

# **The Milk Man, The Connection**



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by  
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## About the Book

Jess Sterling, a handsome precocious teenager, secures a job at a milk dairy . . . Bob Servo, very tall, extremely handsome adonis, trains Jess the art of delivering milk, . . . *and its fringe benefits!*

Jess's Dad teaches him to box; he defeats Roger Stokes, the much older school-drop-out bully.

Sensuous Sally Blaine is off limits at the dairy, jailbait, and her father is a Detective with the Detroit Police Department. She serves Jess a cup of coffee with her phone number, and they spend the New Year together.

An accidental meeting brings Jess in touch with his former English Teacher, Mrs. Gladstone. He is fascinated with her voluptuous beauty . . . Sharon Gladstone wants this young handsome man for herself. She comments, "*Milk? We can do better.*" . . . Mr. John Gladstone, owner of Detroit's only golf club manufacturing plant, meets Jess with trepidation, says, "I'll trust Sharon's judgment, for now."

Jack English, a Gladstone lackey and plant manager assigns Jess to the golf club assembly room. Mr. Vang and Mr. Chow controllers of their specially designed golf clubs have reason to keep a watchful eye over this kid.

The involvement of Hub Blaine, Special FBI Agents, J.B. Clark and Shades Soble; and the cleverness of Jess Sterling spinning a spider's web around these cocaine thugs . . . and then his maneuvering of Sharon Gladstone keep the pagers turning for an exciting conclusion.



## CHAPTER ONE

The sound of a snowball hitting my bedroom window awakened me with its familiar thud. *Four o'clock in the morning already?*

I had five minutes to get myself ready for work - that meant brush my teeth, wash my face and get dressed. That's how long Bob gave me to get downstairs and into the truck.

Bob was tough. I could be persuasive myself. Once it took me six minutes instead of five. I hope my stubbornness will not become a future virtue of mine. The bus stop was a mile away.

It was so cold while I walked that long mile to the bus stop. I watched a dog lift his leg to pee on a tree and what usually splashed turned into steam. Tiny elliptical pieces of yellow ice landed on the new white snow, then disappeared without a trace.

I was fortunate, like one of those good news, bad news jokes. The bad news - it was two degrees Fahrenheit, with a mile hike to the bus stop at 4:00 a.m. The good news - the bus was on time. By the time I got warm, it was time to get off. As the bus pulled away, I could hear the sound of bottles clanging against each other in the distance.

How my thoughts would change as I walked toward that sound. All the while talking to myself, of course. Maybe it

was only for my own amusement, but at least I would get an answer.

Should I turn around and go home, or look forward to freezing my ass off one more time?

As I approached that deafening sound, I looked up to see a huge sign, TWIN PINES DAIRY.

You could be run over with a hurried milk truck if you didn't pay attention. There was a maze of milk trucks dodging in and out, just barely missing each other. Once in awhile, they would collide. Glass would fly and the pavement would turn white from all of the broken bottles of milk.

The fist fights were second to none. A huge driver would jump out from each truck and soon the pavement was a mixture of blood, milk and glass.

There was an unwritten law at the dairy, "Everything you broke, you paid for." These guys were serious. To some of the drivers, it was cheaper to pay for the broken bottles of milk than it was for a new set of teeth.

One of my responsibilities as a new truck jockey was to make sure the mess was cleaned up.

The milkmen had a lot of unwritten laws at the dairy. And one of them was that I was only paid when I was loading a truck with filled cases of milk.

This was the beginning of my second week at the dairy. It was the same old thing - take the cases from the conveyor belt, then load them onto the sea of white milk trucks that were lined up, impatiently waiting for their fill. I'd be working my tail off when, all of a sudden, I would hear one of the truck owners hollering, "Hey, Kid, we'd better have the milk filled into rubber bottles so when you drop one, it will just bounce right up in front of you to catch."



*Boy, that got to be tiring. I didn't mind the teasing but one guy named, Joe, never let up on me. It sure would be nice to get even someday, the sooner the better.*

That first week I don't think I made ten dollars. I would get home at two in the afternoon, totally exhausted. *How could a 14-year-old boy be so tired?* I thought by now I would have a steady job delivering milk, instead of loading it onto trucks six hours a day.

The next morning, I finally found my nitch. No one knew it but me. *It was about time.* All I had done so far was pay for the broken bottles of milk and sweep up the mess. I could hear Joe starting up with his wise cracks again.

"Hey, Frank, four to one the kid breaks a case before your truck is half loaded."

"Come on, Joe, give me better odds than that."

Joe was a burly, constipated-looking Ed Asner, always full of snide remarks. Most of the guys were afraid to stand up to him, especially Frank. Frank was Joe's wimp and he knew it. This was going to be the day that Frank and Joe would remember.

They were making sure I heard every word they were saying.

Frank said again, "Come on, Joe, you can give me better odds than that."

"All right, all right, five to one."

"Well, now, that's more like it, Joe."

*If I want to get even with Joe, maybe now is the time.* I didn't break a bottle until the truck was a little past half full. Joe couldn't believe it, neither could Frank.

The next driver pulled his truck up to the dock and I quickly broke the first three cases.

Joe and Frank were laughing like crazy, doing all that back slapping and hand clapping, just to piss me off. I

could feel the hook starting to take hold. Like when you go fishing and you can't wait for the fish to grab the hook.

Joe was dying to get his money back but I was going to make sure he didn't. It was time to set the bait.

"Hey, Kid, think you're pretty smart don't you?"

I said to myself, *keep quiet and don't say a word.*

Joe kept going, "I'll bet you couldn't fill the truck two thirds full without breaking a bottle. Shit Kid, you don't have any money anyway. "Hell," he said to Frank, "he breaks more than he makes."

I gave Joe a quick glance. I could see Joe's face, full of himself and enjoying what he was doing to me. He carried on with his stupid remarks.

"Hey, kid, I'll bet you don't even have any milk money." He was laughing so hard that his big fat face was turning beet red.

I must admit that was funny, even to me. It took all of the strength I had not to laugh. I do have a sense of humor but now was not the time to show it. Joe dug at me some more. How could I shut up this giant?

"Come on, Kid, say something. Hey, kid," he taunted, "My truck is next to be loaded."

He started to laugh again, so hard, tears were rolling down his overly-confident red face.

"Kid, I know you don't have the guts to bet."

I immediately broke two bottles, saying to myself, *this milk fishing is getting to be expensive.*

Joe was having a ball laughing while the other men were watching. They knew Joe was mean and didn't want to challenge him. He drove his truck right up to where I was standing. "See, I told you the kid's got no guts."

I didn't say a word. Joe was becoming crazed. He couldn't help himself. "Come on, kid, I can't stand it anymore. Are you all puss, or what?"

I still kept quiet, hoping this would drive him into swallowing my hook.

"All right kid, I've had it with you. Listen, you little son-of-a-bitch, twenty-five to one, against whatever you've got in your pockets!"

I looked at him again. This time he moved closer to me. The yellow streak on my back started to get wider as he approached me. *Boy, is he big.* My heart started pounding so hard I thought I would wet my pants. *That's all I need, for him to see how scared I am.*

I gave Joe my most sincere, confused look. I was hoping my face was showing what I was trying to imply. My voice was shivering with, "I don't know what you mean."

Joe started laughing so hard, his spit and bad breath were hitting me right in the face. He became louder and louder, "See, I told you, besides being gutless, HE IS STUPID!"

Joe couldn't resist being obnoxious, "Twenty-five to one, kid. Twenty-five to one against whatever you've got in those empty pockets of yours. That's what I mean. You understand I said twenty-five to one, you can't load my truck without breaking a bottle?"

Joe smirked to the gathering crowd, waving them forward, as he continued, "You got that? Come on kid, is it a bet or not? I don't have all day. Now quit fucking around, God damn it!"

You could almost see the smoke coming out of his ears. He moved closer as he looked down at me. For a second, I thought he was going to hit me. I stared at him just long enough to get him a little more impatient. Then, I looked him straight in the eye and blurted out, "You're on!"

*The hook was in.* All of a sudden, there was a hush in the gathering crowd. I had the audience now. They all

stood there, watching me as I hosed off the inside of Joe's truck. I made sure there wasn't any broken glass on the runners in Joe's truck. This time was for me and I wasn't going to blow it. I took a deep breath, saying to myself, *come on, let's get him.*

I reached outside the truck to push the red buzzer on the wall, telling the loaders inside that I was ready for Joe's order. The big door flew open. Before I knew it, cases of milk came flying out of the receiving dock faster than I had expected. But I concentrated harder than ever before. The faster the cases came out, the quicker I would grab them.

After the first ten cases were loaded, I was amazed by my sudden burst of strength, the crates felt like cases of feathers instead of milk. I could feel the blood in my body rush through my veins. My arms started to sweat. I was wet all over. I had to time it just right, between grabbing cases, so I could take off my coat.

I was really getting into it. I didn't hear a thing but bottles and cases banging against each other. The truck was nearly half full. I gave Joe a quick glance. He was still laughing. I returned my view to the cases of milk coming out of the dock port but could hear Joe in the background.

He was laughing harder and louder. He kept it up, "Ten to one, the kid starts his fumbling act." He hollered, "Hey, Pete, ten to one, he can't go the rest of the way."

Several guys moved closer, saying. "You're on, Joe, I'll take five dollars on the kid."

Another man said, "I'll take ten, Joe."

"I'll bet fifty on the kid," boomed a voice in the crowd.

Joe kept laughing and yelled, "You're on. You're all on."

He turned to me and taunted, "Hey butter fingers, cases getting heavy?" Joe liked the edge. He was doing everything he could to make me lose.

I was getting that certain feeling you only get when you push yourself to the limit. I visualized myself in the swimming pool at school. It was the 8th Grade Swim Marathon and the pool area was lined with kids cheering for their favorite athletes.

There I was in the pool, swimming for all I was worth. As I approached the last 100 meter mark, my chest felt as if it were going to explode. *Oh, no*, I moaned to myself, *I can't be finished now. Come on*, I coached, *you've got to keep on going*. Suddenly, my breathing had become easier and I immediately felt a rush of energy, *WOW, what a feeling!* I felt brand new. *What do you know, I got my second wind*. There was no stopping me.

Joe stepped closer to the action and when his face came into my view, it brought me back to reality. I looked at Joe, my inner smile became, an all knowing confident smile.

Our eyes locked for a few seconds and the look on his face was priceless.

The truck was three fourths of the way full and out of the docking port came the last twenty cases of milk. I felt like a ballet dancer. The bottles didn't rattle anymore, they just floated onto their landing spots. I reached for the last case. The shouting turned to silence as I placed my final milk filled case on top of the stack.

I could mentally hear the cheer I received when I won the swimming marathon last week at school. But that was nothing compared to the bellowing cheers I was receiving from this group. All I could see were smiling milkmen. I didn't know their names, only their faces, they were patting me on the back and face and shaking my hand. All the men started talking at once, "How much you got in your pockets, kid? How much you got in your pockets?"

Joe wasn't smiling any longer. It seems he had bitten off more than he could chew. I wasn't the only one he had to pay off.

"All right, Joe, that will be five hundred and I don't mean yen," said a stocky man who had a voice to match.

Joe looked at the man and said, "Ah, come on, I was only kidding. You guys know that. I was just funnin the kid".

The voice said, "BULLSHIT," and he meant it. "PAY THE KID FIRST! I just hope he does have some money stashed away in one of his pockets."

The cheering section started again, "Come on, kid, how much you got?"

I looked at the group of men and smiled. That smile was for me.

*Whew, am I glad. What do you mean glad? Thrilled is the word, thrilled. Wow, I did it!* I nonchalantly reached into my left pocket. *That's where I kept my folding money - I picked up that expression watching Westerns on TV.* I pulled out a fistful of one dollar bills and threw them on the floor of Joe's truck.

Joe covered the small bunch of bills with one of his large shoes. Once again, he said, "I was only funning."

Before he could say another word, Joe was lifted right off of his feet, like a bird leaves its perch. He sat on the ground while the much larger man counted the money I had just thrown on the floor.

"MY, MY, he did have a few shekels in his pocket," he said to the crowd. Slapping me on the back he said, "Kid I like your style." Then he turned his attention to Joe, "Joe, I count eight dollars. Pay the kid two hundred dollars." Joe gave him a look of disbelief.

There wasn't a sound, as the man leaned close to Joe and snarled, "Listen buster, if you don't have enough cash

on you, you best get that fat ass of yours inside and get the paymaster to give you an advance to cover ALL of your bets."

The look on Joe's face was only for a mother to understand. It didn't take Joe long to return with the money. Joe's expression reminded me of a baby's, pissed off and can't do a thing about it. Beads of sweat poured off Joe's face; his nose was running as he handed me my two hundred dollars. That was my first look at a hundred dollar bill. A double treat, two one hundred dollar bills. I felt like I'd grown two feet taller.

*Now I can take a taxi to the dairy*, I laughed to myself. I was more practical than that. *But, heck, a guy can dream.*

After Joe paid me, what a pleasure it was to watch him turn around and face the larger man. Joe ever so lightly, counted out five one hundred dollar bills across the man's palm.

Meanwhile, all of the guys waited in line for the big pay-off. Joe's mother was working overtime this day.

I got so many pats on my back and face, my neck was starting to bob up and down like a chicken's.

My cheering section inspired me, I felt obligated. I stood up on the receiving dock platform and said, "All right men, step up to the bar. THE MILK'S ON ME!"

*Taxi, hell.* I was so excited, I ran all of the way home. *To think of all the money I've spent on the bus.*

I kept talking to myself, *I'm rich, now, what do I do with all this loot?*

I walked back and forth in my room, kind of holding my hands together like Peter Lorre did in so many of his movies with Sidney Greenstreet. He not only held his hands together, he would say out loud to himself, "I'm thinking and blinking, heh, heh".

That's exactly what I was doing, but I didn't steal Mr. Lorre's lines. *Heck, this is for real, not reel.* I kept looking around my room for a unique hiding place.

By the way, I shared this room with my brother. He's always had a nose for my extra, unaccounted for, money. Whenever he found it, he would have that certain look on his face. *Al Capone has nothing on my sweet brother.* He would have half of my cache, or he would have nothing, which meant there was always my mother to go to and tell how much money I had and where I got it. It was easier paying off motor-mouth than explaining.

*Well, he isn't going to get any of my hard earned dairy money. I must say, my brother could find a squirrel's last nut.* It was time for the thinking cap . . . and mine was on squarely.

I looked around. It's amazing, no matter how hard you look for something, and you can't find it, even when it's right in front of you.

For a moment, I thought someone was watching me. *Boy, sometimes I feel I have a real case of dumbness.* It was only my own reflection in the mirror on the dresser drawer.

I ran to the kitchen. *What am I doing here?* I pondered for a second.

*Oh, yeah.* I found it - the longest knife my mother had. I grabbed it and headed back toward my room. *Boy, why hadn't I thought of this one before?*

I stared at that mirror for a long time. I wondered how much money I could stuff between the mirror and the hard backing? I was about to find out.

I needed four things; a ruler, a small hand mirror, a pencil, and a small piece of tape. With my equipment in hand, I was prepared to start. The trick was not to push too hard with the knife, or I would stuff the money too far into



the mirror. *Boy, that would have been stupid.* First, I measured how long the knife was. The dresser was too heavy to move, so I took the hand mirror and reached behind the big mirror so I would have a back side view of what I was trying to do. I measured five inches deep with the ruler. The knife blade was ten inches long and the handle four, that gave me five inches to spare. I was safe from screwing up.

With my pencil in hand, I made a mark only I could recognize.

For safe keeping, I measured five inches from the bottom of the mirror up to my mark and three inches above my mark. That way, I was sure to find my money and be able to mark another spot for additional funds.

*I'm now ready for the big moment.* I could feel the perspiration running down my face as I folded the first one hundred dollar bill in half.

I had tight quarters to work with, so I was very patient not to make any mistakes. I reached for my knife and my piece of tape. I carefully wrapped the sharp edge of the knife with the tape so I had a flat, blunt edge to work with.

I gently pushed the first bill into its hiding place. I picked up the other hundred and pushed it three inches above the other bill.

