised me by pulling over next to the Washington U. power plant. "What are you doing?" I said.

"What time is it?"

"About four."

"You know what I've always wanted to do?" he said.

"What?"

He craned his neck to look up at the smokestack of the power plant, towering above us, red lights blinking from its top high up in the dark and the falling snow. "I've always wanted to climb up that."

I looked at the smokestack – it seemed to be a hundred feet high – and then at Dal studying it. "You've gotta be kidding," I said.

"It's got handholds all the way up," he said, as if that made it a good idea. "And besides, you know how it's got those kind of guardrails around the ladder? I don't think you could really fall very far."

"Oh, that's nice, that's a comforting thought."

"Well, you don't have to do it," Dal said.

"Neither do you." What is it with him? I thought. This is crazy stuff.

"But just think about being up there, Andy, it's got to be really an incredible experience, haven't you ever thought about trying it?"

"I guess I have, but not for more than about ten seconds."

"Well, tonight could be the night." He opened the door and got out and I could see that I wasn't going to stop him as he went up the walk beside the power plant. I got out, too, zipped my jacket up tight, put my gloves on, and followed him into the snow. He had to be nuts to try it on this night of all nights, and yet even I could feel the attraction. Dal went up some steps – the power plant backed up to the side of a hill – and turned off the walk, disappearing behind the building. It was dark brick, with high arched windows, and it gave off a steady whir and hum night and day; a few lights were burning inside, and I was hoping someone on the night shift or a watchman or the campus police would notice Dal and stop him, but there didn't seem to be anyone afoot except us. He came to the base of the smokestack – it was square, and almost as big as a garage, at the bottom – and looked up at the first handhold, which was just out of reach. I caught up to him as he stood thinking it over.

"You're not really gonna do this, are you?"

"Now's the time," he said. His face looked the way it had when he was guiding the car down off the hill, around the turn where I thought we wouldn't make it. He looked around and spotted a trash barrel by the side of the road; it was something to stand on to reach the first rung. "Help me get that thing, will you?" he said, and I couldn't just stand there and watch; together we guided the heavy barrel down to the smokestack, and Dal turned it upside-down and climbed up on its bottom. "You coming?" he said, with a hand on the ladder.

I looked up to the top of the stack, where red lights blinked and smoke drifted out, at times almost indistinguishable from snow. Did he believe he could do anything? And if he was nuts to do this, what would I be if I followed him? "I don't know," I said.

"Don't miss it," Dal said. "This is going to be good." With that he began to climb, smoothly, steadily, as if there were not one doubt in his mind. In a few seconds he seemed high above me; I found it almost unbearable to watch, like a high-wire act without a net, and something was pulling me after him – somehow, for some crazy reason, it was easier to go up after him myself than to stand below and watch him do it. I got onto the barrel, took hold of the highest rung I could reach with both hands, and pulled myself up so my feet were on a rung, straightened up with my face to the brick surface of the smokestack; I knew that if I thought about what I was doing, I wouldn't be able to, and I looked up at Dal above me and began to climb, focusing all my attention on his feet that were stepping steadily and determinedly from rung to rung, keeping in time with him, trying to forget where I was

and what I was doing, to see the smokestack not as a giant pillar sticking up in the air but as some sort of level road or bridge, horizontal not vertical, which for some unknown reason I had to traverse on all fours. A road that led to the night sky. It was true, there were semicircular guard rails around the row of rungs, with vertical rods connecting them, and as I looked up they seemed to form a kind of tunnel, but I knew there were great gaps between them, and I didn't believe they made us any safer at all. Still I was all right as I climbed, watching Dal's feet stepping up and up, until something – the headlights of a car, a streetlamp shining over the roof of the power plant, something – caught my eye and pulled it to the side and made me look out and see where I was. I was over the roof of the power plant, over the treetops, up in the middle of the air, with the night wind blowing snow past me and in my face and nothing under my feet but an inch-thick iron rod, nothing in back of me but a couple more of the same, one slip away from death. I made myself look straight ahead, at the bricks in front of my nose, I ordered myself not to panic, not to breathe so fast, and I took one more step up but that was it, the feeling of letting go of one rung to grasp another and that moment of nothing to clutch onto, nothing in my fingers but empty air, terrified me so much that I froze. I clung where I was, unable to stop imagining myself falling, frantically trying to climb the air and knowing that nothing on earth could save me, and the more I imagined it, the more it felt as though it was already happening, my fingers weakening, losing their grip, and when they slipped from the rung they were holding I would have about four seconds to live and when would it begin? A wave of panic swept over me and felt as though it would pull me bodily off the ladder, out into empty space, but somehow I held on and the peak of it went by me but I couldn't move anything. I was looking at the bricks slightly above my head, feeling cold sweat all over my body, and thinking that this would be the last thing I saw, these bricks, and it was so fucking stupid that these old sooty bricks would be the last thing I'd ever see in my life, why the fuck did I ever follow Dal up this thing and how could I die when I hadn't even lived yet, I hadn't even graduated from high school or had sex with a girl or done anything and now it was all gone because of some stupid game . . . I looked up at Dal; I had moved my head before I realized I was moving it. I couldn't believe how high he was, almost at the top, and as I watched he stopped climbing and took a long look around, first to one side, then the other. How could he do that, what was he made of, anyway? I began to think he wasn't even human, up there so high in the teeming snow that I

could faintly see the redness of the blinking lights tinging his clothes every time they came on, maybe next he would fly or just disappear. Then it occurred to me that if he didn't do one of those things, he would have to climb down.

But I knew I couldn't.

That would be when I would die, he would reach me and I would try to move and that would be when I would lose my grip and it would be over.

If I couldn't move, what would happen? There was no room to go by me, maybe he would die too, starve to death stuck there above me, no, that was ridiculous, he'd have to push me off and I wouldn't blame him, or he'd try to get by me but fall, even Dal made mistakes sometimes . . . he was climbing down, and panic mounted in my heart.

His trip down seemed agonizingly long and yet it could not possibly be long enough to save me. I clung there, my fingers clenched so tight they hurt, watching his feet move methodically toward me, descending by imperceptible degrees, rung after rung – when would he realize I was there? I waited for him to glance down, to see me, to understand that I had betrayed him by my weakness, my not being like him, and that now because of me he was in terrible danger.

"You should see it from up there," Dal said when he got close enough to be heard. "It's unbelievable. It's like flying without the airplane. You should have come up." He glanced down, expecting an answer, but I couldn't get any words out. "Of course, it's not bad even from here," he said. "You can see way down into Forest Park, and everything." He looked down again, a longer look this time. "Are you all right?"

"Dal," I said, getting his name out between my teeth. "I can't move."

"What?"

" . . . can't move."

"What do you mean, you can't move?"

I shook my head. That was all I could say, my stomach felt too tight and my lungs too out of breath to get any more words out.

"Of course you can move, you got up here, didn't you?"

He looked down at me, and I up at him, for what seemed a very long time, and I could see him begin to realize it might be true, begin to see what it meant.

"Well, don't look down, then, if that's the problem, just let yourself down until you feel the rung under your foot. Kind of scrape

your toe along the chimney. You can't miss it. I know it's a little harder going down than up, but believe me, you can do it."

I closed my eyes and tried to do as he said, tried to ease myself down, but as soon as I took my foot off the rung it was on I felt as though nothing at all was below me, my fingers seemed to turn to spaghetti and I was sure I was going to fall. I pulled myself back up and clung there, panting. I couldn't look at Dal because of the shame of it, but finally I got my breathing calmed down enough to be able to say to him, "I can't let go."

"Andy. All you have to do is let go with one hand and move it down while you keep a hold with the other one." He talked to me the way you would to a little kid. My mind knew he was right, but no matter how I told my body to move it wouldn't. Only the misery of what I was doing to Dal enabled me to try it again, but the panic was too sickening and I had to pull my foot back before it reached the next rung.

"I can't," I said, exhausted, and he understood that I meant it.

"Well," said Dal. "This is interesting."

I looked up at him. "I'm sorry," I said, "I've fucked up totally, I didn't mean to do this to you, I'm sorry –"

"Cut it out," he said. "Just shut up, I've gotta think." He held on with one hand and leaned out to look down past me – what the hell could he be thinking of? – and then he reached out and grasped one of the guardrails with one hand. He pulled at it as if testing its strength; it was as thick as the rungs we were standing on, and it didn't move. There were two vertical rails, all the way up, and horizontal rings linking them to the chimney every eight or ten feet. As I watched, Dal climbed up a couple of steps so that he was level with one of the rings, then held on with one hand, leaned out and took hold of the ring with his other. For a moment, he was poised there, one foot on a rung, one out in space, higher than a housetop, no net. "Talk about a fuckin' adventure," he said to himself, and swung himself outward, his legs went around the vertical rail and there he was, hanging onto the horizontal ring with his hands, his feet locked around the iron upright as if he were climbing a rope. He slid down like a fireman coming down a pole and landed on the next ring, next to me, and then let himself down past that, out of my field of vision. I thought for a moment he would just continue that way and leave me there, and there seemed to be justice in that. But then I heard a little scraping noise below me and looked down – involuntarily – and saw Dal back on the ladder again, climbing up toward me.

"Don't look down," he said sharply, and I obeyed. I felt his hand close around my ankle. "I'm gonna guide your foot down, understand? You're not gonna miss the step. And when I say go, you're gonna go. I mean it, Andy, don't crap out on me now."

Something seemed to flow into me from Dal's grip that steadied me and made me feel that I would do what he said because I had no choice, whether I thought I could or not. "Go," he said, and I felt him pulling my ankle down into empty space, into darkness, and I let him be the guide, gave myself up to whatever he would make happen, and my foot touched the next step. "Again," he said; this time I had to let go with one hand to keep going down, but I did it the same way, watching it travel through space from one rung down to the next and take hold, and the spell broke and I began to move my foot down before he pulled again.

"See, I told you," Dal said below me. "Now, don't look, damn it, just keep on like that," and we went on, me hugging the brick and never looking right or left or down until after what seemed like half an hour I heard Dal's feet land on the bottom of the upturned trash barrel. Then I looked; the end of the ladder was a couple of steps below me, and I could let myself down, onto the teetering barrel, and jump down at last to the solid ground I had thought I'd never touch again. I crouched down for a second and put my gloved hands palm down into the snow, pressing it down, feeling the earth beneath; then I straightened up and leaned against the base of the smokestack and breathed all the way down into my lungs for the first time since I had set foot on the ladder. I couldn't look at Dal, too ashamed of what I had done, owing him too much. "Boy," he said, "you know how to make it exciting."

"You saved my life, Dal."

I looked up, but he only seemed embarrassed. "Oh, come on," he said, "I'm cold, we've gotta get home."

"You did."

"You would have gotten it together, I just didn't want to wait any longer."

All of a sudden I felt sure I'd piss in my pants if I didn't go right that instant. "I've gotta pee," I said, and turned my back to the road above us. Dal said, "Well, what the hell," and joined me; we peed a faintly steaming hole in the snow together. My legs felt weak with the relief of being down on the ground and for a moment I stumbled a little as I was zipping up my pants.

"Hold on there, Ace," Dal said, slapping me lightly on the shoulder, and we turned to go back to the car, passing our own footprints on the way. Before I got in, I looked up at the smokestack, trying to figure out where I had been; already it was like remembering a dream to think that Dal had actually gone all the way to the top.

It was five in the morning as we turned the corner into our neighborhood. "I didn't know you had that much trouble with heights," Dal said.

"That's the worst it's ever been."

"Why'd you follow me, then?"

I turned up the hill toward Dal's, trying to find the answer. "I don't know. I guess I thought I had to."

Dal was quiet; I pulled over to the curb, trying to think of something to say to him about what he had done.

"It was so beautiful up there, Andy," he said. "Away from everything. I wish you could have seen it." He opened the door and stuck one foot out. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Dal closed the car door quietly and I watched him walk away toward his back yard through the snow, silent, keeping himself to himself.

CHAPTER TEN

Even though I was sure it would be a snow day, I had to get up at the usual hour, but it didn't take long to find out that school was cancelled and go back to bed. As I lay there falling asleep again I kept reliving that frozen eternity of fear on the side of the smokestack, clutching the edge of the bed involuntarily to save myself from the imagined abyss. It didn't happen, I kept repeating to myself, but part of me was still terrified. Finally I was able to drive it away by thinking of Becca, and fell back asleep.

I woke up at noon to a sunny day made twice as bright by snow, and called her as soon as I was out of bed; we spent a couple of hours wandering around the neighborhood in the snow, having snowball fights, trying to build a snowman, and eventually ended up in her living room with me going through her dad's collection of jazz records. In their fireplace among the ashes I noticed peculiar half-burned pieces of wood which looked almost like shoes, and when I asked Becca about them she told me that was what they were – shoe lasts thrown out by the factory. "It's one of my dad's bright ideas. He gets them from a guy he knows – huge bags of them. All they do is throw them in the trash. So we burn them in the fireplace. Every once in a while you have to sweep up the metal parts that are left over."

"Your dad is really one of a kind."

"Believe me, I know."

I got a heap of shoe lasts out of a burlap bag that was sitting in the corner, and made a fire, and put on a Coltrane record I'd never heard that had Tadd Dameron on it, and Becca came and sat with me in front of the fire on the threadbare carpet; she leaned on me from behind and rested her chin on my shoulder to stare at the flames. Not long ago I had thought of us on Claire's bed as being like golden

retrievers lying in a heap, but that was absolutely not how it was; whenever any part of her touched any part of me, it thrilled me.

"Guess what Toni told me yesterday, over at Claire's," Becca said. Immediately I wondered why they hadn't called me if they were going to get together.

"What?"

"She has a crush on a guy who goes to Washington U."

"Washington U.? She's dating some guy who's in college?" I hadn't imagined that as a possibility, but if someone I knew was going to do it, it would be Toni.

"Well . . . she isn't really," Becca said. "But she wants to."

"How'd she meet this guy?"

"Oh, he came into the restaurant with a bunch of other boys that age, and they were all teasing her and asking her where she went to college and stuff. So they found out she was in high school and one of them called her 'jail bait' – "

"You're kidding."

"No."

"To her face? What a bunch of jerks."

"I know, but anyway, one of them came over later and apologized and she decided she liked him."

"The one that made the remark?"

"Somebody else. His name's Clay, I gather he's pretty cute."

"He must be." I knew Toni, she had to have been hopping mad. "So, all of a sudden she's got a crush on him?"

"Well, he showed up a couple more times without those other guys and talked to her. And while she was on her break she went outside with him and he kissed her."

"Aha." I pictured Toni trying not to let her dad notice, sneaking out the back way, meeting this shadowy figure named Clay in the parking lot. Maybe he had kissed her on the same spot where we had seen Dal's dad kissing L. "So – she's got it bad, huh?"

"I guess. She's been waiting for him to call ever since." That did not sound like the Toni I knew – it was she who always had boys dying for something from her. And anyway, what guy wouldn't call Toni back if he knew she was interested?

"Maybe he did call and her dad answered the phone. That'd drive him away for at least a week."

"Not if he really wants to see her," Becca said, and something in her voice seemed to tell me to forget Toni, forget this faceless guy she had a crush on, remember where I was. It was midafternoon, and all at

once I was very aware that we were alone in the house and Becca's parents wouldn't be home for a couple of hours. For a moment I thought of Dal telling me I should be hard to get for once, but I couldn't; I turned to face her, and kissed her, and she kissed me back. We sat cross-legged, knee to knee, leaning forward to kiss; I took her barrette out and played with her hair. She was wearing a white sweater that reminded me of a Persian cat, if a Persian cat could have decorative beadwork on it; I didn't know if she would let me touch her breasts, as I was dying to do, by the light of day that was streaming in the living-room windows. When I did she stopped me and said, "We really shouldn't do this here, you never know when Zack might come in."

"Who?"

"My little brother. He's eleven. He could be anywhere."

"Oh." Inwardly I told this little brother to go play in traffic. We were still facing each other, and I touched her lips with one finger; I caressed the line of her jaw, the side of her neck; she tipped her head back slightly and half-closed her eyes, smiling to herself. In her throat she made a little humming noise.

"How do you know what I like?" she said, and my chest felt filled with radiance. I kept caressing her neck, letting my fingers slide under the neck of her sweater and her blouse to touch her collarbones and the little hollows above them, and she seemed to accept these caresses without reservation, closing her eyes, her hands gently curled in her lap as if she would be willing to have this last the rest of the afternoon.

"You know what Zack would do if he knew this was going on?" she said, without opening her eyes.

"What?"

"Sneak up on the porch and spy on us through the window."

I had to look, of course, but there was no little brother peering in at us. Still the bright, curtainless windows made me feel exposed. "Is there someplace we could go?" I said, wondering if that was asking too much.

Becca opened her eyes and considered me as if she were wondering the same thing; some amusement danced in her eyes, at me perhaps, at the situation, at the universe – I still didn't know what that look meant, but I knew it was pure Becca. "Well, we could go in the den, I guess," she said, and got up; she held out her hand to me and led me through the next room –the dining room, evidently, but without a dining-room table. I got a confused impression of a lot of clutter and

stuff, unframed paintings on the walls, what looked like a china cabinet but not full of dishes. There was an interesting smell – a comfortable smell, somehow – I couldn’t name it. We went into a little room with more books in it, a less broken-down couch, another desk piled with more papers, an aquarium with a humming air pump, and a television set. The shades were half-drawn, and it wasn’t as bright as the living room. I closed the door behind us; she glanced at me as I did that, but she didn’t object. “So – now that we’re here, want to watch TV?” she said brightly, reaching down for the knob.

“No.” I still had hold of her hand, and pulled her toward me and kissed her.

“Ohh,” she said. “So *this* is what you had in mind.”

“Shocking, huh?”

“I would never have guessed.”

“Now, is your brother going to find us in here?”

“Well, I don’t see anywhere to hide, do you?” said Becca. “Unless maybe we crawl under the sofa.” It was about six inches off the floor.

“You are a very silly individual,” I said.

She stuck out her tongue at me, smiling, and I came up to her and touched the tip of my tongue to hers, trying not to laugh, and then we were kissing again. Without warning, she began to tickle me mercilessly under the armpits, and I gave a yell without meaning to; she giggled, I started tickling her in the ribs and as she tried to twist away from me and I tried to keep hold of her we bumped into the couch and fell onto it. I had her in my arms, and I found myself lying there with my head wedged against the arm of the sofa and one foot still on the floor and Becca on top of me. We regarded each other. “Did you plan that?” she said, trying to look severe and not laugh.

“No, it was just luck.”

“Hm.” She planted her elbows on either side of me, propped her chin on her hands, and studied me from close range like something she’d never seen before. She got a serious look on her face that made me uncomfortable, and I had a hard-on which I was sure she must be able to feel because her hipbone was pressing against me there, and that made me even more self-conscious.

“You’ve got a zit coming right – there,” she said, pointing her finger and delicately touching the side of my nose. I had to look away, embarrassed, and I could feel my penis get less hard. “Such is life,” I managed to reply, after a moment. Becca kept examining me as if I were a biology experiment.

"I told them about us, too," she said absently; it took me a moment to realize she meant Toni and Claire. Fair exchange of gossip: Toni's crush for our . . . what?

"You did?" For some reason I had thought I'd be the one to do that, when I was sure there was something to tell.

"What's the matter, you want to keep it a secret?"

"No."

"Turn your head a little," she said.

"What did they say?" She leaned to one side and with one finger explored the ridges and indentations of my ear; I almost felt scandalized by her attention.

"Oh, they mostly just went 'woo-woo' and teased me about letting you come in on Saturday night. I told them you wanted to tear my clothes off." My face felt hot and twice its size, especially with her looking at me from eight inches away, and her breasts pressing against my chest in a way she seemed unaware of, and had they really thought it was true?

"God, great, what'd they say to that?"

"Claire wanted to know if you were in love with me." My heart raced – did she want me to tell her, right now? She took the upper edge of my ear between two fingers and gently tried to turn the curl of it inside out. I risked a glance at her but she didn't meet my eyes.

"Becca, what are you doing?"

"Playing," she said innocently, as if the word "love" had never come up.

Then I can play too, I thought, and slid my hand under her sweater and up her back, feeling the smooth bumps of her backbone through the thin material of her blouse. Touching her bra strap made me think of unhooking it, undressing her, and that made me hard again. How could she not feel it? And what did she think if she did?

"You don't look very comfortable," she said. "Don't you want to move down a little?"

"I'm okay," I said, because I was afraid she'd go away altogether if we moved at all, but she sat up so that she was kneeling looking down at me, pushing her hair back from her face.

"You're going to get a stiff neck if you stay there like that."

I scooted myself down a little on the couch so there was room for my head, and got my other foot up on the couch so I was comfortable, and put my hand on her arm and said "Come back." But now it was a different thing, to lie down with me deliberately, openly to choose it, and I could see the difference in her eyes. I remembered

the impossible questions Dal had asked me the night before about how it would feel in twenty years, and in her presence I was even more aware of how much I did not know about any of it, but I knew that right at that moment I loved her. And what was she thinking, as she knelt there? I couldn't tell, but I felt suspended, and afraid that now I really had asked too much.

"Make a little room for me," she said.

She was kneeling between the back of the couch and me, and I moved as much to the edge as I could without falling off. Carefully she lay down beside me, on her side, her head on her arm. I turned my head to look at her, and we lay for a while without moving or speaking; it seemed to be something we had to get used to. Then, cautiously, I turned on my side facing her and laid my hand on her cheek and kissed her. I stroked her side through her silky-haired sweater, felt the smooth curve of her hip under the thickness of her wool pants; when I covered her breast with my hand, she didn't move my hand away. Her knee was between mine. We lay looking at each other with that touch happening between us, face to face, and I felt as though everything was changing, opening out into something I'd never experienced before.

A minute or two passed, quiet except for the hum of the aquarium air pump; I kept running my hand down the length of her, her shoulder, her side, her hip, feeling the curve of her breast through her sweater. After a bit she closed her eyes. She really does trust me, I thought.

I was overcome with an irresistible urge to yawn, and had to take my hand away to cover my mouth. Becca opened her eyes and sweetly said, "Bored?"

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help it, I spent half of last night driving around with Dal."

"You did? What for?"

"It's something we do now and then. We sneak out and go for long drives and talk." It felt strange for Becca to matter so much to me and hardly know Dal – and vice versa.

"What'd you talk about?"

For a second I didn't answer, but then I thought no, I can't have secrets from Becca, that's what it means to say you trust somebody, scary or not. "You and me, partly – and Dal's family – our parents, his and mine both."

"You talked about us? What did you tell him? I hope you didn't go into every single little detail."

"The way you probably did with Toni and Claire."

"So? We're girls," she said, as if that were an argument. "Besides, I don't even know Dal."

"Well, I didn't tell him everything anyway."

"So come on, what'd you say? I've always wondered what boys talk about when they're alone."

"He said I ought to play hard to get for once. And I told him the hell with that, I couldn't. But you know that already, don't you?"

She nodded, with a teasing look on her face. "I don't think you're much of a planner – are you?"

"You mean as in strategy? No."

"But obviously he doesn't agree with you," she said.

"He just doesn't want me to get hurt."

Instantly she looked offended. "Is that what he thinks I'm going to do?"

"You? No, it's not you, he – Dal has a pretty dim view of love these days." Saying the word "love" out loud to her made my heart race again.

"Well, that's his problem."

"You don't have to get mad at him, it really *is* his problem, and besides, he practically saved my life last night."

"What do you mean?" she said; I thought of how I'd feel if I discovered she had narrowly escaped some kind of danger.

"Well – it was about four in the morning, and we were over by Washington U., and Dal said he's always wanted to climb up the smokestack on the power plant – you know where I mean?"

"That thing? Wait a minute – it's the middle of the night and it's snowing and he wants to climb that?"

"Right."

"Meshugana," she muttered.

"Huh?"

"That's nuts."

"I know, but he did it, and I started to follow him and I got halfway up, or a third, I don't know, anyway I got up there and all of a sudden I realized where I was and I froze. I couldn't move."

"But why did you go up?"

"I don't know. It was too scary to just stand there and watch him climb higher and higher."

She studied me with a slightly pained expression. "Sometimes boys do things I cannot understand," she said. "If you were so scared

watching him, what made you think it would be better to go after him?"

"I didn't. I didn't really think, anyway. I just climbed. And then I got stuck and I couldn't go up or down, I really . . . I panicked." I couldn't look her in the eye and say that. "So he got me down. You know what he had to do? He had to climb down these guardrail things to get around me – talk about scary – that was probably ten times worse than climbing to the top. But he didn't seem to think anything of it. That's the way he is. Then he got below me and held onto my foot and made me move it, and that's how I got down. He really did save my life, I think, even if he doesn't think so."

There was a long pause, and Becca didn't look happy with me. I wondered if it had been a mistake to tell her how I lost my nerve. Then she said in a low voice, "Are you my friend?"

"Yes."

"Then would you please do me a favor? Don't get yourself killed."

"I won't," I said, thinking I'd better not tell her about the things that had happened before that in the car. Not if I ever wanted her to like Dal.

We lay there, and I studied the ceiling, listened to the air pump hum. Never *just* friends anymore, I thought. I couldn't bear that. She must have seen something cross my face, because she said, "What's the matter?"

But I couldn't tell her I was worrying over the very thing Dal had warned me about, so I said, "I was thinking about Dal. His family, I mean."

"What about them?"

I felt disloyal telling this even to Becca, but I thought that if Dal ever knew he'd understand. "Well, it's a secret, but – his dad's having an affair with another woman."

Her eyes widened. "You *know* this?"

"Yes."

"How?" she said, disbelievingly.

"Oh – Dal found a note that his dad must have dropped – and then we actually saw him with her, once."

"But are you sure? I mean, it could have been just a friend, couldn't it?"

"Believe me, if you saw what we saw, you'd know they weren't just friends."

"God – it must be awful."

"For Dal, you mean?"

"Yeah."

"It is."

I could see Becca thinking dark thoughts for a moment. "It would just kill me if my dad did something like that," she said. "I can't even imagine it. But the way he kisses my mom sometimes, it'd never happen. One time I was sitting in the living room with Jeff, last year, and we were talking to my mom, and my dad comes in and says, 'Excuse us for one minute,' and grabs her and gives her this big French kiss right in front of us – you should have seen the look on Jeff's face. But that's the way they are sometimes."

"Wow."

"Zack calls himself the mush police – he fines them for necking in front of us. Of course, they never pay up. He charges about five hundred bucks a kiss."

"Do they do this a lot?"

"Well, it doesn't happen every day," Becca said, and I could see her inwardly laughing at me, "but it happens. What's the matter, are you shocked?"

"No, more like – envious, I guess."

"Why?"

"Oh, my parents are so boring."

"You just think that because they're yours and you're too used to them."

"Mm – no. Maybe."

"I used to think that everybody's mom did yoga in the morning. She stands on her head in the dining room."

"You're kidding." I almost felt upside-down myself, hearing this. "Why does she do that?"

"Oh, she says it reverses the pull of gravity. I don't know. She taught me how, but I'm not so crazy about it myself."

"How come she does it in the dining room?"

"There's more room there than anyplace else, and anyhow, it's her room. She paints in there, too."

"That must be what that smell is," I said.

"Linseed oil. I love that smell."

I tried to imagine growing up with parents like Becca's, and failed. Yoga, I thought. I wasn't even exactly sure what yoga was. "Pretty amazing," I said, half to myself.

"Want to hear something else?" Becca said with a mischievous look. "It used to be, in the summer when it was really hot, she'd do her

yoga with no clothes on. But now it embarrasses Zack too much, so she wears her underwear. Don't tell her I told you, though."

"Believe me, I won't." Hi, Mrs. Shulman, nice to meet you, Becca tells me you used to stand on your head in the dining room naked. "Anyway, didn't it embarrass her?"

"Well, she didn't do it in front of company."

"What does your dad think about this?" I was sure my parents would be a little shocked if I told it to them.

"Oh, he probably thinks it's good for us. My dad's very big on openness. He's a psychologist, you know how they are."

I didn't, actually, but I didn't want to admit that. If psychologists were like Mr. Shulman, I thought, they must be more fun than I had imagined. I heard some kids yelling to each other outside and wondered if one of them was Zack, if he was about to come in. As soon as I thought our afternoon of being alone together might be about to end, I realized that lying there with Becca had come to feel like something we were entitled to. I seemed to have been imagining that there was all the time in the world, that this could happen whenever we liked, and of course that wasn't true and I felt I had to seize the moment before it got away. I was on my side facing her, and I put my arm around her and kissed her; she seemed a little taken by surprise, but not as though she minded. I could feel the whole length of her against me; she was squeezed between me and the couch, willingly it seemed, and as we kissed she slid her leg between mine, my hard penis was pressing against her and the thought came to me that maybe she actually wanted me to do that so she could feel it, that it wasn't just one of those unmentionable things boys did but something she liked. With a fast-beating heart I pulled back a little and started unbuttoning the tiny pearl-shaped buttons of her sweater, and she lay with her hand on my side and didn't stop me, and didn't stop me, until it became perfectly clear that this was what she wanted and had even perhaps been waiting for – how could I have let the time go by? I pulled back her unbuttoned sweater and caressed her breasts through her blouse, slipping my fingers between the buttons to touch her bare skin, kissing her as I touched her, and then I began to unbutton the blouse too, not knowing what she'd do or say, and she still didn't stop me as I uncovered her so that I could see the swell of her breasts and the base of her throat and the hollows around her collarbones, and touch her in all those places, slide my fingers inside her bra and touch her tender nipples, cup her whole breast in my hand in a way that made her sigh – I was wild to take off her clothes all the way, knowing I couldn't,

pressing my hard-on against her hipbone, and she was kissing me whole-heartedly and we both heard the back door open. We lay there, holding each other, breathing hard and listening; "Anybody home?" a voice called, and I knew it was Zack.

"Damn," Becca whispered vehemently.

"Nobody's home," I whispered. "Go out and look for someone else."

I could hear footsteps wandering around, pausing maddeningly, then a step or two again. A chair scraped on the floor. The sound of a refrigerator door closing. "Maybe he'll go upstairs," Becca said.

I thought I felt her wanting to sit up, but I held her tight and kissed her; she was distracted, she put her hand on my chest to hold me back. "He's still there," she said. "If he decides to watch TV . . ."

"Oh, great."

A chair scraped again, there were new footsteps, and in an instant Becca had sat up and was buttoning her blouse with flying fingers; I sat up too, infected by her urgency, but the footsteps didn't come to the door of the den. There was another pause, the sound of shoes hitting the floor, then sock feet went away. I thought I heard him climbing the stairs. Becca gave a sigh and rolled her eyes and said, "Well, those are the breaks."

"What we need is a hideout."

"Oh yeah?" she said, leaning her head back on the couch and rolling it to the side to look at me. "What are you going to do, take me off to your secret love nest?" Her eyes were laughing at me.

"I wish I could."

"I know what you wish," she said.

"And you? What's your wish?"

A slow smile came over Becca's face, and she shrugged her shoulders a little in an I'll-never-tell sort of way. "You'll just have to figure that out, won't you?" she said.

"I hope to," I said, and pulled her to me and kissed her to stop her from teasing me any more; that seemed to be the right answer.

"What time is it?" she said, and twisted around to look at the clock on the desk. "I'll bet my mom's going to be here any minute."

"Where is she, anyway?"

"She works at a place over in Clayton that sells art supplies. And it's sort of a gallery. I think she just does it so she can hang around with artists."

"Maybe she'll be late because of the snow."

"Maybe," Becca said, but doubtfully. "Even if she is, you never know when Zack might decide to come down here."

"I get the picture." It was over, the moment had come and gone.

"Well, you don't have to look so glum about it," she said. "Really. Let's just enjoy, okay?"

"Yes." She seemed to grow more beautiful the more we were together, and how could I even need to be asked that question? It was just that I wanted her probably too much. I caressed her cheek, ran my hand back through her long, rebellious hair, wanting to tell her that I loved her and feeling unsure, not of what I felt but of whether I had the right to use that word. "You're wonderful," I said.

She closed her eyes for a moment when I said that, and opened them again but wouldn't look at me. "I want to be," she said, furtively, as if this were her secret. We sat side by side for a minute or two without speaking. Late afternoon sun was coming in the windows of the den, reddish and warm, making the moment seem steeped in memory even as it was going on.

There were footsteps outside, Becca sat up and moved away a bit, the door opened and in came a kid with red hair. I had a feeling I'd seen him before and never knew he was Becca's brother. "Oh," he said, taking us in.

"What's up?" Becca said to him.

"Nothin'."

"This is Andy. And that is the famous Zack, chief of the mush police."

He looked uncomfortable. "Hi," he mumbled.

"Hi."

"You want to be in here?" Becca said.

"Yeah."

"Be our guest. It's all yours." She got up, I followed, and Zack turned on the TV as we left. I wondered if he noticed that she took my hand as we crossed the dining room, or studio, or whatever it was. It looked to me as though Becca's mom must have painted the big picture in the living room, because I couldn't figure out the ones in this room either. There were stretched canvases stacked against the walls, and now that I was paying attention I noticed a pile of mats that I supposed she must use for yoga. An easel stood in the corner, spotted with every color of paint, and the china cabinet was full of brushes and jars and tubes.

In the fireplace the fire had burned down, but a few red coals were still smoldering. I put my coat on. At the front door I said, "Thank you for this afternoon."

She smiled a little, as if that amused her. "You're a sweet boy, you know that?"

"I am?" Maybe sweet was not the thing to be.

"So far," she said, and gave me a quick kiss, her closed lips just meeting mine. "See you tomorrow."

"Bye."

I went down the steps into the last, reddest rays of late afternoon; in the sun the snow was turned pink, and by contrast in the shade it looked blue. I bent down and made a snowball and threw it out toward the street, watching it hit a branch and break up into falling particles that twinkled as they caught the light.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

That night I went to bed tired out but filled with the excitement of what had happened with Becca and of almost knowing that she wanted to do those things again. I didn't dare be sure for fear of jinxing it, but secretly, some part of me knew that it had nothing to do with superstitious worries – it had to do with what she would choose.

Next day the weather stayed clear and cold, sun blindingly bright on snow everywhere, cold enough so that the snow squeaked underfoot and did not melt even in the middle of the day. It was almost impossible to remember that in six months it would be ninety-five degrees. I sat next to Becca in English and read a hundred things into it when she would give me a look – or not give me one; seeing her in class, as she raised her hand and disagreed with Mr. Kearns, and remembering that this same girl had chosen to lie down beside me in our own secret privacy, kept me in a state of astonishment and distraction. I was aware all the time of waiting for the next chance to be alone with her, or just for school to be over so I could talk to her on the phone. The hot bulletin of the day was that Clay had finally called Toni and asked her out. I tried again to convince Dal that he'd saved my life, but he wouldn't believe me. Instead we talked about physics and Becca and whether he felt like going out with Denise Crevello again and the way things were at his house, which was no better. On Wednesday night he and I went out for a walk because his dad was at another evening meeting and Dal couldn't stand to be in his house; we wandered over to Washington U. while he told me about how his parents and Katie had a huge fight over a boy she wanted to go out with who was in the eleventh grade, because they said he was too old. "Do you think it ever occurs to your dad that he's being a total hypocrite?" I said, and then wished I'd bitten my tongue.

"Maybe he still cares what happens to Katie," Dal said.

Well, if he cares so much, I thought, why's he fucking some other woman? But I managed to keep it to myself.

We were on one of the diagonal paths across the quadrangle when I looked up at the couple coming toward us; the guy had his arm around a girl with curly black hair, and she was laughing at something he was saying, and it was Toni. She almost passed by without noticing us, she was so engrossed in the guy she was with, but I said her name and she came out of her spell and said, "Oh, hi – Clay, these are a couple of my friends – this is Andy, and Dal – this is Clay."

"How're you doin'?" he said, shaking hands first with Dal and then me. He was a bit taller than Dal – he had his straight hair combed straight back, he was wearing a grown-up-looking topcoat, he probably thought he was a pretty sharp guy especially with Toni adoringly hanging on his arm the way she was.

"You didn't see me here, you guys," Toni said. "I told my parents I was over at Claire's."

"They don't approve, huh?" I said.

"Surprise," said Toni. "Actually, I didn't bother to ask. No need to beg for trouble."

"So, what do you guys do?" Clay said. He reminded me of a politician.

"Do?" Dal said. He was already in a dark mood and I could see Clay wasn't helping it out. "We go to school, what do you do?"

"Hey, what can I tell you?" he said, gesturing to the buildings around us. "This is the story – old Washout U." We called it that too sometimes, but somehow it offended me coming from Clay. Did he think he was too good for it? "You guys in high school?"

"Mm-hm."

"You must be seniors," Clay said, which I assumed he guessed because he knew Toni was; it gave me a funny feeling that he was trying to ingratiate himself.

"Yeah."

"Let me tell you something: the fun starts next year – you know what I'm sayin'?" I thought he gave us a wink, but in the semi-darkness of the quad it was hard to be certain.

Dal nodded slowly, very coolly, as if from vast experience; I said nothing.

"Well, good to see you," Clay said, when no one answered him.

"Yeah," I said.

"See you guys," said Toni, sounding like she was ready to get rid of us, and we continued in opposite directions.

"Who in the hell is that?" Dal said, when we were out of earshot.

"That's a guy Toni has a huge crush on, she's been sitting by the telephone for days waiting for him to call her."

"He looks like a real lizard to me," said Dal.

"Thinks he's hot shit because he's in college."

"Hi-i-igh temperature shit," said Dal.

"Very high."

"Nuclear," said Dal.

"He better watch out or he might go critical and explode."

"Talk about shit hittin' the fan," said Dal.

"Yeah, but has he got any fans?"

"He's got one," said Dal.

"Toni, you mean."

"Toni makes two. His biggest fan is him."

That put Dal in a better mood; maybe Clay was good for something after all, I thought.

On Thursday after school the Graces and I agreed to meet at Claire's – only, really, they weren't the Graces anymore to me because Becca wasn't in a category with anyone else. I got there before she or Toni did, and Claire and I found ourselves in her room looking at each other a little awkwardly. "How's it going?" she said to me, sitting cross-legged on the bed.

"Good. Very good." I was looking out the window at her back yard.

"With Becca?" It was the first time Claire or I had said anything about it.

I nodded. There was a self-conscious silence. "Do you mind?" I said finally.

"It's not really a question of whether I mind, is it?" said Claire, but the sound of her voice made me think she did. I wanted to ask her to repeat everything Becca had said to her about us, but wouldn't that be unfair somehow, and anyway why should there be any need to sneak around and play telephone, weren't we old enough to quit that? Openness, I thought, remembering what Becca had said about her dad. A vague image of a woman standing on her head naked flitted through my mind and made me smile.

Claire got up from the bed and stood next to me at the window, looking down at the snow covering the flower beds in the back yard. On the gutters of the garage icicles glittered in the sun. Unexpectedly, she put her hand on my shoulder and kissed me on the cheek, peck, and said, "I'm happy for you, Andy, I really am."

"Thanks," I said, putting my arm around her shoulders. It was thoroughly confusing to feel her lips touch my cheek, and like it; I couldn't understand what she wanted from me, but I felt it would be wrong not to show her the same kind of affection I had for the past year or more – I wasn't supposed to push her away, was I? But I didn't want Becca to walk in and find us there like that, either, and the more we stood there the more uncomfortable I got. Neither of us seemed to know what to do next. I took my arm away but that didn't make me feel any less awkward. It was a relief when the doorbell rang and Claire went to answer it.

She came back with Toni; I could hear them talking excitedly halfway up the stairs. Toni burst into the room unwinding her scarf and saying, "Oh, Andy knows already."

"What does Andy know?" I said.

"That I went out with Clay last night."

"Yeah, I actually had the honor of meeting him." Toni gave me a semi-dangerous look.

"You did?" said Claire. "How?"

"Oh, Dal and I were over at Washington U., we were just wandering around and ran into them."

"What's he like?" said Claire.

Watch yourself, I thought, feeling Toni's eyes on me. "Well – he's pretty tall, he's good-looking – he's definitely older."

Downstairs the doorbell rang again, and Claire ducked out of the room to let Becca in. "You guys didn't like him, did you?" said Toni quietly.

"No, it's not that – we only talked to him for a second – I just felt kind of uncomfortable, you know?"

"I think he was uncomfortable too," Toni said. "He didn't really act like himself."

Claire and Becca came into the room and my attention was taken up by Becca, pulling off her hat with the red pom-pom on top, saying "Hi" to Toni as she took off her gloves, bringing with her a breath of cold outside air hidden in the folds of her coat. "Hi, Andy," she said in a low voice, as Claire went back to grilling Toni about Clay, and edged herself around to be next to me.

"So where did he take you?" Claire said.

"Oh, I met him over at the Student Union, and we had coffee and then we walked around for a while. He showed me where he lives – I mean the downstairs, he's in a fraternity."

"Ooh, Gracie," Becca said, "maybe you'll get pinned."

I thought perhaps I saw Toni blush as if she'd thought that herself. "I was kind of afraid I'd run into that guy that said 'jail bait,' but I didn't. Maybe he's not in Clay's house, anyway. He introduced me to a couple of the guys – they were okay. Not the loudmouth type. He didn't tell them I was in high school, though."

"Did you?" I said.

Toni looked uncomfortable. "No – you know what bothers me – they assumed I was in college and I just went along with it." I could tell everyone felt faintly betrayed.

"What *did* he say about you?" Claire said.

"Oh, he told them my dad owns Sorrento's. They kept asking me what it was like to grow up with him for a father. He's not really half as scary as they think he is."

"He could fool me," I said.

"Yeah, but you're a boy."

"I know, it's a congenital problem I have."

Claire parked herself in her usual spot in the corner of the bed with a pile of pillows behind her; Becca and I sat between her and Toni. "So what's he really like?" Becca said.

Toni hesitated. "Well, he's gorgeous, for one thing."

"That always helps," said Claire.

"He seems a lot more grown up – you know what I mean? He's not all tongue-tied the way some boys are."

"Mike Sinkiewicz," said Claire with a sigh. "He's cute, but he always seems to be trying to think of what to say."

"So what happened?" Becca said.

"He sure isn't shy," Toni said. "He must have had an awful lot of girlfriends." I could tell she didn't like to think about that, the same way I didn't like to think about who Becca had been with before. "He always seems to know what to do."

"And what *did* he, um, do?" I said.

"Well . . . eventually we went to his fraternity to get warm because I was starting to freeze out there, and we were in the parlor and I think he wanted to kiss me – well, I know he did – but there were other guys around so we couldn't. So finally we went outside again. It was awfully cold, but he lent me his coat."

I could picture Toni in Clay's topcoat, looking small in it, like a kid in her dad's overcoat – Toni, who always seemed to be one jump ahead of the boys she dated, letting herself be taken charge of for once. "Let me guess," I said – "he didn't waste any time getting to the point."

"Kind of like you and Becca," said Claire. Toni didn't say anything, and I looked at her next to me; she met my eyes and a faint smile crossed her face which was like the ghost of a look she might have given him after many kisses – it told me everything.

"You really like this guy, don't you?" said Claire, after a few moments. Since she and I and Toni had known each other, Toni had never been really head-over-heels in love with anybody, and I could tell Claire was thinking this might be the one; so was I. I wished I had liked him better.

"I don't know what he sees in me. He's surrounded by girls that are his age, for God's sake." I could understand her fears, but any boy anywhere would notice Toni. I remembered once when she was next to me in a crowd of students funnelling into the auditorium for an assembly, and the pressure of the kids behind us pushed us together so that her left breast was jammed against my arm – she had looked at me as if to say, Well? What do you think? Not minding a bit, just amused. She forgot about it the second we got inside, but I couldn't stop feeling a tingling in that place as if I had been branded by her femaleness.

"Sounds like you're doing just fine, Grace," said Becca.

"When're you going to see him again?" Claire said.

"He asked me to a party they're having Saturday."

"He did? Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

"Well, I had to save something to tell, didn't I?"

"I can't wait to hear about this party," Becca said.

"If you're lucky," said Toni.

"Maybe Dal and I'll crash it and keep an eye on you," I said. "I wouldn't want Mr. Jail Bait to get any ideas."

"What were you two doing over there last night, anyway?"

"Oh, Dal couldn't take it at his house, so he dragged me out to go for a walk," I said.

"What's his problem?" Claire said, and I realized I'd said too much.

"Is he in trouble with his parents?" Toni said.

My hand was resting lightly on Becca's, on the bed between us, reminding me that I'd already told her. But wasn't that different? "Not exactly. It's something I really can't talk about," I said.

"Jeez," Toni muttered impatiently. "Come on, you know the rules," said Claire. "There are no secrets on this bed."

"Forget the rules, it's not my secret, it's his. Look, it wouldn't be fair to Dal, I'm sorry."

"What's the big deal? I told you how Mark Milner and I took our clothes off in the garage when I was six," Toni said. "How much more embarrassing could something get?"

"It's not like that," said Becca.

There was a moment's pause, and then Claire said, "Oh – so it's okay to tell her, but not us? Thanks a lot."

Wonderful, I thought, giving Becca a look. Why did she have to do that?

"All right, but don't let him find out, damn it."

"Yes, sir," Toni said sarcastically.

"Dal's dad is having an affair with another woman." That sort of stopped time in its tracks while it sank in.

"Oh," said Toni.

"How in the world do you know that?" said Claire.

"That was just what I wanted to know," Becca said.

"Dal found this note in their garage – he showed it to me, it was obviously a love note, only person we could think of it could be for was his dad, and then eventually we ended up" – I didn't want to say it – "spying on him, we saw him in the parking lot at Sorrento's with this woman, making out with her."

"Making out in the parking lot at my dad's restaurant?" said Toni in an outraged voice, as if the location made it worse.

"Yep."

"Jesus."

"What were they doing?" said Claire.

"Kissing and kind of – feeling each other up."

"Did Dal see this?" said Becca.

"Yeah. I wish he hadn't. He's been messed up ever since. Well really, ever since he found that note. I ate dinner at their house last weekend, and it was just horrible, no one really talked except his little sister – I mean his mom tried, but she didn't get anywhere. Dal wouldn't say two words. And you know what else? She looks about half the age of Dal's dad. Like just out of college."

"Why'd you spy on him? If one of my parents did that," Claire said, "I sure wouldn't want to see it."

"That's disgusting," said Toni with feeling. "Her being that young, I mean."

"His dad went out to a so-called meeting last night, that's why we were over at Washington U. – it was driving Dal crazy to be at home and see his mom going around not knowing."

"Doesn't she suspect?" said Toni.

"She sure doesn't act like she does."

"God," Claire said. "Imagine what happens if she finds out."

"I know," I said.

"If my mom found out something like that . . ." Claire said darkly, and trailed off.

"What?" said Becca.

I looked at Claire, but she only shook her head. Her mother had often seemed tightly coiled inside to me, like a trap set to spring, preoccupied with thoughts that were not improving her mood; her father, when I caught a rare glimpse of him, seemed too nice to be a match for her mom, mild and placating, trying to keep her happy and not succeeding. We all sat brooding over what might go wrong in a family.

"I wish we could do something for him," Becca said.

No one answered.

"Well, there's no use sitting here getting depressed over Dal's problems," Toni said, bouncing up off the bed and going through Claire's records. "It's not going to help any." She put on "What'd I Say" and cranked up the volume until Claire yelled at her to turn it down before her mom came and kicked us out. I watched her jitterbug by herself and thought of what a lucky guy Clay was, if she was as crazy about him as she seemed to be; I just hoped he appreciated it. "Come on, move," Toni said impatiently. It was easier to get up and dance than not, with that music on, even though we bumped into each other in the confined space of Claire's room; the movement cleared my head, made what was happening to Dal's family seem like a bad dream. For a moment I almost felt guilty that I could let go of it like that when I knew Dal couldn't. "Hey, you know what?" I said. "It's supposed to snow again tomorrow, why don't we go sledding tomorrow night? We could go to that golf course out at Westwood, it's perfect."

"Sure," Becca said, in the middle of a spin.

"Yeah, why not?" said Toni.

"Might as well," said Claire.

"We could take Dal with us," said Becca. "Get his mind off everything."

"Yeah, make him come," said Toni. "Tell him we'll fix him up with Claire."

"Yeah," Claire said. "Oh yeah. He really needs help getting a date."

"Hey you guys, what am I going to wear to this party with Clay?" said Toni, and Ray kept on going "unhh – ohh – just a one more time" and the Raelets kept answering "just one more time" and I kept watching Becca's dark hair bounce and swirl as she danced.

The route was like one of our midnight drives out into the county, the radio was on KATZ where we often had it, but everything else was different: Becca between me and Dal in front, Toni and Claire in back with a sled wedged in next to them, more sleds in the trunk. The girls teased me about the rattiness of my old car, its tearing upholstery, the roof liner that hung down so that your head brushed against it in the back seat, the peculiar noises its suspension made, but I was driving, I was in charge, and to have Becca and Dal next to me, and mine in different ways, made me feel singled out for honor – a success in life. The car was warm and full of voices and it was Friday night, I was in love with Becca and she might be with me, and Toni knew in twenty-four hours she'd be out with Clay, and "Ruby Baby" was playing on the radio and it felt as though anything else was crowded out, thrown out the window and left behind. The fresh snow had rounded the contours of everything, the soot that had fallen on the old layer had been covered up and again everything was new.

We parked next to a low stone wall by the edge of the golf course and lifted our sleds over and set off across the untracked snow; it was giving off pearly gray light which seemed to reflect back and forth between the cloudy sky and the white ground. Impossible to tell where that light first came from; it was one of the elements – it came, perhaps, because the scene was complete, and would be there at midnight without a moon. Walking forward into it, we spread out; the space seemed limitless, voices were lost in it. I held Becca's hand as we plowed along through the deep snow, sinking in to the tops of our boots, each pulling a sled. We could be ten years old, I thought, remembering how on snowy days in grade school we were allowed to bring our sleds and use them at recess, how the entire basement hallway, alongside the gym, was filled up with sleds leaned against the walls two and three deep. There was a special racket of sleds bumping each other and runners scraping along the floor that echoed off the concrete walls before and after recess on only those days of the year.

But the way Becca's gloved hand felt in mine was something no ten-year-old could know. In the distance were dark masses of trees against the gray-whiteness. We were on rolling land that stretched gently uphill until, still not close to us, it became steeper and there was where we were going. Dal was a little ways in front of us, looking small in the landscape, and Toni and Claire were off to the side; I could faintly hear Toni chattering excitedly to Claire, but I couldn't make out the words. Above, there were a few gaps in the clouds where black sky showed through, and lights were on at the country club but that was far away and no one would notice us.

Dal was first to get to the top of the hill; it was not an easy climb, pulling a sled and trying not to slip on the snow. Becca and I had to let go of each other's hand in order to get up it; Toni and Claire came last, Toni saying the snow was getting into her boots. It wasn't as high as the hill at the monastery, but the horizon was far away; snow extended out and out, and at points where there were no trees on the horizon, the snow finally seemed to blend into the sky just at the fading-out of sight so that there was no real division – that made me feel as though I was floating. The scene made us all quiet, separately reflecting, for a long moment.

"Which way do you want to go?" Becca said; she was next to me. Just then Dal flung himself on his sled and sailed off down the hill in a long gradual arc to one side, his path winding over or around little bumps in the land, far out into the dimness. Then we all couldn't wait; Becca and I started almost at the same moment, but I somehow left her behind, flying down the first part and then coasting with just the hiss of snow under the runners, trying to steer always toward the downhill, making it last every moment it could. I heard Claire yelling "Look out!" somewhere behind me and Toni giving a shriek probably of delight; then I slid to a stop, got up, looked around me; not far away, Toni and Claire were having a snowball fight. Where was Becca? I felt tiny in the world of snow. Someone was coming along, just a silhouette in the dark working its way uphill, off to one side of me, and after a moment I made out the pom-pom on the hat. We met halfway up the hill, panting slightly. "Isn't this fantastic?" she said.

"God, yes."

"I wish it would snow even more."

When we got to the top Dal was there already, looking around. "Want to have a race?" he said.

"I'll win." My sled was longer than his, it weighed more, and I had always maintained that this gave me an advantage, ever since we were kids. He refused to believe it.

"No, I'll win," Becca said. That put a whole new face on things.

"All right," said Dal, "let's see." We hemmed and hawed over which way to point ourselves and whether there was room for all three side by side and where the race would end, then lined ourselves up with our sleds poised on the edge of the slope, Becca counted to three and we pushed off, headfirst down the hill, gathering speed, careening over bumps – I wasn't ahead after all and at one point it seemed we were all going to converge at the same instant on one narrow little dip where it was obviously steepest and crash, and at the last moment I tried to change course but I was going too fast to turn, the sled began to tilt and then the steering bar dug into the snow and I rolled over and ended up like someone making snow angels, on my back and half-buried, looking up at the sky. Through a rift in the clouds I could see a couple of pinpoint stars. My own momentum as I flipped over had left me pressed down into the snow a little and it was suddenly absolutely quiet, oddly comfortable, my vision to the sides blocked by snow so there was nothing to see but sky. I felt as though everyone else had vanished or as though I had flipped into a world of my own. It made me think of Becca asking me if I had ever thought I was the only person on earth.

Abruptly Dal entered my field of vision, loomed over me. "You okay?"

"Fine."

He gave me a hand up and I brushed myself off; Becca was approaching, pulling her sled. "Who won?"

"I'm not sure," she said.

"She did," said Dal. I wasn't sure if he was being chivalrous, or if he was convinced she had, but I could tell he was impressed. People didn't beat Dal at athletic pursuits.

"I didn't mean to run you off," Becca said to me. "Did I make you crash?"

"No, I just turned too quick. Anyway, it was fun."

"Fun? Aren't you frozen?" she said. "Turn around. You're covered." With efficient hands she brushed snow off my back and then finished off the job by dropping a little down my neck.

"Hey! Enough already!" I ducked down to make a snowball and straightened up with it in my hand, but Becca had her hands up and a

"who, me?" look on her face. "Now, would I do something like that on purpose?" she said.

"Sure," I said, but I dropped the snowball. I wanted to grab her and kiss her but I was too aware of Dal watching us. I pulled my sled out of the snow instead, and he and Becca turned and headed uphill. The target was too tempting to resist; I made another snowball and flung it, but instead of hitting Becca I got Dal square in the back.

"Oh, is that what you want?" he said, turning around.

"I missed – I was trying to hit her."

"Oh, sure," Dal said, bending down. I knew that it was hopeless to get into a snowball fight with Dal, but we'd done it a hundred times and why not do it again? He drilled me with his first shot as I was making a snowball; it seemed maddeningly easy for him to evade my throws, and equally easy to hit me – not to mention that he threw hard. He concentrated on it as if he were putting someone out at home, but just as he was getting off another, Becca plunked him right in the back of the neck with a handful of snow. He turned to face her as she scooped up another. "Now, just a damn minute," he said, starting to laugh, and I threw a snowball and actually managed to hit him. "Okay! I surrender!"

Becca said something to him that I didn't quite hear and they started up the slope again, me following after. I stepped in Becca's footprints. At the top I found everyone in a clump, looking around, saying how fabulous this was: Dal surrounded by girls, as usual. Maybe not literally, but in truth. I watched Claire, wondering if she might have her eye on him after all – if Toni had known more than she let on when she made that joking proposition – but Toni seemed more interested than Claire, talking a mile a minute to Dal about why didn't he ever get together with the four of us, didn't he like them, did he have too many girlfriends already? and Dal was agreeing, yeah, it was so hard to keep track . . . Becca was quiet, looking out into the distance; when I came and stood next to her she didn't seem to notice for a while, and then she took my hand.

"Let's go down together," I said.

"Okay."

"You be on my back, all right?" I poised my sled on the edge, lay down on it, Becca got on top of me and we pushed ourselves off with our hands, really flying now, if we had a race like this we'd win for sure, I thought, trying to steer around the bigger bumps – we flew over one and came down with a thump but Becca held onto my shoulders and stayed on; we coasted farther down than I'd been able to

go by myself. The weight of her on my back was lovely. We lay for a moment like that before she got off, and I could feel her warm breath on my neck. Then we stood up and I put my arms around her and kissed her; we stood there, off to ourselves, and I took off my glove and touched her cheek, feeling pulled out of myself until Toni, from higher up, called "No necking down there!"

"Oh, who says," Becca said under her breath, but as if we had to obey, we started back up the hill, pulling together on the sled rope. As we were halfway up someone on a sled zipped past us and I couldn't even tell who it was, but we got there and found it must have been Toni; Claire and Dal were preparing to go down together on Dal's sled, which was not as long as mine so they barely fit. They were sitting up, Claire in front of Dal; he had his feet on the steering bar and she was scrunched against him – I wondered if this had been her idea or his. He reached behind him and pushed off and they sailed away into the dimness. In a different direction, Toni was working her way back up to us. She got to the top, panted a little, and said, "Everybody gets to do that except me."

"Do what?" said Becca.

"Double up."

"Andy'll take you, I bet."

"Sure, if you want to," I said. I positioned the sled ready to go again and Toni sat leaned back against me, holding on to the sides. Inwardly I thanked Becca for volunteering me for this, so I wouldn't have to feel I was making her jealous. I looked up at her over my shoulder, standing there hands in pockets, the legs of her dark pants covered with snow. "Push us off, okay?" I said, and she gave us a good hard shove over the edge, stronger than I had realized she was; Toni let out a whoop. We bumped and sailed and skittered and glided a long way down.

"I think it was a good idea to bring Dal," Toni said, when we had started back up. "He seems okay to me."

"Were you kidding when you said you were gonna fix him up with Claire, or not?"

"I thought I was."

"Stranger things have happened, I guess."

We trudged along in a comfortable silence for a while; it seemed a long time since I had been alone with Toni or we had had one of our long talks about her love life. "You're really crazy about Clay, aren't you?" I said.

She sighed. "Maybe it is crazy. Do you think? I mean, I keep thinking he's going to wake up and look at himself in the mirror and say, hey, I'm in college, what am I doing going out with a high school kid?"

"Maybe he likes younger women."

"Oh, don't say that – it reminds me of Dal's dad."

"Well, there's kind of a major difference between his situation and yours, don't you think? Anyway, Clay's not so horrendously old – how old is he?"

"Twenty. I knew those guys had fake I.D.'s. But then, they all do."

"So he's twenty, why should that stop him from liking you?"

Two people on a little sled shot by, lying down, holding up their legs to keep from dragging their feet on the ground. We found Claire at the top by herself, holding her hands over her ears. "Cold," she muttered, stamping her feet. I took her hand away and breathed on her ear; it felt like the night for everyone to be close to everyone. I remembered the scent of her hair from when she was my girlfriend.

"Better?"

"Some."

"Then maybe I should do the other one." I was breathing on her other ear when I looked up and saw Dal and Becca coming up the slope toward us, and felt caught, guiltily, although it hadn't meant anything like that; I had to stop and move away. Dal and Becca were talking anyhow and I wasn't sure she had noticed.

When they got to the top Becca was quiet, a little drawn into herself. Dal wasn't saying anything either. She breathed out for a while, looking around at the horizon as the rest of us were already doing, and then she came over beside me and took my hand. A silence came over the group. The clouds had begun to part more and more; it was darker now, colder, the stars were showing through, we seemed to be on a promontory in space.

"Well," Dal said, the word falling into the quiet in the definitive way that meant, This is over.

"Well," said Toni.

"Shall we go?" said Claire.

I looked at Becca; she nodded. "Yeah," I said.

Dal pulled his sled to the edge of the steep slope in the direction we had come from, paused for a moment, then decisively he swooped away down the hill; we followed him almost in a line, first Toni, then

Claire, then Becca, and I came last, each in our separate hurtle and glide.

I wondered if Dal would get in the back seat on the way home, with Claire, but he sat in front again, with Becca between us. No one spoke except now and then when Toni would want Becca to change the station on the radio; she would let go of my hand and do it and then her hand would come back again.

CHAPTER TWELVE

One by one I dropped the others off; when Dal got out Becca said "Good luck" to him. He went away up the front walk to his dark house, carrying his sled with one hand; I didn't envy him having to go back in, return to knowing what he knew. Becca seemed to be meditating on her own thoughts as we drove to her house, and I didn't want to break in upon them.

"I had a little talk with Dal," she said, in kind of a sad voice, when we were close to her place. "About his dad and all that."

"He told you about it?"

"No, I brought it up."

Great, I thought. Did she have to let everyone know that she knew? "Was he mad that I told you?" I thought back over the evening, to see if there were any signs of that.

"No, it's okay. I think he really wanted to talk about it."

"Does he know Toni and Claire know too?"

"I didn't tell him."

"Good."

"He seems so sad to me. I can tell it's really bothering him."

"What'd he say?"

"It was mostly about his mom, worrying about her. And how selfish his dad's being."

"Boy, I'll say." We pulled up in front of Becca's house and I turned the lights off but left the engine running so we could have some heat. There was time yet before she had to go in.

"I didn't say this to Dal, but I think you have to be selfish sometimes, you know? It's not always such a terrible thing, really. I mean, you are who you are, how can you deny that?"

"Yeah, but it was his choice to marry her, wasn't it? Don't you have to live with that?" I thought of Dal telling me about the picture of his parents when they were in England and first in love. But that had been a long time ago.

"What if it really doesn't work?" Becca said. "What if you're just not in love anymore? My aunt and uncle are like that – my cousin Sharon says she can't remember them ever sleeping in the same room. We always see them on the holidays. Everything seems normal at their house until you get the picture, and then it all seems fake. They're hardly ever together except at dinner – he's always at work. One time my mom was talking to my aunt in the kitchen and they didn't know I was in the next room and I heard her say I know you're not happy like this, why don't you tell him you want a divorce and my aunt said because of the kids."

"What a life," I said, trying to sound like this was nothing personal to me.

"Yeah," Becca said. "And you know what? Whenever they come over to our house for Passover or something, Sharon tells me she wants to come and move in with us because things are so much more fun here. She's the youngest, maybe my aunt's just waiting for her to go to college so she can leave too."

"You think so?"

"Maybe. I don't know how she could have waited this long, myself."

Becca was holding my hand in both of hers, gently stroking my palm; we sat and contemplated her aunt's unhappy life, living day after day in a family and all the time sitting on a plan to end it. Maybe one of my parents was thinking about making an escape – it would be my mother, I was certain. The troubles of family formed a cloud over us; what had happened to the evening since I had driven out to the golf course feeling on top of the world?

"So what I want to know is," Becca said, "would it be selfish?"

"I don't know," I said. Trying to fit all that under the word "selfish" seemed like trying to make a bed with too small a blanket. "But it's not the same as what Dal's dad is up to. You don't know Dal's mom, but if you want to see somebody unselfish, that's where to look." I thought of her baking that pie that Dal and I hadn't eaten. "She's trying really hard to fix things but she doesn't know what needs to be fixed."

"What does?" Becca said, and until she said it I would have thought that the answer was his dad did, but all at once I didn't have a clue.

"I don't know," I said again, and what if no one knew?

I looked at my watch; it was a quarter of twelve, and I felt thwarted: a whole evening had passed, I'd hardly even kissed Becca and somehow joy had slipped from our grasp and now the moment didn't feel right. Even that moment was getting away. I kissed her and she seemed willing enough but I could still taste her sadness, or confusion – and my own. The thought that maybe she was giving me dutiful kisses tormented me and made me pull back to look at her in the dim streetlight that was coming into the car. "Are you mad at me, Andy?" she said.

"God, no."

"Are you sure? Something's wrong."

What made me think I could hide anything from her? "Kind of a depressing conversation we've been having."

"I'm sorry," she said, which surprised me.

"It isn't your fault."

"Let me erase the depressing stuff, okay?" She looked at me as though that was a real question; I had no idea what she meant.

"Can you?"

"If you let me. Do you want me to?"

"Okay," I said, thinking that there was no end to the surprises in her. She turned her hand sideways and laid her fingers on my forehead, as if feeling to see if I had a fever.

"Now think of everything that's been bothering you, really hard, and let it go into my fingers." You can't mean it, I thought, half-embarrassed for her, but I looked into her eyes and she didn't seem to be kidding. "Concentrate," she said strictly. "Close your eyes." I did; that made me a little less self-conscious. It was still difficult to believe I was doing this at all. "Think hard. Think about how awful everything is. Really do a good job, get it in your mind, don't do it halfway." I thought about grownups living their long, unhappy lives of resignation and duty, holding everything in, maybe lying to themselves, to each other – no passion, their bodies thick and tired – and me becoming one of them . . . "Let it go into my hand," Becca said. "Where I'm touching you. Feel my hand, let it go there." I felt her gentle touch, very definite and somehow at that moment so intimate it almost scared me to be so exposed to her, so without defense. Suddenly her fingers swiped across my forehead, as if wiping

something off, and I opened my eyes to see her holding up her closed hand, showing it to me. "I got it," she said. I didn't know what to say. She rolled down the window, held her hand out and seemed to throw something away, shook her fingers as if they were wet, and then pulled back her hand and rolled the window back up with a satisfied expression on her face. "Now you," she said.

"What?"

"Do me the same way."

"But – " She put her finger on my lips.

"Please?"

I took a breath, thinking, who am I to do something like this? but Becca's eyes left me no choice. I put my hand on her forehead and she closed her eyes and her face went serious and then it went to no expression at all; I thought she had gone away from me and then I thought she was absolutely present, not trying to be pretty or smart or profound or anything, just Becca doing what might be the silliest thing in the world in front of me, trusting me with that, and it had never occurred to me that I might be this close to someone except maybe Dal, in a whole different way, and I wanted to take every sad or painful thing away from her in one sweep of my hand, and keep it away for good – "Are you letting it go?" I said.

"Yes," she whispered, and I pulled my fingers across her forehead and captured the thoughts like some noxious bug with sharp scabbling little legs, held them tight, rolled my window down and hurled them away into the street. I turned back to her; she opened her eyes. "It works," she said softly. "My mom taught me that." All I had to do, I thought, was let go of some one last shred of doubt or fear in my heart and we would become a world.