When my money was stored between the mirror and hard backing, it brought a smile to my face. In fact, I started laughing, "*What a joy.*"

This was the most fun I'd had in a long time. *How many kids could have this much fun, with this much money? And not spend it?*

Well, most of them don't, because they always end up telling on themselves.

I was so tired from my day's excitement, I thought I would lay down on the bed to catch a cat nap.

I was dreaming about cases of milk. The bottles were jumping up and down and walking all over the milk trucks. They had little faces, and would jump up on my lap and shoulders, exclaiming, "Come on, get up, it's dinner time".

I opened my eyes and there was my mother saying, "Come on, Son, it's time for dinner."

I looked at my mother's smiling face and asked her if I could stay in bed. I explained I'd had a tough day and wasn't hungry.

You know how mothers are. "Are you all right? You're not sick are you?" After she was satisfied I was just tired, she let me be.

*Here it is, morning already.* I could hear Bob's accurate tosses of snow balls at my bedroom window to awaken me. Little did he know, I was so hyped up with my escapade of the day before that I had gotten myself up earlier than usual. Mind you, no one knows what went on at the dairy. This was my secret to the grave.

I walked out of the front door and saw Bob Servo smiling at me. He had a look on his face, as if saying I had done something wrong or something right. Whatever it was, I felt comfortable getting into the Divco Truck.

I looked up at Bob and said to myself, as usual, *boy, I've met my first real live hero.*

Bob was what all boys wanted to be like. *If they didn't, I sure wanted to be.* Bob had big white teeth that would lighten up a dark room. Speaking of rooms, he was so big, doorways seemed to make him duck before he entered. For a kid like me, he was a pillar of strength. He moved like a panther, a very large panther. If you were a female, he would have you treed and eating out of his hand wishfully.

Bob still had that infectious grin on his face and he would glance at me every once in a while as he drove to the dairy.

He finally opened his mouth to speak, commenting, "Well, slick, that was quite a performance you put on yesterday. The guys haven't stopped talking about the way you set up Joe. You're pretty smart for a kid. Where did you get all that moxie?"

I said to myself, *what is moxie?*

I guess there was only one way I was going to find out what he meant. "Bob, what does moxie mean?"

He replied, "It means one who is able to handle difficult situations with energy and spirit."

Little did he know, it had taken all of the energy I had in my body, as well as my very expanding brain, since I have so much moxie. *God, isn't life great, I exclaimed.*

Bob had been giving me rides to the dairy for two weeks now. *Mind you, it wasn't a free ride.* Our deal was, that I had to clean the inside of his truck, then load it to the ceiling with full milk cases.

Bob not only delivered milk, he had eggs. *Boy, did he have eggs, maybe 40 dozen and at least 30 pounds of butter and two dozen bottles of whipped cream.* Bob had one of the largest routes at the dairy.

We were just a few blocks away, the lights of the dairy glistened as we approached it. Using my self communication as usual, I thought, *Isn't it too bad the sun doesn't shine at 4:30 a.m. in the morning?* It wouldn't matter anyway; I would still be inside the truck, working my ass off.

*Boy, these winter mornings would freeze the nuts off of a brass monkey. Wouldn't you know it? Here comes the snow, I grimaced.*

I not only had to contend with the cold and the snow but the slush that splashed up on my behind when one of the trucks decided to squeeze by another truck.

While I was out there in the cold, guess where Bob was? *You got it.* Inside the dairy cafeteria having his warm coffee and rolls, laughing with the guys and walking by the window every now and then to see how I was doing.

I was fortunate to have caught his eye and gave him the signal by touching the top of my head to signify the truck was full. Bob gave me one of his infectious smiles and waved for me to come inside. Truck jockeys, like myself, were not allowed inside the cafeteria unless invited. I didn't question this action. *I've been outside freezing my ass off for two weeks now, sweeping, washing and loading enough milk trucks to satisfy every baby's lips East of the Mississippi. You bet, I'm eager to get inside, even if it's for nothing.*

When I walked inside, I could smell the aroma of coffee and burnt toast, and not a glass of milk in sight. Bob walked over to me with that communicable attitude only he possessed. Of course, his pearls were flashing. He could light up a roomful of Iranian Muslim mourners with that look of his.

Bob reached over to me and put one of his huge paws on my shoulder. He squeezed me lightly and said, "Boys, I want you to meet Jess Sterling, my new delivery boy."

I was so excited when he said 'new delivery boy' I almost wet my pants.

*I've got a job! Now I can make some real money.*

The guys were very friendly. There must have been fifteen men in that room.

I recognized some of the men from yesterday. One of them said, "Hey, I know this kid. He has more balls than a Mexican bull farm."

Everyone started to laugh; it became very loud. Before I knew it, I was picked up and put onto a chair at the head of the table. The waitress sauntered over to me with a cup

of coffee. Instead of the usual armload of plates with short stacks of pancakes, she had just one plate piled high with pancakes. She set them down in front of me, winking with a smile, "These are especially for you." She reached over and pinched my cheek, then asked, "When are you going to be eighteen?"

I looked at her, wide eyed, then said, "Four more years." All the guys started laughing again.

One of the larger men said, "Eat up, kid, it's on me. I just loved the way you set up big mouth, Joe."

*Gee, this was the man who made Joe pay off all of his bets! I can see why Joe did. Wow, what a mountain of a man!*

The man said, "I like you, Kid. My name is Mack."

Mack put out one of his huge hands to shake mine. Of course, my hand was out as fast as Billy the Kid's gun came out of his holster. I shook his hand and replied, "Nice to meet you Mack, and thanks for the help with Joe."

The massive man smiled, and one of his large rough hands lightly touched my face. Mack's deep powerful voice fit his size. He said, "Son, you're in good company now."

Each guy came over to me, introduced themselves and shook my hand. *Boy, what a feeling. I don't have this many friends at school.*



## CHAPTER TWO

I guess you may have been wondering where I live. I live with my parents, James and Mary Sterling and my little brother, William.

We live on the Westside of Detroit, on a street called Treasury Way. Coincidentally, my father's twin brother and his family live two blocks away, on the same street. My uncle's name is Harry. Dad and Harry have a long, aristocratic blood line; English, Scottish and Irish. Harry is the best uncle a guy could ever have. The rest of my uncle's family consists of my Aunt Dora and my cousin, Joe. So one half of the Sterling family lives on the same street. *Isn't that a coincidence?*

The other half of my family, on my mother's side, lives in the suburbs of Dearborn, Michigan. That's my Grandmother, my Grandfather and my Uncle George. My grandparents don't speak a lot of English. They are from Rumania and came to America when my mother was six months old. They moved to a community where many Rumanians live. My Uncle George was born in the United States. George is just five years older than I am.

Uncle George was just plain, George, to us. He wanted my brother and me to call him, George, instead of Uncle George. *That made us feel as if we were friends, rather than relatives.*

William and I visited Grandma's home often, simply because Grandma Chelaru was always fun. We had a chance to learn more Rumanian and help her with her English.

Grandma was the best cook. She often fixed stuffed cabbage, Rumanian style, for us. She would make a giant pot of it, knowing we would eat it all.

Grandpa and Grandma Chelaru's back yard was like a miniature farm. Grandpa grew all kinds of vegetables on the farm. He also raised chickens and pigs.

Speaking of chickens, today Grandma wants a chicken. She called for me to get one for her. William wanted to go with me and watch how I did it. If you ever tried to catch a chicken, you know how fast they can be, at least when they want to be.

Grandpa had shown me how to capture one. He would say in his broken English, "Fiu, get me a patura." That meant, "Son, get me a blanket." I would go to the pig shed, get the blanket and hatchet. Grandpa would smile at me affectionately, being so pleased that I was a good student and not afraid.

*Afraid? Who could be afraid of a chicken?*

Well, getting down to the nitty-gritty - Grandpa would take the blanket from me, then open it up like a big sheet. With blanket in hand and that look of quiet confidence, he would walk over to a group of chickens.

He knew what he was doing. The chickens would scramble but Grandpa would throw the blanket and there would always be a chicken underneath it.

After observing this ritual many times, I finally figured out how he did it. Grandpa would watch the chickens who were eating, then he would spy one who was just bobbing downward for some feed.

*Bingo! The chicken under the blanket trick.*



Grandpa would grab the blanket, with the chicken beneath it and, before you knew it, he would have the chicken by its neck. He was faster than Mandrake the Magician.

I watched Grandpa, with his thick gray hair combed down tightly and admired how agile he was for a man of his age. His movements were like those of a Matador.

After Grandpa had the chicken firmly in tow, he would glance at me with his warm gray eyes and motion for the hatchet. I always handed it to him handle first.

I spent a great deal of time working with Grandpa and one of the first things he taught me was how to use sharp tools. He knew catching chickens would be one of my jobs on his little farm and he made sure I wouldn't hurt myself.

Grandpa would grab the hatchet, then walk over to a tree stump he used for this occasion. He'd grab the chicken's head and lay the chicken down on the stump. He'd raise the hatchet then, whop, off came the chicken's head. The chicken would jump up and run around in circles, like someone had cut his head off. Some of those chickens almost made three circles before they would suddenly stop and just roll over.

Grandpa would then pick up the dead chicken and put it into a large pot that was steaming with water. He would leave it in the boiling water for about fifteen minutes. I'd run to the shed to get Grandpa a peck bag. Peck bags were large, thick paper bags that would hold about fifteen pounds of potatoes.

After the fifteen minutes were up, Grandpa would use a small pitch fork to fish out the chicken. He'd lay the chicken on the stump and start pulling off the chicken's feathers. When he had finished, the peck bag would be full of chicken feathers. I would take the bag, tie the top with a piece of thick string, then store it in the shed.

When I returned from the shed, Grandpa would hand me the naked chicken, then motion for me to take the chicken into the house for Grandma. He knew I understood him. His English was limited but we had our own way of communicating.

This was my day to get a chicken for Grandma. As I walked out the door, William coaxed Grandma into letting him follow me outside. I strutted over to the shed and found the blanket at the usual place, on a hook where Grandpa kept it. I took the blanket and the hatchet outside but made sure I closed the shed door and hooked the latch. Grandpa didn't want any chickens in the shed.

As I strolled across the yard, I looked at my brother the way Grandpa had looked at me. CONFIDENCE, was what I was trying to project. This was my first time at trying to catch a chicken but I wanted my brother to think I had done this before. I continued my nonchalant attitude as I sauntered toward the flock. *I guess I was trying to convince myself that I knew what I was doing. Hopefully, I looked as if I did.*

The chickens were in a large coop. My brother followed me inside. "William," I said, "Close the gate and stay there."

Chickens usually pal around in small groups and I watched for a small group that was just milling around. I crept slowly over to a group of six chickens.

I carefully opened the blanket, like Grandpa had done so many times before. I was ready for the big catch.

I threw the blanket on top of the chicken who was just starting to bob downward for some feed. He fooled me and stepped sideways. *That's a smart chicken.* I kept my eye on that chicken. I waited patiently for him to settle down. As soon as he forgot that I was there, I readied my blanket

again and gave it another toss. *Darn it. That chicken did the same thing, again.*

My brother started laughing, "Jess, you'd better get a gun. You'll never catch him."

*You know how brothers are.* I gave him my most pissed off look, "Keep quiet, you're disturbing the chickens."

He snickered, "What's the matter, big brother, can't you take it?"

I had to admit to myself, William was right. *Why should I take it out on him,* I said, inwardly, *I'm the guy who is screwing up.* But I wasn't about to let him know he was right.

I gathered my concentration and settled myself down for the job at hand. I looked for that same chicken for a long time, then finally said to myself, *What? Are you stupid? They all look alike!* I must say, that gave me an inside chuckle.

I glanced at my brother, just to make sure he was watching me.

He was. He took his finger and started picking his nose, still giggling.

*Boy, he sure knows how to get to me, even though it's funny.* I did my best to ignore him.

I started all over again. This time, I found two chickens who were bobbing their heads up and down for feed. I slowly walked over, and then I opened the blanket again. I smugly, thought, *maybe, you'll catch both chickens. That way you'll have a choice.* I threw the blanket at the two chickens.

*I got one!* But the other one just side stepped the landing blanket. *I'll bet a chicken, that was the one I tried to catch twice before.*

The weight of the blanket kept the chicken still. I was able to grab the chicken with the blanket over it. I held the blanket down over the chicken until I could find its neck. I finally got a good hold on its neck.

I peeled the blanket back with one hand so I could see the chicken, then took my free hand to secure it tightly around the chicken's neck. Once I did so, I let go of my other hand that was holding the chicken through the blanket. I was ready for the hatchet but during the struggle for the chicken, I forgot where I had laid the hatchet. My eyes surveyed the area. *Ah, there it is, right where William is standing.*

"Hey, William, hand me the hatchet. It's right in front of you," I called.

"What do you want the hatchet for?" he inquired.

"Give me the hatchet and don't ask stupid questions."

"Get it yourself," he snapped back.

I glared at my brother, with fire in my eyes and said, "William, if you aren't going to help, go back inside the house."

"NO! And you're not going to make me."

I looked at my brother and said to myself, *now is not the time to argue.*

I wasn't about to drop the chicken I had worked so hard to catch. So I picked up the hatchet, then asked my brother, "Please, open the gate."

My mind drifted back to Joe at the Dairy and the way he had bullied me around. *That had taught me a lesson.*

I thought, *don't be a jerk. After all, William is your brother.* Now that I had my good sense back and the hatchet in hand, I proceeded to the chopping block.

The chicken must have been stunned at first by my tight grip around its neck, but it was starting to squirm. I laid the chicken on the stump and cautioned myself, *you'd better get*

*this over with.* I had a good grip on the hatchet. I took aim. Whop! Off came the chicken's head. The chicken jumped up, then started running in circles, just like the ones Grandpa had done so many times before.

I gave a sigh of relief and whispered to myself, *look at you. Now, you are a chicken killer.*

For a moment, I felt sad. I turned to say something to my brother to change the mood. William wasn't there. *Oh, well, I sighed, he must have gone into the house for something.*

I still had a lot of work to do and I knew I had better get it done. Grandpa had an old wood burning stove outside, near the chopping stump. He usually kept it burning. I was in luck, the fire was hot. It just needed more wood to bring the big pot of water on top of the stove to a boil. I stoked the wood and added more. In no time at all, the water came to a full boil. I picked up the chicken then dropped it inside the pot. My legs seemed to grow longer as I took wide strides toward the shed to get a peck bag.

I had some time to spare and I was hungry. Tucked among the rows of potatoes, carrots, rhubarb, radishes, tomatoes and corn were the onions. I pulled an onion out of the ground and wiped it on my jeans. I ate it like an apple. *Boy, do I like onions.* By the time I finished the onion, the chicken was ready for plucking.

I finished plucking the chicken then cleaned up all of the loose feathers.

I took my first naked chicken into the house for Grandma to see. She looked at me and, with her usual robust laughter, gave me a big hug.

*You always knew you were hugged when you got a Grandma hug.* "Fiu, your Grandfather will be very proud of you. I know he will tell you himself. He mentioned this

morning, before he left for work, he would like to have roast pui (chicken) for dinner tonight."

Grandma was always fun but she never let you forget that the work had to be done too. "Jess," she continued, "did you clean up after yourself? You know how Grandpa is about a messy yard."

"Yes, Grandma, and I even fed the pigs."

"That's a good boy. Now, why don't you go out to play with the other kids, while I make this pui extra special for tonight."

"Okay Grandma." I hit the bricks.

Before I knew it, it was dinner time. *And, am I hungry.* All I had eaten today was an onion, two giant tomatoes and a stalk of rhubarb. It seems I'd been on the run all day. *It's a good thing I know how to catch a chicken.*

Five of us were at the dinner table - Grandma and Grandpa; my brother, William; George; and myself.

Grandpa sat at his usual place, at the head of the table, sitting in his large oak chair. Grandma was at the other end of the table. George was at Grandpa's right, facing my brother and me.

A gentleness always edged into Grandpa's husky voice whenever he said the nightly grace in Rumanian, "Vino Doamne, Fii Oaspetele Nostru Fa Ca Mincarea Aceasta Sa Ne Fie Binecuvintata! Amin."

The English version went like this, "Come, Lord Jesus, Be Our Guest, And May This Food To Us Be Blessed. Amen."