I was back at Dal's the next day to do physics again; snow was still on the ground, but wind had blown it from the trees and bushes, except for little white hammocks of snow at the base of each branch. While Dal was searching for his notebook in his room, I went up to his mom's study, and as soon as I came in I remembered the picture. It took only a moment to find it, and I wondered how I'd managed not to notice it all these years. His mom was wearing a dress with a high collar and a long skirt and a belt cinching in a waist that was already amazingly small; she looked almost too thin, as if she were so young in the picture that she hadn't even finished growing yet. It was true, she hardly looked any older than we were now. Her hair was up on the top

of her head in big curls, and a silly-looking hat was perched on the back of her head, but even that couldn't keep her from being beautiful. I could see why Dal's dad had fallen in love with her – anyone might have when she looked like that. There was a kind of newness about her as if she'd just been created whole and perfect about ten minutes before the picture had been taken and there hadn't been time yet for the muddy overcoat of the world to rub against her and leave its mark – but that was kind of heartbreaking when you remembered that it was in the middle of the war, and the night before a bomb could have dropped, did drop somewhere, and probably killed some other girl as perfect as she was. How did he bear it, knowing she was in danger of that kind, I thought, imagining Becca – a Becca trapped in Nazi Germany – but I couldn't let myself imagine that, there were things I couldn't bear to think about. Dal was right, it was impossible not to see how in love they were. Dal's dad was hardly recognizable, young and wiry-looking and in uniform, with his arm around her – you could just see where the uniform was kind of crumpled because he was holding her to him really hard, pulling her off balance a little bit, and she was beginning to laugh up at him. They were like a sort of legend, unchanging and far from the world I knew.

I heard Dal come in behind me; he studied the picture over my shoulder for a long moment before he spoke. "See?" he said.

"Yes." But I couldn't say what I saw; there was too much – there was everything that came after for them, right up to today, but that was only the obvious – there was love itself, anyone's love, there was even Dal, and if Dal why not me or Becca, our lives yet to be lived, there was war which if we had one now would end everything, there were years of dinners and pies and outgrown clothes and basement projects, new jobs, fixing cars – Dal's house and everything in it, my house, all the houses seeming to balance crazily on the heads of two legendary young lovers and everything to depend on keeping all that lightly, impossibly aloft. How could anyone? Wasn't there just too much, so that it had to swamp down and overwhelm the two, so that that feeling *had* to end?

And if it did, I thought, thinking of Becca, how were you supposed to bear losing that? Nothing in the world could take its place; some things you were born knowing – that was one.

It made me think I understood why Dal liked science courses the best. They took your mind off what you could never do anything about.

After an hour or so of beating our heads against the latest set of problems I went downstairs to get a drink of water and as I passed by the living room Dal's mom looked up and said, "Andy? Could I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure," I said, though I couldn't think what about. If I had been younger I would have thought I was in trouble somehow, but her voice said that wasn't the case. "What is it?" I said, leaning on the back of the couch.

She was sitting in an armchair with a flowered slipcover, reading. One of the rules of their house was no eating in the living room, for fear of spots and stains. Mrs. Carlton seemed to size me up a little uncomfortably, as if there were something she didn't know about me after all this time, and she hesitated, which wasn't like her.

"I wonder if you can help me with something," she said. "I don't want you to feel you have to say anything, but – I'm worried about Dal."

"Oh," I said, and then inside there was another Oh, as I began to see what kind of a position I was in.

"He seems awfully unhappy to me. I can't help noticing. I know he doesn't want me to; whenever I ask him how he is he mumbles something and changes the subject. But I'm his mother, I can't simply sit by and watch."

I didn't know what to say, and Mrs. Carlton kept her eyes on me, waiting patiently, even humbly, which felt all wrong coming from her. Now I knew how Dal must feel, wanting to help her, wanting to make it go away, and helpless to do so. But if he couldn't fix it or tell her what the real trouble was, how much less could I?

"I don't mean to invade his privacy," she said, as if that was what my silence meant. Her eyes left mine; there was a resigned note in her voice. "I know he's growing up, you two are, there may be things you need to keep to yourselves. But I'm worried about him, Andy. Haven't you noticed a difference in him lately?"

I nodded without speaking, wondering what in the world I was going to say.

"Do you know what it's about?"

I should have known this could happen, I thought, should have had something ready to tell her. "I'm not really sure," I said, tracing the pattern in the rug with my eyes. Say something, think of something. "I think maybe he needs a girlfriend." Dal's love life was something I'd never thought of talking to Dal's mom about, but it was

the closest thing to the truth that I could mention. "A real girlfriend, not just somebody to go out with."

She took a breath and sighed; I glanced up at her and then away again. "I've had that thought too," she said. "And then I've thought – perhaps it has something to do with the point where you are in life – about to go off to college. Maybe it's only natural for it to become uncomfortable to be at home any longer, at a certain point . . ." She sounded as though that was the last thing she wanted to believe. A good thing she hadn't heard some of our midnight conversations in the car, over the past year, about how we couldn't wait to get out of the Midwest. "I remember being your age better than you might imagine," she said, and I looked up again and tried to see the girl in the picture upstairs, as green and inexperienced as me, perhaps, as full of dreams, but I couldn't – she certainly got away, didn't she? Married an American and ended up in another country for the rest of her life – for the first time I began to think of what it would feel like if I had to make such a decision in a year or two, and it occurred to me that Dal's courage might have come from her. "There's a sense that everything will change when you go away. Or that going away will solve things." I wondered if this was the conversation she wished she could have with Dal.

"Do you think it does?"

She gave me a look as though I'd come close to too personal a question, but after an instant the look softened. "Nothing solves everything, Andy," she said gently, making me feel absurdly young. What could I possibly do for her?

"Oh, I know, I didn't mean that. Dal and I do think a lot about going to college, though." At least that had been true before everything that had happened recently; there didn't seem to be room to right now.

"Of course," she said. "And you should. Life doesn't stand still. I only wish he seemed happier. This is a time to enjoy, too, you know. One doesn't go back to anything in life."

"I'm sure you're right," I said vaguely.

"Well, if it's a girlfriend he really needs, maybe it's just as well if he doesn't find her right now – they'd only end up going off to school and breaking up." She said it like a law of nature, and I felt jerked out of a sleep, out of a dream; my heart went hollow inside. "Where do you think you'll go?" Mrs. Carlton said in a pleasant, social voice.

I hardly cared, feeling as though I'd just lost Becca when she had barely begun to be mine. "Tufts was my first choice. Still is, I guess. If I get in."

"Of course you will," she said, as if that were obvious – or maybe she was just being polite, dismissing me, now that she saw I wasn't going to help her with what was really on her mind.

"Thanks," I mumbled. Becca wanted to go to Carleton and I was more certain that she would get in there, and then there would be a thousand miles between us; how had I managed not to think about this?

"I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable, asking you about Dal," she said, as if she noticed something was wrong.

"No, no – no problem," I said. "I guess I'd better get back to physics. I don't think I'd ever get through this problem set without him." But as I climbed the stairs I was thinking that it was the second of March already – six months and then, if she was right, it would be as good as over . . .

Walking away from Dal's in the late afternoon, crunching over the snow that was hard packed on the sidewalks where people hadn't shoveled, I heard again Mrs. Carlton saying "One doesn't go back to anything in life." It registered for the first time how much she might have meant – everything she hadn't gone back to – and more than that, as if she was telling me that loss was simply the condition of things, that whatever else I might look forward to in uncertainty, I could be sure of that. But then how could anyone bear it, if what was beautiful or precious was forever being lost in the moment when it came?

It was windy, and the low sun shed no heat; as I walked it went behind some clouds that were building up in the west. I wondered if it would snow again, if the weather would change suddenly – anything could happen.

The same thoughts were still tormenting me when I walked up the porch steps at Becca's an hour or so later; she'd invited me to eat dinner with her family. I was almost glad to feel nervous about the dinner, because it offered some distraction from thinking what if Dal's mom was right, would a door slam shut between me and Becca, would I never again see that look that she was giving me as she was letting me in right now? But once I was in her presence that seemed impossible, crazy, and there was too much going on to think, Dobie was barking and then sniffing me, Becca was leading me into the kitchen where something smelled good, a jazz record was playing from the living room and she was saying, "This is my mom." Becca's mother leaned over a counter that stuck out into the middle of the kitchen and

held out her hand, a small, thin woman with straight hair and intense blue eyes like Becca's and a strong grip. "Nice to meet you, I hope you like fish," she said. "Sure," I said. The kitchen didn't smell the way it did at my house – spicier, or something. It was warm in there. "Take off your coat and stay a while," said Becca. "Just hang it in the back hall," her mom said, "that's where you throw anything, around here, if you don't know where to put it." She pointed toward a passageway where I found half a dozen coats of various sizes on hooks, Becca's sled that I recognized from the night before, brooms and mops, a baseball bat, assorted scarves and hats and ice skates and boots – I looked up and realized that was where Zack had taken off his boots and dumped them a few days ago, while Becca and I listened from the study; its door was only a couple of steps away. If her mom knew what we'd been up to in there – but she didn't. "What have you been doing today?" Becca was saying to me.

"Physics problems with Dal over at his house, just like every weekend."

"God – physics," Becca said. "You could have gotten through your whole life without taking physics." I knew she intended to.

"Maybe he wanted to," her mom said, cutting the ends off some green beans.

"I know he wanted to," Becca said, "but – "

"Well, I'm sure there are good reasons for taking physics, aren't there?" Mrs. Shulman looked up at me as if she knew I'd say what I really thought, and somehow I had to.

"It's sort of beautiful when you finally get it," I said. "You know how in math they say things are elegant?"

"Yes, but I can never see it," said Becca.

"Think of geometry."

"Ugh," Becca said.

"Beck," said her mother, "what do you think paintings are about, anyway?"

"They're not about geometry, Mom."

Her mother slid me a look as if we understood one another, and I thought she was about to say something but just then Becca's father came in. "Hey, Andy, how are ya?"

"Fine."

He poured himself a glass of wine from a bottle on the counter. "So when's dinner, I'm starving," he said to Becca's mom.

"Have a bean," she said, holding a green bean up, and to my surprise he took it with his teeth and crunched it up. "They're better raw anyway."

"No substitute for a large hunk of fried catfish," he said.

"Why don't you just take your large self back to the living room, and dinner will happen when it happens."

"Large self, yet." He looked down at his stomach as if she meant he was getting fat. "Hey Andy, want to listen to this Ellington record I got the other day?"

"You don't have to say yes," Becca said.

"Stay and talk to me," said her mother, and her dad, leaving the kitchen, said "Outvoted again."

Becca sat down on a stool across the counter from her mother, and there was another, so I joined her. "Okay mom, so talk."

"No no. I cook, you make the scintillating remarks."

"I told Andy how you stand on your head, now he wants to learn how," she said with a straight face. Oh thanks a million, I thought, giving her a look.

"Do you? Beck could teach you – you remember how, don't you, sweetie? It's very good for you, I don't know why nobody else in this family is interested."

"Because we all know how it looks," Becca said.

"Oh, children are so conventional," sighed Mrs. Shulman. "But you'll outgrow it."

Becca drew down the corners of her mouth in an I-beg-your-pardon sort of way, and her mother smiled. "It's worth a try, no matter what my daughter says," Becca's mom said to me. "Clears things up, gets rid of the kveching in your head. The petty little voices. That's the real point of it."

"I didn't know there was anything that did that," I said.

"Show him how, Beck. There's plenty of time before dinner."

Now wait just a minute, I thought. Since when did I volunteer for this?

"Oh, Mom, I haven't done it in years, don't you think you could? It wouldn't take too long."

Mrs. Shulman glanced up at the clock, and I was hoping she'd disagree, but she said, "Well, all right," wiping her hands on a dish towel. "You really want to?" she said to me, but of course it was too late to say no and Becca, with a mischievous smile on her face, knew that. I promised myself I'd pay her back somehow.

"Sure," I said, trying to sound convincing, and thinking what a fool I was about to make of myself. Here I meet my girlfriend's mother and ten minutes later I'm trying to stand on my head? What am I, nuts?

Mrs. Shulman led us into the dining room – her room – whatever it was called – and unfolded some mats that were stacked against the wall. "Take your shoes off," she said to me, arranging the mats in the middle of the floor. She acted as though this was perfectly typical everyday life – and maybe it was, for them; I was beginning to think that anything was possible at the Shulman house. I took off my shoes, and she positioned me in the middle of the mats and said, "Now you start by being on your hands and knees." I resigned myself to looking like an idiot, knelt down, put my hands on the floor; I deliberately didn't look up at Becca, but I could feel her watching, and, I was sure, suppressing giggles. "That's right, keep your back straight . . . now just put the top of your head on the floor." I did, and from that upside-down perspective watched Mrs. Shulman move around to the side. Isn't this great, I thought, here I am on the dining room floor with my butt sticking up and the two of them watching me, if Becca ever tells anyone else about this I'll never hear the end of it. "Make sure the very crown of your head is on the floor," her mom said matter-of-factly. "So it feels comfortable. Don't tuck your head under. Keep your neck straight. Let's see . . . move your hands back a little." She bent down and touched my elbow, guiding it a little closer to my body. "Now what you want to do is shift your weight forward and rest your knees on your elbows."

"My knees on my elbows?" How the hell was I supposed to get there?

"Just shift your weight," she said again patiently. "So you're resting on your head."

"This is the hard part, if you ask me," said Becca.

I made an effort to follow her directions, feeling as though I was falling off something, pressed my head down into the mat and lifted my legs off the floor, trying to guide my knees to my elbows but I couldn't seem to find them, and then I lost my balance and toppled over, rolling to one side and coming up feeling totally ridiculous. "That always happens at first," Mrs. Shulman said. "Give another try." I looked up at Becca helplessly, but she wasn't laughing at me; she made a gesture of opening out her hands that seemed to mean "No big deal." I resumed the position of waiting for someone to kick me in the ass, and from upside-down saw Mr. Shulman in the archway that led to the

living room. "What is going on in here?" he said. "Have you got him in your clutches already? Andy, you have to watch out for these two."

"Shoo," Becca said. "You're distracting him." He chuckled and disappeared; I could hear tenor saxophone music coming from the living room.

"Try it again," said her mom, and this time I managed to get my knees on my elbows. "Good. Now, do you feel pretty secure like that?"

"Not really." My lungs felt compressed, and I had to squeeze out the words. I felt as if I were frozen in the act of diving into the floor.

"Well, wait until you feel steady, and then gradually let your feet go up. Beck, stand over there in case he falls. Don't think about pushing your feet up, just let them float up like they're very light. Like they're on threads that are pulling them up to the ceiling until your legs are stra-a-ight up," she said coaxingly, touching my feet with her fingertips and just barely guiding them as I straightened my legs all the way. "There!" she said brightly. "Very good." She stepped back. Neither she nor Becca said anything; the saxophone continued to play. I was engrossed in the strangeness of my sensations and the effort I was making to stay straight, not to leave the point of precarious balance, looking at a piece of the living room upside down – sofa on the ceiling and windows below – and all at once I felt as though I was right-way-up in some very peculiar world, holding up a heavy ceiling with my head and my hands, and what were my feet standing on? I was floating in the air . . . I began to teeter and brought my feet down just in time to avoid falling, was on my hands and knees for a moment feeling the world go right-side-up again, and then sat up. "Wow," I said, looking around.

"So?" said Becca's mom in a perky voice.

"I got the strangest sensation for a second there, like I wasn't really upside-down."

"Ah – that's very good," she said, looking pleased with herself – or perhaps with me, I wasn't sure. "You must have a talent for this. Okay, so now I have to make dinner."

"Thanks, Mom," Becca said.

"Pick up the mats, okay?" Mrs. Shulman disappeared into the kitchen, and Becca and I folded up the mats together.

"You got it a lot quicker than I did," Becca said.

"I can't believe that whole thing even happened. Did I look totally ridiculous?"

"You worry too much," Becca said, and came up to me and furtively gave me a quick secret kiss. We both glanced around, saw no one looking, and kissed again for a longer time, silently, holding our breath. In the kitchen I heard Becca's mom hitting a spoon against the rim of a pan, and kissing Becca and hearing that at the same moment seemed to make a whole. We went into the living room and Mr. Shulman said, "Well, I tried to rescue you, but you wouldn't take me up on it."

"He did really well," Becca said.

"Fran's tried to teach all of us how to do that. Let me tell you, it's never been one of my favorite activities. As far as I'm concerned, a couple of good Duke Ellington sides'll do more for your psyche than any amount of headstands."

"How about both at once?" said Becca. "That should really do the trick."

He ignored that. "You ever heard this?" he said. "It's Ellington at the Newport Jazz Festival. Do you know Paul Gonsalves? Tenor player?"

"No."

"Man! Wait till you hear this," he said, getting up and turning the record over and making it louder. Behind his back, Becca made a face at me that seemed to mean Here we go again, but I wanted to hear it; she went back to the kitchen while the tenor solo went on and on, rocking along like a railroad train, above a rising tide of crowd noise. Mr. Shulman was sitting in his desk chair, nodding his head to the beat, and I was going through his record collection, half-reading the liner notes of albums I didn't have, thinking how you'd never hear music at my house this loud unless I put it on while my parents were out, until the side ended in an explosion of jubilation and shouts and drum crashes and trumpet squeals and yells of "More!"

"That is one hell of a record," Mr. Shulman said with feeling in the sudden silence, getting up and taking it off. "Can you imagine what it must have been like, being there?"

"Incredible," I said. Privately I thought it was just a little bit square – I would have picked John Coltrane or Miles Davis, if I could be at any concert in the world – but it did sound like a great night. An Event – one of those things that only happened in the East.

"You found anything else you want to listen to?"

"How about some Charlie Parker? I keep remembering that record that was playing the first time I came in."

"Oh yeah – let me look for that – "

"Dave! Dinner's ready!" Mrs. Shulman called. "Would you get Zack?"

"Okay," he called. "Here, you put it on, okay? Just turn it down a little so they don't complain."

Dinner happened in the kitchen at their house, around a wooden table with massive carved legs that would have been more at home in a dining room. It looked as if it had led a long and not too easy life in the kitchen – it was nicked and scratched and had rings on it from where people had put their glasses – but it was like everything else in their house: worn down by living into a state of comfortableness. It was not a house where you worried about whether you were going to break some rule. One wall of the kitchen was practically covered, from a couple of feet off the floor to as high as you could reach, with drawings by Zack and Becca as kids, snapshots, cards from friends, cartoons cut out of magazines – there was a bulletin board in the midst of everything, with notes stuck on it, but it seemed as if it had burst its boundaries and taken over the whole wall a long time ago. A telephone sat in a little niche, and next to the phone there was tacked to the wall the lid of a shoe box on the inside of which a child had written "get oof the" followed by an extremely accurate picture of a phone. "Who did that?" I said, pointing to it as we were sitting down.

"Oh, that was Zack," said Mrs. Shulman. "He always hated for me to talk on the phone when he was little. It took quite a while for him to draw that, so you can see how strongly he felt about it."

"Ah," said Mr. Shulman, "but Zack shall have his revenge."

"How?" said Zack.

"By being on the phone all the time so no one else can ever use it."

"Oh right, Dad. Becca's on it ten times more than me."

"Yes, but you're waiting in the wings to take over when she goes to college. I'm not fooled."

"This is good," I said, taking a bite of the fish; Mr. Shulman had been right when he said a green bean was no substitute for it.

"Thank you," Becca's mom said.

"So Beck," her father said energetically, as if hailing her from a distance, "what other fiendish torments have you devised for Andy besides making him stand on his head?"

"He picked it up right away," Mrs. Shulman said.

"You mean you've been making him do that already?" Zack said.

"I didn't make him, hon."

"No, you did," I muttered to Becca, who was sitting next to me.

"You loved it," she replied under her breath.

"Remember you're giving me a ride to that party at Jason's tonight, Dad," Zack said.

"Zack. You've been reminding me every ten minutes since noon."

"A sure sign Marcy'll be there," said Becca, making Zack squirm. "Zack's in love," she said to me, making doe eyes over the word "love."

"I am not," he said heatedly. "That has nothing to do with it."

"I don't know why it has to be such a source of conflict," Mrs. Shulman said mildly, but Zack only looked put-upon.

"I can't believe we have two kids old enough to go out on Saturday night," Mr. Shulman said to his wife. "Hey, we could have a date."

"Isn't it kind of late for that?" she said.

"It's only a quarter of seven," he said; she smiled tolerantly.

"What did you two do when you went out on dates?" Becca said; I thought that was a pretty nervy thing to ask her parents in front of a guest, but they didn't seem to mind.

"Back in the dark ages?" her dad said. "We drank tea and ate bagels, mostly."

"Woo-woo," Becca said, rotating her index finger in the air. "Heavy duty."

"We studied together a lot," said Mrs. Shulman.

"Even better," said Zack.

"This may come as a surprise, but at the college your mom and I went to, we were required to read books."

"Yeah, but you must have done something that was really fun once in a while," Becca said.

"The joy of each other's company," Mr. Shulman began in a once-upon-a-time voice, "was such that it transformed the most mundane –" He was interrupted by gagging noises from Zack.

"Zack, please," his mother said.

"Very mature, don't you think?" Becca said.

"Delightful," I said; I was just beginning to realize that I wasn't stopping at falling in love with Becca – I was falling for, of all things, her whole family as well.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was close to twelve when Becca and I got back to her house, after a long movie and a stop for a milkshake at the Parkmoor Drive-In. The house was dark except for the porch light and a dim light in the living room; somehow we had agreed without words that we were going to go inside.

Quietly we got out and closed the car doors; I knew how to do it now, as I followed her up the steps, waited for her to unlock the door, stepped inside as silently as I could.

"Beck?" Her mother's voice floated down the stairs to us.

"Hi, Mom."

"Did you have a nice time?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to bed?"

"Not right away. Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight." I heard a door close up above. I pulled Becca toward me by the lapel of her coat and kissed her, trying not to make even the sound of a foot shifting on the floorboards. We moved into the living room on tiptoe, took off our coats and dropped them on an armchair, and I grabbed her and started kissing her there in the middle of the living room, wanting her more than ever. We kissed as if kissing were a kind of breathing, until we were out of breath; I felt I couldn't get her close enough to me or hold her tight enough. When we stopped kissing, Becca leaned her head toward the couch as if to say, Let's sit down.

"Let's go in the den," I whispered, remembering everything that had happened there; my heart was pounding with wanting it all again, and more.

Becca turned her head a little and looked at me slightly sideways as if sizing me up. "You're getting bold," she said in an undertone, and I felt that I was, but somehow being with her family had made me feel it was okay to be bold in this house, the rules were different here.

"You were bold in the first place," I said. "When you gave me that kiss."

"Yeah," she answered with a smile, "but if we go in the den you might want more than a kiss."

"So? Would that be bad?"

"Maybe," she murmured; I couldn't tell if she was teasing me or not. She regarded me a while; it seemed as though something was happening very rapidly inside her, but I didn't know what it was. I began to wonder if I'd overstepped some boundary. "Well, all right," she said. "I don't suppose anybody'll come down and look for me." I hadn't even thought of that, too occupied with wanting her; what if one of them should find us in there, surely they'd know what had been going on – "My dad said to me once, If you're going to do something you don't want us to know about, at least do it at home."

"I hope he meant it."

"I hope he doesn't have to find out," she said, but she went with me across her mom's room, across parallelograms of streetlight on the floor, and into the den. I closed the door as quietly as I could. It was dark – the shades were down most of the way – and Becca turned on the light over the fishtank; it was just enough to see by. I felt very careful of her all of a sudden, as if one wrong move might shatter the moment; we looked at each other warily; I took her hands as if we were starting an old-fashioned dance, but somehow it was hard to begin.

"Change your mind?" she said quietly.

"No." I leaned forward and kissed her, and then I had her in my arms and it seemed that everything but us dissolved; in a moment we were lying together on the couch, kissing, my hand caressing her side and her hip, her leg between mine. I felt myself falling into the depth of her, her wanting me against her, taking me into the mystery of herself; there seemed to be no hesitation in her, no doubt, and I had never felt that with a girl before – the possibility that she might not hold back. I realized that made me the tiniest bit afraid.

As we kissed I reached for the top button of her blouse and began to unbutton it, almost certain that she would not object, and she didn't. I undid her buttons, feeling bolder and more excited with each one, until the waistband of her skirt stopped me, and opened her

blouse and caressed her breasts and her sides, her back, her neck, sliding my fingers into her bra to fondle her nipples – she lay with her eyes closed, turning slightly to meet me as I caressed her. I was wild to see her naked – would she stop me? – and though I wasn't sure if it was too much, I slid her bra up so that her breasts were exposed. She opened her eyes to watch me look at her; how did she feel about showing me herself that way? Her breasts were smallish, with hard pink nipples, and they seemed tender and vulnerable; I hesitated to touch her, though I was dying to, while her serious eyes held mine. Instead I bent my head and kissed her there and she held my head next to her, her hand in my hair closed in a firm grip, pulling my hair slightly, as if something else in her, not as strong as the desire to have me there, wanted to pull my head away. I realized I'd been pressing my hard-on against her for some time, deliberately rubbing it against her hipbone, and she was pressing back. Our legs were tangled together and I was pressing against her and I began kissing her mouth again and reached down and touched her hip, her thigh; I became bolder still and began to bunch up the material of her skirt in my hand, drawing it up and up. I could feel it sliding against the material of her slip, and I pulled that up too, gradually and recklessly, until I could touch her bare leg, slide my hands between her warm thighs, and higher and higher, scarcely believing this was happening, until my hand was frankly between her legs, feeling her wet panties and the softness of her beneath the slick material. I kept stroking and pressing into her there, and my touch seemed to make her arch her back; she pressed her breasts against me, made the faintest of sounds in her throat, parted her legs slightly, held onto me tight. I looked at her; her eyes were squeezed shut, as if she were feeling something that was almost too much. She opened them and our eyes met; we were both breathing hard. "Don't," she said breathlessly. "No, really. Don't. Andy, please."

"You like me to, I know you do," I said, still touching her.

"God, Andy, don't make it harder and harder for me – do you love me?" she said in a fierce whisper.

"Yes."

"Then please please don't ask me for everything all at once."

I can't help it, I thought, how can you stop, not now, please not now, but I could see in her eyes how much she meant it and took my hand away; she breathed out as if she'd just arrived after a hard run, put her hands on my cheeks and kissed me, then held onto me again. I rested my hand on her waist, feeling the curve of her there, her heart

beating against me. My nose was in her hair and the smell of her surrounded me; wanting her was pounding inside me, unbearable. "I don't know if we should do this," she said, and my heart sank. She turned over on her stomach and pulled her arms in at her sides, hiding her breasts from me, and I had to sit up and perch on the edge of the couch to keep from falling off. Becca lay with her cheek against the couch, eyes closed, breathing audibly. She reached one hand back and pulled down her skirt that had gotten bunched up around her waist in all the touching, then tucked that hand under herself again, seeming to close in upon herself, seal herself away from me. Don't do this to me, I thought helplessly, please don't do this; I pushed her hair back from her face, willing her to look at me, but she kept her eyes closed.

"Why not, Becca?" I said, when I couldn't wait any longer for her to speak.

She opened her eyes and looked up at me, and there was something lingering and even sad in the look. "It hasn't been very long at all."

I knew that was true – hardly any time, a week and a half, but it seemed as though time had stretched wildly since we first kissed, that every day meant ten times what it had before. "Feelings don't know about time," I said.

She closed her eyes again and we were both silent; the air pump hummed; it seemed to be the absolute middle of the night, a separate time with no before and after. I laid my hand on her back, watching for the least reaction, and made slow strokes with my whole hand down her from the nape of her neck to the small of her back, as if smoothing something out, trying to be her and breathe with her, to breathe calm into her and myself both, until I felt so close to her that I could almost forget myself. But still the desire was there, inexorable.

"Are you going to tell Toni and Claire about this?" she whispered after a long while, without opening her eyes.

"No."

"Or Dal? Anyone?"

"No," I said, because I knew she didn't want me to, but it was too wonderful to share anyway. It would be hard keeping a secret from Dal, but this was more important.

There was another long moment of silence; then Becca turned on her side and looked up at me.

I lay down beside her again and took her in my arms, and it seemed as though I felt for the first time how much it meant that she

would be with me in that way. "I love you," I said; I couldn't keep the words inside myself any longer. Hadn't I just admitted it anyway?

Becca's face was against my shoulder, hiding and close at once. "You too," she mumbled, shyly I thought, though Becca was not shy. The reverberation of those words almost drowned out her saying, "But I can't do that with you right now. Can you understand that?"

"I thought you liked it."

"You know I do."

"So do I," I said. "To say the least."

She sighed, her breath warm against me. "I know how you feel, Andy, there just hasn't been time."

Time enough to want you more than anything in the world, time enough to fall in love, I thought, but though I didn't want to, I half-understood what she meant. Yet we still lay there body to body, she had asked me to hold her, I was acutely aware of her bare breasts next to me and the hard-on that was almost painfully stretching against my underpants, and I was sure she must be too, I knew she liked to be touched . . . "What do you want, Becca?"

I could feel something change, some quality of her presence, her hands against my back, something. "Can we do what I want?" she whispered, and for an instant I felt as if we were playing a childhood game.

"Yes."

I waited, almost holding my breath, as she made up her mind. "I like to be with you like this," she whispered, and took my hand and held it between us, at the base of her throat; I could feel the warmth of her against the back of my hand, despite her bra being bunched up there and in the way, and I couldn't help moving my hand down, between her breasts. She didn't let go or try to guide me away. "But you can't touch me . . . somewhere else," she said. "Promise."

"I promise," I said, and then we were kissing again, I was caressing her and feeling her words had set me free to do so, and she was touching me, slipping her fingers between the buttons of my shirt in a way that made me dizzy with possibilities. But it was Becca who would say what could be. "Would you like me to take my shirt off?" I whispered in her ear, feeling bold again, and she whispered back "Yes."

I sat up and began unbuttoning my shirt, while she lay there and watched me; it was hard to look at her and do that at the same time, and I had an idea of how she must feel when I tried to undress her. I took off the shirt, dropped it on the floor, looked at her lying

there; the air between us felt charged with something almost visible. "And would you like me to take off yours?" I said, when she reached up and touched my side.

She didn't answer right away; her eyes were big and dark. "Will you remember what you promised?"

"Yes."

"Really?" This is serious, her look seemed to say, do you understand that?

"I will, Becca."

She nodded her head slightly, closing her eyes for a moment, and I unbuttoned the last couple of buttons on her blouse, pulled it out of her skirt – how was I going to get it off? I took her hands to tell her to sit up, and she did, and I tried to slide the blouse off her shoulders but she held out her wrists to me, showing me her cuff buttons that still needed to be undone; I unbuttoned them, took off her blouse and dropped it on the floor, slid my arms around her back and tried to unhook her bra but I couldn't. She seemed amused by my fumbling attempts, turned her back to me so I could see what I was doing and held her hair up out of the way. Then I could finally unhook it, and she took it off and dropped it on the floor too and lay down again on her stomach, hiding her breasts again, but this time glancing up at me with a half-smile that I knew meant she wasn't hiding at all. I caressed her back and her shoulder blades, lifted up her hair and kissed the back of her neck. "Could you turn over?" I whispered in her ear. "Please?" and she turned over and lay looking up at me as I sat perched on the edge of the couch, all of her wonderfully bare from her waist to the top of her head, the continuity of her girl body there before me in nakedness. She watched me look at her and touch her; when my hand was covering her breast she covered it with both of hers and held it there, never taking her eyes off me. I had never been with a girl in that way. I could feel her heart beating, feel her breathe, and her hands holding mine to her there seemed to make me feel her more powerfully from one moment to the next, an intimacy even beyond the privilege of looking or touching; it seemed to me I could feel her wanting me to love her, to adore her even, and I would have even if she hadn't wanted me to but her wanting it made it twice as strong. "God, you are so beautiful," I said.

"I'm glad," she said. There seemed no need to say anything more. I lay down with her, thinking of her saying "Can we do what I want?" and knowing in wonder that this was it; we kissed and touched, by turns passionately and tenderly, until it seemed it would

never end, and I wanted this moment of being with her, in nakedness and pleasure freely offered and freely taken, to open out into an infinite expanse. But Becca raised her head and looked at the clock and said, "It's almost one-thirty, do you realize that?"

"Aren't they asleep?"

"They'd better be. It could be sort of awkward."

"I'll say." But I didn't believe that anyone was going to break in upon our charmed life on this night of all nights.

Becca sat up, pushed her hair back and shook it out, reached down for her blouse that was on the floor and was about to put it on, but I took hold of it. "Don't," I said. "Not yet. I can't stand it."

"I've got to get dressed sometime, silly."

"Not right this minute."

I sat up and kissed her and she put her arm around me, still holding the blouse, and while we kissed I reached back and took it away from her and dropped it on the floor again. We sat side by side on the couch, kissing and caressing, and to my surprise her hand rested on my hard penis, gently surrounding it through the material of my pants. Cautiously I raised up a little, urging my penis against her hand, and she didn't move it away. "Do you like that?" she said in my ear, sounding a little self-conscious.

"God, yes."

"This is our secret, Andy. Promise me."

"I promise," I said, my heart racing. We started kissing again, and her hand stroked me, and I moved against her, until I thought I was going to come in my pants any second. Did she know that? She took her hand away for a moment. "Don't stop," I said, and she took hold of my zipper and pulled it down and she had hold of me through my underpants, my penis in her hand, grasping it now and pulling a little as I moved harder and harder and came under her hand so that she had to have felt the hot sticky wetness suddenly spread everywhere, I was embarrassed by it at the same time that I wanted to jam myself against her, my eyes were closed and I couldn't help making a sound, a kind of moan that I felt embarrassed about too as soon as it escaped, and I opened my eyes and saw Becca watching me; she seemed happy. She took her hand away from my soaked underpants and put it flat on my chest so I could feel the wetness on her palm. "Sticky," she said.

She got up, pulled a tissue out of a box on the desk, and wiped her hand off, then rubbed at the wet place she'd left on my chest. "It'll take more than a Kleenex for the rest of you," she said, looking

amused. "Hope your mom doesn't inspect the laundry before she throws it in the washer."

"You are incredible," I said. How could she sound so normal, talking to me half-naked after something that had never happened before in my life?

"I'm just me," Becca said, and I thought how absurd it was to say that Becca was "just" anything. "Aren't you getting cold?"

"A little," I said, but if she hadn't mentioned it I never would have noticed.

She took an afghan that was folded up on the back of the couch and spread it over both of us, tucking it behind my shoulder and her own, making a kind of tent under which we sat curled together resting for a bit, breathing together quietly, letting the deep surprise and secret of intimacy sink in, as if we were in a little hideout of our own; I wasn't ready to let her go when she gently disengaged herself from me and the afghan, picked up her blouse and slipped it on. The moment hadn't ended; it felt as though it should last all night, but that was not a choice we could make. I watched her button her blouse matter-of-factly, as if she were used to getting dressed in front of me, and tuck it into her skirt, and stuff her bra into her skirt pocket; I zipped my pants and put my shirt on and we tiptoed our way to the front door. I was very aware of how wet and sticky my pants were inside, inordinately happy about how they had gotten that way, happier still to have heard her almost say she loved me. "Thank you for such a lovely evening," she whispered to me at the door, when I had my coat on, holding out her hand as if I were going to kiss it chastely goodnight. I took her in my arms and said "I love you, Becca," and she put her finger on my lips and whispered, "Don't wear it out."

The moment still had not ended the following day; I began to think it never would. I couldn't even look at a piece of homework – it was a good thing there wasn't an English paper to write – and I couldn't carry on a conversation with my parents because I didn't want to divert my attention for one moment from the thought of Becca and the way I felt inside; I left the house and wandered around the neighborhood aimlessly, up the alleys where Dal and I had played as kids, bumping over the bricks on our bikes. The sun was warmer than it had been, and the snow on roofs was beginning to melt and drip, but where it dripped into the shade it formed icicles. The crust of snow on the alleys had been broken up by cars, but not worn clear away; I kicked at chunks of snow idly, thinking of all that had happened,

feeling as if I were somewhere above myself, a foot or two above my head and looking down over my shoulder, watching my body wander down the alley while I was somewhere else in a state of wonder.

It clouded up while I was outside, not the even gray that meant snow, but low, fast-moving, restless clouds that made me think of spring. A day of spring could always come, out of its proper place, in the middle of winter in St. Louis, and vanish again just as quickly; and anyway, it was March, and there was no telling what might happen. It was cold again now that clouds hid the sun, not that it mattered to me inside, where I was still holding Becca in my arms under the afghan, nothing between us but just us, skin to skin, and thinking that she must really love me, nothing else could make such a thing happen.

For a while, though the clouds overhead were on the move, the air around me was still; then a wind came up as if it had learned its lesson from the sky. It chilled me and made me want to get indoors, so I headed in the direction of Dal's. Letting me in, his mom only said about three words; I wondered if she felt me looking at her differently. The inaudible sigh of Sunday afternoon filled the air of their house. I found Dal in his room, lying on his bed the wrong way, with his feet up on the wall above his pillow, looking as if he were glued there.

"What's goin' on out there?" he said morosely.

"Oh – it's getting pretty cold," I said, realizing I wanted to tell him about me and Becca, despite what I had promised her.

"I don't mean the weather," he said, and after a second I understood that "out there" meant outside his room. How long had he been holed up in here?

"Nothing's going on, that I can see."

"Typical." He stared sullenly at the ceiling. Dal in a truly foul mood. This was not a picture I was used to seeing. "Katie went off with some of her bird-brain little friends about two hours ago, my dad's been in the basement all day, my mom was locked in the bathroom for about an hour."

"Sounds like time to get the hell out of here."

"And do what?"

"I don't know, anything."

"Like?" At least he looked at me, even if he wasn't being any help. I tried to think of something, knowing how often we'd complained there was nothing to do in St. Louis.

"We could go bowling, I guess."

"Oh, great."

"Shoot pool?"

He pursed his lips disgustedly and thought. "You got any money?" he said after a while.

"A couple of bucks." Enough for an hour of pool at the bowling alley in Clayton.

"I guess it beats looking at the cracks in the wall," he said, swinging his legs off the bed. He pulled on a jacket and stepped quietly through the kitchen and out the back door as if he might get caught trespassing. I didn't say anything as we crossed the yard and headed toward my house; I knew he didn't want to talk, and what good could talk do anyway?

After about a block he breathed out as if he'd been holding something in all day, and I expected him to speak, but he didn't. I kept doling out to myself moments or minutes when I would allow myself to picture – yet again – Becca as I had seen her the night before. Once I started, each time, it was harder to stop, but I felt I had to; I kept remembering her saying "Don't wear it out." Traipsing along next to Dal, I wanted to tell him everything that had happened, let him know that I was not the same as I had been the last time he saw me. More like Dal now, closer to things he had experienced – the secrets you had to learn for yourself. Somehow it would be more real if I could tell him. But I had promised her.

"Where's your car?" Dal said.

"Around the corner."

Still silence. Had everybody in his family just stopped talking? I felt that keeping my mouth shut was turning into a test of loyalty.

When we got in the car I couldn't stand it any longer. "What'd you do last night?" I said, turning the key.

"Nothin'. I went to a movie."

"Who with?"

"Ed Garza and a couple of his bad-ass friends."

"Jeez, what for?"

"I don't know, I ran into them. They were standing around the drugstore reading skin magazines."

Great reason to go to a movie with them, I thought. I felt as though in some way I'd abandoned Dal by being with Becca. "How come you don't just call up Denise?"

"On a Saturday night?"

"You know what I mean." The day was decidedly gray; there were few cars on the streets in the middle of Sunday afternoon. The houses seemed to be hibernating.

"You really want to know why?" Dal said. There was finally an iota of energy in his voice.

"Sure."

"Something about her always reminds me of Elizabeth, every time I see her. That lasts about three seconds and then I remember who she really is and that's it for the evening."

"I get the picture." Any girl Dal compared to Elizabeth Carver might as well just forget about him. She had gone to our school the previous spring, while her father was being a visiting prof at Washington U., and probably more than half of our dreams about the East were really about her. Her name always called up for me a scene I'd never seen – even Dal, who had planted the image in my mind, had never seen it, only heard about it from her: Elizabeth in a little sailboat alone, on a summer day, crossing some bay on the coast of Maine to an island in the distance. An impossibly crisp blue day, like a painting, and out there in the middle of all that summer light and water, one sail. That was her, doing by second nature something Dal and I had never even tried to learn. She seemed part of an older way to be. She had long straight hair, and was quiet most of the time in school except when she said something very smart, and if you saw her at a dress-up party she'd be wearing something plain compared to the other girls and look twice as pretty as they did. I had never even imagined that she might notice me. Dal had been in love with her, and it looked like he still was.

It had seemed at times that Elizabeth might be, almost was in love with Dal – or maybe she was and just refused to say it because she was leaving. There was some boy hovering in the background, back home in Massachusetts; she called him her "friend," but what did that mean? All I knew from Dal was there were two Elizabeths – one who was really there with him, when they went out, and one who wasn't.

You didn't mention Elizabeth first to Dal; that was up to him. But now that he had said her name, I could pursue it. "You ever write to her anymore?"

"Not really. She sent me a Christmas card."

"What'd it say?"

"It was just a card."

"So?"

"So I sent her one, but I didn't know what to say."

"Invite her to visit the scenic Midwest."

"Yeah, right. When she sent the card she was in Vermont, skiing."

Skiing. In Missouri that was something you did on water in the summer. We pulled into the parking lot of Clayton Bowladrome 52 Lanes, but when I went to get out of the car Dal didn't move. "What's the matter?" I said, sticking my head back in. Stupid question.

"Save your money. I don't really feel like shooting pool."

I got back in the car. "So whaddya wanna do?"

"I don't know, what do you?"

"I don't know." For a minute we both sat there staring out at the gray day. We seemed to have brought the stuckness of Sunday afternoon with us from Dal's house, and only the thought of Becca saved me from sinking completely into it with him. Again I wanted to tell Dal everything and knew I shouldn't.

"Remember the hayride?" he said.

"Is the Pope Catholic?" It had taken place at the end of the last school year, a few days before Elizabeth left. In not too long it would be a year ago. Dal had gone with her and I had gone with Claire. I could see the two of them half-lying propped up against the side of the hay as we bounced along in the night air, and though I could barely make them out I could tell, somehow, that she was letting herself be completely with Dal. As for me and Claire, there was a problem brewing and we both knew that but weren't going to say a word about it.

"Anything could have happened that night," Dal said. "If we'd had somewhere to go." I thought of the den and what Becca's dad had said to her.

"What went on in that back seat, anyway?" It was a double date, I was driving, we stopped somewhere out in the country on the way home and Claire and I both knew we weren't supposed to look behind us. While I was kissing her I was listening to the silence from the back seat, trying to hear and not hear, and I thought Claire felt she had to keep kissing me to stop herself from turning to look at Elizabeth and Dal.

"A lot," Dal said. It would have been boasting if someone else had said it, but he sounded more sad than anything.

"You sure weren't talking much."

"She wanted everything, Andy, I know she did."

"You mean it?" It was impossible to imagine Elizabeth Carver letting down the shield of her elegance and openly wanting any boy, even Dal, as much as I knew Dal wanted her – or maybe it was not that she couldn't have but that I didn't dare imagine it.

"You think I don't know?"

"No." I couldn't say anything else, but privately I thought maybe this was not something he knew at all but a dream he kept in his pocket to torture himself with. I knew I would have.

"Didja ever notice anything funny about the back seat afterwards?"

"No."

"She gave me a hand job."

"You're kidding." Elizabeth Carver with Dal's hard-on in her hand, making him come, in the back seat of my car, while I was in the front with Claire who was just trying to make up her mind when to break up with me? It was making me hard just to think about it.

"I am not kidding, damn it," he said morosely.

"Weren't you afraid somebody might look?"

"We weren't thinking about you."

That was obvious enough. But Elizabeth was sort of a sacred being to me, and to think of her and Dal in that way confused me. What wasn't possible, then, if she – and for that matter Becca . . .

"Anything could have happened," he said again, and I was certain this was what he told himself in the middle of the night.

"You still think about her a lot?" I knew that was playing dumb, but I always had to leave Dal room. He gave me a pained look.

"Not that it accomplishes a damn thing," Dal said, putting his feet up on the glove compartment. Maybe I hadn't told his mom the whole truth the day before, when I said Dal needed a girlfriend, but it had been more of the truth than I realized. I had been on the verge of telling him that I had done with Becca what he did with Elizabeth, promise or no promise, but now I couldn't; I'd only be rubbing it in.

"Where's she going to college?"

"I don't know. Maybe Sarah Lawrence. If she gets in."

"Could be worse – you go to RIT – invite her up for the weekend . . ."

"I wish," Dal said, as if he never got anything he wanted.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On Monday morning I sat in AP English trying to pay attention to Kearns and not to look at Becca, constantly aware of her presence in the next seat, wondering if Claire had noticed anything different about us, and Toni came in five minutes late. Normally she darted in at the last second as the bell rang, but this time she came into the room at half speed, looking at the floor, shuffling to her seat and sitting down without even muttering an excuse. “Ah, Toni – we missed you,” Kearns said – not unkindly, not the way Conroy would have said it – I thought he was giving her a chance to say something as simple as “Sorry I’m late” so that he could excuse it and go on, but Toni didn’t reply or even look up. He looked at her for a moment and seemed to think better of pursuing it; I could see why. She must be sick, I thought.

We were discussing what might have been the most peculiar story he’d assigned all year, one where a con man passing himself off as a Bible salesman takes a woman up in a hayloft, seduces her, then steals her wooden leg while she’s sleeping so she can’t get down the ladder, and walks off with it – Kearns kept on trying to convince us there was something profound about this sordid little soap opera, and hardly anyone was buying it except Ricky Malvin; somebody was saying he thought it was pretty funny when Toni abruptly got up and half-ran out of the room, leaving her books behind. Kearns looked after her in a mixture of puzzlement and annoyance. “Anyone know what this is about?” he said, glancing around. “No?” He thought for a moment. “Claire, would you go see if she’s okay?” That was one thing I liked about Kearns – he cared enough to pick up on things like which people in his class were friends.

Discussion went on – someone else didn't think it was funny at all – and Claire came back and said, "She's not feeling well, I think she might have to go home."

"So it goes," said Kearns with a shrug. I traded a glance with Claire but I couldn't pick up a secret message about what was wrong; people argued over the story and got nowhere, Kearns started to look frustrated, class ended. I took the books that Toni had left behind. In the hall, Becca and I said "Well?" and Claire said, "I don't know, I found her in the bathroom and she looked awful. But not like she was sick. She was crying about something. I asked her what was wrong but she didn't say anything."

"Nothing?" Becca said. That didn't seem like Toni at all.

"All she said was, 'Go back and tell him I'm sick.'"

We looked at each other but didn't find the answer on anyone's face. "Where do you think she went?" I said to Claire.

"I don't know, she was still in the bathroom when I left." But when we passed by it and Claire went in to look for Toni, she wasn't there.

"I've got study hall," I said, "I could say I'm going to the library and try to find her."

"Maybe she did go home," Becca said.

"Well, it's worth a try, anyway."

We went our various ways, and once study hall had started I went up and made my excuse and left, carrying Toni's books in case I might be able to give them back to her. A teacher, standing outside the teacher's lounge, gave me the eyeball, and I said, "I'm going to the library." He didn't reply. When I looked back he was gone. Where would she be, if she were even in the building? Where would Toni go to hide, to be alone? There weren't that many places you could go to get away from other people, unless you hid in a broom closet, but why would she do that? Not that I understood any of this. I passed the auditorium, and then stopped and turned back and opened one of the doors a crack, quietly. There was no sound from inside. I slipped in, scanning the rows of seats, hoping to find one dark-haired head somewhere, but it was empty. The curtains of the stage were drawn. I had that spooky illicit feeling of being off limits. If the drama coach should come in with a class – well, if she did, too bad. I walked quickly down the sloping aisle, thinking of all the boring assemblies I'd sat through – some with Toni – and went up on stage, peered into the wings on the side where I had come up the little stairs. No one. I crossed the stage, idly parted the drawn curtains in the middle and

peeked in, and there was Toni sitting cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the stage, in a dusty half-light, looking up at me with a defiant face. "It's only me," I said, realizing she'd been hearing my footsteps and expecting to get caught.

"Where are you supposed to be?" she said in a low voice.

"Study hall. But I got worried about you." Toni looked away and didn't answer. "What are you doing here?" I said.

"We used to have dance class here. It was the best place I could think of."

"Here's your books," I said, and set them down by her. I stood for a moment trying to decide if she wanted me to stay or go, and then sat down on the floor in front of her. "Toni, what's the matter?"

She took a deep breath; I could see she didn't want to look at me. "I can't tell you."

"Oh, of course you can, you've told me everything else for the last year and a half, haven't you?" No reply. "Besides – you know the rules – no secrets on this bed." That was what we always said at Claire's, to make each other tell.

"This isn't a game!" she burst out angrily, glaring at me for an instant as if it were all my fault. "And I can't sit in that stupid English class and listen to some stupid boy who doesn't know what he's talking about say that story was funny, either." She took a Kleenex out of her pocketbook and wiped at her eyes, roughly, as if mad at herself for crying.

"How the hell could English get you this upset?"

"It isn't English, for God's sake!" she said, raising her trembling voice.

"Not so loud, somebody might hear." We sat in silence, not looking at each other; every once in a while I'd glance up at Toni and try to gauge her feelings, but she wouldn't meet my eyes. It was bad, whatever it was. I wanted to help her but I didn't know how. "Do you want me to go away?" I said finally. She closed her eyes and pressed her knuckles to her mouth; I thought she was trying not to cry. She shook her head without looking up. I scooted myself around so I was sitting beside her instead of in front of her, and laid my hand on her shoulder; she seemed to twitch slightly away when I touched her. I took my hand away. "We are friends, aren't we?"

She nodded. I'm here, I thought to her silently, as we sat there side by side. I knew classes were still going on all through the building, clocks moving toward the next bell, but in the dusty quiet of the empty stage it seemed as if the two of us were suspended in space and time.

"Something happened to me Saturday night," Toni said in a low voice. Then she stopped talking as if she had to get herself under control again. I almost held my breath; somehow I knew I mustn't look at her or call any attention to myself, or she wouldn't be able to tell it. "I've got to tell somebody. I wasn't going to tell anyone, but I have to, I can't stand to keep it to myself. I can't tell my parents. I'd go home, only my mom might be there, and she'd ask me what was wrong." Saturday night, I was thinking – the party she went to with Clay – but of course she wouldn't have told her parents where she was going . . . "I got drunk, Andy," she said despairingly, and I thought, Well, that's not the worst thing in the world. "I got drunk, and Clay – I was in his room – we were making out, and God, I was so drunk, and – he forced me, he had sex with me – he was so big, he was on top of me, there was nothing I could do." She was crying as she said it, and hiding her face in her hands, so that I could barely understand the crucial words; but I understood. Horrible image of Toni helpless, as she never was – pinned, at that guy's mercy – I had no idea what to do. I wanted to put my arm around her to comfort her, but it was too clear why she didn't want to be touched. That shithead, I thought, was that what he was planning all along, that son of a bitch . . .

Toni's crying ended in a hiccup and a few gasps for breath; she wiped her eyes again, blew her nose, leaned her head back and looked up at the ceiling exhaustedly; her eyes were rimmed with red. "I wanted it to be so different," she said, closing her eyes. "I thought he felt the same way I did." She looked down and seemed to study the wadded Kleenex she held clenched in her hand. "I was so stupid to get drunk like that, but everyone was drinking so much, even the girls, I was just trying to look like I knew what I was doing. I thought I was in love with him, Andy. I guess it was pretty obvious, people were looking at me. I'll bet everyone in that place knew what was going to happen except for me. I wanted him to kiss me, I was thrilled when he did – God, I wanted him to be in love with me. He took me up to his room and we were making out, and when he started unzipping my dress I thought I shouldn't let him but I still wanted him to touch me, and then he just didn't care, it didn't matter what I said, I told him to stop but I could see it in his eyes he was going to get his way no matter what. You know what he said when he got on top of me? He said I might as well lay back and enjoy it. Now I'll always have to remember that," Toni said. Her voice was almost inaudible. "It was the first time, Andy. But I didn't let him know that."

Murderousness swept over me and made me shake. "I'd like to kill him," I said.

"My dad would kill him," she said. "That's one reason I can't tell them. I spent practically all of yesterday hiding in my room."

So this creep, this plausible bastard in a fancy coat had taken Toni's dreams about falling in love, and her virginity, and stepped on them and crushed them in the course of a drunken party. "Did he even apologize afterwards?"

"He acted like it was just something that happens – he wanted to know why I was in such a hurry to leave. He was so casual it made me want to throw up. And then he started being all polite and wanting to walk me home – oh, God, it was so revolting, I can't tell you. He wanted to kiss me. Finally I just ran."

"God, Toni, how awful."

She looked away, breathing in raggedly. "I'll bet he does this all the time. All he's got to do is find someone else as stupid as me and make her think he's different from the rest of the frat boys, the way I did. God damn it, Andy, I made it so *easy* for him," she said fiercely, hitting her fist on the floor.

"It's not your fault."

"I had such a crush on him. Him," she said in a low, bitter voice, looking away. "What's the matter with me, how could I?"

"You didn't know."

"I should have," she said, hugging her knees to her chest and staring bleakly into the wings. "He was just too – I don't know – he told me everything I wanted to hear. I should have known it wasn't real."

"Toni, just because he's such a shit doesn't mean you should have known. I mean, how could you?"

"You should have seen how they were looking at me at that party – I didn't really notice at the time because I was so busy hanging all over Clay. But the next morning I remembered. They were laughing at me the whole time. Maybe one or two of the girls felt a little sorry for me. But nobody did anything about it, they just watched me serve myself up for him on a silver platter. He didn't even have to try . . . God, it makes me sick. Sometimes I think it's my own fault."

"It's not your fault, damn it, what could be your fault? Wanting to fall in love with somebody? If that's wrong, everybody's wrong."

"It had nothing to do with love," Toni said, almost as if she were angry at me. "Nothing. You don't get it. You're such an idealist, Andy, you think everything's supposed to be so wonderful. I was a

stupid little girl who fell for this guy because he was in college and gorgeous and cool, and he took one look at me and realized he could make me believe anything. I'm thinking he's Rhett Butler, like an idiot, and all the time he's waiting for me to get drunk enough so he can take me upstairs and hold me down on the bed and tell me to lay back and enjoy it while he sticks his thing in me. It's so revolting, there's no way you could know, you're not a girl. He didn't care about me for one second, and I can't go back and undo it, it's too late. It'll always be there."

For an instant I thought of laying my hand on Toni's forehead and trying to do the trick that Becca had taught me, but I felt stupid just thinking of it.

"I care about you," I said. "Claire does, Becca does, we all care about you a lot." But that sounded weak and half-hearted to me even as I said it; not that it wasn't true, but true or not, did it even begin to reach the part of her that was wounded?

"I know," Toni said, looking at me with her eyes shiny with unshed tears. "Give me a hug, okay? I really need one."

I held her a bit awkwardly as we sat there side by side on the floor, glad that she would ask and unsure of what to say or do, gently stroking her curly head. "You'll feel better," I said, just to say something, but I had no idea what could make it so.

"You know, I read that awful story right before this happened," she said with her head on my shoulder, "and it never crossed my mind once that it might have anything to do with me." Of course not, I thought; not with any of us – and if it did, maybe that was not something I even wanted to know. Except there might not be a choice.

I sat there studying the worn floorboards of the stage.

"I don't want Claire and Becca to know," she mumbled in an exhausted voice; she straightened up and ran her hands back through her hair. "If they don't, maybe it'll be more like it didn't happen."

"Oh, Toni, I wish I had a time machine."

"So do I." She heaved a sigh. "I guess I'll go try to look like I haven't been crying all morning."

Slowly she gathered her books together, and we stood up stiffly. "Thanks, Andy," she said, making a little attempt at a smile that made me want to cry too.

"You're welcome."

We left the stage and walked up the slope of the aisle without speaking; I stayed close to her as if that would somehow protect her, now that it was too late. At the doors I checked to see if the coast was

clear, and then we slipped out into the hallway. Toni turned in the other direction from where I needed to go, and I watched her moving off slowly down the hall, small and defeated-looking, and I thought of Clay with her hanging on his arm, winking at me and Dal and saying “the fun starts next year – you know what I’m sayin’?” and again I wanted to kill him.

When Becca and Claire asked, I said I hadn’t been able to find Toni; but two days later she told me she’d called Claire and told her the whole story. That made me understand the way I’d seen Claire look during class; I knew something was bothering her. “Can I tell Becca, then?” I asked, and she said yes. When I did, that day, on the way home after school, her eyes got big and dark and I thought she might cry. She seemed horrified and unnaturally subdued and barely said goodbye when she went into her house, as if there were too much going on inside for her to notice what was around her. The weather had warmed up a little, just to the freezing point, and the snow on the ground was getting mushy and gray, like the sky. As I drove home it was beginning to rain and I was hoping it would get colder and snow again overnight.

Later Becca called me and I thought she wanted to talk about Toni, but she couldn’t seem to find any words; we sat for a long time without speaking while I listened to her breathe and tried to figure out what to say. “I’m sorry, Andy,” she said, finally breaking the silence, “I guess I’m no fun to talk to right now.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. The whole thing is no fun.”

“I don’t know how she can live with it,” Becca said. “All the time. I’ll bet she never stops thinking about it.”

“We’ve got to do something for her.”

“I know.”

But neither of us knew what to do.

I lay in bed that night, thinking of Becca as usual, remembering everything we’d ever done when we were alone together, and there seemed to be a smudge over every image, smearing and blurring it, taking her away from me, messing with love itself, because of what Clay had done. It was bad enough what was happening with Dal’s father, his family, but at least L. wanted Dal’s dad to fuck her – this was worse, and it was closer to home. What was the most horrible to imagine was the same thing happening to Becca – someone overpowering her and having her without tenderness, without even feeling, without caring at all or having the slightest clue that her love

was a priceless treasure, tearing that to shreds and grinding it underfoot, irreparably . . . these thoughts squirmed inside me like an unspeakable parasite and made me writhe and groan, and if it had had to happen to someone, then traitorously I was even a little glad that Toni had been the one and not Becca. Then I hated myself for thinking that. What could we do for Toni? We had to do something – something to distract her, maybe – but I went to sleep without having an idea.

When I woke up in the morning there was something different about the light; at first I thought everything seemed too bright because I'd been asleep and my eyes weren't ready for the day, but I tried to blink it away and it wouldn't go – the branches outside my window were glittering in a hard and glaring way, and I realized there had been an ice storm. That got me out of bed in a moment, to squint out the window and see everything blindingly bright in the sun, coated with a thickness of ice. There were some branches down on the sidewalks, and the two spruce trees in front of our house were bent halfway to the ground under the weight of ice. Every year, it seemed, this happened, and I always wondered if they would survive – one had a peculiar shape already because its top had broken off in such a storm. In the distance I could hear the sound of spinning tires. Futility to try to drive, I thought, at least without chains. Maybe they'd call off school; I flipped on my radio and got back in bed. I was half asleep when the announcer began to drone out the list of cancellations, through the alphabet of schools one always heard on snowy mornings. It was a long wait, and school wasn't cancelled after all, but it was starting two hours late. I drifted off again.

When I finally got up I promised my mom I wouldn't try to drive to school, got my books, threw on my coat, and left. It was nearly warm in the sun, and everything was glazed and gleaming and dripping, which only made it glitter more, under a sky of hard winter blue, and when a wind came up the branches of trees clacked and rattled together, making a sound you never heard at any other time. The telephone wires sagged as if they might break at any moment. On the sunny sides of tree trunks and downspouts tiny channels of melt water trickled down under the sheath of ice. Everything was treacherous underfoot; I practically fell twice just going down the front walk, before I remembered to lean a little forward at each step.

A couple of blocks from school I ran into Becca, picking her way carefully along. "How are you doing?" I said to her.

"Okay." But she didn't sound like herself.

"Really?"

She didn't reply for a while. "No."

We walked in silence for some moments, trying not to slip; some of the brightness seemed to be drained out of the day. "It's bothering me a lot," Becca said. "To think somebody would do that to Toni. Or anybody. It could happen to anyone, Andy."

"Most people don't run into a creep like that."

"Toni's a smart girl, she's dated a bunch of different boys, it happened to her."

You're with me, Becca, I thought, and I will never do anything like that to you, you know that, but what I couldn't help hearing under her words was that she wouldn't always be my girlfriend, that she'd meet other boys and be attracted to them, go to college parties, take her chances out in the world, and I knew it must be true but I couldn't bear to think it.

We were each in our separate thoughts when I looked up and there was Dal. "Hey," he said, looking pleased to see us.

We both said "Hi" and there must have been something in our voices because Dal said, "What's the matter, you were hoping we'd get the whole day off?"

Becca flashed me a look to ask if Dal knew about Toni and I said no with my eyes. "Yeah," she said, "I figured it would mean an extension on the English paper."

"Ah, that's what you get for taking AP. It's your own fault." He fell in next to us. "Some day, huh?"

"Remind me not to drive anywhere with you until this melts."

"Why not?" Becca said.

"He likes skidding a little too much."

"Low coefficient of friction can be fun," Dal said, running ahead a little and sliding along the icy sidewalk, skating on his shoe soles with his books under one arm. "Come on, give it a try." He held out his hand to Becca and she put down her books and took it; she held out her other hand to me. This is not such a great idea, I thought, as we all tried to get up some speed and then start sliding, and sure enough, Becca lost her footing and all three of us went down. We would have looked like idiots, but other people were trying the same thing. Dal laughed, but I had banged my elbow and it hurt; Becca seemed unfazed. We all got up and collected our spilled books and continued on our way into the school; Dal was talking about what it was like to try to play soccer on a day like today – he acted more cheerful than I'd seen him in a while, and it seemed to bring Becca out of her dark mood, too. The only one who couldn't shake it off was me.

That day after school we all met at Claire's, because it had come to seem as though we would every Thursday as a matter of course; but everything was different because of what had happened to Toni. And Dal agreed to come over, which surprised me a bit, when Claire asked him to. Toni didn't want anyone else to know, so that was one enormous secret being kept from Dal; and she and Claire knew Dal's secret but couldn't admit they did. We didn't even hang around in Claire's room; somehow it seemed too small, or too personal – maybe the presence of the bed made us think uncomfortable thoughts. Instead we ended up in the kitchen. Claire's house was sort of fancy inside – the kitchen had been remodeled so that it was all shiny white Formica and everything was built in, like something out of a magazine. Privately I liked Becca's kitchen a lot better; Claire's wasn't very welcoming. Maybe that was why her mother always seemed discontented when I saw her in it, or maybe her mother had made it that way in the first place. Still, it had a radio and the refrigerator was well-stocked. Dal seemed to make the girls a bit nervous at first, but Becca said, "Maybe Dal needs a blind date. He's already tried everything else."

Dal lounged in a chair by the kitchen table, amused and on guard, looking up at Becca who was perched on the counter drinking a Coke.

"Wonderful idea, Grace," said Claire.

"What do you think her name will be?" Becca said.

"Oh – Gertrude, or something like that," Claire said.

"Bertha," I said.

"Penelope," said Claire, when Toni didn't chime in.

"Penelope, yes, that's it," said Becca, "Penelope Pearl, she's the most gorgeous creature in Greater St. Louis, and she loves baseball and soccer, and – "

"She's nuts about my batting average," Dal said sardonically.

"Right, and she drives a T-Bird – "

"A *convertible* T-Bird," Claire said, and Becca threw her a smile.

"A convertible T-Bird and she says she'll pick you up – she drives up with the top down – " Becca made a sweeping hand gesture that seemed to mean long hair or a scarf trailing in the breeze.

"In this kind of weather?" Dal said.

"She has her mink coat on, of course."

"She's starting to remind me of Barbie," Toni said in a dissatisfied voice.

"Barbie who?" I said.

"Barbie, the doll."

"And she says, I'm starving, let's go to Steak & Shake."

"Ugh," said Claire, "couldn't you make it HoJo's?"

"Just then," Dal said, "up drives Ken in *his* T-Bird and says, 'If you don't get away from mah girl raht naow Ah'm gonna wrang your neck an' make you into chicken stew, so move along before Ah start to get mad.'"

"I didn't know Ken was from Texas," Toni said, sounding a little more like herself.

"Oh, but he is," said Becca, looking at Dal like a teacher at a prize pupil.

"Plus," said Dal, "he's six foot six, weighs two-fifty, and plays for the Dallas Cowboys, so it looks like my date with Penelope is off."

"But luckily he's been going out with someone almost as fabulous," I said, and Dal gave me a look of Not you, too.

"Tell," said Becca.

"Denise Crevello."

"My gracious," Claire said, and Toni said, "I guess you don't need any help after all."

"I went out with her two times," Dal said, "count them, two."

"Poor old Denise – she wasn't really a hit with Dal," I said.

"Yeah, poor Denise," Claire said. "Boys only follow her around in packs."

"But don't you think it's kind of gross when they drool?" Toni said.

"So come on," said Becca, "don't just sit there, let's have a little dirt on Denise. Why do you think we asked you over?"

"Beats me," said Dal, putting his feet up on a chair with a slow smile, and they went on teasing him and grilling him, and for a few minutes I thought the lurking secrets were pushed out of the room; but they were waiting to follow us home.

On Saturday Becca and I again came into her house around midnight. I was beginning to wonder if her parents knew that I was there, if the sneaking in was only for show, a kind of unspoken agreement between Becca and her parents that she would follow their rules by being home at twelve but still do what she liked. We were in the den, kissing, and I was caressing her through her blouse, trying to convince myself that there was nothing wrong and knowing that a darkness had been hovering over her all night. When I went to

unbutton her top button she took my hand away and said "Don't" in a voice that made my heart sink.

"No?"

"No," she said definitively, not even looking at me; then she relented a little, turned herself so that she was leaning back against me with her head on my shoulder. I put my arms around her and we sat like that for a few moments in silence. She didn't seem comfortable with me, for practically the first time since it had begun, but at least she was still next to me, it seemed she wanted me to hold her. Her hands were covering mine. "I'm sorry," she said in a low voice.

"It's not to be sorry about," I said, hearing myself say it the way she would have.

"I can't stop thinking of Toni." And of course I knew that, had just been trying to ignore it, that was all, and of course it hadn't worked. "How she must have felt. Or how she feels. It won't go away, Andy."

I wasn't sure if she meant for herself or for Toni, but in all selfishness I hoped she meant Toni. "I know," I said.

"Do you?"

I let that sink in and bother me for a while. I had known Toni longer than she had; maybe I knew more than she thought. "What really made me hate him the most," I said, "was when she said she thought he felt the same way she did – you know what I mean? She had this whole dream about how it would be, and then it didn't mean anything to him how she felt. That seems like the worst part of all."

"No, the worst is that he went into her when she didn't want him to," Becca said in a low voice, and somehow because she was right next to me and said it in such simple words I seemed to feel for the first time the brutality of what had happened – and an anger in Becca that didn't stop at Clay; I could feel it shivering into me.

"I would never do that to you, if that's what you're thinking," I said.

"You're a boy, Andy."

"Is that so terrible?"