We were ready for Grandpa to carve the chicken. But before he started carving, he slid his chair back and walked over to me. I could feel his big rough hand gently pat my face as he said, "Thank you, Fiu, for catching the pui and cleaning it for our dinner."

Of course, I was beaming, "Ah, it was easy, Grandpa. Come on, let's eat."

Well, as soon as I said, "Come on, let's eat," my brother looked at the beautifully cooked chicken and started to cry. With the quivers in his chin getting larger with each word, William mumbled, "Jess killed that chicken and I'm not going to eat it." William was just ten years old and had never before seen a chicken killed.

I guess William thought I was a murderer. He poked me in the ribs as he left the table. George and Grandpa started to laugh. Grandma was more understanding and told us all to, "Hush up." She left the table to console my brother.

As Grandpa started carving the chicken, he asked George to get "Patru Pahare De Vin," that meant four wineglasses. George came back with four crystal wine glasses that Grandma had lovingly cradled inside her clothes and carefully packed into her leather strapped trunk that made the journey with her to America.

Grandma had been sea sick many times on that month-long ocean voyage and generous passengers had helped her with my mother, who was only six months old at the time, yet Grandmother had never lost sight of her trunk. Those wine glasses were the only wedding present she had received. They were used for special occasions.

I guess George knew this night was a special occasion. Grandpa poured wine into the glasses, handing me one along with George and himself. *I had never before had a glass of wine. I wasn't about to turn it down.* Lifting his glass in a saluting gesture and a wink to me, Grandpa said, "Noroc." Which means, happiness and good health in Rumanian.

Grandma had returned to the table as we were loading our plates with my chicken and all the trimmings.

She explained, "William's all right. He just doesn't want chicken tonight. He'll settle for a sandwich after we finish our dinner."

I started to say something smart and clever about my brother and the chicken but thought it best to keep my mouth shut.

Grandma saw my glass of wine nearly empty and said, "Jess, just one glass and please don't take any wine on your own, only when you are asked."

"Yes, ma'am. And please, don't tell my mother."

"When the time comes," she remarked, "she will offer you some."

We had just finished dinner, when George invited, "Jess, how about coming outside to meet some of the boys?"

"Thanks, that would be great, George, but I've got to help Grandma clear the table."

"That's okay, Son, go out and have fun with George." She cautioned, "George, you be careful to watch after Jess."

I excused myself, smiled at Grandpa and said, "Pe Curind." That means, "See you later," in Rumanian.

As soon as we were out of earshot of Grandma, George whispered, "How would you like to ride along with me in Bumper Tag?"

"You don't have to ask twice." *I'd been waiting for this day for a long time.* George and I walked outside to meet his cronies. My immediate attention went to the street. I counted, four old Model-T Fords parallel parked on both sides of the street. The street looked like an antique junk yard.

As he walked down the steps, George waved, "Hello" to the guys who were waiting for him. "Boys, I want you to meet my nephew, Jess."



George was always a gentleman and seemed proud to introduce me to his friends.

I was most anxious to meet the guys and get on with bumper tag. The guys had been leaning against one of the Model-T's, smoking cigarettes. They were laughing with each other as we approached them. There were three boys in the group.

The first one I met was, Frenchie. He had very long blond hair and wore a gold earring like a Buccaneer. His sharp features and baggy black shirt and pants gave him the appearance of George Arlis, the way he tilted his black beret on the top of his head.

I shook his hand, saying, "And, nice to meet you, Frenchie."

Frenchie responded, with a French accent. "Bon Soir, Jess."

"Jess, that means 'good evening' in French." George said.

I looked at George and mumbled, "Oh." My eyes moved over to the next guy.

George continued, "Jess, shake hands with Jack."

Jack was smoking a cigar. He took a puff of his cigar, looked up, "Nice to meet you, Kid."

He was wearing a black leather jacket that matched his black hair and thin moustache. He also wore a long white scarf around his neck.

Wow! I thought to myself. *Jack is the spitting image of 'Smiling Jack' in Comic Books.*

I smiled at Jack and said, "Nice to meet you Jack."

George stated, "Last, but not least, Jess, meet Fingers. Fingers is the guy who keeps these buggies running."

Before Fingers shook my hand, he reached into his hip pocket and came up with a blue rag. I watched Fingers as he wiped his palms. It was difficult to see what Fingers

really looked like, he was the tallest, thinnest person I ever met. His face was camouflaged with car grease, as were his clothes.

Fingers smiled at me as he reached out with his right hand to shake mine. Finger's hand completely wrapped around mine. All I could see was his hand and my wrist. His hands were so big, I'll bet he could conceal a bowling ball with just one of them. Fingers seemed as if he were a shy guy. He was so tall he had to bend at the waist. "Nice to meet you, Jess. Please excuse my appearance."

Sticking the rag back in his pocket, he continued, "I seem to spend more time fixing these buggies than I do driving them."

"You look like you know what you are doing, Fingers. I'll bet it's a lot of work to keep them running. I noticed all of the cars have railroad ties for front and rear bumpers. What's the reason for that?"

"To answer your question, Jess, there are two reasons for the wood bumpers; for the safety of the guy who is driving and for the safety of the cars. These buggies are very fragile," he explained. "I had to weld steel mounts on the front and rear portion of the frames to hold the railroad ties. Without the railroad ties, it wouldn't take much to push in either end." Fingers scanned the cars proudly, then continued, "As far as the mechanics of these 1927 Model-T Ford Tudor Sedan's, these Tin Lizzies are the last year they were manufactured. It took the four of us almost a year to find these Model-T's. They were in pretty good shape, all we did was to cut off the tops and remove the head lamps. I rewired the ignition so we could bypass the foot starter."

I was really enjoying Fingers' knowledge and enthusiasm about the Model-T's. I glanced at George and he looked as if he was just waiting for Fingers to take a breath. Fingers took time out to blow his nose. George's

timing was perfect. He walked up to where I was standing, "Fingers, we had better get started, before it gets dark."

I kind of chuckled to myself, thinking, *Isn't it funny? When you think a guy is shy, all you have to do is give him a chance to let his insecurity leave.*

George shouted over his shoulder as he turned toward the group, "You can tell Jess more when we finish."

Fingers smiled and said, "Great, George."

"Ok, guys," George continued, "Now that you've met Jess, I've asked him to ride along with me today. How does that sound?"

"That's okay, George, anything you say is fine with us," they replied. But they warned me, "Jess, you better hang on. George is IT today and things can get bumpy and rough!"

The three guys started running for their cars, laughing and hollering, "Come on, let's go. Hey, George, get the lead out! You're sucking hind tit today." Their cars were all painted black, with no tops. They all looked alike. But each one of the guys seemed to know which car was his.

George said, "Come on, Jess, I don't want these guys to get too big of a head start. I'll explain how bumper tag is played as we drive to the field." We ran for George's car, which was parked across the street. The way George moved, he looked like a Gazelle. He took four long strides and on the fifth he was airborne.

George glided to a standing position on the front seat of his car, facing the steering wheel. He slid down into the driver's seat and started the car in one motion. George was so fast, all of this happened before I could reach the passenger door. Fortunately, I made it in time. *After all, I was invited.*

George turned the Model-T around, we were in pursuit of his friends. "George, where are we headed?" I asked.

"Livonia Field," George said, "It's a couple of miles away."

It was hard to hear him talk with all of the noise the car made. *Just try to say, "Dica dica dica," real fast and you'll get the idea how these cars sounded.* It didn't take George long to get up to speed. These cars only had two forwards, low gear and high gear. You have to make a complete stop to put them into reverse.

My education on the Model-T's was limited. All I knew was what I saw in books and what Fingers had told me. I was sure that before today was over I'd be a well-informed and full of tidbit.

The guys were almost out of sight. "George, I thought you wanted to catch up. Come on, get this buggy going."

George smiled at me, leaned forward and flicked a switch under the dash board. The car took a sudden leap. "Wow, that's more like it. What did you do?"

George said, "Fingers is very clever. He hooked up a switch to bypass the thin fuel line and installed a larger line for occasions like this, to kick in extra fuel for quick bursts. It only lasts for ten to fifteen seconds."

George maneuvered the car with grace and ease. Boy did he know how to take corners! These cars were so light, it felt as if we were on two wheels when he took sharp turns. In fact, we were. I just hung on by the seat of my pants, I wasn't about to be thrown out.

George seemed to be the leader of this group. He had style, maturity, a smooth no nonsense guy, being at least six feet tall and built like a gladiator. Whenever he turned to give me a smile, his eyes would sparkle, and his long wavy wind blown brown hair matched the color of his brown

eyes. His face had a look of excitement, as we flew down the street. All he needed was a shield and a sword and you would think he had just stepped out of a Biblical movie.

"Pay attention, Jess," George said, "We only have a few minutes before we get to Livonia Park." George, spoke loudly over the noise.

"Jess, bumper tag is a game we made up. There are four of us playing." I nodded in agreement. "So when the guys arrive at Livonia Park they scatter. We have boundaries marked off with large white stakes. Should you go out of the boundaries, you are automatically out of the game. The objective is to catch each driver by tapping their rear or front bumper. The first one caught is out of the game and he will be IT when we start a new game. The guy who is IT must catch every driver."

George explained, "The person who is IT has just one hour to do this. If he doesn't catch all of the drivers within that hour, he will be given a demerit for every driver he missed."

George let that piece of information sink in for just a second before he added, "After we have completed six games, the demerits are added up and the driver with the least amount of demerits gets the money. We charge a fee of five dollars, per man, for each game. When this game is completed, we start all over again with a new game. Jess, we also have an honor system," he divulged. "If you do go out of bounds, it is up to the driver to get off of the game field, park his car and wait for the game to end. We have penalties and they can be expensive. The guy who was tagged first will be IT for the next game. If anyone goes out of bounds, then he becomes IT for the next game. The guy who was tagged first then gets a free ride. He remains out of the game but the out-of-bounds man is the one who

has to pay a five dollar penalty." George was quiet for a second, then continued.

"Also, not to complicate things, if a second driver goes out of bounds, he is only fined the five dollar fee, along with any other driver who happens to go out of bounds. They are also out of the game."

George smiled, "Jess, did you get all of that?"

*What was I to supposed to say? Heck, I'm not stupid I understood everything George said.* I replied with a friendly bit of sarcasm, "You bet George, anything you say, George." I gave George a quick wink.

George smiled again and said "Oh, Jess, I forgot one thing. If a driver taps another driver anywhere besides the rear and front bumpers, he must help the driver fix any damage that is done to his car, plus pay for all costs of repair. The reason we have so many stiff penalties is that it keeps the game safe for the drivers and this helps keep the game clean and fun."

George made a quick turn to the right and there it was, Livonia Park. The park was gigantic. It appeared to be the size of three football fields, without the grass. The guys were steering their cars in all directions, warming up for the big chase.

George pulled to a complete stop, got out of the car and put his hand out like a policeman does when he wants traffic to stop. They all came to a halt. I could see Smiling Jack in the distance, waving his white scarf.

"That's the signal for the game to start. Hang on, Jess, we're on our way!" George shifted into low gear. The field looked smooth from a distance but there were bumps you couldn't see. George knew the terrain. He maneuvered his car with alacrity. I felt the excitement shivers run through my spine. The guys were ready. I watched them move their cars, as they jockeyed themselves for the big chase.

Livonia Field was so large, all they had to do was to make sure they didn't run into each other. George rammed the gearshift into high gear. Dirt and dust was churning from the spinning tires. We were temporarily blinded from all the dust and the field was getting very bumpy.

*If a guy had a case of the hiccups, he would lose them on this ride.* My inquisitive mind was wondering what his strategy was? "George," I questioned, "these cars are all clones of each other how can you tell which one of them you're chasing?"

George gave me a knowing smile, "That's easy, Jess. We've played this game for a year now. I've known these guys a long time and have gotten to know their individual peculiar habits. You can recognize them when they are coming and going. In other words, by the back of their heads." I thought about that one for a minute. *You know, he was right. When you do know someone, you can recognize them from the rear.*

The dust settled, the three cars were at the far end of the field. George was moving his Model-T at a good pace. He looked anxious. I interrupted George's thoughts, "George, I can make out all three of them now. Why don't we go after Frenchie first?"

"Good choice, that's just who I had in mind. Jess, which car is Frenchie driving?"

"Come on, even a neophyte could point out Frenchie," I quipped, then chuckled silently, *how could I miss with all the experience I've had?*

I broke the twenty second silence, saying, "George, Frenchie wears a beret and Jack wears a white scarf so that leaves Fingers."

"Let's concentrate on Frenchie first."

"Anything you say, George."

George started weaving his car, first pointing it at Jack then at Frenchie. Fingers stayed stationary, kind of taunting George. He was sitting side saddle in his car, with his heels resting on the passenger side of the windowless door.

I watched George. He sure looked tempted to go after Fingers but had second thoughts and those thoughts were on Frenchie. Once George made up his mind, it was almost as if Frenchie knew it. Frenchie shifted into low gear and spun away quickly. George started after Frenchie, moving slowly, thinking out his strategy.

We were gaining on Frenchie so George said, "Jess, you'll need to put your imagination to work to visualize Frenchie's peculiarity."

My imagination was ready and my ears were wide open. I knew George had something up his sleeve.

"OK, Jess, I'll tell you what Frenchie's down fall is. Frenchie is a music buff. He plays the Banjo and can he ever play it. It's obvious he can't play it while he's driving but the beat stays with him. The faster he drives, the jumpier he gets. Watch what happens as I get closer to him."

We were on Frenchie's tail and our cars were bouncing like crazy.

Frenchie could feel our presence and it didn't seem to bother him. Frenchie started to bang the side of his car with his hand. It looked as if he were trying to get his car to go faster. All of a sudden, Frenchie made a quick left turn. When he was in the middle of his turn, he hit his breaks, hard. His car spun around to make a complete U-turn.

George hit his breaks but not soon enough. We clipped Frenchie's left rear fender. George wiped his brow and said, "He's lucky I didn't smash the whole fender. Frenchie's been practicing that move."



George gathered his composure, then spun out after Frenchie. Dust was flying all over us and the car.

I had just enough time to spit out some of the dust when George said, "Hit the switch. He's gained too much ground and I don't want to waste too much time in catching him."

I reached down and flicked the fuel switch. *Man, it felt like a rocket.* We seemed to take one giant step, we were on his tail in no time. Meanwhile, Frenchie was having a ball, pounding the side of his car. George moved over to the left side of his car. We were so close, I felt as if I could almost touch Frenchie's car.

George hollered, "You crazy son-of-a-bitch."

Frenchie was now hitting his left knee with his left hand, singing, "I can't stop my leg, I can't stop my leg." His left knee kept going up and down. I started laughing.

Frenchie hollered back, "Fuck you, George." And hit his fuel switch.

George was getting pissed, "Hang on!" George caught up to him again, and moved over to the right side of his car. Frenchie started to make his clever U-turn to the right. That's when George slammed on the breaks. We skidded to a stop. Dust was hanging in the air. George had anticipated his every move, and Frenchie had no idea we were sitting and waiting for him to tag himself out by hitting us head on. Frenchie didn't have enough time to pick up any speed.

The collision was light.

Frenchie was dumbfounded. George was delighted. He backed up and pulled up next to Frenchie. "Hey, Frenchie, how's your leg now?"

George spun us around to find the next bumper to meet. George wasn't wasting time, we were gliding over the bumps on the field as we approached the two remaining

drivers. George looked at me with a challenging grin. "Well, what do you think? Who's next?"

I looked at George enjoying my newly acquired job as Field Marshall, imagining, I had a General's epaulets on my shoulders. The stars on the epaulets would sparkle from the sun and made me squint from their reflection. George looked like General George Patton with a cigar in his mouth, mumbling, "We should attack from the rear."

I didn't realize George had a sense of humor. *It goes to show you, one never knows until it comes out. George had made my day, inviting me to come along and sharing his friends with me. I could understand why my mother said George was a fine man and it was nice to have a brother like him. My grandmother had given birth to George late in life. I'm glad she did.*

This time, Fingers wasn't resting his foot on the door, he was ready and so was Smiling Jack. George gave a fake move toward Fingers. Fingers spun off. George hit the brakes lightly and turned left.