She moved my arms away and turned around to face me, kneeling on the couch, and all at once I saw myself in her eyes as a stranger, no longer Andy, no longer the person she'd all but said she loved. "You don't know what it's like for a girl," she said. "You couldn't. How unfair it is."

We stared at one another, at an impasse; my heart was filled with fear. Would it even matter what I said if she thought I could never

understand, and wouldn't the logical conclusion be that there was no hope of such a thing as love? "I thought you said you trusted me," I said. "Back at Claire's. The day she told me I was different and I got mad. The day you kissed me."

Becca held me with her unyielding gaze for another moment before she looked away. "I'm sorry," she mumbled. She held out her hand, palm up, and I laid my hand on hers.

"Don't you know I'll never hurt you?"

"I know you'd never want to," she murmured, in a sad voice, as if she knew everything that would ever happen to us and it didn't have a happy ending.

"What's the matter, Becca?" I tried not to speak too loud, as if that would scare the truth away, and yet I wasn't sure I wanted to know it.

"There's something I want to tell you," she said, and my heart seemed to empty out for a moment, to beat on nothingness. "About me. Last spring I . . . remember I told you I was going out with Jeff Solomon?"

"Yes." My mind was racing – did she want to date him again?

"Jeff and I – had sex. Made love," she corrected herself almost in a whisper.

"You did?" Becca, the girl I was in love with, with whom I was afraid of going too far, the same girl next to me this moment, naked with some other boy, giving him everything, all that I had assumed was impossible, only desired, never allowed – I didn't want to know this, why was she telling me this when she didn't even want me to touch her, was it just to torture me?

"We did. Last spring. He kept asking me to, and it took me a long time to make up my mind I wanted to do that with him, but finally I did. Partly because he was going to graduate, and go to college, and I suppose I thought there wasn't much time . . . My parents have always told me they trusted me to make my own decisions, and I guess I trusted myself. I know I did. Oh, and I wanted it to be so right. But how did I know what right was? And afterwards – I don't know what happened, Andy. I don't even know what to call it. I was in love with him, but I didn't feel comfortable with him anymore, I didn't feel right, not like myself. And we did it again and it only made the feeling worse, and I decided we should stop, but he wanted to so much that I finally gave in and that time I really didn't want to and it was all wrong. That was why we broke up. I was still in love with him, in a way. Or I would have been if we could have forgotten about all

that, but we couldn't be together the way we'd been before, it was impossible. And he was so hurt – that's why he hates me. I felt horrible about it, I still do. I can't bear to have anyone not like me, it's a terrible weakness of mine. That's what my mother's always told me, and I think she's right. I feel so guilty about hurting him. But I just didn't know it would feel that way."

"How could you know?" I said, but there were a million other questions I wanted to ask, like was she still in love with him, and did she think she might ruin things again if she let me, and my heart was pounding with desire . . .

"That's what my mom said, too."

"What?"

"How could I have known beforehand."

"You mean you told her about it?" That can't be, I thought.

"Yes."

"Didn't you get in trouble?" I couldn't imagine any of the other girls I knew deciding to make love to their boyfriends, and even if it happened, the last person they'd ever tell would be their parents. Think of Toni's – not only would Mr. Anastos kill Clay, he'd probably lock Toni in her room for the rest of high school.

"She said she wished I'd talked to her about it beforehand, she was kind of upset, but she didn't really get mad at me. She gave me a big lecture about not getting pregnant. She did the same thing when she was my age," Becca said. "But it worked out better for her."

And it could for you, I thought. If only she hadn't made up her mind it would be a mistake. And then Clay had to come along and do what he did to Toni and poison the whole idea of making love so that even being close to me seemed to make Becca nervous, just now, when she had told me this story that made me want her unbearably. He should be shot, I thought, full of frustrated desire, and jealousy of that other boy whose name I didn't even want to remember. I was a virgin, I knew nothing about these things, most of what I thought I knew about love came out of books . . . some were chosen to live life completely, like Becca or Dal, I thought, and some were not. Most were not. Who else had a family like hers, a mother you could say anything to, who allowed – everything, life itself? The truth was Becca lived in a world I couldn't even imagine, and probably everything between us was child's play to her.

We sat in silence, and I began to fear that even worse was to come; the fear mounted to panic, it forced out words I didn't want to say. "Do you want me to go away?"

"Andy, *please*," she said, squeezing my hand hard. "Please don't sound so miserable."

"I'm sorry," I muttered. "I think too much."

"So stop, okay?"

That was easy for her to say – and anyway, the only thing that could stop these thoughts would be to hold her and feel her wanting to be held as she, in my short experience with her, always had – and wasn't that just what she didn't want? But I had to take the chance, and I put my arm around her, feeling as awkward as if we were on a first date, as if every moment of intimacy between us had been erased. How did she have the power to send everything back to the very beginning – or beyond – to make me have to try to begin again but this time without her help? She thought it was all so unfair, but wasn't I at her mercy? That was what she didn't want to admit.

"Come here," I said; what I wanted to say was "Lie down with me" but I didn't dare.

"I *am* here, Andy, would you just please say something about what you're feeling or what you think, I just told you something that really matters to me and you've hardly said a word."

"I don't *know* what you're telling me, do you mean you don't want me to touch you anymore ever? I know you don't want me to now, it's driving me crazy, and then you tell me about going all the way with another guy, how do you expect me to feel?"

Becca folded her arms protectively across her chest, and lowered her head, as if hiding, and I couldn't tell if she was going to get angry or cry or do something else entirely. "Do you think it was wrong of me to do that with Jeff?" she said, in a low voice.

"You were in love with him, weren't you?" It hurt me to say that.

"Yes."

And I could imagine how in love with her he must have been, especially after they made love, and how he must have felt when she broke up with him then . . . "No, I don't think it was wrong."

"I wish I hadn't hurt him that way."

"But didn't you just do what you had to?"

"Yes," she said, but she still didn't look up.

"Those are the chances you take, aren't they? What else are you going to do, not feel anything because it might be risky? You might as well not live."

Becca nodded, just perceptibly, to herself. "I tell myself things like that, but I'm not always sure I'm right."

"If you ask me, I'd rather love someone now and worry later about getting hurt."

She turned and knelt facing me on the couch as if she wanted to look me over and find out who I was. I searched her face, too, for the experiences she had just told me about; the more she let me know her, the more deeply she surprised me, and it seemed I had never been so alive as I was in her presence – except maybe in childhood sometimes, entranced by the world itself. Finding a cat skeleton in the overgrown lot Dal and I called Andorra, or following a miniature river down the bricks of the alley while late snow melted under the spring sun. But never like this. I pulled her to me, gently, wondering if she would resist, but she did not; she put her arms around my neck and let me kiss her, and then she pulled back and looked at me seriously, with her hands on my shoulders. "There are some things we can't do right now," she said. "But it doesn't mean I don't care. You'll just have to believe me."

"I do." And I was willing to pledge her that loyalty – entirely willing – but had she given hers to me?

She said nothing, and I kissed her again, carefully, and caressed her cheek and her neck. She took my hand and held it between hers. "I need to go to sleep, Andy," she said. "It's late."

"All right," I said, trying not to sound disappointed, but I had a feeling I didn't succeed. We got up and tiptoed through the darkened house. At the front door she flung her arms around my neck, embraced me as if she couldn't bear to see me go, but she didn't speak; I held her tight, wanting her all over again, not understanding after all. When I kissed her a sad, breathless feeling tightened in my chest. "Goodnight," she whispered.

"Goodnight."

Then I was going down the front walk, slowly, my eyes on the ground, feeling the cold on my neck, thinking of what she had done with Jeff Solomon, hating him in an abstract way without even knowing what he looked like, glad that he had been wrong for her and trying to believe that I was not.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dal and I spent so much time together that my dad said he and my mom were betting on whether I'd move in with Dal, or Dal would move in with us. Not that we found anything particularly original to do. Nothing but homework, listening to the radio, "Twilight Zone" and "77 Sunset Strip," but I felt I had to be around, providing a kind of insulation in the midst of his family's troubles. For the first time in my life I felt I was guarding Dal. Now and then when we were in his room we'd hear something – his mother protestingly banging a pan on the stove, his dad muttering to himself – and trade a look that said more than we knew how to say out loud.

It seemed as though coming over to Claire's and being teased by the Graces had made Dal a part of that group, finally; when he wasn't at practice after school, that was where the two of us would end up. But when he and I and Toni and Becca and Claire were all together, we didn't have the kind of talks I'd once had with the Graces, that made me feel that I was admitted to the private lives of girls. The rule about no secrets was no longer in effect; maybe that was because Dal was there, or maybe it would have happened anyway because there would have been too much to say if we'd let ourselves begin. Even between me and Becca that was beginning to be so; maybe it was easier to see her when other people were around, looking at us as boyfriend and girlfriend, so we could think things hadn't changed.

Becca and I converged in the hall before English one day and she said, "Dal called me last night."

"He did? What for?"

"He wanted to talk about his family. I'm worried about him."

"Things aren't getting any better, are they?"

"He sounded like he was about to explode. He said he had to talk to somebody and I guess he picked me because we talked that other time when we went sledding."

"Did something happen yesterday?"

"His dad went out to one of his so-called meetings, I think that's what bothered him so much. He's really unhappy, Andy. You don't see it the rest of the time, with the others, but he is."

"I know." And I, of all people, could understand his wanting to talk to Becca – difficult things were always easier to say to a girl – and yet it almost made me jealous of her, as if she were replacing me in Dal's life. But that was absurd, and if she could help him, why not?

Later on, when Dal and I were walking home after hanging around at Claire's, I said, "Becca told me you called her last night."

"Yeah. I thought maybe you were getting sick of hearing me bitch and moan about my family."

"Come on, Dal, it's not like that, you know that."

"I can't stand watching my mom be nice to him. You know what they are?"

"What?"

"Polite. Since when do they have to be polite after all these years? She must know something's the matter or she wouldn't act like that."

"She's always polite."

"Not like this."

"She's worried about you, Dal."

"God, I know, it makes me hate myself sometimes. But what am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know."

We walked along, quickly, with collars turned up and hands jammed in pockets; it was the middle of March and there were beginning to be hints of spring, but a light rain was falling and it was cold.

"You're a lucky guy," Dal said.

"Why?" But I knew why, and I knew I was, despite my fears.

"Becca's something special, you know that, don't you?"

"I know," I said, and for a moment it bothered me that he said that. Did he think he saw something about her that I'd missed?

For a couple of weeks, while March wore along toward April, the five of us went around in a clump, to Claire's house, or sometimes Becca's, and ate things that spoiled our dinners, watched dumb TV

shows and made fun of them; the sight of our coats heaped together on a couch or a chair made me feel ensconced and safe, and I kept hoping it would do the same for Toni. We all went to a movie together – Dal sat between Toni and Claire, and I wondered if something was happening over there, if Toni had been right after all when she said she was going to fix up the two of them. Becca didn't think so, but I wasn't so sure, especially when Claire decided to give a party. Wasn't that the obvious move for her to make? Becca and Toni and I teased her about whether she was going to invite Kenny Hunsicker – of course she didn't – and we told Dal he could ask Denise, but he only rolled his eyes and looked bored. I didn't give a damn who Claire invited as long as it wasn't Jeff Solomon; all the people I really wanted to see were sure to be there. The Graces spent two days conniving over the guest list, trying to pair people up or at least set up a little research into the possibilities; most of the scheming was done by Becca and Claire while Toni watched, only half-interested. Claire deflected every attempt of Becca's to find out who she was putting on the list for herself, and no one even talked about a date for Toni; that subject was taboo. Even Dal seemed to understand that without having to be told why.

It was odd being met by Claire in a party dress at the door of her cleaned-up house as if we didn't see each other all the time. I seemed to have forgotten how pretty she was. The house smelled like a party – like recent cleaning, and popcorn, and a hint of perfume. Becca was wearing a black scoop-necked dress that made her look so grown-up and so beautiful I could hardly pay attention to anything else or keep myself from touching her neck in front of everyone, and when we danced I could see other boys watching her. I had been one of those boys at most of the parties I'd ever been to in my life.

The air swarmed with unspoken words, with invitation and sizing-up and turning aside, unmistakable emanations both cool and hot. The least gesture – the turn of a head, the flip of a hand in mid-sentence – flashed like a beacon at sea: hope, disappointment, desire. Uncertainties crossed in midair like birds having a fight. Music made it bearable, or ecstatic, became a place to hide, ran you through, sword-like, and so did turning down the lights; the living room was dim, and the sunporch off it was dark. Who had the nerve to turn the last lamp off in there, when everyone wanted it out but no one dared? Perhaps Claire herself; but it wasn't clear who was in there, or what they were doing, or with whom. I could see Toni holding herself apart from everyone but us, fending off the looks of boys she might have flirted with at another time; wherever she was in the room, she seemed to

occupy a space by herself. She did dance with Dal for a while, because both of them were so good at it; I admired them, Becca wandered off – where? To the kitchen, perhaps; maybe Claire was in there. Toni and Dal and I were talking over the music, and then Dal went away and I danced with Toni a little but mostly we talked and I watched to see if she was all right or not, if being at a party only made her remember things she wanted to forget, and Claire came into the living room with Dal and I thought, looking at the glow around her hair as she stood in front of a lamp, that I must be right about her and Dal, or at least about her. Then Toni and Claire were dancing to “Green Onions,” turning together and snapping their fingers, the electricity seemed to have come back into Toni for a moment, and I went to look for Becca and finally found her and Dal sitting together halfway up the stairs, a bit above the party, paying it no attention, absorbed in some low-spoken talk. “What are you guys doing up there?” I said.

“Talking,” said Dal. They looked serious and apart – too serious for party talk – proud and silent, like big cats.

“Come down and join the party,” I said.

“Do it for me,” said Becca, not moving.

“It’s more fun with you.”

“You’ll see me later,” she said, as somebody put on Ray Charles.

After that all I was doing was waiting for it to be time to go home; I stood around with Toni, who didn’t seem to want to dance with anyone, and we tried to figure out what each of the people around us wanted out of this evening. Claire was dancing with Mike Sinkiewicz, and she looked discontented to me; I thought I knew why, but Toni wasn’t so sure. After a while Becca joined us as though nothing had happened; I looked around for Dal, but he seemed to have left without my noticing it.

Becca and I left too, and I thought Claire looked a little betrayed as she said goodnight. Leaving before the end was letting down the side – I knew that, but there were more important things on my mind. Becca and I walked slowly to my car, holding hands but saying nothing.

“What was that all about?” I said, when we were in the car and I had started the engine.

“With Dal?”

I glanced at her – what else would I mean? She was sitting a little apart from me on the seat.

We drove half a block before she spoke. "He was talking about what'll happen if she finds out. Whether they'll split up, and I was telling him about my aunt and uncle, you know, the ones who should have split up a long time ago." No wonder they looked so serious, I thought. "I think it scares him a lot. But it's hard for him to admit that."

"Yeah."

"Maybe I shouldn't have, but I was saying that I think sometimes people have to do some pretty selfish-looking things. He didn't like that very much."

"That's Dal for you. He's never been a selfish person, that I can remember." I thought of when we were in the fourth grade and he invented the game called Chaser, and he and his friends wouldn't teach it to anyone else – but if that was the only time I could remember Dal being selfish, it was the same as never.

"Maybe he's never had to be," Becca said.

"What do you mean?"

She sighed. "I don't know. I just think he's in an awful position, knowing this. And thinking if it comes out, his parents might split up – don't you see? It means he'd be the one who broke up his own family. If he told. And that's the last thing he wants to do. But it's still the truth, how long can you hold it in?"

Murder will out, I thought. And we had been telling ourselves for a long time that what mattered, maybe the only thing that mattered, was the truth. I pulled up in front of Becca's house and turned off the lights and we sat there, thinking dark thoughts. I could feel them lumped between us like an undesired third presence in the car.

"It's true no matter who tells it," I said finally. "Maybe it really doesn't matter if it's Dal, or his dad, or she finds out some other way."

"It matters to Dal," she said, with conviction.

"I know." Somehow Becca knowing Dal's dilemma, and feeling it so acutely, was like pulling a scab off a half-healed scrape. I had gotten used to it insensibly – face it, I thought, I've been ignoring it, really, I haven't thought of anything but Becca and myself in weeks, talk about selfish, when Dal needed a friend more than he ever had – and then the better friend turned out to be Becca . . . "Ever since this started I haven't known what to do. Except it was my brilliant idea to go and spy on Dal's dad, and make Dal see him with that chick of his, and screw everything up royally for him."

"Don't blame yourself," Becca said, reaching over and touching my hand. "He doesn't."

"Maybe he should."

"Andy, if Dal didn't know it would still be going on." Maybe it was even more important than we'd thought that we were about to go away, go East, start a different life – but would it be so different? – and then I remembered that in mine there wouldn't be Becca.

All I wanted was to be next to her, but even that seemed remote, as if the little strip of car seat between us were a gap over which I had to call to get her attention. We weren't touching, and when I looked at her she was staring straight ahead, her face somber. I wasn't sure if I dared disturb her, but when I screwed up my nerve and turned to her and put my arms around her she met me halfway, and we sat holding each other; I could feel her warm breath against my neck. It wasn't as cold as it had been the first time we had done this. I kept seeing how she had looked at the party, the beauty of her shoulders and neck in the black dress, her hair swirling as she danced – and a kind of dignity about her, something carved, when I saw her on the stairs with Dal. At that moment she wasn't seventeen, she wasn't a girl, and now I wasn't certain what she was as I held her in my arms, all I knew was that I was a boy who could not yet call himself a man and if she couldn't love me as that, then she couldn't love me at all.

But when we kissed, those thoughts evaporated in tenderness and wanting her; I slid my hand inside her coat to touch the warmth of her waist and caress her side and then, secretively, the soft swell of her breast, falling into kissing as if into another world better than our own, but gently she took my hand away and murmured, "Not here." I looked around – there was no one on the street, hardly a light in the houses around us, but I knew how she felt.

"Can we go inside?" I said.

She looked at me for a long time, still holding my hand that had been caressing her, stroking the back of my hand with her fingertips, studying my face with troubled eyes. "But it'll be so hard for you to stop," she murmured at last.

That made me turn away and pull away my hand, I couldn't help it. "God," I said. I felt as if she had said it was only a matter of time before we were just friends again, before it was like nothing had ever happened between us at all.

"Don't, Andy," she said, putting her hand on my cheek and turning my face toward her. I didn't want to meet her eyes. "Damn it, don't do that. Please. Don't you remember what we said? You told me you believed me."

I had an impulse to say I was sorry, but for once I stifled it.

"If you don't say something about how you're feeling I am really going to get mad at you," she said, grabbing my shoulder and shaking me.

"Is it against the law to touch you all of a sudden? What am I supposed to do, I can't just switch myself off, you know, I'm a human being, I want you."

"I know," she said, taking my hand between both of hers in a motherly calming way, and I wanted to snatch it away but didn't. "I just can't right now." Her voice was soft but it was a voice of absolute certainty.

"I give up," I said; I wasn't even sure what I meant but the words had to come out.

"Does that mean you want to stop going out with me?" she said in an even voice, as if it were all the same to her, as if she could say a polite goodbye and never think twice, and I felt myself suddenly cut loose and falling, the blackness of despair.

"Please don't do that to me," I said, closing my eyes. "Please." Don't beg, a voice inside ordered me, but it was too late.

"Don't you do it, either," she said. She still had my hand between hers, and I held on tight, feeling the answering pressure from her; there was a long moment of edging back from the brink, but stepping back didn't take it away. It was as if we had been walking through what I thought was a pleasant and unfenced meadow and all of a sudden I looked to my left and there at arm's length was the edge of a hundred-foot drop.

I took a deep breath. "I think I love you too much, Becca. More than you want me to."

"You're wrong," she said instantly, and then it seemed as though she had to think for a moment before she could go on. "Every time you look at me I feel beautiful, do you know that?"

"It's because you are."

"You are so good to me, Andy, please don't take that away from me."

"Why would I?"

"I don't know, just don't." She put her arms around my neck and held onto me as if I were trying to get away, but wasn't she the one who put a distance between us? I will never understand, I thought, embracing her, kissing her neck and her mouth, and for a minute or two, kissing was a place to hide from everything I didn't know how to do or say.

"I've got to go in," she whispered. I knew it was true –her parents had said she could stay out extra late because of the party, but it was surely one o'clock. She put her hand on my cheek and kissed me, and then she was out of the car, going up the walk, and I couldn't take my eyes off her until she had vanished inside the front door. She turned and looked in my direction before she clicked the porch light out, deep in some thought I couldn't read.

It was the last week in March, and there were beginning to be more than hints of spring; buds were pushing through and turning to leaves, there was a smell in the air of growing and South, but at any moment a cloud might pass over the sun and it would be winter again. The weather was fitful and restless, as if it couldn't get comfortable with itself. Lawns no longer looked as stubbly and bare as they had, and the unfrozen earth, on wet days, gave off a smell of being ready. There was a feeling of waiting and anticipation, unaccountable excitements and dreads. I couldn't shake the sensation that everything I feared was always beside me, one step away. At times I thought something was shifting between me and Becca in some crucial, underground way – I couldn't tell if it was for better or worse, and at times I thought I was only imagining it. It was beginning to seem to me that when she gave me that kiss on the sidewalk in front of Claire's house we had skipped past some necessary period of hesitation and doubt and hanging in the balance, and now we had to suffer through it; Dal had told me not to fall in love with her so soon, and maybe he had understood better than I realized. More than strategy after all.

The school week straggled by, punctuated by bells, lunches, problem sets, lines to be translated, stares out the window, the bang of locker doors in the halls. Claire's party seemed to have eliminated the need for our little group to see each other every day; I felt more the way I had the year before, talking to her or Toni on the telephone. And Becca of course. We were on the phone every night, but usually not for long, because we didn't seem to know what to say. Dal was drawn into himself when I saw him at school – just keeping his head down, getting through it. When I asked him how things were going at home he answered in monosyllables.

On Saturday afternoon the sun was coming and going, and when it was out the day felt like true spring. I called Becca; she had just come back from shopping and was thinking she might read the latest English book for a while. But it was Saturday and no kind of a day to

do homework, and it didn't take much persuading to get her to go for a walk with me instead. It was windy, and strands of hair that had escaped from her barrette flew in the breeze; we no longer had to wear winter coats, or gloves, and I hoped that being without them was the reason it felt almost as if we had recently met. I was sure of nothing, on the watch, too aware that the fabric of each moment was thin and easily torn.

We ended up in the vacant lot next to Dal's house, the place he and his sister and I called Andorra – a childhood spot – I wanted to show it to her, and more than that I felt as though the weather told me to go there, though I couldn't have said how. Becca wanted to ring Dal's doorbell and see if he was home, but I didn't; I wanted to be alone with her in that secret place. She was surprised at how thick the undergrowth was, how slowly and patiently we had to work our way into the bushes and saplings and vines and weeds, pulling branches aside, sometimes almost bent double to get through difficult places, scratched despite our best efforts. It was silent, determined work. "Is there really somewhere to get to inside all this?" she said, after a minute, and I said "Yes" and tried to remember if I had ever known exactly how to get to a clearing. There was no way to get your bearings in Andorra, and I supposed, now that I thought about it, that Dal and I had never known exactly how many clearings there were – not to mention that they could have been overgrown by now. I kept on by instinct, looking for a thinning of the branches, and a minute or two passed before I saw which way to turn and we emerged. We were in a space the size of a small room, irregularly shaped, with a lump of stone poking up a couple of inches out of the earth in the middle of it – "That must be part of the old foundation," I said. "They were going to build a house here once, but it never got finished. That's what Dal's mom told us, anyway."

"Must have been a long time ago," Becca said, brushing off her clothes.

"It's been like this ever since I can remember." Middle-sized trees were growing now in what would have been the rooms.

Becca sat down on the stone, which was fairly flat on top, and I stretched out on the ground that sloped up to it, my head next to her feet. We were surrounded by bushes and saplings, and the only view was of the sky.

"Once you're in here, no one would ever know," I said.

Becca looked around her and up at the sky, as if letting the place sink in. "It feels strange," she said.

"I know. You could be anywhere. It wouldn't have to be St. Louis out there anymore, or even anyplace we know about. You could be in a different century." I remembered telling Becca I wished we had a hideout of our own, and her teasing me about a secret love nest.

"Stop, you're giving me the creeps."

I looked up at her, held up my hand toward her and she grasped it momentarily but then let go. "I always liked it here. Dal and I used to come here and tell stories."

"Really? What about?"

"Oh – hidden treasure, people running away from things – escaped slaves. Or magic."

"I didn't know Dal could tell stories like that."

"We both could when we were kids, if we did it together. I never was as good at it without him."

"It seems sad that the house got started and never finished," Becca said. "Something must have happened to the people who were building it."

Words popped into my head and I said them, trying not to think. "This was a secret magic spot, and they were invading it without knowing what they were doing, so the hidden powers sent them away."

"How did they do that?" Becca said, and it was just what Dal might have said, years ago, to make me keep talking.

"Forced them to abandon the project. Bricks crumbled in the workmen's hands. Boards they were going to use rotted away overnight. Cement wouldn't harden, mortar turned to water, nails bent as soon as a hammer hit them." I felt as though one of the old stories was telling itself through my mouth. "The most experienced carpenters hammered their fingers and sawed their thumbs. After a few weeks, they saw it was hopeless and gave up, and no one's tried to build here ever since."

Becca was silent for a while. I glanced up and saw her looking musingly into the branches. "Tell about the hidden powers," she said.

"Mm, the hidden powers – this is their sacred grove."

"I always thought sacred groves were a bit better tended than this."

"Ah, but if it were, the secret would get out. This place is not intended for everyone. The powers do not lead every passerby into their inner chamber. Only the chosen ones may enter here."

"Chosen by who, you?"

"I am only the humble vehicle."

"Oh, are you really? Well, does the vehicle know why I was chosen?"

"Because of your great beauty," I said, and thought, how cornball. "The hidden powers recognize you, they know that you are one with them, you can call upon them at will. You are not of the ordinary world."

"I wish someone would tell that to Mr. Kearns, so I wouldn't have to write the next paper. And what about you, Sir Andrew? Why are you chosen?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? You seem to know everything else."

"It is not for me to say why I am chosen. The hidden powers have not given me that knowledge. But you may call upon your own wisdom and tell me, if you so desire."

I was lying with my eyes closed, breathing the air that was almost the air of spring, fully immersed in another reality, and for a while there was no sound except wind in the upper branches and a few birds. Then the sound of a car going by on the street broke in upon the spell. I looked up at Becca, wondering if she was going to answer. She was sitting with her chin on her hands, staring into the trees, but she glanced down at me when I looked at her. "You are chosen," she said, as if reminded it was her turn to speak, "because you are a believer."

"In the powers?"

"In them, and other things. You believe in believing. You're good at it."

I closed my eyes again, encircled her ankle with my hand, ran my fingers up her calf, thinking about what she had said. It had never occurred to me that to be good at believing was a qualification for anything except being gullible and easily led.

"Is anyone else chosen besides you and me?" she said.

"Dal is. Of course. He was chosen first. That was the secret reason why his family moved in next door."

"Ah." I was waiting for her to ask me why Dal was chosen, but maybe it was obvious that he too was one with the hidden powers, always had been. Except they seemed to have failed him now, for the first time in his life, and that was hard to understand. Harder for him, I was sure. I had always thought he was born to have everything work out.

Small shreds of cloud were blowing quickly across the patch of sky above me, and the light changed from moment to moment. I felt like myself in Andorra, the child self that was somehow continuous

with the me I was now, but as a child I had never felt so on the edge of a precipice. I was lying on the ground in a perfectly protected spot, with Becca sitting next to me, and yet I seemed to be precariously balancing, as if at any moment I might fall into the sky.

"What are you thinking?" I said to Becca, without looking at her. She was sitting above and behind me, saying nothing, and she was quiet for a few more moments.

"About next year. Going away."

So.

"Do you still want to go to Carleton?"

"Yes."

"It'll be cold up there."

"I like winter, you know that."

I remembered her telling me that just before we first kissed – did she mean for me to think of that moment? Next winter I would be in Boston, probably – somewhere in the East, someplace I couldn't even picture, and Becca, if I heard from her at all, would be a letter or a voice on the phone, words from far away . . . she'd be living her own new life, by then any number of boys would have asked her out and sooner or later she would like one of them. "Are you going to write to me?"

"If you write to me," she said, but didn't she know that I would?

"What do you think it'll be like?"

"I think I'll be homesick at first. Even though I'll try not to. I'm going to miss my family a lot, I just know it."

"You'll meet people in no time." I thought of how she had come into my group of friends and altered everything – Becca would never lack people around her, never have to be lonely.

"Let's don't talk about this, okay?"

"Why not?" I twisted my head around to look up her.

"It's making me sad, and it's too beautiful a day for that, and anyway who knows what'll happen?"

I know we'll be far apart, I thought, but all the more reason not to say it since we were together now. I got up and came to sit next to her and pulled a couple of little twigs out of her hair. Maybe it was Andorra or maybe it was Becca, but I seemed to be under some sort of spell that made me feel like we were ten years old and boyfriend-girlfriend was still years away.

She leaned against me and sighed. "I like this place," she said. "I like the hidden powers. They feel good to me."

"They like you, Becca."

"I hope you're right," she said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We picked our way out of Andorra carefully, branch by branch, and emerged onto the sidewalk, back in the everyday world; it was a bit of a surprise, as always, to come out and see how much everything was the same as before you went in, like coming out of a movie theater in the afternoon. "Want to go see if Dal's home?" I said, my feet automatically turning in that direction.

"Sure."

As we came up on Dal's porch I thought I heard Katie's voice inside the house, yelling something I couldn't make out. Was she mad again about something she hadn't been allowed to do? I rang the doorbell and there was an unmistakable feeling of having come at the wrong time, some weird tension in the spring air, as if there were someone on the other side of the door cursing under his breath because the doorbell had rung. I looked at Becca but she didn't seem to be feeling it. Then Dal's mother opened the door and looked at us and I could see she had been crying, her eyes were red and even her hair seemed crazy and out of place – a way I'd never seen her – I knew that something was awfully wrong and in an instant I knew what it must be. Did she see in my eyes that I knew? "Not now, Andy," she said, and at the same time in the background I heard Katie scream, "You stupid creep, you idiot, why couldn't you keep your fat mouth shut?" and Dal: "Stay away from me, Kate, I mean it, shut the fuck up." Mrs. Carlton turned away from the half-open door. "Kate!" she shouted, in a scary trembling voice, darting back into the hall, and then more quietly, "Leave Dal alone." There was a wail from Kate, and sobbing, and Becca and I looked at each other, frozen there in front of the door, not knowing which way to turn; various footsteps sounded inside, some approaching the door, and I expected it to be slammed

shut, but Dal's face looked out. For an instant he glared at us as if he didn't know who we were, as if he were ready to spring and start beating the shit out of us just for being there, and then his sight seemed to come back and he was present. He stepped outside and closed the door behind him, his eyes big and dark, looking first at me and then at Becca without words, because he knew we knew.

"It happened," I said.

He took a long breath, nodding his head.

"Are you okay?" Becca said.

Dal gave her a long, heavy look. "I'm fucked," he said, quietly and precisely, into the silence.

She flinched a little and threw me a helpless glance. "I'm sorry, that was a dumb question."

Dal crossed the porch and sat down on the top step, and Becca and I sat down on either side of him, waiting for him to speak. He ran his hands back through his hair, staring at the front walk; then he reached down and picked up a pine cone that was sitting on the step below him and threw it out toward the street, convulsively. "God *damn* it!" he said through his teeth, holding in what should have been a shout so that it was even more violent. If the pine cone had been a rock there was no telling what would have happened – maybe it would have ended up in the living room across the street along with a pane of broken glass. Becca took hold of Dal's arm with both hands and said, "It's okay," in a way that only a girl could do.

"It's not," Dal said, not looking at her, but I could tell it helped.

"I know," she said. "But you'll make it."

I was trying to send him my friendship, my ancient alliance with him, by being next to him, waiting for him to show what he needed so I could try to do it. But what did any of us know about how to get through even this moment, let alone whatever would come next?

"What happened?" Becca said.

"I couldn't help it," said Dal, not looking at either of us.

"Help what?" I said.

He kept studying the front steps, hunched forward with his hands dangling between his knees. "I just couldn't help it. It was like the words came out by themselves. My dad said he was going out to play handball, I was in the kitchen and I heard him say it to my mom in the living room. All of a sudden I saw red. I never knew that was a real thing. All I saw was red, then he was coming toward the kitchen and I saw myself hit him in the head with a frying pan. Like hitting a ball off a tee. It was either that or say something."

"What'd you say?"

"Why don't you tell the truth for once?"

I could imagine it – the feeling Dal must have had in his stomach after he said those words. Becca made a little sound in her throat that meant she felt it too.

"He gave me this look like he used to give me when he was going to punish me and said 'What was that?' and I said, 'Tell the truth, her name starts with L.' I thought he was going to kill me for a second. He said 'What the hell are you talking about,' but I think he already knew it wasn't going to work, and I said 'You know damn well what I'm talking about, her name starts with L and you've been doing it for months.' He yelled 'Shut up' and then my mom said 'What is this all about?' – she was standing in the doorway, you should have seen her face, I don't know how much she heard but God, she looked bad. He didn't know what to do. I said, 'Tell her.' She said 'Tell me what?' and we just stood there for a long time looking at each other. It was horrible. I knew there was no going back. Then he said 'Leave the room,' and I went upstairs but I could hear them yelling, they said awful things to each other – Katie heard them too . . ." He clasped his hands behind his head, and bent over like that, he looked like someone in a bomb drill trying to protect himself. Too late, I thought. Becca laid her hand on Dal's back, and so did I; we looked at each other over him. No answers.

"Oh hell," he groaned, straightening up. I took my hand away, but Becca didn't; she rested hers on his shoulder. He looked more Indian-like than ever, lonely and fierce.

"What happened after that?" Becca said, and I thought, Don't make him talk if he doesn't want to.

"The back door slammed, then it was quiet, that was almost worse. I didn't want to go down, but I had to. My mom was in the kitchen crying."

"Where did he go?" I said; Dal only shrugged his shoulders. "He left?"

Dal nodded.

"You mean he's still going to go and – "

"How do I know?" Dal said angrily. "He might as well, it's no secret now."

"Maybe he needs time to think everything over," Becca said.

"Why bother?" said Dal. "He obviously didn't think of anything when he got into this, why start now?" I almost wanted to defend Dal's

father, to salvage something of the father Dal deserved, but there was no place to begin, and it would only have made him angry at me.

"Do you know what he said when they were having the fight?" Dal's voice was low, as if he could hardly bear to have it heard.

"What?"

"I should have known you'd turn out just like your mother, completely sexless.' And she said, 'How would you know anything about what I feel?'"

"God, talk about a fight," I said, thinking how he must have felt hearing that.

"It was awful."

I looked over at Becca; she seemed stricken, as if it had never occurred to her that people might say such things to each other. Or maybe it was just that she felt for Dal and it showed on her face.

"Look at me," she said to him. "It's going to be okay, you're still you, that hasn't changed." There was a kind of a held breath as they looked at each other, and I could feel something powerful pass between them and charge the air around us, the way it had when I had seen them talking at the party. Maybe it will help, I thought. There were things she could do that I could not begin to.

Dal looked away, and the three of us sat side by side on the top step of the porch, saying nothing. It was getting cooler as the late afternoon set in; the light was changing on the street, a couple of cars went by but they weren't Dal's dad. I had seen this view hundreds of times, leaving Dal's house, but it had never looked the way it did today. What if he didn't come back, what if this had been the last day of Dal's family the way he had always known it? That was crazy, impossible, even now I didn't believe such a thing could happen.

"Do you want to get out of here? We could go to my house, you could sleep over, my parents wouldn't mind." I wondered how they'd take it when they heard about this.

"My mom's in bad shape, I can't leave too." But I thought I detected in Dal's voice the wish that he could. "I probably should go back in."

But he didn't move, and how unfair it was that he should get stuck with the impossible job of trying to make her feel better – what the hell could? We sat, side by side, looking out at the neighborhood, the curve of the street, the haze of green in the trees. Trees were never unhappy. But if even here people couldn't manage to be together, what about everyone who wasn't so lucky? Were there just sort of deepening

layers of unhappiness, like geological strata, down to some molten core of pure hell?

"What I want to know is why," Dal said. "Why did he have to in the first place."

"Maybe he's in love with her," Becca said, and Dal gave a stifled groan. Leave it to her to say the truly scary thought. So much safer to imagine that all he wanted was to hop in bed with someone new – that might wear off, he might look around and decide it wasn't worth it, but if he was in love with her . . .

"Maybe it's temporary," I said.

"Maybe everything is," said Dal. I put my arm around his shoulder, in the awkward way of boys.

"Hang in there, Dal."

"Yeah, I know."

Becca put her arm around him from the other side. "You'll be okay," she said, and I thought all three of us were a little embarrassed at our feeble efforts to comfort him.

"Thanks," Dal mumbled, disengaging himself and standing up. "You picked a hell of a time to come over," he said, and I could see the effort he was making to sound like he was all right.

"Call me, if it's any help," I said.

"Or me," said Becca.

"Okay." He turned and slipped in the door, opening and closing it as if entering his own house were a mission behind enemy lines, and I knew that his life that minute was exactly what he did not want it to be.

Becca and I looked at each other; I was standing there with my hands jammed in my pockets as if it were cold. We turned without speaking and went down the steps. I wanted to get away from Dal's, away from the disaster that was in progress there, back to some part of the world where there still might be a possibility of joy. "I don't think I understood how bad it would be," she said in a low voice, halfway down the front walk; I felt as though I couldn't even answer her until we had reached the street.

"Just think," I said, "if we'd rung the bell when we first got here, the way you wanted to, maybe . . ."

"It had to come out sometime, it was driving him crazy."

We walked slowly down the street in the direction of Becca's house and I kept wondering how many of the other ordinary-looking houses on all the streets of the neighborhood held families like Dal's. I couldn't get out of my mind the look on his mom's face when she

answered the door. "How would you know anything about what I feel?" she had said to Dal's dad, and if you had once said that to someone's face, how could you still be together with them? You couldn't unsay it, that was for damn sure, and Dal couldn't erase having to hear it said. He had no choice about any of it – Dal, who had always been the one to do the choosing ever since we picked teams to play Bombardment at recess in the second grade.

"A week ago," I said, "you were telling Dal that sometimes people just have to do selfish things."

"Don't remind me."

"Not very pretty, is it?"

"Oh, Andy, don't, it's not my fault." I held out my hand for hers, and she took it. "I feel so bad for him," she said. "What if his dad doesn't come back?"

"What if he does? It won't be any picnic." What else had they said to each other, that Dal hadn't told us? Maybe worse things still, unrepeatable, unforgivable. Who knew how bad it could get? They hadn't known, that was for sure, when that picture was taken in front of the restaurant. If they had, there'd be no family, no Dal – so was it all some sort of hoax, a trick played by nature to get you to reproduce the species, were your hopes and dreams no more than bait that people couldn't help but take?

And yet Becca was next to me, absolutely real; I stole a look at her, wearing a white sweater with embroidered trim around the neck, and a purple scarf, her dark hair fairly wild now in the breeze – if what I felt in her presence was not to be believed in, if her beauty was not real beauty, then I didn't see how I could begin to know anything, and if I was mistaken about what love could be, then surely this mistake was preferable to any amount of the truth.

Dal's dad did come back; his parents went up to their room, closed the door, and didn't come out. Dal and Katie found something to eat for dinner, and sat waiting. I could picture them, when Dal told me about it the next day, waiting together in front of the TV and separately in their rooms, moving from place to place in the house like ghosts of their own past, hardly talking, unable to be comfortable anywhere, sitting down and getting up again – the silence of the house and the blank presence of that closed door behind which two voices spoke indistinguishable words, on and on for hours. Now and then, in a raised voice, came a half-sentence that they didn't even want to hear because it could tell them less than nothing by itself, because they

didn't want to hear any more yelling ever again, because they didn't want to know what those two terrified people, their parents, would be forced to say to each other when everything finally got said. Dal said he couldn't leave the house for fear of what might happen while he was gone; there didn't seem to be an outside world, really, only their house and the waiting. Near midnight the parents came out, looking half-alive, and spoke to them in low, dull voices: they were going through a hard time. There were issues they had to work out. It would take some time. Whatever happened, Dal and Katie would be taken care of the same as ever. They both loved them. Then they went to bed in separate rooms.

There was nothing, the next day, to stop Dal from coming to my house; I thought if he could help it he wouldn't go home. He had talked to his mother alone that morning; it turned out she knew who L. was – her name was Lorraine Carey, she was an administrative assistant in his dad's office, his mother had actually talked to her a couple of times when she met him there to go someplace downtown. She was older than Dal and I had thought, closer to thirty. "But too young for your dad," she'd said to Dal. "And he knows it."

"You can't believe how calm she was, Andy," he said. He was perched on the stone slab on top of my radiator, looking out the window. "Just like she'd been thinking all along about who he'd fall in love with. Waiting for him to do it."

"Nice life."

"Listen – I had to tell her how I found out, she knows the whole thing about us spying on him and everything."

"Does she know it was my idea?"

"No."

"She's probably going to hate my guts if she ever finds out," I said, inwardly thanking him for not telling her. It was one thing for Dal to have done it under the pressure of having seen the note, and another for me to have egged him on.

"She's got other things on her mind."

"So is he really in love with her?"

"That's what she said. But the way she said the words, it came out sounding like a disease."

"I wonder if it's going around." Epidemic of fathers falling in love with someone at the office. But the way my dad talked about the people in Financial Aid, it sounded as though no one, no matter how hard up, could ever fall in love with any of them. More like wear earplugs and occasionally run out in the hall and scream. That still left

my mother, of course, who could easily have been having an affair with some professor the whole time she'd been working on her master's degree, and how would I know? "How the hell did she live with it, if she's been thinking this was going to happen for a long time?"

"What I want to know is how she can live with him now."

"How'd they act this morning?"

"They didn't quite look at each other. My dad didn't really look at anybody. He hardly said a word. I think he's trying to avoid me."

"That shits," I said.

"Yeah."

We talked half the afternoon, until we had exhausted the little we knew and every speculation we could dream up and there was nothing left to say, and then we did the physics. We had gotten to electricity, and there were paragraphs in the textbook I didn't understand no matter how often I read them, even if I could repeat them word for word; to Dal it seemed to come naturally, and I was sure it was good for him to have to explain the problem to me every time I got stuck.

He stayed for dinner; I asked my mother if he could sleep over and she said yes, as I knew she would. At dinner my father tried to start a conversation with Dal but of course it didn't work. Still, as if he guessed that something was needed to fill the air, he delivered his opinion about some political goings-on he'd been following in the paper for weeks – talked much longer, I thought, than he would have if Dal hadn't been there. My mother poked little holes in his arguments that let all the air out of them; but then she agreed with him, so why deflate him in the first place? Dal and I ate and said almost nothing, and I was sure that he, like me, was thinking of his parents and a million family dinners and all that he had never known.

Dal and I were up in my room listening to the radio and half-heartedly reading history when the doorbell rang and a moment later my mom called, "Andy! It's Toni!"

Toni? I thought. What is she doing here? I went quickly down the stairs, glad of the distraction, and found Toni in the living room trying to make small talk about school with my mom. At one glance I could see she was upset; she threw me a look that said "Get me out of this."

"C'mon upstairs," I said. "Dal's here."

"Can I talk to you first?"

"Sure, come on." I beckoned with my head toward the hall.

"Is everything all right?" my mom said.

"I'm okay, Mrs. Brecker."

My mother gave me a dissatisfied look as if I must know what was going on, or maybe she even thought I caused it. I didn't have a clue. I closed the door to the living room and we were alone in the hall.

"What is it?" I said, and Toni didn't make a sound but I could see she couldn't talk because she was making such an effort not to cry. I was trying to guess what could have happened, and waiting, and finally she took a deep breath and let it out and said in an undertone, "I just saw Clay."

"You did? I thought you never wanted to see his face again."

"I didn't. I don't. But I was working and he just walked right in, with a couple of his slimy friends, and sat down as if nothing ever happened. Oh, Andy," she said in a low, quick voice, keeping it down so my parents wouldn't hear, "he's such a bastard. He gave me this look, sort of like – Oh, hi. Nice to see you again. No big deal. God, I felt so used, I felt about two inches high, I ran out the back way. Your house was the closest, that's why I rang your bell."

"What a shit he must be."

"He is. And it made everything come back, just when I was starting to – I mean, I can't forget it, I'll never forget it, but I was starting to feel a little better, a little more like a human being instead of something you just use and throw away, and then he had to walk in there thinking he's so cool and bring it all back. God, I hate him so much, you can't imagine how much I hate him."

From above I heard footsteps, and Dal said, "Hey, Toni. What's up?"

"Not much," she said, trying to fake a smile and failing. It was too transparent, I knew Dal saw something was wrong. "What are you guys doing?"

"Ah, we're having a thrilling evening of homework," he said, coming downstairs. "But now you're here you could give us an excuse to stop."

"I have to go home, I just wanted to see if Andy could give me a ride."

"No problem," I said. "Let me tell my parents." I stuck my head in the living room, my mom mouthed the words "Is she all right?" and I made a noncommittal gesture. "I'm just going to take Toni to her house, okay?"

"Okay, but don't forget it's a school night."

"I know, Mom. Really. Give me a break."

I was half-hoping Dal wouldn't come along, so that I could talk to Toni some more, but of course he did; in the car I kept thinking of the unmentionable things he didn't know about her, or she about him. We drove to Toni's in a state of awkwardness – at least for her and me – Dal seemed as if she took his mind off his own troubles. At her house I got out and walked her to her door. "I hate running away from him," she said, "what the hell am I going to do, hide in my house? But I couldn't be in the same room with him."

"I can't believe he had the balls to walk into your dad's place."

"He can do anything, Andy. He doesn't care. God, I'm glad you were home, I really needed to see a friendly face."

"So you got to see two."

"Does Dal know?"

"No."

"That's good. G'night," she said, opening her front door.

"Goodnight." I heard her mother inside saying, "Home already?" and Toni answering, "Yeah, I didn't feel so well," as she closed the door.

What kind of a shit is this guy Clay anyway, I thought as I went back down the walk, where did he come from, how did he get this way, to just not give a goddamn about another human being, and why the hell did he have to pick on Toni . . . I got in the car. "What's up with her?" said Dal.

I turned the key in the ignition, trying to figure out if I should tell him or not, but fuck it, I thought, it's too late for secrets, too much has happened, and anyway I couldn't lie to Dal. "I don't know if she wants me to tell you, I mean I know she doesn't, but . . . you know that guy we saw her with over at Washington U.?"

"Oh yeah, Joe Hotshot, the guy with the fake name." He sounded half-amused at the thought.

"Clay."

"Yeah. Does she still have a crush on him?"

"He invited her to a frat party and got her drunk and –fucked her."

"What?" he said, in a whole different voice.

"She told me he took her up to his room, and got her on the bed and held her down and, you know, put it to her. She told him not to but she couldn't stop him, I guess she was too drunk. And he's big, the son of a bitch."

"That guy we saw did that to Toni?" Dal said in an outraged whisper.

"Yes."

"When? Did it just happen? Was that what she was telling you?"

"No, no, it was weeks ago, but she was waitressing tonight and he walked into Sorrento's. I guess he acted like nothing ever happened, and she ran out the back."

"He just walked right in the place?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he knew she'd be there?"

"I don't think he gave a damn."

"I knew he was a shit the second I saw him," Dal said in a deadly voice.

"You know what the worst is?" It bothered me too much to keep it in, even though I wasn't sure I should say it.

"What?"

"She was a virgin. Before he did that. Don't tell her I told you. It makes me want to kill him."

There was a long, burning silence for a block and a half, as we rolled down the street toward my house; then without warning Dal kicked the dashboard viciously. "Fuckhead," he said.

"Christ, Dal, don't break my car."

"We know where he is."

"What?" I said, but there was no mistaking the tone of his voice.

"We know where he is, we have a message for him, let's deliver it."

"Dal."

"Take a left." Sorrento's was that way.

"Dal, listen to me, he came in with two other guys, we can't get in there anyway because we don't have I.D.'s."

"Take a left."

"What are you planning to do, beat up all three of them single-handed?"

"I thought she was your friend."

"She is, don't try to pull that on me."

"Take a left, damn it, or stop the fucking car and I'll walk."

"You don't have to do this, Dal."

"If you didn't want me to do something about it, you shouldn't have told me. Now are you coming or not?" He opened his door, and reflexively I stopped the car. Dal stared at me with the look I'd seen the day before when he came to the door, the look he once gave Conroy

when I thought Conroy had better watch his back. "Take it easy," I said. "Calm down."

"Fuck you," he said, and got out and slammed the door, and started down the dark street at a fast walk in the direction of Sorrento's.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I watched Dal as he rapidly dwindled away down the street, passing in and out of the circles of light thrown by streetlamps. He didn't look back. It had been years since he had been really angry at me, and even now I didn't know if he was mad at me or at everything, but I couldn't sit there and let him go off and get in trouble – as if there weren't enough trouble already in his life. I pulled the car over to the curb, got out and ran after him. He had already passed the third streetlamp, walking fast, and it took me almost a block to catch up to him. He looked at me once and said nothing and neither did I. We walked side by side; I fell into step with him, moving fast, and had to catch my breath at first after the run. I kept asking myself what I was going to do. I couldn't stop Dal from doing what he made up his mind to, I knew that. What good would it do to get into a fight, I thought, but the more I walked beside Dal the more I, too, wanted to inflict on Clay something that would begin to pay him back. Or if that was impossible, at least make him think before he ever tried something like that again. Dal's anger seemed to be communicating itself to me, murderous and heady, as if nothing could stop us because our cause was just. I kept seeing Clay's phony smile, his knowing look, Toni clinging to his arm as if he were such a prize – and all the time that prick had been planning what he was going to do, boasting about it to us right in front of her – that was what that look had really meant, that wink which said that he knew about girls and so did we, how they could be fooled, and had, and bragged about, dragging us down to his level, but he was wrong about us and he would find out how wrong if we got hold of him, he'd be sorry he ever came within a mile of her again.

"How are you planning to get in?" I said to Dal. "You know they'll check for ID's at the door."

"Fuck 'em, we'll go through the kitchen, say we're looking for Toni."

"Listen, Dal. Her dad doesn't know about this, he can't find out, you understand?"

"Who gives a shit?"

"Toni does." I knew he'd have to hear that, no matter how mad he was; he didn't reply, but he sped up a little and I almost had to trot to keep up with him. I wanted to tell him to slow down, but I was sure the answer would be "fuck you" again; I could feel him radiating anger and I wasn't sure how much it would take to make him turn it on me. We took the short dead-end street before the tracks at a half-run, crashed through weeds down into the darkness there, across the tracks, up the other side, slipping a little on the slope, and Dal stopped for a moment; we could see Sorrento's across the street. No one was coming in or out. More slowly we approached, trying to look casual, and I didn't know what he was going to do, but he walked straight up to the door with me behind him as if he expected to cruise right in. For an instant I thought the guy at the door would let him do it but then he looked at me and held out his arm to stop Dal. "Let's see your ID," he said, chewing gum. "And your friend's."

"I don't have an ID," Dal said. "We just need to make a phone call." There was a phone right inside the door and I wondered if Dal had known that or if his reflexes were that fast.

"A phone call?" The ID guy was big, with thick shoulders that stretched his knit shirt, and he had the boiled-looking eyes of a cop.

"One phone call, that's all," said Dal levelly, and they looked at each other for a few moments, Dal's face as dead as the other. Then the ID guy gestured with his head in the direction of the phone, saying nothing, as if we were too insignificant to talk to.

"Give me a dime," Dal said, and I dug in my pocket and gave him one, edging toward the phone with him. He stuck it in and dialed – who? – and I saw the bouncer's eyes flicker over us, impassively, and then back to the door. Jukebox music was loud inside the restaurant. It was about half-full. "Look for him," Dal hissed. He was pretending to talk on the phone and his eyes were scanning the place, looking for Clay, and at the same moment we both saw him, at a back booth with two other frat boys, beers in front of them, not full. Maybe that would slow him down a little bit, I thought, but there were still three of them. Dal looked like he was going to bolt into the place and start pounding

on Clay; I grabbed his arm. "Don't," I said, keeping my voice down and my back to the bouncer. "Not in here. That guy'll beat the crap out of us."

He was pulling his arm out of my grip and I was afraid it was too late to stop him when Clay and his friends picked up their beers and drained them and began to stand up. Oh shit, I thought, my heart racing, and Dal hung up the phone and headed for the door, me after him, out into the night. We were about three steps from the door with our backs to it when Dal stopped with his hands in his jacket pockets and I knew it was going to happen. He had his head slightly lowered, staring unseeingly at a car's bumper with total concentration; then we heard male voices behind us and Dal turned and so did I, yes, it was Clay, in the middle, and Dal said through his teeth "Hey, asshole," and punched Clay in the stomach, hit him so hard it scared me, Clay doubled over and Dal was ready to hit him again, someone else said "the fuck?" and the two others grabbed at Dal, I was terrified but I dove onto the back of one of them, pulling him off, the guy driving his elbow into my gut, everyone grunting and gasping for breath, something else hit me in the ribs and my hand hurt, I realized I'd punched someone, I had a flash of Dal driving his fist into Clay's side, someone kicking at him, I was hurled against the wall of the restaurant and I managed to duck and kick at the guy's legs before he could smash my nose in, I was trying to get away but he shoved me from behind and I went forward onto the parking lot, scraping my hands, trying to scrabble away. "You cocksucker," he gasped, "I'll kick the shit out of you," and I believed it, but there was a sound of shuffling and scraping and "Get the fuck out of here!" someone roared, Dal grabbed me by the arm and hauled me up – "Come on," he panted, and we were running like I'd never run before, across the street, no cars thank God, their footsteps after us, I couldn't look back but I knew if they caught us now we'd get beaten up without mercy, across the parking lot with Dal one step in front of me and we dived down the slope toward the tracks – maybe it would confuse them, slow them down, but the crashing was right behind us and at the same instant I heard the sound and saw the glaring light of a streetcar coming at us, over us, and Dal said again "Come on" and flew across the tracks, the car frantically dingling its bell, and some force like a magnetic field pulled me after him with the rushing streetcar practically on top of me, how would it feel when the wheels took off my feet but they didn't and then I was stumbling up the other side, clawing at branches as fast as I could go, gasping for air. We emerged onto the street and started to

run; they were still chasing us, but the streetcar had gotten in their way and slowed them down and they were farther behind now, and when we passed an alley I grabbed at Dal's jacket and pulled him into it with me; I knew where to go, a place I hadn't used since childhood, past the first garage I dragged him with me into a tiny gap between the garage wall and a high stockade fence, a space where no one would ever think there was a space, no one had ever found me there and no one ever would, especially at night. We stood wedged in there and panted, trying to make no sound, and their footsteps ran on for a while and then stopped. There was a silence, a blank of willing my heart to stop pounding, trying to get my wind back, straining to hear anything over my own breathing but all I heard was distant cars and someone somewhere putting the lid on a garbage can. My scraped hands were suddenly hurting like crazy and I could feel my side where I'd been punched, or kicked, but I seemed to be all right. Then I heard voices, but not close, low and cursing indistinctly, and I could picture them standing together on the street, panting like us and probably wondering what the hell it was all about. Maybe they didn't even know, maybe they thought some lunatic came up and started punching Clay for no reason. That was for Toni, you shithead, I thought.

We listened in silence until there hadn't been voices for what seemed like a long time, shoulder to shoulder in that sliver of space, and it began to seem more and more like one last game of sardines, me and Dal together where no one could find us. But tomorrow we would not go on a magical expedition down the tracks, with wizards in chariots and secret messages left for us in the leaves and branches, and we wouldn't be saving any worlds – we'd been lucky to save our own skins this time, and I wasn't sure it had done one damn bit of good.

Finally Dal muttered, "Must have given up by now."

"Yeah."

There was another silence while we listened again, but no one was there. "Christ," he said, "that was crazy."

"I know."

"I would have killed him, Andy. If I could have."

"No you wouldn't," I said.

"It was just the same. I saw red. Like yesterday. God, I hate this," he mumbled, bowing his forehead against the fence, and I knew what he meant; this was never what he had intended to be. Not the Dal I thought of in the grassy open space of center field, so effortlessly in the world that you looked at him and it rubbed off on you and you, too, for a moment, were absolutely in place and in time.

"Let's get out of here," I said. We edged our way sideways and emerged into the alley, cautiously, making as little sound as possible, but no one was in sight. We stayed in the shadows as much as we could until we reached the other end of the block and came out onto the street. A car went by and made us both nervous for a moment, but its driver paid no attention to us. We set off in the direction of my car. "So are you okay?" I said.

"Yeah, I guess. I might have a black eye."

"You hit that guy hard, Dal."

"I know. More than once. He's tough, though, he hit me right on my ear and about knocked my head off."

"I didn't even know what the hell was going on."

"What dya think Toni'll say when she hears about this?"

"That we acted like idiots." My sore and scraped hands were starting to throb a little. I knew what she'd think: don't be such a guy. But damn it, you had to be something, didn't you?

Dal was right; the next day he had a black eye – not too spectacular, but unmistakable. And there was no hiding the scrapes on my hands. We had to make up a story to tell my parents in the morning about how we got this wild idea to climb a tree after we took Toni home but a branch broke and we fell, a ridiculous story, I couldn't tell if they believed it or not but at least they let us get away with it.

We were walking into school and who should be coming down the hall but Becca; my heart sank a little, wondering what she'd think, but I was proud of it too. She took one look at Dal and said, "What happened to you?" with that appalled look I'd seen on Saturday, and I knew she thought it was something at home – a fight with his dad?

"We got in a fight," Dal said, rolling his eyes a little as if he didn't want to admit it.

"We?" she said, transferring the look to me.

"Yeah, me and Andy," Dal said.

"What, you don't mean with each other?"

"No, are you kidding?" I said. But we almost could have, at one point.

"Well, what did you do?" she said severely, and I felt called on the carpet.

"Have you talked to Toni?"

"No, why?"

"She was working last night, and guess who walked into the restaurant like nothing ever happened."

"Oh, God, not him."

"Yeah. So she ran out the back way, she came to my house, she was all upset, I took her home – "

"We did," said Dal.

"Yeah, we both did, and then I made the mistake of telling Dal what it was all about, and he wanted to go kill Clay, I couldn't stop him."

"You wanted to too," Dal said.

I shrugged; I couldn't quite look Becca in the eye. "So you two went off and picked a fight," she said. "At her dad's restaurant. So probably everybody in the place found out what it was about. That's really terrific." She looked coldly angry with both of us.

"No," Dal said, kind of sheepishly, "it happened in the parking lot."

"Oh, great," said Becca, shaking her head. She examined both of us as if we were some other species. "You just jumped on him or what?"

"Yeah, sort of. He had two friends with him," Dal said, "they were about to beat the crap out of us but the bouncer came out and broke it up. Then they chased us back across the tracks, and Andy missed getting run over by a streetcar by about two millimeters, but he did find a place to hide, so they never caught us."

Becca turned her gaze to me and now she was plain mad, not cold but hot, at both of us. "Is this your idea of how to deal with a problem? Try to beat somebody up in a parking lot? That's really mature, guys. I thought you were more than fourteen years old, but I guess I was wrong."

"What do you want us to do, hand him a bouquet?" Dal said.

"A whole lot of good it does for you to get in a fight and get hurt and practically get hit by a trolley car – you promised me, Andy, damn it."

"I'm sorry," I said, but she only looked disgusted and turned away, let the current of the crowd carry her down the hall.

Dal and I stood for a moment looking at each other in an advanced state of chagrin. "Promised her what?" he said.

"Not to get myself killed. I told her about what happened on the smokestack."

We stood there some more, in the way, with impatient people pushing by us, not knowing what to do with ourselves. "Well, shit," Dal said finally, heaving a sigh. "We're not going to get any medals from her."

"Boy, I'll say."

Glumly we walked down the hall toward history; my hands were hurting again, especially where I was holding my books.

I was dreading what else Becca might say to me – or not say – when I got to English, and of course the others would be there, and they'd hear about it, and if I got it from all three at once it would leave me wanting to crawl under a desk. They were standing in the hall in a clump, and the way they looked at me when I came up to the group, I was pretty sure Becca had told them. No one said anything right away; I could feel Becca still being mad at me.

"Did Becca tell you what happened to me and Dal last night?" I said to Toni. She nodded, giving me a look I couldn't interpret, except that it was partly sad. "I told Dal afterwards you were going to think we acted like idiots." I waited for her to deny it, but she didn't. "We were just so mad at him," I said, knowing I sounded lame, "especially Dal, he was so mad he couldn't see straight when I told him about it."

"Last night," Toni said, "when I went through the kitchen, I saw all those knives in there, and I was thinking I could stick one of those right in him and no one could stop me. And I wanted to. You don't even know what mad is." Her voice was low and passionate and it kind of froze me inside because I knew she meant it, that I'd said I wanted to kill Clay but she really did. The others seemed taken aback, too.

There was an awkward moment; then Claire said, "Well, I'm glad you didn't do it. I'd hate to have to visit you in jail for the rest of your life."

"Yeah," said Becca, "it would be so inconvenient."

Toni managed a half-smile and they all moved toward the classroom, turning their backs on me; I tagged along behind, wondering if Becca was even going to talk to me. When we sat down she stared severely at the blackboard and ignored me for a few moments; then she turned in a pouncing sort of way and said, "I can understand about Dal, he's got reasons to get upset and do crazy things, but you don't."

"What do you want me to do, let him go off and get in trouble by himself?"

"Going along with it is not what I call much of a help, why didn't you stop him?"

The bell rang as I was about to say "I tried, damn it," and Kearns began to talk and I couldn't. So maybe it wasn't much of a help,

but what would be? Easy for her to think I should have stopped him, but I knew I couldn't have. He had always been the leader, and he still was.

I was on edge with Becca each time I saw her at school, watching myself, watching her, afraid she was slipping away; I could feel that she wasn't comfortable with me, but I didn't know why. Maybe the reappearance of Clay had put a curse on everything. Toni was somber and unnaturally quiet, and I had a hard time getting her to talk to me about how she was doing. Finally she said, "I keep wondering where I'll see him next. I guess after it happened I thought at least I'd never have to see his face again, I don't know why, and now I can't go anywhere without being afraid I'll run into him. It's like he's everywhere."

"He's not. And he probably won't go back to the restaurant, either."

"Neither will I. I can't wait to get out of here."

In less than two weeks the letters would come from colleges, and we would know our destinations, but I wasn't sure how I felt about that anymore; sometimes it felt like loss and sometimes like running away.

Dal went around looking haunted; I could picture him in his house, keeping to his room, the door shut, wanting to stop listening to what was on the other side but unable not to and yet hearing nothing, waiting for the shoe to drop, as Katie must be too – and his parents – all of them waiting without knowing exactly what they were waiting for but knowing that something had to change because this was intolerable.

The one person in our group who seemed to have some resilience was Claire, and she couldn't get a rise out of anyone else – couldn't even get us to come to her house. The weather was wet and gusty, changeable, untrustworthy. I tried to talk to Becca on the phone on Thursday night, but we got stuck and ended up not being able to talk or to hang up, either, so I sat there on the floor of my room, my ass getting more and more sore by the minute, holding a phone on which no one was saying anything and silently cursing myself for not knowing how to get out of the situation. Finally she asked me how I thought Dal was doing.

"It sounds horrible at his house. Everybody's tiptoeing around everybody else waiting for the next blowup. When his dad comes into a room, his mom gets up and leaves."

"He told me that too," Becca said.

"Yeah? When'd you talk to him?"

"Last night. I got worried about him."

"He doesn't look good to me. He sounds tired. Like he never sleeps."

"Poor Dal," she sighed.

"Don't let him hear you say that, he wouldn't like it." He'd never been "poor Dal" in his life.

"Oh, girls can get away with things," she said, and the words were like the mischievous Becca I knew, but her voice had a low, guarded, melancholy note.

I didn't know what to do with that. She sounded far away from me in a place of her own, as if she wasn't quite talking to me even when she said something. "So what movie do you want to go to tomorrow night?" I said, making an effort, and there was a silence.

"I'm not sure I do," she said at last.

Oh, I thought. The words dropped like a rolling ball that goes down a storm sewer and is lost forever. "Does that mean you don't want to go out?"

"I'm sorry, Andy," she said in a faint voice, and I knew that meant No, maybe No to everything that might happen ever, No to all that had, cancel it all, if she said a few more words it could roll up into itself and vanish and nothing would be left of what I had once thought of as a world in the making – grandiose idiot that I was –

"Is there something more that you want to say?" I said with my eyes closed, trying to picture the Becca I knew, or had thought I knew, but nothing I did or said could hold her if she did not choose to be held and so somehow I had to invite the very thing I feared most, to rush toward it if it had to be . . .

"No," she said, more faintly still, without conviction.

I held my breath waiting for more, but no more came except that I could feel her waiting too. "What is it, Becca?" I said.

"I don't know," she mumbled.

"Are you still mad at me for getting in that fight?"

"It upset me, that's all, Dal said you almost got run over by a streetcar."

"He wasn't kidding."

"Would you please take care of yourself?"

"I was trying to take care of him. It's not easy to do."

"Well, maybe that wasn't the way to do it."

This is crazy, I thought, we're going in circles. There was another silence, and I knew we were stuck again, but I couldn't be the one to bring the phone call to an end. I felt as though I was watching a ceiling-high curtain rip slowly from top to bottom, except I was the fabric, feeling each thread pull away . . . "I'd better get off," she said, "I think my mom wants to use the phone."

I knew it was an excuse, I wanted to end the conversation and grudgingly I was grateful to her for finding a way and yet I didn't want to let her go. "Okay," I muttered.

"See you."

"Bye." I hung up, and then I picked up the receiver again and slammed it down on the cradle so it made the telephone bell ring, and leaned my head back against the closet door while the sound died away, and felt the worm of fear enter my heart.