He high-tailed it after the speeding car Smiling Jack was driving.

Before I could say anything, George volunteered the pertinent information about Jack, stating, "Jack lives near Livonia Field and every time we come here, he drives past his house and whistles for his dog. Jack has a big German Shepherd who loves to ride in his car. Jack slows down just enough for the dog to jump into the front seat of his car and they ride to the park together. When Jack gets to the park, he tells the dog to get out and watch the chase from the side lines."

George paused, "Look, there's Samson now, sitting on the North East End of the field near the boundary line. The dog has a white scarf wrapped around his neck, just like Jack does. Jack loves to show off his dog, so when Jack

gets near the North East End of the field he will spin his car around in a circle and whistle for Samson. Of course, the dog obeys his every command and jumps into the car. This time I have a surprise for Jack and his dog." Jack was heading South. George said, "Hang on!" *It's a good thing I did.* George hit the brakes and spun us around on a dime. We were heading for the North East End of the field. George said, "Quick, Jess, reach under the seat. You'll find a bag full of food scraps. As soon as I slam on the brakes and spin us around, start throwing the bag of food at the boundary line where Samson is sitting." I did exactly what George said.

As soon as we spun, I held my breath and closed my eyes, I didn't want any dirt in my eyes or mouth. When George gave me an important assignment, I didn't want to screw up. I felt the excitement of the spin.

With our about face completed, I opened my eyes and there was Samson. He looked a little confused by the way he tilted his head to the side. I had no trouble throwing the food for Samson. I tossed the bag, as we spun off after Jack. George must have thought the dog was starving, there was at least five pounds of scraps in that bag.

We hadn't lost much time. Jack was about a hundred yards ahead of us. George reached forward, flicked the fuel switch on again and zoom, we were gaining on Jack. Jack started his big circle turn, not giving George a chance to cut him off. George kept up the pace for a few more seconds, then he cut the switch. George looked at me and said, "Watch."

I said, "Watch? Watch what? You're letting him get away."

George answered me with, "Be patient. I can't flick the fuel switch until the reserve bowl is refilled. Besides, Jack

hasn't started his spinning turn yet and, believe me, that dog isn't going to leave those scraps for a ride in Jack's car."

"I thought you said that Samson obeys Jack's every command."

George started laughing and he kept laughing until the tears were rolling down his face. He finally said, "Okay, okay. Jess, the dog will be too busy smelling the food and the bag." He noticed my quizzical look, "The reason he will be doing this is our next door neighbor has two female dogs who are both in heat. I left the bag full of meat in their dog house last night."

He anticipated my next question, "I also made sure that I fed the dogs first. That way they wouldn't eat the food that I had left in there, because I wanted it to pick up their scent. Jess, do I have to tell you why Samson is sniffing and smelling?"

"No, you don't have to explain," I said, "I read the book on animal husbandry in school." George started laughing.

*I guess he was just pulling my leg but I did read the book.*

We were about fifty yards from catching up to Jack. Jack was going full bore toward the North East End of the field. His scarf was flowing with the wind. All of a sudden, Jack slammed on his breaks and started to make his spinning turn. With peripheral vision, I could see George flicking on the fuel switch. The after burner kicked in. We closed in on Jack. Jack was stopped. I heard him whistling for Samson but Samson was preoccupied making his own circles of scent.

Jack whistled again and again, to no avail. Samson kept his nose pointed downward.

Jack gave up whistling and started hollering for his dog to get his ass into the car. George was laughing. He knew the chase was over.

George cut the switch and we coasted toward Jack. Jack was so involved with his dog, that he temporarily forgot about us. George slammed on the breaks and gently tapped Jack's rear bumper.

George was still laughing as he pulled up next to Jack's car. George tried to say something to Jack but he couldn't stop laughing. I tried not to laugh but George's laugh was so infectious, I couldn't help myself.

George looked around for Fingers and said, "Ah, there he is on the other side of the field." George started moving toward Finger's Model-T, which was near the South West End of the field. "Jess, we better conserve our fuel. I don't want to run out on Fingers."

I asked, "Is it difficult to catch Fingers?"

George replied, "Fingers is the best driver here. He can out maneuver anyone. But not today. You know why I'm IT don't you?"

*I didn't want to guess.* By what George said about Fingers, I assumed Fingers had the least amount of demerits, so I left it up to George to tell me. I answered, "There must be a reason, fill me in."

"Last week, Fingers was IT for the first time during this game. He caught the other guys in no time at all. I don't know how he does it but he sure gets the job done in a hurry."

George stopped explaining for a minute. His mind was going a mile a minute, thinking of how he was going to corner Fingers. Then I saw why George had stopped talking. Fingers had reached the South West corner of the field. He spun his car around and came to a full stop. George broke the silence with, "Look at him, toying with me. Well, I'm going to make him sweat a little. I'll just give him a little of his own medicine." George came to a full stop.

We sat there in silence for a couple of minutes. First I looked at George to see if I could read his expressions, then I gave Fingers a going over.

These two guys were trying to read each other's minds. George finally said, "Jess, how much time do we have left?"

I looked down at my wrist and said, "You have eleven minutes before the game ends."

"Thanks." George said. "Now is the time to confuse Fingers." He reached for his ignition key, "Let's just sit here for five minutes. I'm going to cut the engine to let it cool off a little."

With the engine quiet, I could easily hear George's explanation.

"Finger's will leave his car running. You know, Fingers knows, if he turns his engine off, it may not start up right away, therefore it would leave him vulnerable. That's just what I want him to think. These buggies don't like to idle for any length of time. They get hot real fast."

George started to smile, he continued, "Now, let me finish telling you how Fingers caught me. After Fingers finished off the other guys, he was in hot pursuit after me. Fingers, being our in house mechanic, is smart enough to hone his own car to a fine tune, therefore, he is able to catch us whenever he wants to."

George never took his eyes off of Fingers all the time he was talking to me, "Anyway," he said, "Fingers started after me with great speed. I made him chase me all over the place. Believe me, it was a rough ride. He hung on to my tail like a sewing machine makes a stitch.

He was so close at times, I could almost hear him breathing. All I could do, was spin around and scat. He was relentless, and had me going so fast this time, I couldn't

spin out. So where was I to go? He ran my ass out of bounds. Now it's my turn."

George was half talking to himself, saying, "I must and I will, out think him." I could feel his thoughts when he asked, "How much time do we have Jess?"

I said, "Six minutes. You don't have much time left to catch him. You had better make your move."

George kept looking at Fingers for another minute, then said, "I've got to take a chance and wait until the last couple of minutes. Fingers will have to come toward us. We have his back against the wall." George reached forward and started the car. Fortunately, it turned over and started right away.

George said, "Hang on." He shifted into low gear. The wheels spun as we headed forward. "As soon as I shift into high gear, hit the fuel switch."

I reached forward for the switch and kept my eyes on George's right hand, waiting for him to shift. I couldn't see what Fingers was doing. I didn't dare look up. George shifted and I flicked on the switch. I was thrown into a straight upright, sitting position by the sudden thrust.

I looked up and there was Finger's car right in front of us. George was right. Finger's car overheated. His car sputtered for a second or two before he could get any momentum to escape George's front bumper. We hit it hard. I must say, George recompensed speed for brains.

Fingers jumped out of his car. He looked angry. Fingers approached the car and took a swing at George. George ducked.

He grabbed Finger's long tentacle and yanked on it, bringing Finger's head to George's tightening vice lock. George said, "Cool off, Fingers," Fingers relaxed and responded, "All right, all right, let me go George." George released Fingers.

The tension lightened as the rest of the drivers arrived circling George's car. They all got out and congratulated George for his shrewdness.

"I'm sorry George. I couldn't help myself, it won't happen again." Fingers directed his attention to me. "Hey, Jess, how does it feel to ride with today's winner?"

While George and I were getting out of the car, I looked around at all of the guys and said, "You're all winners in my book. I didn't realize I could have this much fun in an hour's time. Thanks for letting me tag along."

The guys all started laughing and cheering each other. Each one walked over to me and shook my hand, welcoming me back anytime. Fingers reached out with his large paw, shook my hand and said, "The next time you come to see your Grandparents and George, let George know in advance. I'll run over and take you for a ride in my buggy. I promise not to get angry."

"That would be great, Fingers, and I sure would like to know more about these Model-T's."

Fingers replied with, "You're on, Jess."

George spoke up, "I had better get Jess back, he has school tomorrow."

They all said, "George, we'll all be at Frenchie's house. He's going to cook and play the Banjo for us tonight."

George answered, "I'll see you in about an hour."

George and I drove off. I sure was impressed by the way George controlled Fingers. It made me understand that even the best of friends fight amongst themselves. During our drive back to Grandma's, I thanked George for a great day.

*What a guy! I saw integrity at its best being with George today.*



### **CHAPTER THREE**

Upon returning home from my Grandparents' and Uncle George's, I was worn out, and slept like a baby. I awakened early filled with energy, and the spare time I needed to study for my English class and bone up on my dictionary for the Spelling Bee. Being one of the finalists in the Spelling Bee, I wanted to be well prepared. I had gotten this far and wasn't about to be eliminated on the first going round.

I fixed myself a huge breakfast, of four scrambled eggs, half a pound of bacon and a quart of moo juice, along with four slices of toast and jelly. I didn't want my stomach growling during class.

School was just five blocks away from home and the brief walk helped settle my full stomach. For me, Guest Grade School was a treat to see.

Guest Grade School was about a block square. Being constructed mostly of used brick made it appear like a small university. We had a gigantic football field adjacent to the baseball field. Our running track was on the other side of the football field.

The grades started with Kindergarten and continued through the eighth grade. Being in the eighth grade and ready for my graduation three months away, made me feel

like I had accomplished the first half of my education. All I had left was high school and maybe college.

I walked through the huge entrance doors at Guest and made my way through the maze of kids rushing for their classes.

I was fifteen minutes early for my class. I felt I needed a few minutes to get rid of the jitters. The room was empty. I immediately went to my desk, opened my spelling book and buried myself deep in thought.

My mind was going a mile a minute. I'd been concentrating so hard that the usual noises from the hall outside didn't disturb me.

I felt someone's presence. I looked up to see my teacher, Mrs. Gladstone. She said, "Good morning, Jess."

It took a couple of seconds for my mind to come into focus. "Oh, good morning, Mrs. Gladstone. I'm sorry, I was so involved with today's preparations, I didn't hear you."

Mrs. Gladstone smiled, "Jess, you've made my day. I wish the rest of the class would show more responsibility." I watched Mrs. Gladstone as she walked away from my desk. She looked like a model with her golden blond hair bouncing off of her shoulders.

Mrs. Gladstone's eyes always sparkled, and besides being every boy's dream girl. It seemed a shame she was married. *Oh, well, a guy can dream.* Today she wore a tight gray skirt and a long sleeved, dark blue blouse. She was always impeccably dressed. I often wondered what her husband looked like. I wished the girls in class would pick up on how to dress like her.

Mrs. Gladstone took her seat at her desk, then she started leafing through a pile of papers. All that was behind her was the big blackboard she had used so many times this

past year. I glanced down at my study page to continue memorizing all of the words my eyes could scan.

The sound of the school bell went off, as did my concentration. In a matter of seconds, the classroom was filled with noisy students scampering for their seats.

Mrs. Gladstone tapped her ruler on her desk for the class to come to order, but the noise continued. She directed herself toward the class, saying, "Students, please try to be seated before the class bell rings. I would like to start class on time. We only have an hour, so let's not waste this precious time."

I sat at my desk, anxiously awaiting the commencement of the Spelling Bee.

My classmates were quietly mumbling back and forth, getting each other's comments about the big event.

Mrs. Gladstone eased herself away from her chair. She walked around her desk to face the class. She scanned the room and finally said, "Class, as you are all aware, today we will view the six finalists for our class Spelling Bee Championship. Class, please refrain from making any unnecessary noises during this competition. Now, will the six finalists please stand and come to the head of the room, and form a single line facing the class."

The classroom had five rows of combination seat and desk sets, with seven desks in each row. All thirty-five seats were occupied with students. The six finalists had a familiar audience, which helped to take off some of the pressure. Reading left to right as we faced the class when we lined up, were John Fitsimmons, Janet Marble, Kenneth Murray, Louise Claimer, Connie Davis and myself.

Mrs. Gladstone stood resting against the window sill. She was holding a loose leaf folder containing her chosen words for us to decipher. She asked if we were ready to commence.

We all answered, "Yes, Mrs. Gladstone."

She glanced down at her prepared words and said, "Group, you will be asked to define each word before you spell it. If you have the wrong definition or misspell the word in question, you will be eliminated so please take your seat and we will continue with the next contestant. All of the contestants will have an opportunity to define and spell the word, until we have eliminated all but one participant. The last contestant to remain will be asked to spell one extra word for the championship. Finalists, do you have any questions before we begin?"

Of course, we all said, "No."

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Fine, we will start with John Fitsimmons. John, please define and spell PROTAGONIST."

John smiled, then said, "Protagonist is a leading or principal figure. It is spelled protagonist."

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Very good, John."

She continued by asking Janet Marble, the second contestant, to, "Please define and spell the word SUCCINCT."

Janet responded with, "Succinct means to clearly express one's self in a few words. It is spelled succinct."

That's exactly what Janet was, "succinct" - being the class beauty and one of my favorites. If you asked her to have a milkshake after school, her answer would be, "Yes" or "No."

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Very good, Janet."

She turned to the next in line, "Now, let's move on to our next contestant, Kenneth Murray, please define and spell XYLOPHONE."

Kenneth said, "Xylophone is a musical percussion instrument. It is spelled xylaphone."

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Your definition was correct but your spelling was wrong."

Kenneth asked, "What was wrong with the spelling, Mrs. Gladstone?"

She answered with, "Please take your seat Kenneth, you might look it up for the correct spelling."

Kenneth had a look of disbelief. He was the kind of guy who felt he was always right, but not this time. Kenneth took his seat reluctantly.

Mrs. Gladstone, being a woman of good nature, said politely, "I know it's difficult to lose after going this far, but let's all be good sports and take your seats when you are asked to do so. Our next contestant is Louise Claimer. Louise, will you please define and spell the word EXACERBATE."

Louise said, "Exacerbate is to intensify or aggravate. Exacerbate is spelled exacerbate."

"Very good, Louise."

"Our fifth contestant is Connie Davis, Connie, please define and spell the word MALIGN."

Connie said, "To malign is to slander or defame. Malign is spelled malign."

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Very good, Connie. Our sixth and final student in our first round is Jess Sterling. Jess, will you please define and spell the word INAPPRECIATIVE."

I looked straight at the class and said, "Inappreciative means no appreciation. Inappreciative is spelled inappreciative."

"Very good, Jess."

I said to myself, *"Whew, that was a tricky word to spell. I knew it but I had to make sure I used two P's."*

Mrs. Gladstone immediately started all over again with John.

"John, define and spell CAVEAT."

John answered correctly.

Janet spelled PROPRIETARY correctly.

Louise was asked to spell PLEBEIAN. She stood there for the longest time, then finally said, "I'm sorry, I can't define it or spell it."

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Please take your seat, Louise." I was sorry to see Louise miss out - she sat across from me in class and we had been quizzing each other these past few weeks in preparation for this day.

*Hopefully, all will not be lost if I can survive.*

Mrs. Gladstone continued with, "Connie, define and spell PLEBEIAN."

"Plebeian means common, vulgar. It is spelled plebeian."

"Very good, Connie."

It was my turn again and Mrs. Gladstone was moving at a faster pace. I got by DEMAGOGUE.

John was next, "John, INTERNECINE."

John paused for a minute then finally said, "I think I can spell it but I can't define it."

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Thank you, John, please take your seat."

I was surprised to see John eliminated so early, he was the class favorite to win. He took it on the chin and seated himself.

"Connie, define and spell INTERNECINE."

"Internecine means deadly, destructive feuds. Internecine is spelled internecine."

Mrs. Gladstone went right to me with, "Jess, define and spell the word INEXORABLE."

*I must say, I was prepared. This word has a lot of meaning.* I said, "Inexorable means unyielding, relentless, recalcitrant. Inexorable is spelled inexorable."