Saturday was worse; once dread had come it settled in, it blocked the sun, made me afraid to call her up for fear of finding out the worst. The beauty of the April weather seemed to mock my dreams. Dal and I played catch, single-mindedly, for hours, as if the simplicity of throwing and catching a ball could solve everything if we kept it up long enough – but I couldn't tell him what was bothering me because his family's difficulties were so much worse. It was no time to ask him to feel sorry for me; I should have been some help to him, more than just a way to pass the time mindlessly, but I didn't think I was. I didn't get the courage to call Becca until it was too late to talk about going out without seeming to be rude, unless she was my girlfriend and we were past all that – but that was exactly what I didn't know. Somehow we had a conversation without my asking her what she was doing that night, because I was thinking those thoughts, and when I hung up I was sure I'd offended her, worse off than ever, and I knew I couldn't call back. All evening I was holed up in my room, trying to read, in a state of despair, periodically going out into the hall to look at the telephone as if it could tell me what to do and then going back in, cursing my ineptitude. Finally I went out and got in my car with no idea except I knew I had to be in motion, and it took me to Becca's where I sat and stared uselessly at her house, not even knowing if she was inside, breathing the lyrical air until I couldn't stand it. This was the night of all nights when we should be on the hill at the monastery, gazing at the twinkling lights of St. Louis in the distance, doing what monks never did, and instead I was sitting in front of her

house dreading that everything was impossible – probably somehow my fault, but I didn't understand what I had done.

Sunday I tried to call her and she wasn't there, twice, and I knew in my gut that I wasn't supposed to reach her, that there was a barrier surrounding her no power of mine could break through. Frozen out. I tried to figure out how joy had been lost but I discovered only that I knew nothing and could do nothing and no matter how long I asked myself why that wouldn't change. By ten on Sunday night I couldn't stand to be alone with myself one second longer and there was only one thing I could think of: I had to talk to Dal. But it was too late to call him, and I never wanted to call his house anymore, knowing how things were there. Then go and tap on his window. He would be in there, staying away from his parents, he probably needed someone to talk to as much as I did.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I muttered some excuse to my mom about how Dal had a book I needed. She gave me a skeptical look and said, "Don't fall out of any trees," and I said I wouldn't. I knew she didn't believe me, but too damn bad. It was none of their business, and in six months I'd be in college and they'd never know what I was doing, any time of any night, and they might as well get used to it.

I had to see Dal, that was all. He had always shared my dreams, it seemed to me; they were in danger now, for both of us. The night was misty but not cold; the air was full of the ache of spring, the uncertainty on whose pivot I was balanced. The world would bloom and grow, undeniably, but what about us, had we been kidding ourselves all along? Maybe there was no more than stiff upper lip from here on out. I had thought I was leaving that world forever for a better one, the one I was made for – but apparently not – and Dal – how must he feel, waiting for his family to come apart at the seams? Being in that fight together had reminded me of how we had always been ready to do anything for each other, the way Dal had been when he saved my life up on the smokestack. I still couldn't imagine how I could have gotten down, except by falling, if not for him.

There were lights on in the front of Dal's house, and I didn't want to know what was going on in there. I knew too much already. I went up the little walk that led along the side of the house; there was no yard on that side, just a bushy hedge that was beginning to show a few white flowers among the new leaves. The dining room lights were out, and I passed quietly under the window of the pantry, avoided tripping over a hose that was coiled up on the walk, and came around the corner of the house to where Dal's room stuck out on the back. There was a light on in his room and his shades were up and as I came

around the corner I saw Dal standing there with someone – a girl – he had his hand up to touch her, and the girl was Becca. I was frozen in place, stopped in mid-step with my hand on the rough brick corner of the house as he leaned forward and kissed her and I saw her kiss him back and then give him that look I had seen the very first time she kissed me, and times afterward that I would never forget, the one I couldn't describe, only fall into, give myself to, the way I thought she meant to give herself to me. And it wasn't so. It had never been so. She had moved on, to Dal – and how could he? – but of course it was Dal, she had been attracted to him for weeks, in an instant I saw how it all had worked. Becca on Dal's back, sledding, and the two of them on the stairs at the party, the look she gave him on the steps of his house the day his mother found out – I had been right there and seen it and still I didn't understand. What a fool I was. When she saw us in the hall after the fight it was Dal she looked at, Dal she was worried about – she was saying something to him now. No danger of their looking out and seeing me; they couldn't take their eyes off each other, and he was putting his arms around her, holding her, and I knew how that felt, how softly and trustingly she could be against me – or him – it was Dal's turn now.

She detached herself from Dal and turned her back for a moment; then I saw she was putting her hair in its barrette and I felt that to see her do that simple intimate thing with him was more than I could bear. He was watching her as if he were thinking of everything they had done before I came – and what had they done? What was to stop them, if she wanted him, from doing anything? They were in his room, his bed was right there, his parents probably weren't paying attention to anything . . . I felt as if I'd been cored like an apple. They moved out of the frame of the window, toward the door, and I could picture them in Dal's kitchen; in a moment, I heard the back door open and Becca's voice drifted to where I was: “. . . don't have to.”

“That's okay,” said Dal.

A few footsteps, both of theirs, then nothing. Right next to me were the cement steps that led down to the basement door of Dal's house, and in some instinct to hide myself from the world I went down them, into the blackness that smelled faintly of mildew, and crouched in the shadows next to the door, sitting on my heels, arms around my knees, looking up at the bushes and wishing I were dead.

How could he do this to me, how could either of them? But especially Dal. Now maybe I knew why Jeff Solomon really hated Becca. But Dal . . . I couldn't stop imagining him holding her, touching

her all over, taking off her clothes – had he? When did it start? Before tonight. She even told me she called him up – and he had called her – needed someone to talk to. Some talk. No wonder she didn't want to go out with me. It had all been staring me in the face, Becca telling him people had to do selfish things sometimes. It wasn't a philosophical discussion. But how could he? He knew what she meant to me, he of all people, and then I remembered when I had first told him about me and Becca, that day we were doing the physics, he said "The Becca we ran into in the hall?" and got a certain look on his face and said "You dog," I remembered that look, the unfolding recognition that she was a girl he might want. "Becca's something special, you know that, don't you?" Oh yes. I knew that. And he knew it too. Too good for Andy, too special for the likes of me, let a real man do the job. Dal always got any girl he really wanted, why not her?

I straightened up and climbed the steps, went out into the back yard. The light was still on in Dal's room, and no one was there. Where had they gone? They already had a perfect place to meet. But she had to go home, it was a school night, and no doubt Dal was walking her back to her house. What a gentleman he was. For a long moment I was in the grip of rage, imagining myself driving my fist into him the way he hit Clay, over and over, cracking his bones like toothpicks, invincible, in an ecstasy of violence turning him into a bloody bag of torn meat, but the next second I had to resurrect him, put him back together, I couldn't do that even though I wanted to. Not to him. And if we had a fight, I would be the bloody and beaten one, and I almost wished it would happen, to take me out of this and let me hate him completely, with nothing held back. He had always been stronger and faster than me, the number one male in the pack, and that was who got the best female, wasn't it? Stupid to imagine it was any more complicated than that. Fuck my dreams, fuck my best friend and my so-called girlfriend who was now his for whatever it was worth, and most of all fuck me for being such a loser, for having my head up my ass so I never saw what was going on right in front of me. How naive could I be, and how could I have been any more ready to get royally screwed? Oh yes. Tell me anything, I'll believe it, I'll make it all pretty and perfect and live in my fantasy world of bullshit and never know the difference until the truth runs me over like a moving van runs over a cat.

I made a circle of Dal's yard at a fast walk, wanting to scream obscenities loud enough to make every neighbor call the police, to throw a brick through Dal's window and kick the railing off the porch,

but none of that would do any good, and yet I couldn't leave, as if what had happened there was holding me to the spot. This was where it ended. But I wasn't done with it yet, I knew I had to see Dal's face and there was no telling what would happen then.

I made myself sit down on the back porch steps, knowing that if he had gone out without telling his parents he'd come in the back way too. Anger sang in my head, a high thin ringing buzz that sent shudders through my body unexpectedly, twitches of involuntary motion that warned me if I had a weapon in my hands I would use it. I was trying to hold off the image of Dal and Becca together, kissing and touching each other, but there was only the thinnest of barriers between that and me and it was being eaten away. When the barrier broke I would have to watch that mind movie a thousand times and each time she would be more perfect and more willing, melting at his touch, giving him everything she hadn't given me, and watching it I would want to die. Or kill him.

I was bent over, pressing my nails into my palms, and I heard a footstep and looked up and Dal was coming up the back walk. He saw me, and I saw him hesitate, almost stop, I saw the readiness come into his body as if he knew I might hurt him, and then the effort to seem natural but I could see in his eyes the racing thoughts. "Andy?" he said, but he knew damn well it was me. "What's . . . ?" He couldn't finish the sentence. Go on, ask me what's up, lie to me, I thought, that will finish the job.

Dal stopped about six feet from where I sat, and I knew he was afraid to get closer. I stood up and rage made me feel eight feet tall and I stared at him, my oldest friend, we had done everything together and now we had one more thing in common. I will never forgive you, I thought. "So, Dal," I said. "Did you get to second base?"

He closed his eyes for an instant. "Oh shit," he breathed. He couldn't look at me. "Andy – " he said in a pleading voice.

"Shut up, Dal, don't talk to me. I saw you. You and Becca. You forgot to pull the shades down, it was quite a scene. Of course, I only came in at the end. What happened before that, Dal? Did you score?"

Dal still couldn't look at me for a second. Then he did and said, "It wasn't like that."

"Dal, I saw. Don't lie to me. I saw her kissing you, she's gone all the way before, did she do it with you?"

"Don't do this, Andy."

"Don't tell me what to do and not do, God damn it! Don't tell me I didn't see what I saw, either, she's in love with you and if I

weren't such a fucking idiot I'd have seen it coming a month ago. Shit, you knew you could get her all along, didn't you? You always got any girl you felt like, you've always been the captain of whatever team you were on, you're so fucking cool, Dal, you're everybody's idol, but that wasn't enough for you, was it? You had to have Becca, the one girl in the whole goddamn world that I was in love with, the one real girlfriend I've ever had or so I thought up until a few minutes ago, you just had to, didn't you? And I've been running after you all my life with my tongue hanging out like your fucking dog, I always jump when you say jump, so why should it be any different with Becca?"

"Andy, for Christ's sake – "

"Shut up, Dal, I thought you were my friend but you've been taking lessons from your fucking dad."

Dal leapt at me, grabbed my shirt in his hand, his eyes blazing, and I almost hit him but instead my hands slammed against his shoulders and I held him off that way. "I'm not your mascot anymore, Dal. Let go of me. I'm madder than you ever were and I swear I'll hit you if you don't."

"Hit me, then," he said, tightening his grip on my shirt. "Go ahead." We were face to face and I could imagine my fist smashing into his regal nose and the blood running, and the way his other hand dangled at his side, I knew he wouldn't stop me. "Do it," he said through his teeth, but I couldn't, I broke his grip with a hard shove that made him stumble back a couple of steps. "Go to hell," I said.

He stood watching me warily, his head a little lowered as if he might charge, but he didn't try to come closer. "I'm already there," he said.

"Jesus Christ, you still expect me to feel sorry for you? If that's what you want, call up Becca. That's how you got her in the first place, isn't it? Poor Dal," I jeered, dragging out the words, and he looked away. I knew that hurt him, and I wanted it to.

"What do you want me to say, Andy?"

"You do whatever the fuck you want, I don't want you to say anything." I turned my back on him and started back the way I had come.

"I'm sorry," Dal said behind me, but I kept walking. "Don't leave it like this!" he yelled as I was about to turn the corner of the house, and I stopped and looked back at him. I had known him all my life but that didn't mean I would after tonight.

"Here's a piece of free advice," I said. "If she tells you she loves you, don't believe it," and I kept walking and by the time I was halfway home I was wishing I had hit him.

It was so clear: I had never seen a goddamn thing but what I wanted to see, and Becca knew exactly how to play with me like one of those squeak dolls that you squeeze and make me do and say whatever she wanted. She was used to it, probably – being able to do that – she was one of the people who always got to do the choosing in life, the same way Dal did, while I stood around with the rest waiting to be chosen. Or not. And there wasn't a fucking thing I could do about it. Out of my league, I should have known all along. It was about one thing: who was at the controls. And the secret was that there was no way to stop people from doing whatever they wanted to each other, if they didn't care.

I dragged myself into my house, and muttered "Goodnight" to my mother who looked at me as if she knew the whole story telepathically, and closed the door to my room. I took off all of my clothes and looked at myself in the mirror, naked and defeated, an utterly ordinary lump of protoplasm, so completely nothing special that I had to have been crazy ever to have imagined things could be as magical as I had dreamed. Either there was no magic or the magic was a form of temporary insanity that only led to one destination. I turned off the light and crawled in bed and the pictures came, of Dal holding Becca, of the way she offered her mouth to him to be kissed, of her putting in her barrette there in his room, and I started to cry, I wanted to scream it out at the top of my lungs but I couldn't let my parents hear and I jammed my face against the pillow, clutching the headboard, and sobbed.

In the middle of the night I awoke and lay looking at the ceiling, too exhausted to move but unable to sleep, thinking back over everything that had ever happened with Becca, all the times I had thought I saw tenderness in her. I had been sure that it was real. It had to be, there was no way to fake something like that, no other kind of knowledge that went so deep – and I was wrong; and if I was wrong about that then maybe I was wrong, period, about everything, and I had no idea what was going on around me in the world. If tenderness was not what it ever had been, then maybe I was wearing a sign on my back that said "Kick Me" all the time and didn't know it. Or maybe

there wasn't anything that was what I called real. Living in a world of illusions. I had known at age twelve.

Desire to hurt Dal came in waves, to see him lying helpless and beaten and kick him one more time and leave him there, never speak to him again, and then it would go and I would have to ask myself how he could do this to me and for one instant I would begin to understand but I hated him too much to let myself think that. And then it would come back to Becca, the way she had been when we stood on the bench by the practice field, or the first night we snuck into her house and I felt we were so together that we were outside of time and the world, or when we held each other half-naked under the afghan, scene after scene that I could not help returning to and sinking into even though it hurt more every time. I should have known that that was not a world where I was allowed, those were not things that happened to me, I had never been one of the chosen ones, that was only a story for children.

In the morning my mother asked me if something was wrong and I made some sort of meaningless reply and she didn't push it. "Buck up," my dad said, gulping his coffee, "you've got vacation in a week. I wish I had one coming."

"If it's college you're worrying about, don't bother," my mom said. "If you don't get in, nobody will."

"Yeah, yeah," I said without looking up. As if I could give a damn. I drank my coffee and got up from the kitchen table.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" she said.

"I'm not hungry."

I drove to school thinking only one thought: I would see Dal there, and worse yet I would see Becca. And what would I do, what words would come out of my mouth, or would I say nothing, only look? Walking into the building I felt as if I walked on stilts or a narrow beam I might fall off of, my insides were in a knot and I couldn't breathe all the way down into my lungs. At any moment I might run into one or the other of them and maybe there would be a scene – but I seemed to stand outside all of it, as if someone else would take over at that moment and I would only watch. No one took any notice of me, I slipped through the crowds like a ghost, and I got to History sooner than I wanted to because Dal was in the class and I didn't want there to be any time when I might talk to him, or he to me, but I was damned if I'd let him stop me and I walked in and sat down at my usual seat; I tried not to look around as I came in but I couldn't

help it. He wasn't there, and I sat waiting, deliberately not watching the door, and the room filled up and the bell rang, Atkins called the roll, no Dal. Maybe he couldn't face me, I thought, and that was grimly satisfying, but all period I kept expecting him to come in late and I didn't hear one word anyone said, keeping my head down except when I looked up to see the clock inexorably carrying me closer to the moment when I would have to see Becca. I felt dry and paper-like, as if a wind could blow me across the room.

The bell rang and I got up, feeling mechanical as I walked down the hall, ignoring everything around me, none of it mattered except going where I was going, I was jostled and bumped a few times and said nothing, I turned the corner toward English and there were the Graces together, Becca, Toni, Claire, and I saw how beautiful she still was. That had not changed. I wanted to hate her but already I knew I might not be able to and if I didn't it would be hell. I was the outsider again, she was no longer my girl and never had been, she was what I would never have and if I was to be thrown away why had she ever taken me up in the first place – but there didn't have to be a reason, people like Becca did whatever they felt like, that was the whole point. I happened to be there, she needed something to do, she wanted to make Claire jealous, who could tell, and now something more interesting had come along. She saw me coming toward them – they all did, but I hardly looked at the others. It would be quite the piece of news, and Becca and I both held it within us; how could she stand there chatting away so naturally? But I saw her face change when she looked at me. I had been told a hundred times how transparent I was and now I was glad, I wanted her to see it in my face and squirm. Again anger made me feel as if I were floating above my own head, and I walked up to them and stood in front of Becca, who said "Hi, Andy" in a questioning voice, with a wavering attempt at a smile, and stared at her without speaking, her blue eyes that were having a hard time meeting mine, her rebellious hair, her cheek that I had touched so many times, her mouth I had kissed, still beautiful, and every attribute of her tortured me. "What is it?" Becca said, and I still didn't speak. You tell them, I thought. Go ahead. Let's see you do it. All three of them were waiting on me to say something, but I turned and walked into the classroom, Claire's voice behind me saying "Andy?", and I went to the back and sat in a place I'd never been all year. Each of them looked at me as they took their seats, Becca in the place where she had been sitting now for some time, next to where I should have been, but I was no longer there and Ricky Malvin took my seat, self-righteously, as

if he'd been displaced long enough. The bell rang and Kearns scanned the classroom as he did every day, taking attendance in a supposedly unobtrusive way, and I could see him wonder where I was. It took him a moment to find me in the back, and he frowned to himself and pushed up his glasses; Becca glanced around one more time and I thought I saw something like fear in her eyes – at least I hoped that was what it was.

All period I was unable to take my eyes off her; her physical presence in the room seemed to be pulling me towards her, pulling my soul out of me; I felt that it was all I could do not to run out of the room to get away from the pain, and yet there would be no getting away, and my body did not want to leave where she was, wanted to get closer to her but if I could never be truly close to her again then that would be too much to bear. I watched her till everything else in the room seemed to fall away, and my thoughts drowned out every word that was said; time seemed to elongate till it barely existed, but the bell did ring and I got up and went out in the hall and found the three of them waiting for me. I wasn't sure I could say it in front of the others. No secrets on this bed, Claire had said, what seemed like a long time ago. But in school, in the hall, in a crowd of impatient kids, was this any place for such news? There was no choice; their eyes pulled words out of me, all three of them but I was only looking at Becca, and I said, "I saw you last night. You and your boyfriend." Her eyes were dark, full of pain, and I could tell she was not really surprised; she had had a whole period to guess that I knew.

"What do you mean, her boyfriend?" said Toni.

"Tell them," I said, my eyes holding Becca's. "I want to hear you say it," but of course I didn't; it was almost as if, even though I'd seen it with my own eyes, it wouldn't be the truth until she said it herself. Becca was clutching her books to her chest as if to protect herself, and she seemed to lean away from me. I thought she was about to speak but nothing came out; she glanced at Claire as if in some last-minute hope of rescue and then she turned and at an awkward half-run disappeared around the corner. Toni and Claire were still staring at me; I looked from one to the other. "Boyfriend?" Toni said again.

"It's Dal," I said, and hearing it in my own voice was so bad that I, too, had to turn and walk away, as if I had something shameful to hide.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

They came after me, surrounded me. "What do you mean, it's Dal?" Toni said. "You mean she and Dal . . . ?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?" said Claire.

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I'll tell you later." I didn't want to have to say what I'd seen.

"What the hell is he thinking of?" Toni said, in an outraged voice.

"She's been hanging around him for weeks," Claire said.

"We all have," said Toni. "Andy, are you really sure?"

"God, yes, I saw him kissing her, for Christ's sake, why do you think she ran away?"

Toni and Claire exchanged a look; I could see dark messages flashing back and forth. "You don't deserve this," Claire said.

"Thank you." But I hadn't deserved it when Claire dumped me, either, and it had still happened, and she still called herself my friend.

Toni looked transfixed, and a dozen thoughts seemed to be rushing through her mind. "Damn her," she said under her breath. "I should have known." She laid her hand on my arm. "I've got to go, Andy, I'm gonna be late for Spanish, but call me later, okay?"

"I guess so." It was difficult to think past the present moment, to realize that everything would go on as usual, just as if my own particular reality hadn't abruptly ended. Toni and Claire hurried off, and more slowly I turned in the direction of study hall. I felt enclosed in a bubble of silence and invincible separateness, one remove from everything. I knew there were loud voices in the hall and a crowd around me, jostling me, but these things were on the surface, far from

the actual me. I let my feet carry me to study hall and slide me through the door as the bell finished ringing, into a seat, no glances from anyone, nothing noticeable about me. I felt like an animal with protective coloration, so blended into the environment that it can't be seen, hiding out in the open. The ultimate hideout is yourself. I sat there, not opening a book, and felt myself go into the inner room that I carried within me; I had always had an ability to do that but for the first time I felt it become ruthless and complete, a universal secret violence I could do without moving a finger or making a sound. I could absent myself and no one could make me come out until I chose, I could lie in wait, in ambush . . . forever, that was a horrible thought, because what if everyone stopped looking for me, what if no one cared if I were ever found, but the steel purity of never forgiving intoxicated me so that for a second I wanted to shout out some roar of defiance and revenge and blow my perfect hideout to smithereens.

I passed through the whole day virtually unseen, lurking behind myself, crouched like an animal ready to spring, but I never did spring because everything that passed by was contemptible, unworthy of notice. I could even answer when a teacher called on me without interrupting my apartness. All that was trivial, it happened on the surface, in the world of illusion, and I might as well answer as not; it caused less trouble, it had nothing to do with me. Inside everything was fitting together: it had been a way for Becca to see how powerful she really was. Toni and Claire were best friends when she showed up, and Becca had taken Claire away from Toni in a couple of weeks. Then she noticed me; it was easy to take me away from Claire when Claire wasn't even holding on. No challenge in that, no trick at all to get me to fall in love with her, all it took was a kiss or two, a look, a touch. And what was left? Dal. The big prize. I wondered if he had put up any resistance at all.

Nothing changed when I went home; my parents, of all people, could not make me reveal anything, they who wouldn't have known what to say anyway, especially my dad who would no more talk about a powerful emotion than pee on the living room rug. When they had such feelings it was behind closed doors, and I could beat them at that game. Let them look at me with puzzled eyes and hint around all they wanted in their pathetically transparent way. The only thing that broke in on me all day was the thought that Dal might show up for physics – but he didn't – and Toni's voice on the telephone: "Are you all right?" she said, and I couldn't help remembering how I had put my arm around her awkwardly, sitting on the dusty stage in the auditorium.

Out in the world. But I could only be all right if I stayed in the next room and her voice wouldn't let me. "Andy, talk to me."

It took me a while to overcome resistance, to let myself be dragged to the surface. "I'm surviving."

"You sound awful."

"What do you expect?"

"I can't believe Dal would do that to you. What did you see, anyway?"

Don't make me tell it, I thought. "I went over to his house last night, it was late, I was going to knock on his window and he was in his room with Becca." I waited for her to say something, but she didn't and I finally added, "Kissing her. I don't want to talk about it."

"Does he know you saw him with her?"

"He knows, all right."

"What'd he say?"

"What could he say? Not much. I almost punched him right in the nose, but at the last second I didn't." Saying it made me wish again that I had.

"Ohh, God," Toni sighed. "Isn't this a lovely kettle of fish. Did she say anything to you?" The way Toni said the word "she," I knew she didn't want to dignify Becca with a name.

"Haven't seen her."

"Whatever you do, don't let her get away with it."

"What the hell am I supposed to do? I can't stop her."

"I know you, you're such a nice guy, if she calls you up and says Oh please forgive me, please please, you'll probably do it, but just don't for once, let her suffer, she deserves it."

"*Her* suffer? What the hell are you talking about? She got what she wanted, didn't she? I'd be surprised if I could make her feel a goddamn thing."

"You did today. You have to protect yourself, Andy, not everybody's as nice as you."

"I'm beginning to get the picture."

"I'll tell you one thing, if she tries to talk to me about this, she'll hear some things she'll never forget."

I could imagine how ferocious Toni could be if she wanted to; but it wouldn't change anything, any more than trying to beat up Clay. "She's always got Dal to talk to," I said, and wished I hadn't; all of a sudden I was imagining her with him again, lying in his arms in the den at her house at midnight, the two of them talking in low murmurs,

and I felt the way a ghost must feel when he sees his lover with a living man.

"What does he want with her, anyway?" Toni said in a low, disgusted voice. I had thought that she and Becca were friends, but apparently I had been wrong about that, too.

"You'd know if you were a guy. And Dal always gets what he wants with girls. You know that."

"He wanted the wrong thing this time."

"I was in love with her, remember?" I said, half-offended.

"Well, I hope you're not anymore." But I couldn't tell her that; Toni waited for me to answer and I knew she heard my silence loud and clear. "Oh, Andy," she said sadly. "I don't know what to say."

"It's okay."

"Oh, come on, I know it's not. Would you call me up if you need to talk to somebody?"

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"Yes." But as soon as I got off the phone I couldn't bear to be out in the outer world unprotected, where talking to her had left me, and I had a feeling I wouldn't be calling her after all. I wouldn't be calling anybody. And if somebody called me, the obvious somebody, Becca, then what? But she wouldn't. Or Dal. He might, but that didn't mean I had to talk to him.

The best place to be was in my room, away from everybody, away from the phone whose presence obsessed me now that Toni had talked about Becca calling me up and saying Please forgive me. What had made her say that? Did she know something? But she couldn't, she hadn't talked to Becca; it sounded like she wasn't planning to, either. No more Graces; that, too, was over. No more of a whole lot of things. If I got together with Toni and Claire there would be two ghosts with us. Or rather three. I would be the third.

At school the next day I slid through the halls again unnoticed, sealed away far below the visible surface of my being, until I got within a few yards of the History classroom and there was Dal in the hall, leaning on a locker, looking at me, white-faced and grim. I, too, could be grim – maybe I was better at it than he realized. "Andy," he said, in a quick, arresting voice, but my ruthlessness was perfect and I did not slow down or speak, my face felt frozen in place and my heart pounded with the knowledge that what I was doing couldn't be taken back. But neither could what he had done to me, and I passed him.

"Andy," he said to my back, and I almost turned, but the need to be revenged was too strong. Fuck you, Dal, I thought, pay the price. All through class I couldn't stop being aware of him, though I didn't look in his direction once. I didn't feel him looking in my direction either; there was a kind of force field around me keeping him away. The tables were turned now, there would be nothing he could do if I did not let down my guard. One slip and it would be over, I would lose my advantage, but I was not going to slip. At the end of class I was deliberately slow to pick up my books, waiting until I was sure he had started for the door before I raised my head and got up. Then I could watch him ahead of me. He looked tired. Would he stop and turn around and try again to make me speak to him? I had a feeling Dal was too proud for that, and I was right: he didn't look around, and I stayed behind him, not catching up on purpose, until he turned in a direction I wasn't going.

As soon as he was gone it was worse because I had nothing to distract me from the fact that I was about to see Becca, to have to spend another period in the same room with her, and I knew how that would feel. Claire caught up to me outside the classroom and said, "How are you doing?"

"I may live," I said. I could hardly pay attention for wondering when Becca would come into view.

"What does she have to say for herself?"

"Who, Becca?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing, to me."

"She hasn't even talked to you?" I shook my head and Claire made a face as if something smelled bad. "Listen, she's not the only girl in the world." Easy for you to say, I thought. Then we passed through the door and there was Becca, sitting in the usual place, where I should have been next to her, raising her head and giving me one look that made me stumble a little because I wanted so much to go up to her and sit in the seat that was just now being taken by Ricky Malvin, and I thought she meant for me to do that, but she couldn't, could she? and Claire's eyes were on me and just then the bell started to ring and I recovered and turned toward the back of the room. I dropped into a seat in the last row just in time to see Toni hurry in late and pass Becca as if she didn't exist. I couldn't take my eyes off Becca, the same as the day before; after a while everything else in the room was like cardboard silhouettes. I kept thinking of the look she'd given me at the beginning of class, telling myself not to, that I had been her puppet

long enough, but still I had to ask myself what it had meant. Kearns tried twice to get me into the discussion and each time I barely remembered what the last person had said. When the bell rang I was dying to get away from her and yet I didn't want to stop being in the same room with her, either; she stood up, turned around, came toward me amidst people gathering up their books, shouldering their way past each other to leave the room; she had something in her hand – a piece of paper, no, an envelope – her hair not up as it usually was at school but flying loose, her eyes on me dark and purposeful. I sat watching her, waiting, feeling myself drawn into her look, into the same contact with her that I had felt every time since I put my sock feet on her back while we were on Claire's bed, but that was over, wasn't it? She was standing in front of me, holding out the envelope to me, saying nothing, I could see my name on it and at that moment Toni's voice cut across the room: "Andy, I need to talk to you," and I remembered her saying "Don't let her get away with it," and Becca kissing Dal – I stood up too, holding her gaze, and for one moment I held the power. My hand wanted to take the letter, but I conquered it, kept it at my side; I passed by her, trying not to look at her, not to feel how close I had to come to her to get by or see how she was changing before my eyes, hardening over as if made out of porcelain, but I did see and instead of victory I felt petty and alone and it was too late to go back.

Then I was nothing but a ghost, invisible, speaking to no one except now and then Toni or Claire – or my parents, just enough to get by without them starting to grill me. My only thoughts were about what the letter might have said. Dal called me, but my mom answered it and when she told me who it was I said I couldn't talk to him. I kept dreading that I would see him and Becca together in the hall, but the only time I saw either of them was in class, and then we each pretended the other didn't exist; it took all my energy and I suspected it was equally hard for Dal, but Becca seemed to do it without effort. When we were in English, Toni and Claire acted as if they barely knew her; she was outside our group again, as if all of it had never happened. I knew I should do the same, but I couldn't; she was my obsession, my secret vice, and I spent second period each day, from start to finish, watching each gesture of her hand and each tilt of her head from my new seat in the back of the room. When she spoke I listened to the voice and not the words, trying to hear, beneath the student, the secret of how she truly felt, of what went on in private, late at night. The path of each day led up in dread and desire to that fifty

minutes which became more and more like hell as they dragged on, and then away in what I wanted to call relief but knew was despair. If only Kearns had wanted us to write a paper about the Stephen Crane poem where the guy sits crouched in a desert eating his heart – I could have written one that would have knocked him off his desk, only I would never have dared to turn it in.

The only hope of actual relief I could hold onto was the knowledge that spring vacation was coming and for more than a week after Friday afternoon I wouldn't have to sit there and see her, wouldn't have to pretend not to notice when she or Dal passed through my field of vision, and see them pretend alike. I wouldn't have to see anybody. I could spend the vacation sitting in my room reading a book, while somewhere else things happened between Dal and Becca that I didn't want to think about. But I couldn't stop wondering. What did her parents think when she suddenly brought home Dal instead of me, did they invite him to dinner, did Mr. Shulman try to get Dal to listen to jazz with him? Maybe it was no surprise to them anymore, maybe this was just the way it happened – new boyfriends abruptly appearing and then, when their allotted time was up, vanishing never to be seen again.

Friday afternoon came at last, the noise in the halls at its highest pitch of excitement, school emptying out into the welcoming air of spring, but there was no hurry for me, only the blank of Friday night to face, and then Saturday, and Saturday night . . . Monday the college letters would come and I would be able to think about going away; that would be some help. Except that for a long time now Dal and I had been looking forward to this moment, when all of our talk about a new life would actually begin to come true, and we wouldn't be sharing it. It wouldn't matter anymore whether Becca got into Carleton, or anywhere else, as far as I was concerned, and it wouldn't make any difference that the time between now and college was getting short – it wouldn't be short enough for me. Get it over with, that was all I could ask. By Sunday afternoon even that single day seemed interminable. I was in my room asking myself for the hundredth time what Becca's letter had said, and trying to get away from the record my mother was listening to: some Gilbert & Sullivan thing that felt to me like the nightmare of adult life, the forced smile, the false sigh of pretend contentment, empty and fake and God forbid anyone should ever look below the surface and see the indifferent void waiting to swallow it all the moment the absurd jig and whistle past the graveyard should stop. I had heard it forever and it made me want

to scream and break things, it was like being force-fed flannel and melba toast when I was starving, and always had been, for something sweet and juicy and strong.

I heard the doorbell ring, over the chorus of chattering inanity, and part of me wanted it to be for me, part of me said it wouldn't – face it, I wanted it to be Becca and that would never happen, the last moment of contact I would ever have with her had happened in Kearns's classroom as she approached me holding the letter I hadn't taken. "Andy!" my mom called. "Toni's here!" I thought I heard relief in her voice, as if she had been waiting for Toni to pull me out of my tailspin.

The last time Toni had come unexpectedly had led to the fight with Clay in the parking lot. But I opened my door and came downstairs; she looked determined but cautious, and I could see she had something on her mind.

"How're you doing?" she said.

"Wonderful. Just ducky."

"Are you busy right now?"

"You kidding?" What the hell would I be doing, homework? Jerking off?

"Can I talk to you?"

"Sure." She looked around as if wondering where to go. "Let's go outside, I'm dying to get out of here."

"Okay."

"I'm going for a walk," I called to my mother; she waved, timing her wave to the music, as if the cliff-top were not crumbling at her feet. I closed the front door behind me and Toni, trying to resist the temptation to slam it but not quite succeeding. The day was soft and humid.

"You're in a great mood," Toni observed, as we went down the front walk. I knew she would want to go faster than I would, but she could slow down for once. We moseyed along the sidewalk saying nothing until I began to wonder what it could be that Toni would have a hard time saying to me, especially after everything she'd told me already.

"You sure you wanted to talk?" I said, when we'd gone half a block.

There was a breeze, and the air felt as if rain might be somewhere in the vicinity, though it was sunny as we walked along.