*That last word gave me a boost.* There were three of us left. It was me against the girls.

The guys in the class were cheering for me to win and the girls were cheering for their side, of course. The kids in the class were mumbling back and forth, so Mrs. Gladstone covered her lips with her index finger as she faced the class. The classroom was quiet again.

Mrs. Gladstone kept up her pace. The three of us went through three more rounds of words. We all made it with flying colors. "Connie, define and spell the word CODICIL."

"Codicil means to modify or revoke. Codicil is spelled codicil."

"Janet, define and spell the word INCIPIENT."

"Incipient means the beginning or about to appear. Incipient is spelled incipient."

I was next. Mrs. Gladstone said, "Jess, define and spell the word AMBIGUOUS."

"Ambiguous means to be vague, indefinite. Ambiguous is spelled ambiguous."

"Connie, define and spell the word INCOMMUNICADO."

"Incommunicado means without the means or right to communicate with others. Incommunicado is spelled incommunicado."

"Janet, define and spell the word AMBIVALENT."

"Ambivalent is to have mixed feelings. Ambivalent is spelled am- bivalent."

It was my turn again. My hands were behind me. I had been squeezing them together so hard that my knuckles were going to sleep.

"Jess, define and spell the word MENDACIOUS."

"Mendacious is being untruthful, lying. Mendacious is spelled mendacious."

"Connie, define and spell the word MACHINATION."

Connie took a couple of breaths then said, "Machination means intrigue, conspiracy. Machination is spelled macination."

Mrs. Gladstone said, "I'm sorry, your definition was right but machination has a silent h. Connie, you are extremely intelligent, please persevere."

The classroom seemed very disappointed as Connie took her seat. I could see tears running down her face. I was sure she was saying to herself, "How did I forget to use the h?"

I couldn't take the time to be too concerned about Connie, I had Janet to contend with.

I kept saying to myself, *concentrate, concentrate.*

Mrs. Gladstone continued with Janet and me. We went through three different words, each to perfection.

I noticed someone looking through the closed small-windowed door of the classroom. I couldn't recognize who it was, his head kept popping up and down.

I heard Mrs. Gladstone say, "Janet, please define and spell the word PERSPICACIOUS."

I looked at Janet and watched her mouth move to say the word, perspicacious, to herself several times. She paused.

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Janet, I will give you 15 seconds more to define the word and spell it."

Janet looked at me, as if to say, "What does it mean?"

I watched her eyes. She was searching her mind. It just didn't seem to work the way she wanted it to. Janet turned and said to Mrs. Gladstone, "I'm sorry, I'm lost."

Mrs. Gladstone was silent for a couple of seconds, she finally said, "Janet, please wait." She turned to me and said, "Jess, can you define and spell the word PERSPICACIOUS?"

The tears in Janet's eyes were starting to swell up. I thought, *what if I miss? That way Janet and I can be joint winners. Bullshit! I've worked too hard for this moment.*

"Mrs. Gladstone, perspicacious means to be perceptive and keen. Perspicacious is spelled perspicacious."



Mrs. Gladstone smiled, "Jess, you are absolutely correct." The classroom roared. The kids stood up and applauded. Mrs. Gladstone interrupted the excitement with, "Class, please be seated."

In the meantime, Janet and I were looking at each other. I leaned over, kissed Janet on the cheek and whispered into her ear, "Will you have a milkshake with me after school?"

Janet said, "Only if I can buy." I winked at her and she took her seat.

Mrs. Gladstone said, "Class, Jess has one more word to define and spell in order to win the championship, so please bare with us." She looked at me and said, "Jess, I only have one word left on my sheet, please define and spell the word ACCOMPLISHMENT."

I looked at Janet, then at Mrs. Gladstone and said, "Accomplish-ment means achievement, fulfillment. Accomplishment is spelled accom- plishment."

"Jess, that's what you have just done, congratulations."

Mrs. Gladstone walked over to face me. "Jess, I'm very proud of you. I had a sneaky feeling that you would win." She shook my hand with both of her hands. My whole body felt a chill of warmth.

As I walked down the crowded row of desk seats, my classmates were congratulating me, patting me on the back and shaking my hand.

The guys were saying "We knew you could do it, Jess!" The girls were messing up my hair.

I continued toward my desk and, in doing so, I glanced at the door window. Nothing. I looked up again, this time I saw who it was. It was Roger Stokes.

*What was he doing outside our classroom door?*

Roger Stokes was the grade school bully. He was a lot older than any of us. He had a bad habit of picking on the younger kids. Roger was at least 17 years old by now.

Word had it, that Roger Stokes had been expelled from Guest Grade School some three years ago, and he didn't belong here.

My attention was broken away from the door when Mrs. Gladstone said, "Class, you may mill around the classroom for a few minutes but please do it quietly, while I go to the Principal's office to get his signature on Jess's Certificate of Achievement award."

That announcement brought a smile to my face. I watched Mrs. Gladstone get up from her desk. As she was doing so, there was a huge explosion.

Girls began screaming, and the classroom began to fill with smoke. I ran to the windows and started opening them, as were a couple of the other guys in the class.

When the smoke and dust cleared, I looked up at the classroom door and saw that it was hanging on only one of its hinges. There were splinters of wood and glass everywhere.

Mrs. Gladstone spoke loudly over the panicked and screaming girls. She hollered, "Is anyone hurt?"

Fortunately, no one was hurt seriously. Two of the boys who sat near the door received some small cuts, otherwise, we were all in pretty good shape.

The school fire department was in the room just as the dust cleared. I scanned the room for Janet and found her standing by one of the opened windows. I was relieved to see nothing had happened to her.

Mrs. Gladstone kept her cool. She ushered us out of the classroom to the school grounds. The fresh air felt good. Most of the students were sitting on the grass, discussing the explosion. I was standing near one of the trees, consoling Janet. She was extremely upset.

"Oh, Jess, what a terrible thing to happen. It's a good thing that Mrs. Gladstone had not been walking out of that

door. What kind of a sick person could have done such a horrible thing, not having any regard for people's safety?"

I looked at Janet's frightened eyes, knowing who the culprit was but I thought it best she didn't know. *If this was a sample of Roger Stokes' warped mind, who knows what he might do to someone who knew about what happened today.*

I suggested to Janet to let the police and the school deal with whoever was involved. I also said, "Why don't we meet after school to have that milkshake and talk about more pleasant things?"

Janet smiled and said, "I'd like that."

Mrs. Gladstone recommended that it would be a good idea to go back inside to continue our other classes. She told us not to worry and said the police would be at the classroom tomorrow morning to ask a few questions. We took her advice and the two of us left for our regular classes.

During the rest of the day, I said to myself, *you had better keep your mouth shut. After all, you are not positive it was Roger Stokes.*" But, deep down, I would bet my last dime he was the culprit. *I kept thinking that all Roger Stokes needed was enough rope to hang himself. I don't know how, but you can bet I'm going to supply that rope and fasten the noose for the Hangman.*

My last class was mathematics, my favorite. But today, my eyes seemed to find the classroom clock more often than necessary.

My anticipation for the class to end had me arranging my school books in preparation for a fast getaway for my meeting with Janet. The bell finally rang.

I was out of the front door of the school in no time. I wanted to get to Z's before Janet. Z's was the name of our school hangout. It was always crowded with an assortment

of happy to miserable, to the down right mean students who were having fun or making trouble. I was half walking and half running as I approached Z's.

I worked my way through the crowd. I spotted an empty booth and grabbed it for Janet and myself. Flo the waitress came by to inquire about what I would like. Flo is a big woman about fifty and weighs two fifty. Her black hair was covered with a black baseball cap that shades the thick black eye make-up she wears. The bill of her cap has Z's in white across it. She seldom carries on a conversation, just takes orders. I asked her to bring two glasses of water, then to give me a few minutes while I awaited the arrival of a friend. She obliged, left, then returned with the water.

I wanted two glasses on the table to give the impression the table was taken. I sat patiently as I sipped my water. Z's was getting packed. I viewed the shoving matches between students while I waited, then finally I saw Janet fighting her way through the crowded doorway.

Her white pleated skirt looked like an accordion with the folds opening and closing. I waved for her attention. Janet saw me, smiled and slid into the opposite bench seat. "Jess, how did you get a booth? You know how mad this place can get."

"Oh, I always reserve this booth for special occasions."

Janet smiled, then said, "Is it?"

"You bet it is, and you're buying."

"Jess, I'm so proud of you. You really rose to the occasion. Mrs. Gladstone sure had some tough words for us. I mean, at least for me and the others," she smiled while she emphasized, "you are perspicacious."

I had a feeling that Janet was getting ready to mention the explosion but I didn't want it to be the topic of our conversation so I said, "Ah, I was just lucky but thanks for

your sincerity. You sure look very pretty today, Janet. Well, I mean you always look pretty, but now, you seem to have that certain glow."

Janet blushed then said, "You don't look so bad yourself."

"Ah, you tell all the guys that."

She smiled and commented, "Only the ones who look like you."

With that, I said, "What would you like to order, you smooth talker?"

"Let me order for the two of us," she said, "since I'm buying."

Janet waved for Flo, our waitress - the only, to take our order. Fortunately for us, Flo was only a few tables away. Janet ordered two thick chocolate milkshakes and more water.

I must have been thirsty. I drank Janet's water, as well as mine, before she had arrived. *Or was I just a little nervous?*

We both looked at each other, waiting for someone to break the silence. Then, Flo arrived and set down our shakes.

I tried to take a good draw on the straw but the shake was real thick, just like we ordered. Trying to show a little class, I stirred the shake with the straw, instead of picking up the large glass and taking a swig like I would normally have done if I had been alone.

Janet stirred her shake as I had. All the time, she kept her eyes on me. She used her straw like a spoon and took tiny straw tips to her mouth. We continued working on our shakes.

I kept saying to myself, *come on, open up your mouth.*

I looked into Janet's lovely blue eyes. Her auburn hair was nicely shaped around her flawless face.

I finally broke the silence with, "Janet, aren't these milkshakes good?"

She nodded, "Uh, huh."

"What I'm really trying to say, Janet, is our graduation is just a couple of months away. And . . . ah, well, I don't want to beat around the bush. Will you be my date for the Prom?"

She paused and smiled. "I thought you'd never ask. Yes, of course, I would love to go with you. Why do you think I wanted to buy you a milkshake?"

I reached over the table to touch her hands. Our hands met simultaneously. Her hands were soft and silky, I squeezed them gently. We smiled at each other. I guess we were both relieved. I know I was. *I've got to stop being so shy.*

I looked at Janet and said, "Well, I guess I can relax. You're stuck with me now."

She said, "Just like Crazy Glue and don't you forget it."

We were content just looking at each other. The mood was wonderful. *And, this has been an interesting day for me.*

I just happened to glance at the doorway entrance. In came Roger Stokes and two of his henchmen. I didn't want his eyes to catch mine. I quickly said to Janet, "Why don't you let me walk you home?"

"Thanks, that would be nice. Let me get the check and we'll be on our way.

As Flo finally walked up with Janet's change, Roger Stokes and his group sat right behind us. I immediately got up to help Janet out of her seat. My timing was perfect. Mr. Troublemaker missed us by seconds. *I don't know if he saw me through the window in the classroom door or not, but, I'm not about to take any chances.*

While walking Janet home, we decided on a movie  
Friday night.





## CHAPTER FOUR

My last swim meet of the season won me the Backstroke Championship title. I couldn't wait to get home to show my parents my trophy. I could see my reflection in the silver name plate.

*Jess Sterling*  
*Champion*

I was about four houses away from my front door, when, all of a sudden, my progress came to a halt. I was forcibly stopped by Curt Johnson, right in front of where he lived. Curt was 16 or 17 years old. I tried to side step him and continue homeward.

He grabbed me and said, "I've been waiting for you, you little asshole. I don't like you and I never have. I'm going to kick the shit out of you."

"What are you talking about? We don't even know each other."

He snarled, "It doesn't matter."

Before I could say another word, he punched me right in the mouth, and I fell down from the force of his punch.

I tried to get up to run, but Curt was relentless, and continued hitting me. I pleaded for him to stop. He sneered, "You little sissy," and proceeded to punch me in the stomach, and that punch made me vomit. He kept hitting me as I was vomiting. I rolled myself into a ball so

he couldn't hit me in the face or stomach anymore. Curt kept pounding me and kicked me all over.

My Dad was returning home from work and saw what was happening. Dad jumped out of his car and pulled Curt off of me.

Curt yelled, "Get your hands off of me!"

My Dad threw Curt to the ground, then told him to pick on someone his own age and size.

Curt blurted out, "I'm going to tell my old man what you did to me."

Dad said, "Please do." He helped me up from my curled up position and asked, "Son, are you all right?"

I felt embarrassed for my father to see me get beaten up, so I just faked it and said, "Yeah, I think so."

Dad looked at my face. He checked my nose to see if it had been broken. He said, "Look at me son, I want to see if your eyes are damaged." He studied me closely, and said, "Son, your nose isn't broken and your eyes look clear, just a little puffy. Come on, let's go inside the house to get you cleaned up." Dad was very gentle as he washed my face. *I felt like a little kid after he had gotten himself all dirtied up and his Mommy or Daddy had to help the little darling.*

After my Dad had my face cleaned up, he asked, "I know that kid hit you pretty hard all over your body. Do you hurt anywhere else, besides your pride?"

"I'm just sore all over. But you're right, my confidence is at its lowest."

"Don't worry about your self-esteem. We will take care of that. Now, tell me how all of this came about." I gave my Dad my version of what happened. He smiled and said, "Come on, Son, let's go into the kitchen to have a cup of coffee. I'll explain a few things about life to you." I sat down at the kitchen table while Dad made coffee for us. He brought two cups to the

table, along with milk and sugar for me. "One day, you'll learn to drink it black, like me."

I smiled, with my newly swollen face, while I poured milk and a hefty spoonful of sugar into my cup. Dad watched me as I sipped my coffee. *I must say, it did taste good. I can see why adults like coffee, it seems to take the edge off.*

We looked at each other for a couple of seconds. My Dad was always a fair man. He never preached to my brother or me. He always sat us down and explained things so they made sense.

Dad finished his coffee, then poured himself another cup. He sat down again. He looked at me and said, "Son, growing up will seem difficult at times . . . There always seems to be a bully around. I remember when your Uncle Harry and I had some tough times when we were kids. Being twins, we went through school together, until we were 13 years old. The depression came along and times became extremely tough for us. My dad, your grandfather, whom you never met, passed away suddenly. Harry and I had to quit school to help Mom, your grandmother, work the farm. Mom couldn't make it on her own. She was left with a lot of bills and a mortgage to meet and very little money for us to have food on the table. We couldn't afford to hire help because what little livestock we had also needed food. We worked the farm for years."

He sipped his coffee, and continued. "The only schooling we had were hand-me-down books. We were so tired from working all day, there was little energy left for studies. One day, Harry and I pooled whatever change we were able to hang onto and walked to the closest town, which was three miles down the road. The money we were carrying was burning a hole in our pockets. All we had on our minds was to get to the general store to buy something

sweet to eat. This town was so small it only had one gas pump, with a small garage for repairs and a barbershop." He paused for a second, "We noticed a bunch of guys playing who could punch the hardest in front of the general store. We tried to walk inside the store to buy our sweets. Two of the biggest guys walked right in front of us, blocking our entrance.

"One of them said, 'Well, what do we have here?'

"I said, 'Excuse me, guys, we don't want any trouble.'

"The other one said, 'That's just what you're going to get.'

"Harry and I were scared to death. Those two guys beat up both of us and took our money."

I didn't say a word. I watched my Dad as he took another sip of his coffee. I was anxious for him to continue. I wanted to hear more of what my Dad had to say.

My Dad continued with, "A few weeks went by. One day, while Harry and I were mending some fences, we noticed a large man, half walking and almost falling down. I yelled to Harry, 'Harry, that man looks like he needs some help.'

"Harry acknowledged, 'I think you're right.'

"We both ran over to the man. Harry asked, 'Are you all right, mister?'

"The man said, 'Boys, I can't take another step. I haven't eaten in days.'

"We both knew what hunger felt like. Harry said, 'Mister, can you make it a few more steps? You're so big, we can't carry you.'

"He mumbled, 'Thanks, boys.'

"Mother saw us assisting the man, she left the porch to give us a helping hand. Ma told us to make a bed for him in the wood shed. She fed him and we left him to rest. In a

couple of days, he was moving around. He was so grateful to us for coming to his aid. He said he didn't have any money but was most willing to work for us to pay for his keep. He offered to stay for as long as he was needed. We all agreed. The man's name was Jake Callahan. This older, black man became a mountain of strength to our family. We all got along. Ma didn't seem to mind if he stayed on for a while."

"After a couple of weeks, Jake said, 'Why don't you boys go into town to have some fun? I was a young man like you two boys and all work and no play isn't healthy.'

"Harry and I looked at each other but we didn't say a word."

"Jake said, 'go on, I can handle the rest of the day on my own.'

"Harry said, 'No, we had better stay here. Besides, there's nothing but trouble in that town.'

"Jake said, 'Come on, boys, what kind of trouble can there be in that small town?'

"Harry and I decided to tell Jake what had happened in that small, harmless town. Jake listened to us reveal our fears. We were both relieved to tell someone what had happened that day."

"Jake suggested the three of us could finish the day's work together. That way, we would have the afternoon free to set up a training camp. We asked what he meant by 'training camp?'

"Jake said, 'I'll explain everything shortly.'

"When Harry and I arrived at the wood shed, Jake was busy filling a grain sack with hay. We wondered why he was doing what he was doing but we waited patiently." Jake looked at us, smiled, then said, 'Boys, I've made us a punching bag.'

"Before we could say, 'What for?' Jake ushered us into the barn.

"He hung the bag with a long rope to one of the rafters and it was dangling right in front of Harry and me. Jake gave the bag a tap with his left hand and asked, 'Boys, do you know anything about boxing?'

"We'd only heard about boxing, neither one of us had seen it done. We both said, 'No, Jake.'

"Jake explained that he had been a professional boxer when he was a young man and that he had learned the art of boxing to earn a living. Jake tapped the bag a couple of times and said, 'Boys, in a short time you will both learn how to defend yourselves.'

"Harry and I were all ears. Jake continued demonstrating as he danced around the bag. He would punch it with his left hand a few times, then he would hit it hard with his right.

"That afternoon, Harry and I learned how to make a fist. Punching the bag was awkward at first but we finally got the hang of it and everything seemed to flow.

"We hit that bag every day for months. During that time, Jake was able to get some boxing gloves from an old friend to whom he had written a letter.

"Harry and I learned to spar with each other. Once in a while, we would hit each other a little too hard. We both found out how to get mad. Jake would always step in before things got too serious. After all, Harry and I were brothers and brothers should help each other, not hurt each other.

"Jake showed Harry and me how to one punch. 'One Punch' was Jake's nickname when he was a fighter.

"Jake would say, 'You set up your opponent with a left jab, which usually turns his face to the right when you jab him.'

"Jake made a few left jabs at the bag, talking all the time he was hitting, 'See, boys,' jab, jab, 'be patient, it won't take long to confuse your challenger, if you throw some body punches. When you see him drop his guard, just a little, hit him in the gut a couple of times. Then you go back upstairs and start your left jab again. His hands will be lower now. All you have to do is to sting him with your left jab. Before he knows it, the right handed 'one punch' is thrown over his lowered left hand, to the chin. Wham! One punch has him down and sometimes out.'

"I used that theory for years,' Jake said, 'sometimes it worked after two punches, other times I had to be patient. All right, let me show you how it works.'

"Jake used me as a target, so Harry could see how it was done. Then Harry would be Jake's target, so I could also watch the one punch set-up.

"Jake put us through the one punch drill every afternoon, along with enough pointers to help keep our noses straight.

"The year Harry and I turned 17 years old, was the worst year of our young lives. That year, both Mom and Jake died. Harry and I were devastated. We sold the farm and split what little money was left. Harry moved to Detroit to become a master mechanic. I went to Cleveland and became a professional boxer." Dad looked at me and asked, "Son, how would you like to learn the one punch?"

I smiled and said, "Yeah, and everything that goes with it." I looked at my father and said to myself, *now, there's a real man.*

"Hey, Dad, will you tell me more stories about your youth?"

"Sure, but let's work on this one first."

"When do we start? And please, don't tell mother about what happened today."

"If you don't say anything, she'll never know. We can start boxing lessons tomorrow after dinner."

I went to my room thinking *he sure is wise*. I looked into my mirror to get a really personal look at myself. *It's too bad the money I had stuffed in the mirror couldn't buy away my sore and swollen face*. I sat on my bed and thought about Jake Callahan, Grandma, Uncle Harry, Janet, Mrs. Gladstone, the explosion, Roger Stokes and my sore face, courtesy of Curt Johnson. It had been a long day.

Dad had fixed up the basement into a very nice recreation room for my bother and me. He brought out his big heavy punching bag, along with a smaller speed bag. The corner of the recreation room started to look like a real boxer's gym.

I watched my Dad hit the big heavy bag. Then I started hitting the big bag. Dad started me out slowly, learning a little each day. During the next few weeks I learned how to jump rope. *All the time I used to think rope jumping was for girls. I never saw a girl jump rope like my Dad*. It took awhile, but I finally learned how to jump rope.

A few more weeks went by, during which time I did so many push ups that I could do a hundred of them. I also run five miles a day. The weeks have gone by so quickly. I've done so many sit ups by now my stomach is beginning to look like a wash board.

Ten weeks have gone by and I'm finally able to dent the bag. My hands used to bounce off of the bag when I hit it. When my Dad hits the big bag, it seems to bend in half. *Boy, can he punch*.

I work out every night, except Fridays and Sundays. My Dad said the same thing to me that Jake had said to him and Harry, 'All work and no play isn't healthy.' I see Janet every Friday night. We've become very close. *Of course, I*



*never reveal anything I'm doing.* You might say, I have a good habit of keeping my big mouth shut.

Bob Servo called today. It was nice of him to call. *I sure miss the dairy and the guys.* Bob understands that I have to prepare for my graduation. He wanted to know how I was doing. He told me the guys at the Dairy had been asking about me. *That's good to hear.* He also asked what plans I had for my summer vacation.

I said, "Nothing in particular."

Bob asked, "Would you like to come to work full time for me during the summer and part time when you go back to school?"

I was thrilled with that invitation. I didn't hesitate with my answer, "Bob, give me a date and time and I'll be there."

He said, "July first, that way you'll have a few weeks off for yourself after school ends."

Dad and I had a very good session in the gym this evening. I jumped on the scales. I had put on ten pounds.

Dad said, "Son, I'm really proud of you. You remind me a lot of myself when I was your age. But I know what's going on in your mind. Believe me, I wanted to go back to that small town to get even with those guys who had beaten us up. I didn't. I kept my word with Jake. I never bullied anyone or picked a fight." He looked at me with a smiling wink and said, "I never lost one either."

I promised to avoid Curt Johnson, if possible. I did exactly that. I would take a different route home after school. The Prom was next week and I wasn't about to get myself all messed up. I wasn't afraid, just cautious.

Janet and I agreed not to see each other the week before the Prom. I guess she wanted me to miss her. She was right, I did miss her. *It serves her right. Now she'll have to wait a week to find out if I did miss her.*

It was nice to have a week off from school. I spent Monday buying a new dark blue suit, a light blue dress shirt and a new pair of black loafers. I saved money on a tie. My Dad had plenty of ties in his closet from which I could choose.

I walked around the house with my new shoes on, just to break them in a little. *I know I will be dancing a lot with Janet at the school Prom, so my new kicks have to feel comfortable.*

My next door neighbor, Phyllis, is quite the dancer. She's giving me a cram course on ballroom dancing. Phyllis is getting ready for her high school Prom and she knows how important it is for a guy to be able to move around with finesse. She reminded me of how awkward the guys were when she was in grade school.

Phyllis is the High School Prom Queen. *She sure is that. I hope Janet will fill out like she has. Oh well, a guy can dream.*

Tonight, I went downstairs to hit the speed bag. *It's become fun to punch that bag with accuracy.* I had it going really good. My dad came down to watch me hit the bag. He showed me some new moves that made things easier. We put on the gloves and boxed for a few rounds.

Dad said, "Son, you sure have learned how to punch hard and your defense is starting to become second nature."

Those remarks made me feel like I haven't been wasting his time. *I sure want to please him, and it sounds like I have.* I kept avoiding Curt Johnson, like Dad had suggested.

Tuesday was a busy day for me. I did all the grocery shopping for my mother. I even vacuumed the floors. I went outside to cut the front lawn so my Dad wouldn't have to do it, or ask me to do it. I wanted to show my appreciation for all the time that he'd spent helping me

nightly. I planned on washing his car when he comes home from work, just as soon as I finished the lawn. I was deep in thought, raking the spilled over grass. I hadn't noticed Curt Johnson coming up behind me. He announced his arrival by punching me in the back. I was startled more than hurt. I moved three steps forward, then turned around.

Curt Johnson was right in front of me, laughing, "Hey, asshole, how's the little pussy doing?"

I could hear my Dad in my mind, saying, "And watch your opponent's eyes at all times. Ten times out of ten, you can anticipate what he will do next."

I didn't say a word to Curt. I just watched to see what he was going to try to do next. He came right at me with both hands. I just ducked and moved a few feet to the right.

Curt said, "Oh, you think you're going to get away from me don't you?"

I started to shiver a little inside, while he slowly walked up to me. I began backing up but I forgot about the rake and tripped over it, falling on my backside. Curt kicked me in the ribs. I rolled over as fast as I could to avoid him doing it again.

My Dad pulled up in his car and saw what was going on. Curt stopped for a second. My Dad hollered, "Get up, Son, and kick his ass."

Before I knew it, I was up on my feet again. I assumed my boxing posture. Curt threw a right fist at me. I side stepped it and gave him a hard shot to the kidneys. Curt was getting mad, I guess no one had ever punched him before. I kept moving around in circles. My training was going to get its chance.

As Curt moved closer toward me, I let him have three quick left jabs that hit him right in his face. I started to feel a sudden rush of energy. I kept moving to my left. Curt threw another right hand at me. I ducked and hit him as

hard as I could in the center of his chest. Curt dropped his hands. I hit Curt in the face with two lefts and I caught him on his left ear with a hard right hand.

I kept saying to myself, *keep your calm it's your turn now*. I peppered Curt with six more shots to the face. His nose was bleeding, and wasn't about to stop.

I kept hearing my Dad's voice in my ear, "Set him up with a hard left to his face."

I did exactly that. Curt dropped his guard and **one punch** was on its way. I hit him just like Dad and I had rehearsed. When my right over hand caught him right on his jaw, he fell like a tree does when you hear a lumberjack holler, "TIMBER!"

My Dad walked up and said, "Son, I think he's had enough."

I was so into it, I said, "How about it, big mouth?"

Curt had a hard time getting up. I stood ready for more action. Curt mumbled, "Yeah, you got away with it this time, you bastard."

I hauled off and hit him square on the chin. I stood over his prone body and said, "There won't be another time."

We watched Curt get up, then leave. My dad put his arm around me, saying, "Son, you just taught that bully a lesson and you can bet he won't ever bother you again."

With that I felt great. I washed the car, put away the lawn mower and the rake. I walked into the house, saw my Dad reading the paper and said, "Thanks, Dad, I couldn't have done it without you."

"You're welcome, Son. You've learned two things today - how to take care of yourself when there is no other choice and how to be a winner."

My confidence level was at its highest. I wasn't cocky, just relieved at not having to worry about Curt Johnson.

The next few days went by quickly.

I washed my Dad's car again and he told me if I kept it up I would wear the paint down to the primer.

We punched the bag together Wednesday and Thursday evenings and worked on my footwork. I learned how to circle to the left and to the right. Dad said, "Moving in both directions helps keep you away from your opponent's strength." It all made sense after I saw it visually. "Son," he advised, "Concentrate, be confident, there's no room for fear."



## CHAPTER FIVE

Today is the day I've been waiting for all week. My mother said I had better eat dinner because there would only be snacks to eat at the Prom. She sure knew my stomach and how much I could pack in it. I ate a huge salad, along with two portions of liver and onions and broccoli.

I took my second shower of the day, got dressed and asked my mother to pick out a suitable tie to go along with my new dark blue suit. She chose a red and dark blue striped tie for me. Mothers seem to know about ties. *I've yet to figure that one out.*

As I walked to Janet's house, I took my time passing Curt Johnson's house. When I reached Janet's, her father greeted me at the door. Mr. Marble seemed like a nice man. Mrs. Marble insisted on a photograph of Janet and me.

*I must say, Janet looked fantastic.* She wore a beautiful pink dress that had tiny red hearts around the collar. Her purse and shoes matched her dress.

We held hands as we walked. The night was a typical Detroit balmy summer evening. Janet noticed we had a full moon that seemed to illuminate the evening.

Janet and I had gone to a lot of movies together. We had many hamburgers with French fries, but this was the

first time we ever walked with our arms around each other. *She must have missed me terribly.*

The school grounds were filling up. I could see groups of guys taking swigs from their secretly held bottles of liquor. The only one I knew of who didn't graduate from Guest Grade School was Roger Stokes.

As we were entering the gym, Janet and I said hello to the many couples we knew. We introduced ourselves to the ones we didn't know.

The gymnasium had taken on a different look. The basketball nets on each end of the gym were almost hidden by the long colored paper streamers that hung from one end of the room to the other. I glanced upward toward the ceiling - it looked like a kaleidoscope of color webbing.

The gym was beginning to fill up. The band was conducted by our music teacher, Mr. Fillmore. There were six in the band, including Mr. Fillmore. He played the saxophone.

The piano player was John Jacops; Clifford Hodges was playing guitarist, Greg Stone; trumpeter, Peter English; bass player, Michael York; the drums. The whole band was dressed in white suits, white shirts and red ties. These guys were last year's Guest graduates, and now they are sophomores at Cooley High School.

One of the chaperons I spoke with as we came in mentioned that Mr. Fillmore hired these boys for tonight's Prom.

I said, "Janet, that sure was a nice gesture of Mr. Fillmore, to bring the band for the Prom." I knew they had to be good because they were our school's best last year. Janet and I found ourselves a seat while we waited for the band to begin.

The gymnasium lights flickered on and off a couple of times. When the lights stayed on, our principal, Mr.



Stafford, found his way to the bandstand and proceeded to welcome all of the graduates to the Prom. He wished all of us a happy future and a fun evening. He also mentioned how proud he was to have every student this year graduate. We all gave a cheer as he left the bandstand.

The band started off with "The Impossible Dream." With that, groups of couples got up from their seated positions and headed for the dance floor. Janet and I found a nice spot near the center of the dance floor.

I hadn't danced with Janet before and was anxious to see how we would move together. Janet was very smooth as she followed me through this first number. I felt very comfortable dancing. Phyllis's crash course sure paid off.

As I held Janet closely, she whispered into my ear, "Jess, where did you learn how to dance so well?"

I smiled to myself and whispered back, "Instinct, just instinct."

She moved backward to look straight into my eyes and said, "Are you serious?"

"Would I lie to you?" I pulled her closer as we finished our first dance together.

The band continued with Chubby Checker's big hit, "Everybody's Doing the Twist."

Janet asked, "Do you do the Twist?"

I smiled at her and said, "Every night but Mondays."

She laughed and we went at it. The whole dance floor went at it. That number seemed to loosen up the room. Everybody was doing the twist, even the teachers and their husbands.

Janet and I were looking around the dance floor as we were doing the twist. "Jess, isn't that Mrs. Gladstone and her husband dancing?"

I looked in the direction Janet was facing. Janet remarked, "Oh, isn't Mr. Gladstone handsome?"

I nonchalantly said, "If you think so." My mind was thinking of how lucky he is. It was hard to take my eyes off of Mrs. Gladstone. She's so beautiful . . . she looks like a movie star.

Janet continued, "Oh, we must say hello."

I said, "You bet."

We finished the next two dances, then walked over to where Mrs. Gladstone and hubby were sitting. Mrs. Gladstone saw us as we approached them. She was smiling as she stood up to greet us and said, "Good evening, Janet and Jess, what a lovely couple you make."