"I saw Dal yesterday," Toni said.

His name made anger rise in my heart. "So?"

"I wish you'd talk to him, Andy."

"You what?" What business was it of hers?

"I want you to talk to him, I'm really worried about him, his father's moving out."

"He is?" For a second I forgot all about what was wrong between me and Dal.

"They told Dal and Katie yesterday."

"Jesus – you mean that's it? They're splitting up?"

"They say it's a trial separation."

For a moment I could imagine how those words sounded to Dal, and then my heart hardened against him again. "So what does he want from me? He's already got my girlfriend."

"Look, I was really furious at him, too, I called him up and yelled at him, but the more I talked to him the more I realized it wasn't really his fault."

"Not his fault? What the hell are you talking about? I saw him making out with her in his room, for Christ's sake. What do you think, he never noticed she was going out with me?"

"I really don't think he ever meant for it to happen," Toni said.

"Give me a fucking break," I said, though you weren't supposed to say "fuck" in front of girls, "he's had his eye on her ever since I started going out with her."

"She had her eye on *him*," Toni said. "Don't you remember when we went sledding? Come on. You were there, you saw her." Of course I had, and of course I had had the same thoughts; I momentarily had nothing to say, and Toni raced ahead. "She just took advantage, right from the start. I don't know why we ever trusted her, any of us, everything was too sudden with her, like when she came on to you, and Dal – how could he help himself? Everything's falling apart for him – Andy, you've got to talk to him."

"Hey, he can always go get Becca to feel sorry for him, that's how the whole thing started."

"Damn it, Andy," she said, then tried to swallow her irritation. It wasn't in Toni's nature to be diplomatic. "Would you listen to me? He feels horrible about what happened with her."

"Wait a minute," I said, "are you trying to tell me it's not still going on?" Could that be true?

"That's what he told me."

"Oh yeah? I used to believe everything he told me, but guess what?"

"Come on, I saw him, he swore it was true to my face, I know he was telling the truth."

"Why the hell are you sticking up for him? Why is Dal always Mr. Right? Oh, it couldn't be Dal's fault, not him, Dal can do no wrong. Not as far as any girl is concerned. Now he's even got you convinced."

"He's really hurting, he needed anything he could get. She made it happen, Andy. She knew exactly what she was doing," Toni said, in a cold voice that pierced me deep inside. "That girl doesn't care about anything except what she wants."

"I could have sworn you were friends a couple of weeks ago."

"That was before I figured out what she's really made of." I looked at her, and she must have seen the anger inside me turning toward her. "Claire hates her guts now, too."

Oh really, I thought. And since when did she belong on any high horse? "Is that what you came over to tell me? That I don't hate her enough just because I happen to realize that Dal screwed me too?"

"I want you to talk to him, Andy, he needs you."

"*He needs me?* Why the hell is it always about Dal? Don't I have any fucking needs? He totally shafts me and you come and tell me he needs help and I'm supposed to fall all over myself to make him feel better?"

"Don't you think his family is slightly more important than Becca Shulman?"

I stopped in my tracks. "All right, now you get to listen to me: I'm living my life around here, not Dal's. So his parents split up, what am I supposed to do about it? You know what any of us can do about that? Not a goddamn thing. And if Dal wants to talk to me so bad, he can show some guts and come over and try it in person instead of sending you to do his dirty work for him."

"He didn't send me," Toni said, leaning on the word "send" with her face set and grim, "I thought it up all by myself because it is so stupid for things to be like this, and I thought you'd be big enough to do something about it, but I guess you're not."

For a long moment we stood facing each other down, at an impasse. Was I going to lose all of my friends over this, would the whole world I'd known roll itself up and disappear? "So you want to have a fight with me too, is that it?"

She sighed disgustedly and looked around as if she might find something to say written on a house or a tree. "No."

"Then don't tell me what I'm supposed to feel. Dal made his choice and now he can live with it."

Toni looked at me for a while, sizing me up. “Is that it?” she said, more sad than angry now, and I felt a little wavering inside. But she was the one who had told me not to let Becca get away with it, and if Becca shouldn’t get off the hook for this after going out with me for a few months, what about Dal who’d known me all his life?

“That’s it,” I said.

I was seething as I walked back without Toni. What the hell was she doing taking his side, and who were she and Claire to be high and mighty about anything? This whole thing is fucked, I thought, it’s all falling apart, the only thing to do is to get the hell out. Go to college, new life, new people, new plans – except what would the plan be, what made me think I’d turn out any different from my parents, or Dal’s? You got to choose between selfish and selfless, and maybe one was morally superior but where was the joy in either?

There was one crack in the sky of blackness overhead in my inner world, where a sliver of blue showed through – perhaps –and that was Toni claiming that Dal wasn’t seeing Becca anymore after all. I hardly dared to believe that – and even if it were so, would it do me any good? – but the thought ate at me with what it might mean. When I got home I took the phone into my room and sat staring at it and asking myself if I should call – who? Would it be Dal or Becca? And what if I did call Dal and he swore up and down it was true, would I believe him, and if I did would I roll over and say, Oh well then, never mind, it’s all right, like the spineless follower I had always been, put Dal back up on the same pedestal where he’d been all my life? The thought made me feel sick. The secret was out, he wasn’t such a superior being after all, and neither was Becca, but . . . there was an even better reason I was mad at Toni and that was because she had prevented me from taking the letter. It seemed to me that she had known exactly what she was doing, had shot her voice between us at the crucial moment and I had seen Becca freeze up before my eyes. She hadn’t looked my way since. Meanwhile Toni and Claire pretended they’d never been her friends, as if they were so perfect themselves – girls were vicious in their own way. I couldn’t call up Becca. Either I had thrown away the one chance to change all this, or she didn’t want to anyway. There was nowhere to turn.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Monday the college letters came, and my mother was right: I had gotten into Tufts. And the other schools I applied to. Not that it made much difference after about half an hour. I was going away, but I had known that for a long time, and the East Coast no longer seemed particularly magical.

I called Toni and Claire and found out that Toni had gotten into the University of Wisconsin, and Claire was going to Sophie Newcomb. Claire said she had known all along this was what would happen; Toni sounded like she was ready to pack everything and leave in the morning – barely containing her excitement. I knew she had to keep it to herself as much as she could; her parents weren't happy about her going away. Too bad for them, I thought, if they imagined anything could stop Toni from growing up. Part of me wanted to know if Dal had gotten into RIT, but I definitely wasn't going to call him.

After that time crawled; I spent most of it on the couch in the living room listening to John Coltrane and Ray Charles, re-reading science-fiction books I'd read more than once already, trying not to think about Becca or Dal. Especially not Becca, and especially not the thought that the letter had contained some explanation that would have altered everything, that by taking it and opening it I might have gone down a different road. I was hiding from the weather, from the beauty of spring, from everyone I cared about, and if I could have I would have hidden from myself: I avoided seeing myself in the hall mirror when I passed it, as if I might have a chance to become somebody else if I didn't notice I was me. Every once in a while I would catch myself hoping that Becca wasn't really seeing Dal, that it had all been a mistake on someone's part, and that was the one thing I couldn't allow myself to think of because if I had hope, that only meant

my hopes could be crushed again. "You're such an idealist, Andy," Toni had said to me with scorn, "you think everything's supposed to be so wonderful," and I wasn't planning to go on making that mistake, endlessly trying to convince myself that people were not what they were. But the thoughts would not stop coming back.

On Wednesday night I dreamed about her, I woke up with a pounding hard-on and jerked off and couldn't stop picturing her when she lay half-naked on the couch in the den and let me touch her, held my hand to her breast. At that hour of stopped clocks in the middle of the night I wanted nothing in life except to have that moment back, and if that was crazy then I was crazy; I lay there trying to tell myself not to think of her at all, but wouldn't that be lying to myself too? Desire was too much for me, it was invincible, I had to admit that I had not been able to give up the thought of her and now I was worse off than ever because there was no reason to imagine I had any hope. I cursed Toni for stopping me from taking the letter, I imagined what had been in it a hundred different ways, and what would have followed if I had taken it, as though if I could get the story exactly right I could leap to that other life and out of the trap of being myself, but nothing changed except that when I hauled myself out of bed the next day I knew I was going to have to see her, talk to her, if she would let me. If she didn't slam the door in my face.

I looked in the mirror and all of a sudden the whole thing was disgustingly familiar: here I was again, begging for a few emotional scraps, and if I was such a wimp and a feeb that I couldn't hold my head up to a girl who betrayed me with my best friend, then I deserved everything that had happened and any other shit that people might choose to heap on me hereafter.

It was noon Thursday when I took the telephone into my room and sat there on the floor feeling my heart pound slowly and dialled Becca's number. It rang and I almost hung up; I was having a hard time breathing. Maybe she wouldn't be there. "Hello?" she said.

"Hello." Would she recognize my voice, did she still know me? There was a tiny hesitation; she said nothing. "It's Andy."

"I know."

"How are you?" No, you idiot, I said to myself, not How are you, this is not pleasant chit-chat.

"Okay," she said without expression, indifferently, and instantly I thought it was probably nothing to her, she really was perfectly okay and I was a fool, I should hang up and go back to

suffering and do a really good job this time. "How are you?" she said, and I thought I detected the slightest vibration of aliveness in her voice.

"Existing."

"Hmm," said Becca, and I couldn't tell what that meant. I pictured her on the phone in her kitchen, sitting there next to the wall of pictures and notes and keepsakes, and would I ever actually see her there again, ever speak to her face to face, or was this phone call just an inconvenience she intended to endure before she got rid of me once and for all?

"I need to talk to you."

"Then why haven't you? I haven't been stopping you," she said, her voice clear and cutting through.

"I have been having a very difficult time," I said.

"Oh really. You're not the only one." Immediately I thought she meant Dal, that that was where her loyalty was now – such as it was – and if there had been a tiny opening between us, it disappeared. We were both silent, and I could feel the resentment ricocheting between us over the telephone line. Did she expect me to feel sorry for him? "I'm not used to people pretending I don't exist," she said.

"Well, there are certain things I'm not used to people doing to me, either, but it looks like they just happen anyway."

There was another silence; I was almost holding my breath.

"I won't do this on the phone," Becca said.

You won't get out of it that easy, I thought. "Are you going to be at home?"

"When?"

"Now."

"You called me here, didn't you?"

"I'll be over in five minutes."

"I can't wait," she said, and hung up the phone.

I slammed it down too. So you're mad, I thought, good for you, I'm so impressed. I flung out of my room, out of the house, seething, ready to let her have it; I could feel a flood of angry words building up inside me, ready to burst. Let her be mad, she'd need all the help she could get.

Going up her front walk I had a confused impression of leaves on the trees, jonquils in her front yard, making it seem I was going to a different house than the place I'd known, so that I wasn't as perfectly poised on my own anger as I had meant to be. I rang the bell and thought What if her mom's home for some reason, what'll I say, I've

come to yell at your daughter – but she would be at work, wouldn't she? Becca opened the door; she gave me one defiant look and turned her back, walked away leaving the door open for me to come in. I closed it behind me. The house was shady and quiet, no radio playing anywhere, no nothing but Becca's footsteps going into the living room and stopping, and I followed her; we stood facing each other across ten feet of rug. Her arms were tensely hugging her sides, her face grim, her feet planted squarely on the ground. "So," she said.

"So." Everything I'd wanted to scream at her for the past week and a half converged at once in my mind and nothing could get out at first, and each second I stood there I remembered more clearly how it had felt to kiss her in that room; it was all real again, no longer a midnight fantasy, and I felt I had to plunge ahead before I lost my footing altogether. "Do you like being Dal's girlfriend?"

"Who says I am?" She sounded sullen and smolderingly angry.

"Nobody had to say it, I saw it for myself."

"Do you always spy on your friends?"

"Don't try to get high and mighty with me," I said, feeling my skin go cold with anger, "I've known Dal my whole life, I've been doing that little tap-on-his-window routine for years, I went over there because I wanted to talk to him about you, and guess what I found out? All of a sudden everything was absolutely clear."

"You think."

"Oh, give me a break, I know what I saw. I know that look. I used to be the person who got that look, once upon a time."

That made her avert her eyes; she seemed to study the floor of her mother's studio. "What do you want from me?" she said, in a low voice, and I knew I wanted everything but I couldn't say that, I couldn't even allow myself to imagine that it might be possible.

"I want to know how you could do that to me."

"I really felt bad for him, I wanted to help him, I wanted him to feel better, I didn't mean for it to turn out that way."

"What – you just started making out with him by accident?"

"Look, if all you want to do is sneer at me and tell me what an awful person I am, why don't you just get it over with and go away," she said, her eyes flashing at me angrily. But then for an instant I thought, too, that she was going to cry.

"You haven't been fair to me, Becca."

She turned her back and walked away from me; she ground some cinders into the hearth with the toe of her shoe. "I know," she said in a low voice.

"How do you think I felt, did it ever occur to you what you were doing to me?"

"I'm sorry," she mumbled without looking at me. "I didn't mean to hurt you, you have to believe me." I was baffled; she stood there with one hand on the mantelpiece and her head down as if she couldn't show her face. What did she mean to do, then? Or did she just pay no attention at all to what anyone else might feel? I went to the window, stared out at the bright day, the street where just now one person was passing by, walking a dog. The window was open partway and the windowsill I leaned my hands on was a little gritty. I wiped them on my pants and sat down on the arm of the couch, not quite facing her.

"What happened, Becca?" I had to hear it even though I was afraid it would only hurt more.

"Oh, God," she sighed, sitting down on the other end of the couch. She fiddled nervously with a long strand of her hair, picked up some rocks that were on the coffee table in front of her, put them down again. "Why didn't you read that letter I wrote you?"

"I don't know. I was too mad." And Toni as much as told me not to, I thought. Not that it was any of her damn business.

"Everything was in that letter. I burned it after you wouldn't take it."

"Tell me."

"What?"

"The whole thing. When did it start?"

"What is 'it'?" she said, and that made me mad again, that she would try to weasel out of it that way.

"'It' is you realizing you picked the wrong guy, that you could have had Dal and you didn't have to settle for me."

"Is that the kind of person you think I am?" She turned her gaze full upon me and this time neither of us wavered; I could see how that hurt her, insulted her – as I was insulted and hurt myself – and I couldn't say yes. Alone in my room, in my bitterness, I would have been able to, but not face to face with her; it would have been deliberately cruel, like Toni and Claire giving her a frigid, contemptuous little "hi," worse than nothing, when they saw her in class. And anyway, if I thought that was the kind of person she was, why did I care if I ever saw her again, why would the longing not go away?

"No," I said, "but it sure looked that way."

She crossed her arms, hunched her shoulders, studied the rocks on the table in front of her. "I told you," she said. "I felt bad for him, I knew how awful things were at his house, and he seemed like he needed to talk to me, and – I liked him a lot, but it wasn't the way you think, and then everything got completely confused."

"Oh yeah? When was that?"

"I don't know. After Claire's party."

"What do you mean, confused?" I said, thinking she probably hadn't been confused at all, it was I who hadn't understood what was happening.

"He started liking me a different way, I could feel it, and I knew he didn't feel right about it but he couldn't help it, I guess, and I was . . . I wanted to make him feel better and it was working and – God, I'm only human, Andy, I'm not perfect, I could never be as perfect as you want me to be. I wish I were, but don't you understand? Nobody could ever be that wonderful. You believed in me so much it was scary. It was driving me crazy to try to live up to what you thought I was."

"Looks like you managed to relieve yourself of that burden."

She met my eyes for an instant and then looked away again. "That's not what I wanted."

"Did you want to break up with me? Is that why you started going out with Dal?"

"I didn't go out with him. Not the way you mean. I was just over there, he said he wanted to talk and we were in his room, he was sure his parents were going to split up and he was really miserable. I gave him a hug, maybe I shouldn't have but I did and then he started kissing me and ..."

"And what?" I didn't want to hear but I had to.

"You know," she said in a stifled voice, not looking at me.

"I don't."

"I liked it, I kissed him back, all right? If that makes me a horrible person then that's what I am, you can go away and hate me if it makes you happy."

"What else did you do?"

"Please stop."

"Was there more?"

"He tried to touch me while we were kissing, I told him I didn't think we should do that, that's all, nothing else happened." She said it in a high, rushed, guilty voice, and I was sure that the tormented sound of it was real. "I've hardly even seen him since then. He doesn't

want to talk to me, either, now that you found out and you're so mad at him. Some help I was, I made everything worse."

Becca picked up the rocks again, held them in the palm of her hand and turned them over one by one. Her hair hung down and hid her face. Gradually I was beginning to imagine how she felt – and Dal – the whole picture was shifting and changing, if I dared believe in her. And if I did believe her, then what? If all it did was drive her crazy . . .

"This is the most screwed-up situation," I said.

"You're telling me."

"Did you know Dal's dad is going to move out?"

Becca pushed her hair back and looked over at me. "No." Either she was a very good actress, or he really hadn't been talking to her.

"Toni told me. Last weekend. Maybe he's moved out by now, for all I know."

"It's not really a surprise," she said, sadly.

"I wish it were. It surprised the hell out of me when this started, but it doesn't anymore. Nothing else is the way I thought it was, either."

"Everybody seems to think it'll make things better if they hate me," Becca said, quietly, but I could feel the words sink into me. I didn't hate her, I wanted her next to me, in my arms, but I couldn't ask for fear of begging; I couldn't ask at all because that would mean giving her another chance to reject me, and she'd already done enough of that.

"When you got turned off to me," I said – she gave me a warlike glance, in anticipation of another attack – "was that because of Dal?" She didn't say anything. "After Claire's party. It must have been."

Still silence. Finally she mumbled, "I didn't know what to do."

"Of course, it was hands off before that, anyway. I never could understand that. I thought you trusted me, once upon a time."

"You were so intense, Andy, you fell in love with me overnight, I – "

"Didn't you want me to? What did you think, that was some kind of insult?"

She turned to face me, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Didn't you ever hear the things I said to you? Didn't you ever believe me?" she said, and maybe I had not, not really, until I heard the outcry in her voice when she said those words. She had as much as said she loved me, and that there hadn't been much time, and once she had whispered to me "Can we do what I want?" and I had said yes. She had said she knew how I felt. But even if she had meant it all, was any

of that still true? Or maybe she only wanted to have meant it. I was perched on the arm of the sofa and the distance between us seemed unbridgeable.

"I did believe you," I said, not sure if that was the whole truth or not.

"But you don't anymore, is that it?" she said, looking ready for the worst.

"Should I? What are you telling me?" But when I heard myself say those words they seemed snotty and cold and unfair, and she looked away and I was afraid I would see her harden over again and become the porcelain girl, and surely that would be the final time and I would have lost everything I wanted not once but maybe twice over – if she still wanted any of it –

"Would you please come over here?" she said, her voice low and her eyes on the floor as if she didn't really believe I would. The moment of stepping toward her seemed slow and stuttering like a movie getting stuck, and then I was next to her, pulling her to me, against me, and I could feel her arms around my back, hanging on. My heart was racing; I remembered wondering a long time ago if she would let me really know her and I felt that that time might have finally come. Inwardly I could hear Toni saying to me "You've got to protect yourself, Andy," and I knew everything would be ten times more complicated than I had ever imagined, but Becca was next to me and that was still what I needed more than anything in the world. I pulled back enough to turn her face toward me and kiss her, tasting the salt of a tear as I did. Her kiss was blurred by crying, as awkward as if we had been a couple of eighth-graders, sadness and joy were all mixed together in it, and apology and anger and remorse and relief, rushing and confused. I held onto her, and she onto me, as if contact was the only hope of anything making sense. We hid ourselves in an embrace, in closed eyes, in the sensation of her hands on my back and mine on hers, because as long as we stayed that way we wouldn't have to look at each other and let ourselves be seen. We hid there and kept on hiding, long enough for our breathing to slow, long enough to understand that there would be a next moment after this one, and a moment after that, and how were we going to get from one to the next, what would we say and who would we be to each other when we looked up?

I felt, and I thought she did too, that we were still on the very knife-point of together or apart, and I had to know, no matter what. No time to wait, no time to pretend that the moment was anything but

what it was. "Lie down with me," I said to her, and waited for her to find an answer within herself. No would be no to everything. I began to wonder if she would respond at all, and even to question whether I had actually spoken aloud, before I felt her begin to move; it took a moment of awkwardness to get ourselves stretched out together on the couch, but then she was beside me as I had not dared to hope would ever happen again, and we lay there and looked at each other in silence. A tear rested in the hollow between the inner corner of her eye and the bridge of her nose, and I wiped it away with my finger. Her face was as solemn as mine felt, her eyes measuring me, and the situation, as if we had never been close before. Who knew what might happen now?

We lay there for several minutes, not speaking, and I felt that we were again at the very beginning, but a different beginning this time. Her eyes said what they had said the first time we kissed: I am here. But there was a wariness, also, that hadn't been there before. I felt it too. But it didn't mean I wanted to go away.

A nagging thought crossed my mind. "Is Zack going to come in and find us?"

"He went to a friend's house, they're going to a baseball game. They won't be back for hours."

"Is your mom at work?" I knew her dad would be.

She nodded, and we lay there regarding each other. Something in the house creaked as if it were talking to itself. "I could keep you company," I said.

That night I dialled Dal's number, so deep in thoughts of Becca that I didn't even bother trying to think of what I'd say. His mother answered the phone.

"Hi, it's Andy, is Dal there?"

"Just a moment." She put down the phone. "Dal!" I heard her call. "Telephone!"

The phone was picked up at once, and it was his mom again. "Andy, where have you been the last week and a half?" That brought me back to earth, back to what they'd all been through while I had been somewhere else. His mom's voice admitted of no beating around the bush; I knew she meant I'd deserted him, and excuses were out of the question.

"We had a problem. Dal and I did." Did she know, had he told her what it was about?

"And is this problem permanent?" She leaned on the word "problem" in a way that made me feel selfish and small.

"Not necessarily," I said.

"No' would be a better answer," she said coldly, and then there was the sound of Dal picking up the phone and his voice calling down to his mom, "I've got it."

He waited for her to hang up. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's me."

There was a long silence. How old was I the first time I called Dal on the phone? Probably seven or eight – and how many thousand times since had I said to him, "Hi, it's me"? But never a silence like this, knowing that this time was not like the rest. I could picture him sitting on the attic stairs with the phone in his hand, the Indian look on his face.

"What's up?" he said in a monotone.

Of course the answer was Becca, Becca and me – and him – but one thing I couldn't say to him was her name, not now, maybe not for a long time. Now that I heard his voice I remembered again that he had kissed her, he had tried to touch her and make her his, even though I was his friend. It hadn't worked – but would I ever be able to forget that? And yet I wasn't ready to bring it up, either; it was harder to do than I had thought. Maybe I was still too angry inside to risk it. "I heard about your dad," I said to him instead.

"Yeah," Dal said. His voice was low and glum.

"Did he move yet?"

"Yeah. Who told you, anyway?"

"Toni."

Dal gave a grunt and there was another silence, and I began to wonder how I could have let something that big happen without even taking any notice of it. "When did he do it? Where'd he go?"

"He got an apartment over by the post office. He took his stuff out day before yesterday."

"Jesus, I never thought it would really happen."

I heard Dal heave a sigh. "I know." He was silent again, and I thought maybe the conversation was going to run aground and get stuck right where we were. "Well?" Dal said. "Let's hear it," and I knew he meant What about it, what about us, are you going to tell me to go to hell, are we enemies or not?

Nothing I could think of seemed complicated enough to say what I meant. "You first," I said. I had made the call, and that was more than enough.

"I fucked up, Andy."

"Boy, did you ever," I heard myself say; I hadn't meant to sound so unforgiving but it had come out that way without thinking, and now I knew we were in unexplored territory.

"I don't know what to say," Dal muttered, and neither did I. I wasn't going to tell him it was all okay – I owed myself at least that much, didn't I? I sat there on my bedroom floor thinking I could really grind it in so he'd never forget it – but I was sure he wouldn't anyway, and I didn't want to go through it all again. Not on the phone. I was going to have to see him. "You doin' anything tomorrow?" I said.

"No."

"Then meet me by the tracks."

Small clouds passed quickly across the face of the sun, driven by strong winds, but where I lay on the sloping bank by the streetcar tracks there was no more than a breeze, and the tops of the trees were only lightly tossed. Moments of shadow came and went like passing thoughts. There was a spring sun, different from the inexorable one of summer; the grass and weeds by the tracks were green and thick again, the trees were in leaf, I lay on springy new growth. I was thinking of Becca, asking myself where the current was taking us, knowing that we had as much power to hurt each other as to bring each other joy. That was out in the open now, not just about Becca but about all of us. I didn't even know what to call what I was feeling; the word "love" had been thrown around an awful lot, especially by me, but maybe if I didn't say it at all, at least for a while, I'd get closer to what it meant. "We have all spring and summer," she had said to me, and I had been hearing that inwardly ever since, in the background of everything else I thought.

And then we would go, one East, one North, and who knew what would happen after that? No going back to anything, Dal's mom had told me, and she was right – there was no going back to the time before L. wrote the note to Dal's dad, or before Clay did what he did to Toni, and I would never go back now to who I had been before Becca had seen in me something other than the perpetual confidant, that day in Claire's room. Never go back to before I had said those things to Dal, either, that I yelled at him in his back yard when I wanted to hit him but couldn't. But I couldn't imagine Becca ever receding into the past that way – or wouldn't; it would hurt more than enough when it happened and why start now?

A streetcar passed by, making a flock of starlings a few yards down the tracks fly up out of the tall weeds, wheel a couple of times, and regroup in a tree. Then I heard Dal coming through the undergrowth. Our eyes met for an instant as he sat down on the bank to my right, but after that instant I went back to watching the tops of the trees moving against the sky. I pulled out a long stem of grass and put it in my mouth, chewed it and watched the tassels wave in the air, waiting to see if he'd speak first. It was up to him, wasn't it? But he didn't. I could feel his presence as if the ground between us were a perfectly balanced seesaw.

"Didja get into RIT?" I said. It was the first thing that popped into my mind, besides all the things that I could feel hanging over us both.

"Yeah."

"I'm going to Tufts."

"I heard."

"How?" I couldn't think who could have told him except Becca, and for a moment everything threatened to go dark again.

"Your mom told mine."

Of course. She had asked me, just yesterday, if I knew the story behind Dal's dad moving out; the way she said it I had a feeling she'd rather I didn't. I didn't tell her, of course, that Dal and I had known all along.

"How's your mom doing?" I still felt stung by the words she'd said to me the day before.

Dal didn't answer for a while. I glanced at him; he seemed to be looking for something in the grass. "Bad. I've been thinking I might go to Washington U. Stay home, save some money."

That blanked out the things we both weren't saying; I took the grass stem out of my mouth. "Washington U.? You've got to be kidding." After all the nights we'd talked about going East?

"It's a good school," Dal said defensively. "Anyway, calculus is the same no matter where you take it."

"Did your mom try to talk you into this?"

"Tried to talk me out of it," he said. "But I'm worried about her." He sounded resigned and duty-bound and nothing like the Dal of our midnight drives.

"What's it going to do for her if you stay here?"

"I don't think she can really afford to send me away to college. She told me I shouldn't worry about that, but I don't believe her."

This is nuts, I thought. Since when does she have to afford it?
 “Your dad’s paying for it too, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Dal said, reluctantly, as if he was looking for a reason not to go away. Had he turned into a different person while I wasn’t looking?

“Well, so? Have they ever said there wasn’t enough money for you to go?”

“I don’t want to take his money,” Dal said, in a low, compressed voice.

“For Christ’s sake – “

“Not after what he’s done.”

“If that’s the reason you’re not going where you want to go, you’re just letting him fuck up your life more.”

I heard myself sounding angry, and Dal lapsed into another brooding silence; I could feel the tension between us, and the longer we didn’t speak, the more I knew that the only worse thing than talking about Becca would be not talking about her. That wasn’t going to go away and he knew it as well as I did; even the pretense of thinking about anything else became more absurd with each passing moment.

“Becca told me what happened,” I said when I couldn’t stand it any longer, and Dal said nothing, waiting. There was nothing to do but go on. “You wanted to get her in bed, didn’t you?”

I didn’t dare look at him, and I guessed he felt the same about me. “Yeah,” he said, in a barely audible voice.

“How could you do that?”

“What the fuck am I supposed to say? She was friendly, she was there, everything was falling apart, I couldn’t stop myself. Till she told me to. Don’t blame it on her.”

“You had plenty of time to think about it, that’s what really gets me. Ever since Claire’s party. Did it ever occur to you how I’d feel?”

“Ever occur to me? Shit, what do you think I am?” Dal said.

“My friend, supposedly, but friends don’t do stuff like that.”

“Did it ever occur to you that when *I* really needed a friend you never thought about anything except Becca? Everything went to hell, and you weren’t even around,” he said angrily, which shocked me. I was the one who was entitled to get mad, not Dal.

“That still didn’t give you any right to try and snake my girlfriend.”

“God damn it, do you think I don’t know that?” he said loudly, as if he were the offended party. There was a smoldering silence while we refused to look at each other. When he spoke again it wasn’t so

loud. "You know what really just about killed me? It was when you told me I was exactly like my dad. I got so drunk I passed out on the floor of the downstairs bathroom. My mom found me. You wouldn't believe how sick I was. Should have known better than to drink his whiskey."

I didn't know what to say; I had meant to hurt him, but I had never imagined it was possible for Dal to be brought that low, and I didn't like thinking of him that way. I felt pulled toward forgiving him whether I wanted to or not. If I'd known it was going to work so well, I thought, maybe I would never have said that. "Maybe you shouldn't have listened to me," I said.

Dal was sitting hunched over, his hands clasped behind his neck, the way he looked on his front porch the day his mom found out. "Look," he said. "It turns out my father is a selfish bastard who doesn't give a damn what happens to anybody else, and I did exactly the same thing to you. Damn it all," he said, "what am I supposed to do? I can't forget about it, I can't make it go away, I can't make it be not true that I did that. That's why I'm not going to take any of his fucking money. The less I have to do with him from now on, the better."

"It's over," I said. "Things happen."

"I fucked up, damn it, no wonder you hate my guts." But I thought he knew I didn't anymore.

"I hated your guts in the fourth grade, but it hasn't made a whole lot of difference. Just live with it. If I can, you can."

"I don't know how," Dal said, and I knew that was true; it was the last thing he would ever have learned. Of course Dal would think he should do everything right all the time – everyone else did – I had expected that of him, all my life. Since when did any of us want to know there was another side?

"Well, tough. Maybe you have to." A streetcar was coming, and as it got close to us the motorman dinged his bell and slowed down, gesturing at us out his open window. "No trespassing on the right-of-way!" he shouted as he passed. Dal and I looked at each other, outraged. "Hey, we were here before you were!" Dal shouted after him.

"Who does he think he is, anyway?" I said, watching the streetcar rock down the track. This was our territory, and if the streetcar company didn't know it, too bad for them.

I lay back on the ground, looked up at the sky where the clouds were still moving steadily and fast against the brightness. As I watched, a cardinal flew by, like a red string flung almost tautly from

tree to tree. I waited a while for Dal to say something, but he didn't. I was thinking of how he must have felt when his father moved out and I wouldn't even speak to him – I would have to live with that. "I practically got you killed up on that smokestack and you didn't even think twice about it, all you did was save my goddamn life."

Dal groaned as if I was embarrassing him.

Come on, I told myself, spit it out. "I shouldn't have said that stuff about being your mascot, either. It wasn't your fault I made you be the leader."

I looked over at Dal; for a moment he stared straight ahead, trying to pretend he was thinking nothing special, and then he gave me a quick glance, but that was all either of us could manage. Too many feelings shot between us, things the two of us didn't know how to say to each other. There were a few seconds of intense awkwardness.

"Hey," I said, "it's probably not even your fault girls get all oogly inside when you walk by."

"Oh, *give* me a break," Dal burst out in a pained voice, as if imploring the heavens to make me shut up.

"You should have heard Toni stick up for you last weekend. Told me she was worried about you, she wanted me to talk to you, I really gave her a hard time but she wouldn't quit."

"I wish that bastard had been hit by a truck before he ever met her," Dal said.

"You know something? You *can't* go to Washington U. – you'll run into Clay somewhere and end up behind bars for the rest of your life."

Dal gave a slight chuckle as if it might just be true.

"You owe me something, right?" I said. I still had a little leverage, why not use it?

"Yeah."

"Don't blow it. Go East. Don't stay here. Take your dad's damn money and go to RIT and live your life. Otherwise it's just stiff upper lip, Dal, and you know how that turns out."

He sighed. "Yeah," he said again.

We lay there, hands behind our heads, poked by grass beneath us, reclining against the earth as we had so many times in the past, watching the topmost branches wave what had once been secret signals up in the sky. They were no longer as easy to read as they once had been, but I had a feeling they were still being sent, still waiting for me to come along and puzzle them out. I remembered telling Becca the hidden powers liked her, and her saying she hoped I was right; now I

wanted someone to tell that to me, and Dal, and all of us about to step over the brink.

“You want to go for a drive tonight?” Dal said after a minute.

“All right.”

There was a rustling in the rails, and then the singing of the wire, and then with a clattering rush a streetcar whizzed by, paying no attention to us lying there, and as it went away its sound drew me along with it as if I were riding on it, seeing every familiar foot of the world beside the right-of-way.

“There goes the wizard,” Dal said next to me, and in the quiet after he spoke I could still hear it, faintly, far down the track, even after it went around the bend.