Janet said shyly, "Thank you, Mrs. Gladstone."

I said, "I was just saying the same thing about you. I mean, you and your husband."

Mrs. Gladstone smiled and said, "Why, thank you. I would like you to meet my husband." She turned toward her husband and said, "John, I would like you to meet two of my students, Jess Sterling and Janet Marble."

Mr. Gladstone reached out to shake my hand and said, "Nice to meet you, Jess."

"Hello, Mr. Gladstone."

He reached over to Janet, gently touched her hands and said, "Hello, Janet, what a lovely young lady you are."

Janet was all goo-goo eyed as she looked at Mr. Gladstone. She finally said, "Why, thank you, sir."

The band came back after a short break. They started off with a Frank Sinatra favorite, "I Will Wait For You."

I looked at Mr. Gladstone and asked if he didn't mind if I danced with Mrs. Gladstone. He said, "I was going to ask you the same about Janet."

I said to myself, *"Isn't he a clever one."*

"Thank you, sir. I'm sure Janet would like to dance with a smooth-mover, like yourself."

He smiled as I put out my arm to Mrs. Gladstone and said to her, "Shall we?" Mrs. Gladstone and I worked our way through the crowded dance floor. We found a place with just enough room for the two of us.

*It's a good thing I go to movies and read a lot, otherwise, I wouldn't have anything intelligent to say. I looked into Mrs. Gladstone's beautiful eyes, thinking, If I were a little older and she weren't married, I would follow her to the ends of the earth.*

It's amazing how our fantasies paint such a wonderful picture.

Mrs. Gladstone moved closer to me as we continued dancing to "I Will Wait For You." I thought dancing with Phyllis was exciting. Mrs. Gladstone, with her body next to mine, made me feel like I was a neon sign with lights flashing on and off.

As we backed away slightly from our closeness, I got a really close view of what she looked like. I smiled at her and said, "You know, Mrs. Gladstone, if I were a talent scout from Hollywood, you would be my first choice of any woman I'd seen. I would do my best to convince you to return to Hollywood with me for a screen test."

Mrs. Gladstone blushed, then smiled. Her eyes sparkled as she said, "Jess, for a young man, you certainly know how to charm a woman. I watched you closely in class and my eyes weren't the only ones on you." I took all of this in like a vacuum. I waited to hear what she was going to say next. To my surprise, the band repeated, I Will Wait For You. *How fortunate for me.* I had a few more minutes alone with Mrs. Gladstone. I smiled at her remark. Then she said, "I believe all of the girls in class have secret desires for you."

"Are you serious? I wasn't aware."

Mrs. Gladstone smiled and said, "That's why they keep tabs on your every move. I don't blame Janet for catching you first. If I were her age, I would have done the same."

I didn't know what to say. I know part of my fantasy was being fulfilled. I looked up, almost embarrassed and said, "You sure know how to build up a guy's ego."

"Jess, you are an extremely intelligent young man and if you use all of your capabilities, you will go a long way and surely will have a wonderful time."

The music ended. As we were walking back to her seat, I said, "Thank you, for the kind words and a wonderful semester. I've learned a great deal from your classes and I will never forget you."

She smiled and said, "Good luck, Jess, and don't be a stranger. Come by sometime to let me know how you're doing in high school."

"You can count on it. By the way, Mrs. Gladstone, thanks, you've made my evening." *All I'm missing is a good night kiss.*

Mr. Gladstone and Janet were waiting for us as we returned to their seats. We thanked the Gladstones, then I suggested we should move along to give some of the other students a chance to come by to say, hello. I reached for Janet's hand and we made our way across the crowded room toward the snack table. My stomach was starting to yearn for a refill.

I'd noticed that Janet and Mr. Gladstone had not danced to the repeat of "I Will Wait For You."

I had a funny feeling Janet was dying to know what Mrs. Gladstone and I were talking about for such a long time. Before we reached the snack table, Janet said, "What were you and Mrs. Gladstone talking about for two dances?"

The thought had just left my mind about Janet's inquisitive nature.

I said, "Well, I hadn't realized we had danced two numbers but, if you must know, we were talking about class and the Spelling Bee and the future of high school."

"Well," she said, "it sure seemed like you were having a good time dancing with Mrs. Gladstone."

I answered, "I was having a good time. Isn't that why we came? By the way, how come you and Mr. Gladstone quit before the dance number was completed?"

"I thought once was proper enough."

"Are you a little jealous Janet, or was Mr. Gladstone that bad of a dancer?"

She blurted out, "No, I'm not jealous, he's a very good dancer and extremely manly. I rather enjoyed his strength and manner."

I looked at Janet for a moment. I didn't want to say anything off color to create a real argument. I just said, "I rather enjoy your loveliness. Can we kiss and make up?"

Janet looked at me, saying, "Oh, Jess, you always know the right thing to say." She gave me a big hug. *I guess she's saving the kiss for later.*

We finally reached the snack table. We ran into several of our classmates from the Spelling Bee. John Fitsimmons had a plateful of little sandwiches. His date was Mary Miller. I knew Mary from my math class and so did Janet. Mary was a very tall and thin, nice looking girl. She and John fit well together. John being the tallest kid in school was already over six feet in height. John and I shook hands, then he gave Janet a kiss on the cheek.

Kenneth Murray was in line, filling his plate. Janet and I said, "Hello," to Kenneth. He greeted Janet but ignored me. His date was a very pretty girl from another school.

She introduced herself to us. Her name was Margaret Freeman.

Margaret said, "I've heard about you from some of my girlfriends, Jess. They sure were right."

"How so?"

"You're even cuter than I thought you would be."

Janet interrupted and said, "Isn't he."

Kenneth ushered Margaret away.

I almost didn't recognize Louise Clammer. Louise always wore glasses but tonight she didn't. I said, "Hi, Louise, you sure look very pretty this evening."

She replied, "Oh, thank you, Jess. You and Janet make a wonderful couple."

Janet loved that statement and gave her pleasantries to Louise.

Louise introduced her date. His name is Ralph Mellons. Ralph is an honor student at Guest, in fact, the only A+ student.

I said, "Nice to see you, Ralph. Congratulations on your very impressive scholastic record." Janet agreed, as we all shook hands.

Connie Davis was seated near the table. She was nibbling on one of the small sandwiches. I gave Janet a light elbow to catch her attention. Janet turned to me and asked, "What is it?"

I said, "Take a peek to your left. You'll see Connie, sitting all by herself."

Janet turned, saw Connie, then said, "Let's join her."

Connie was the least attractive girl in our English class but she sure was one of the smartest and nicest. Tonight, Connie looked very pretty with her hair up in a bun and secured with a silver ring. Her white dress made her appearance angelic. We walked over to join Connie.

She was very pleased to have some company. It seems she didn't have a date for tonight's Prom. She wasn't alone. Many of the girls and boys didn't have dates. It was easy to notice the dateless - the boys would be on one side of the room and the girls on the other side. The boys would be grouped in bunches, telling stories, laughing and sneaking swigs of liquor. They were ignoring the girls, or too shy to walk across the room to create idle conversation, or ask their opposites for a dance.

"Connie, you sure are a fox tonight," I remarked. She was so happy to hear anything about herself. Janet and Connie shared some girl talk, while I was busy filling my stomach with several little bite-size sandwiches.

Between breaths of conversation, Janet said, "Jess, I just saw Sara Fuller. She's my best friend, you must meet her." Janet excused herself to capture her friend. The music started again and I asked Connie to dance.

Connie said, "I don't know if I can dance to that number."

"Nonsense, girls have a penchant for natural rhythm. Come on, we'll have fun." Everyone was doing the swing. All we had to do was avoid the wild swingers. When we claimed our own space, the crowded floor seemed to widen.

Connie was having a good time doing the swing. She remarked, "This is fun. I had no idea you were such a good dancer."

*I didn't either. I must buy Phyllis some flowers.*

The swing ended. Connie started to walk off of the floor, and I reached out for Connie's hand and gently pulled her back for one more dance. Connie said, "We'd better not. I don't want to take up too much of your time. I know Janet's waiting."

"You let me worry about that. Besides, this is a nice number. Let's not let it go to waste." The band was playing "Till Then."

As I moved closer to Connie I could feel her body tremble. She moved embarrassingly at first, and after a few moments, she relaxed as we danced to the completion of "Till Then."

Returning, we found Janet in a deep conversation with her girlfriend. I found a couple of vacant chairs for Connie and myself. Finally, Connie politely interrupted Janet and said, "Janet, thank you so much, Jess sure is a wonderful dancer."

Janet turned and said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I hadn't realized you had returned. But you're right, he is a smooth mover." With that, she gave me a sarcastic, holding wink. Janet continued, "Connie and Jess, I would like you to meet my friend, Sara Fuller. Sara, this is Connie Davis and my date, Jess Sterling."

Sara was a spitting image of Gail Russell, the movie star. Wow, what a knockout! I had to be careful not to pay too much attention to Gail, I mean Sara.

Connie and I both said our hellos. Connie said, "Sara, you are absolutely beautiful."

Sara smiled and said, "What a nice thing to say. Thank you."

I said, "How lucky for me to be able to sit with a bevy of beauties."

The girls all laughed. I thought it would be a good idea to ask Janet for a dance. We hadn't danced together since the twist. I had gathered during the evening that Janet could have a short fuse, plus I did care about her and didn't want her friends to think anything else. Janet and I walked hand in hand to the center of the floor.



The music was nice and moody, which gave me a chance to get nice and close to her. The band was playing one of my favorites, Nat King Cole made the song a big hit, "Somewhere Along the Way." We snuggled up.

Janet was talking into my ear, "I have to be honest with you, Jess, I started to get a little jealous when you were dancing with Mrs. Gladstone. I saw how close you were holding her and she made no attempt to move away from those clutching hands of yours."

I answered Janet quickly and softly. *If I hadn't, I'm almost sure her fuse would have ignited.* "Thank you, for being so honest, Janet. I would never do anything to embarrass you or deliberately hurt you. I hadn't realized I was holding Mrs. Gladstone so closely. But believe me, I would much rather hold you in my arms than anyone on this earth. If you have any doubts, please erase them. I do mean what I say. Besides, you are the best looking girl I know."

Janet backed away slightly. She looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, "Jess, do you really mean that?"

"Of course, I do. I only say things I mean." I crossed my heart and said, "Honest Injun."

She laughed, "I had hoped you felt that way. I feel so much better now."

We danced to another slow number. Janet was as sweet as one of my grandfather's onions. I felt the pressure leave and could now relax and have a good time.

*I did have Janet's girlfriend on my mind. I wasn't fickle, just curious. I knew I would never be able to meet Gail Russell but Sara would do. Boy, would she!*

We finished our second dance and returned to our seats. Connie and Sara were still seated where we had left them.

"Would you all excuse me for a minute." Sara said, "I had better get my date before he leaves me for somebody else. Don't leave, I'll be right back."

I was glad she left to get her date. Maybe her date would dance with Janet. If I paid little attention to Sara, Janet would suggest I should dance with her best girlfriend. That was my plan. *If that doesn't work, I'm sure I'll think of something that will.*

Connie said, "Janet, you and Jess sure look good together."

Janet loved that remark. I grabbed Janet's hand and gave it a squeeze and said, "Thanks, Connie, I do believe you're right."

Connie asked Janet, "Where, and how long ago, did you meet Jess?"

"Oh, we met at the beginning of the semester during our English class." Janet leaned over to whisper into Connie's ear. Of course, I leaned with her, straining my neck to overhear what she was saying about me, "If I hadn't paid attention to Jess, I know some other girl would have gotten him."

I quickly leaned back, with a smirk on my face, saying to myself, *Aren't you the nosey one.* The two girls were giggling, thinking they had pulled one over on me.

Sara returned with her date. Bob Doyle was in my gymnasium class, and he was very tall for his age, besides being good looking and a fantastic basketball player. Sara introduced the girls to Bob, and they were very interested in meeting him. Bob and I shook hands and I congratulated Bob on his team winning the school basketball championship.

Janet and Connie had seen Bob at school but never had met him. Janet seemed a little taken by Bob, as was Connie. Sara wanted to dance, so I suggested that she and Bob dance this

number while Janet and I do the same. If I played it right, we would get a chance to change partners the next number.

The four of us went to the dance floor. I made sure not to pay any attention to Sara. Janet and I were having a good time. Janet said to me, "Isn't Bob good looking and don't they dance well together?"

Before I could answer Janet, I was interrupted by this guy who insisted he dance with Janet. I'd seen this character hanging around with Roger Stokes, and he looked about the same age as Stokes. His name was Weasel and he was Stokes' gofer. Weasel got very pushy and said, "Move over, Sterling. I'm gonna dance with this cute little thing."

Janet didn't like his manner or him and said, "Get away from me. I don't know you and I certainly don't wish to dance with you."

Weasel gave me a push and made a grab for Janet. I grabbed one of Weasel's very large ears and twisted it as hard as I could. Weasel dropped to his knees. Weasel's name fit his description. All he needed was a long tail. I said to Weasel, as I held his ear, "I don't know you either or why you're butting in." I twisted his ear some more, "You heard what my girlfriend said. If you didn't, let me refresh your memory. She said she didn't want to dance with you and to leave her alone."

Weasel was in pain and said, "All right, all right. I got the message." I let go of his ear and as soon as I did, Weasel said, "Roger Stokes isn't going to like this. He sent me over to dance with this girl and he's going to be very angry after I tell him what you did to me."

My whole body was starting to shake. I swallowed hard and said, "Weasel, you had best sneak away, like you crept in."

"Your ass is going to get it," Weasel said, "when Roger Stokes gets finished with you. I just hope there's enough left for me."

My guts were churning. I didn't want Janet to know my concern. *I now know I was right about Roger Stokes. He did see me in the classroom and he knows, I know, he was the culprit.*

Janet was scared and asked? "Who is Roger Stokes and what is all this about?"

I just said, "Ah, he's just a bully and has nothing better to do. Come on, let's dance. After all, we're here to celebrate our graduation." I quickly moved Janet around the floor and she was soon back into the excitement of the evening. We finished the next two numbers without another word said about the incident.

As we were returning to our chairs, I kept thinking, *Roger Stokes has something up his sleeve. Why would he send Weasel to dance with Janet?* Weasel's threat had me very concerned but I had no fear of Weasel. *Roger Stokes was the one who kept those chills running up and down my spine.* He has proven how ruthless he can be.

Sara, Bob and Connie were watching us as we arrived. Bob started to say something. Before he could open his mouth, I put my finger to my lips and shook my head, quietly saying, "No."

Bob got the signal and changed the subject, saying, "Hey, Jess, do you mind if I dance with Janet before the evening ends?"

I said, "Only if I can dance with Sara."

The girls chuckled and said, "Now, now, boys you don't have to fight over us."

Janet nudged Sara and said, "Don't worry, Jess won't bite."

Sara said, "I guess we're both safe."

In a matter of seconds, I was on the dance floor with Sara.

I looked into her beautiful dark brown eyes, all the time keeping my distance. *Don't worry he won't bite. That's what you think.*

Sara smiled and said, "I've heard a lot about you from Janet."

"Was it all bad?"

"On the contrary, Jess. I've had nothing but glowing reports."

Now was the time for me to get some information. "Sara, do you live in the neighborhood?"

"All of my life. I live just a few blocks from Mumford High School. Do you know where Mumford High is?"

"I sure do. Are you going to Mumford now?"

"Oh no, not yet. I graduated from Phillips Grade School last week but I will be a Freshman at Mumford this September."

I continued probing, "Did you have your graduation Prom at Phillips?"

"No, our Prom is next week. It's too bad that I have a date. If I didn't, I would be tempted to ask you to take me. But that would be useless, I know how close you and Janet are."

*Sara said exactly what I wanted her to say. She must be a mind reader.* Sara moved closer. I could feel her breath. Sparks started flying. I know how girls talk, especially best friends, so I thought out my reply.

"Sara, I can't tell you what's going on in my mind right now but it just so happens that I will also be a Freshman and I will be going to Cooley High. Cooley is only two miles from Mumford. Anyway, why don't I give you a call after school starts? Maybe we can meet and have a coke. Are you in the phone book?"

"Yes, I'm in the book under Jack Fuller on Grand Point Drive. That sounds like fun, Jess. Please call." *I will.*

I smiled at Sara and got a lasting look at her as the music came to its completion. I walked Sara back to our seats. Janet was smiling. I wonder if she had a similar conversation. *Gnaw, it couldn't be possible. Or could it?*

Bob said, "Hey, Jess, why don't we go over to say hello to some of the guys before the dance ends?"

"Good idea, Bob. Girls you don't mind do you?"

They spoke in unison, "Of course not."

Bob and I headed to the other side of the room where some of our school chums were milling around. In route, Bob asked what had happened on the dance floor with Weasel. I gave Bob a quick rundown, making light of the situation.

Bob cautioned, "Beware, Weasel is known to start things he can't handle but always has someone around him who can."

I knew what Bob was trying to tell me. I was just hoping it was only a threat . . . not a happening.

We ran into a half dozen of our mutual friends. We all wished each other good luck in high school. Some of us lived in different school districts and would be attending high schools in their own area. Most of us knew we would be making new friends when we started high school but vowed to keep in touch.

Bob and I made our way back to the girls as the band was playing the last number of the evening, "Stardust." I grabbed Janet's awaiting hand and we headed for the dance floor, as did Bob and Sara. To my surprise, Connie was also dancing the last number. She had an ear to ear smile across her face.

Janet and I was cheek to cheek as we danced. Janet broke the silence, saying, "Jess, I've had the best evening

I've ever had and you're responsible." She hesitated for a moment, then continued her thoughts, "I don't know what your plans are for the summer. Mine are open, except that I may have to make a trip with my parents this summer. My Dad has to be in Texas for some kind of Air Force meeting."

I knew what my plans were, I just hadn't shared them with Janet yet. I said, "Janet, the next two weeks are for you and me. If that meets with your approval?"

"Of course it does. But what about the rest of the summer?"

"I'll be working at the dairy every day throughout the summer, beginning on July first."

"When will I see you?"

"Well, it all depends upon how tired I am. I'll tell you what, give me a week to get acclimated to the work schedule." I spun Janet around very slowly and said, "How does that sound?"

"That sounds fine but don't make it longer than a week." She smiled, "I don't think I can stand not seeing you any longer than that."

The music was coming to its end. All the kids were applauding the band. Janet and I said goodbye to Bob, Sara and Connie. Janet excused herself to go to the ladies room. I waited for the longest time. The gym was almost empty. Janet finally came out of the rest room, and to save argument, I kept my mouth shut about the amount of time she was gone.

Janet was all smiles as she approached me, "Jess, thank you for being so patient. I just had to say goodbye to some of the girls and, of course, they all commented on how lucky I was to have such a handsome boyfriend."

I took Janet's hand, "Are you ready for a nice slow walk home?" She smiled, "The slower the better."

I opened the exit door for us. Janet and I walked through the huge opening and stepped outside, into the evening. We found the exit walkway lined with kids from the dance. It looked like a tunnel with kids on both sides and the black sky above. At the end of the tunnel was the ominous, Roger Stokes, with Weasel standing next to him.

Stokes was pointing his finger at me, and shouted, "Come here, punk. Your ass has had it."

Janet walked in front of me to stop our advancement, "Jess, what is going on?"

"I don't know. It looks like trouble. Listen, Janet, please wait, I don't want anything happening to you."

"What about you? Aren't you afraid?"

*Damn right I was afraid but I wasn't going to let Janet know. I kept thinking about how I was going to get out of this one.* There was only one way to find out. I looked at Janet, first thinking - then saying, as I squeezed her hand, "I hope to be back real soon, with all of my teeth."

I walked up to Roger Stokes. He looked like one of those bad guys you see in Westerns, standing at the saloon bar, facing off the good guy. All that Stokes was missing was a ten gallon hat and a six-shooter. He glared at me with his thumbs hooked behind his waist band and belt. I got within five feet of him and stopped.

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

Stokes snarled, "Me. And your ass is going to get kicked all over the school yard."

Roger Stokes had a strange way of talking. His large teeth protruded outward and his lips never touched or gave a pause while he was talking. All I saw and heard was noise coming out through his teeth.

I looked at Roger Stokes and Weasel. "Look, you don't even know me, so why pick on me? You're much older and



bigger than I am. You know I don't even have a chance. Please, just leave me alone."

All the time I was talking, I was circling to the right. If there was going to be a fight, I didn't want to be falling into a crowd. I was now facing the crowd, my back was to the street.

Stokes snickered, "Punk, you made a big mistake, roughhousing Weasel here." With that he kneed me in the groin. The surprised low blow moved me back against a parked car. Fortunately for me, he missed his target.

All of a sudden, I could hear my Dad whispering into my ear, 'Relax Son, assume your posture. *Protect yourself, jab, jab, and set him up for the one punch. Now, go kick his ass.*'

I pushed myself away from the car. Stokes came at me. I quickly side stepped, and he ran into the parked car. That gave me just enough time to take off my suit coat and throw it behind me. My hands were up, protecting my face. Stokes came at me again. I gave him a snapping left to the chin. That punch just made him angry. He started throwing rights and lefts but all he was catching was air. I backed up and moved side to side. Stokes came within range. I gave him two hard lefts to his forehead. I hit him with my right fist as hard as I could. I landed one on his left ear. I could hear the kids yelling in the background, cheering me on. They were forming a circle around us.

Roger Stokes was relentless. He came at me again. This time, I caught him with two rights to his kidneys. Those two punches to the kidneys made Stokes drop his guard. I kept aiming for those big teeth of his. I was doing my best to knock them out of his head. I hit him in the face with rights and lefts, at least six times. His face was starting to swell, and his nose was bleeding, as was the

corner of his mouth. I kept hitting him and hitting him. *And he kept coming back for more.*

I said to myself, *Boy this guy must be on novocaine. I can't seem to stop him.*

My hands were starting to get sore from hitting him so much. *Roger Stokes still had yet to lay a finger on me.*

Stokes came at me again. This time, he kicked me in the right shin. It hurt for a second but I didn't have time to rub my aching shin. I just concentrated on my objective and that was to *finish off Stokes.*

My confidence was building. I didn't wait for Stokes to come to me, I went at him. I threw three hard lefts to his bloody mouth and face. He was backing up. I caught him with a solid left. His face turned and I threw the right handed one punch. It caught him between his nose and cheek.

Stokes fell to the ground. I jumped on top of him with my knees bracing his arms to the ground. I hit him as hard as I could with straight rights and lefts to his face. I finally finished him off.

*Stokes was defenseless and couldn't take any more.* I started to get off of him but Weasel came at me, feet first. I ducked. He just missed my head. I was on my feet in a flash. Jake was right. Sometimes you don't have to wait so long to use the one punch. I hit Weasel with one punch. His face seemed to concave itself as he crumpled to the ground.

Roger Stokes was trying to get to his feet. I walked over to him and pulled him to an upright position. "Roger, you've been calling me a punk. You're the lowlife, rowdy bully. That's what punk means. The name fits you."

The hangman's noose finally found Stokes. Now was the time for everyone to hear about the classroom door. "Mr. Bully, remember a few months back, when you blew

our classroom door off of its hinges? You frightened the whole classroom. You had no regard for anyone. This is for the door."

I pushed Stokes backward, he flinched, dropped his hands, and I hit him right on the button. His nose crushed from the force of my one punch. Stokes collapsed to the ground and stayed there.

Janet came up to me with my suit coat in her hands. She gave me the biggest hug. I felt relieved it was over. All of the kids were cheering. They all came over to congratulate me. My hands were too sore to shake hands so I put them into my pockets. *Thanks Dad.*

While walking Janet home, she asked, "How did you know Roger Stokes blew down the door?"

I looked at her, smiling I said, "It was just elementary, my dear." I kissed her goodnight. She kissed me back, hard. I told her I was worn out. She understood, and we made plans to see each other tomorrow afternoon.

It was nearly midnight by the time I got home. My Dad was sitting in his favorite chair, waiting for me to get home.

Dad said, "It's kind of late, Son, what kept you?"

I explained to him what had happened and showed him my sore hands.

Dad said, "Son, you have to keep a closed fist when you punch. Come here, Son." He took a look and said, "All you've done is push your knuckles back. This is going to hurt, so hang on."

He took hold of my left hand and, with a firm grip, he yanked my knuckles back into place. He did the same with my right hand. He was right. It hurt so much it brought tears to my eyes.

We walked into the kitchen. Dad filled two bowls with ice and water for my aching hands. We sat and talked about my fight with Stokes.

Dad said, "Son, I know it's hard to stay out of fights. I've had my share of them. You will be starting high school after this summer, so keep on your toes and do the best you can to get a good education. I want the best for you and you've got a running head start. Remember one thing, you can always be a bum - but not today, or any other day. Now, regarding this Roger Stokes character, the next time you see him, smack him one more time and tell him to find some other place to bum around."

With that, he said, "I'm going to bed, Son. See you tomorrow."

I dried off my hands and went to bed. I sure was worn out, and all I needed was a good night's sleep.

I stayed in bed until ten in the morning. My hands were a little sore but not swollen. It's a good thing my Dad had me soak them in ice. I was to meet Janet at two o'clock in the afternoon. I had some time to kill, so I went to Z's for a coke and maybe a little conversation.

When I walked into Z's, low and behold, there was Stokes sitting in a booth all by himself. The place was empty, except for Stokes and me. I walked over to where he was sitting.

He was drinking coffee through a straw. His face was a mess. He had two black eyes. His nose was bent to the right . . . almost flat on his face. His teeth looked like they had been pushed in. If they weren't loose, all he had to do was challenge me one more time.

I walked up to Stokes and said, "I think it would be a good idea for you to find some other place to hang out. You're not wanted around here."

Stokes said, "Yeah, and who's going to make me?"

I reached over and punched his swollen mouth. He sank into the booth. I yanked him out of his seat and pushed him outside of Z's. "On you way, motor mouth."

And keep out of my eye sight." He left, like a dog does when he is reprimanded, with his tail between his legs.

I said to myself, *I just hope I've had my last fight.*

I was determined to get a good education and never become a bum. I headed for Janet's.



## CHAPTER SIX

I saw Janet every day and night during the next two weeks. Tonight was my last night to see her as often. She knew I had to begin work at the dairy in the morning.

Janet, had asked me to come over to spend the evening watching television with her. I arrived just as her parents drove away.

She was at the door waiting for me. "Jess, we have the house to ourselves for the evening. My parents have gone to a dinner party and won't be home for several hours. Come in." She continued, "I've fixed sandwiches for us. We can have buttered popcorn and A&W Root Beer a little later."

"That sounds great. What's on TV tonight?"

Janet wrapped her arms around my neck and gave me a warm wet kiss. I could sense I was in for a big night. She kissed me again. I could feel her body pressing and moving closer to mine. The kiss finally broke. We were cheeks to cheek. "Why don't we sit down before I fall down. I'm hungry for one of your sandwiches."

She squeezed me harder, "What's the matter, Jess, are you afraid I'm going to bite you?"

"I was hoping you would but I need some fuel. My tank is running on fumes."

"You're always hungry. Come on, I have everything set up in the den for us."

Janet's parent's home is similar to my parent's house - brick exterior and long driveways. All of the houses are set back some fifty feet from the sidewalks . . . with plenty of grass to cut.

As we walked toward the den, I noticed their living room and dinning room were separate rooms, divided by a common wall. The living room and walls were painted white. The kitchen has two solid oak swinging doors. One door directly led into the dining room and the other to the hallway that led to the den. The interior floor plan is the same as our home, the only difference being the decorations and the addresses. This house was very military, everything in place, with no-frills furniture. The whole house looked as if it had been spit shinned.

The first thing I noticed when we walked into the den was a large burgundy maple desk, on the other side of the room, facing the door. Three model jet airplanes supported with individual stands, and they were arranged in a cluster on the left side of the desk.

A name plate, positioned in the center of the desk, had *Major John Marble* written on the polished brass. A family photograph of Mr. and Mrs. Marble and Janet, faced the huge black leather chair on the other side of the desk.

Behind the chair, dark maroon drapes covered the outside window. Behind, and to the right of the chair, stood a ceiling high flag pole with the Stars and Stripes resting from the windless room. The walls are covered with vertical red, white and blue stripes. About every two feet there was a single line of stars running vertically with the stripes. Lots of photographs and paintings partially covering the flag walls. The furniture is burgundy colored



leather. Tall lamps stood on both sides of the huge couch that faced the giant television.

The oak coffee table, positioned in front of the couch, drew my attention immediately. On top of the table, a large silver tray loaded with sandwiches. I thought, *This is what I need, a sandwich, a table to rest my feet on and a good TV program.* Before I knew it, Janet had me maneuvered onto the couch delivering one of her fantastic, inviting kisses. We kissed and kissed. We began to get very warm and excited. Janet was hot all over. So was I. *I've thought of these moments! Cross the bridge when you get to it. Well, I'm on the bridge now. What's next?*

Fortunately nature was giving me a helping hand. Janet's hands were helping mine rove all over her body. I was getting more and more excited touching Janet. Janet's breathing started to become more rapid. So was mine. Janet groaned into my ear, "Oh, Jess, I'm so hot. I've never had this feeling before." She whispered. "You can do anything you want to. I want you. I can't stand it anymore. We can go all the way. I know what to do. You know how girls are. They find things out."

*Who am I to argue? I've been a virgin long enough. I'm on Janet's side.* I began to get stomach pains and I knew it wasn't from hunger. Finally I broke the silence, "Janet," I whispered. "I've always wondered what I would do, or how. It's like I'm under a spell and I have no control. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I know what you mean. You're under my spell."

As she began unbuckling my belt and unzipping my pants, I helped by kicking off my shoes. All I had left on were my shorts. Janet stood up and took off her blouse and skirt. She paused, then turned around revealing a smooth white body clad in scanty panties and a lace bra. She said, "Jess, help me with my bra."

I got up. Everything was up. I fumbled with Janet's bra. I don't know how they get these things on but I figured out how to get it off. Janet turned around and slipped off her panties.

I was a lot of nervous, looking at her beautiful body. I had never seen a naked girl before. Only in magazines. We grabbed for each other and held on as tight as we could.

Janet inched her hands slowly down my torso and slid off my shorts.

I saw the walls and the hanging pictures. "Ah, Janet, I feel like your parents are watching us and I should do the pledge of allegiance. Would you turn the lights down a little?"

The room was dimly lit and the silhouette of Janet's body was glowing. We embraced each other as we sat on the couch. My heart was pounding as I rolled on top of her. We made love on the couch, on the floor, on the couch. I felt a closeness to Janet I had never felt before. We studied each other. Tears were running down Janet's lovely face as she said, "Jess, I don't know what I would do without you in my life. This is the first time for me. I hope you don't think I'm some . . . !"

"Stop. Sweetheart, I think you're wonderful. I've never felt like this before and I hope it doesn't go away."

"You wouldn't make love to another girl, would you?"

"Janet, it's just you and me from now on. I promise."

"Oh, Jess, I'm so happy. You're all I want. There couldn't be anyone but you."

"I feel the same way about you, Janet. Let's keep it that way."

"My God! It's almost ten o'clock. We'd better get dressed. My parents will be home any minute."

Janet grabbed her clothes and headed for the bathroom. I was dressed in a flash. *That's all we needed, having her parents catching us in the nude.*

I turned the lights up and the television on, then worked my way through the tray of sandwiches. Janet returned in a few minutes. We ate side by side. Ten fifteen chimed on the clock and the front door closed. Mr. and Mrs. Marble walked into the den.

"Children, have you had a nice evening?"

"Oh, yes Mrs. Marble. How was your dinner?"

"We had a splendid time," Mr. Marble remarked.

"Janet, will you say goodnight to Jess at eleven and turn off the lights."

"Sure, Daddy."

*I never got my A&W and popcorn. I would give them up for an evening like this anytime.*



## CHAPTER SEVEN

The sounds of the Dairy brought feelings of the beginning and now. The rumba of bottles put me into the rhythm I had when I baited Joe. Bob's truck was filled flawlessly. We were soon on our way.

Bob maneuvered the big Divco truck around the dairy and out to the streets. We headed West. I only knew how to get to the dairy, so I paid attention to where we were going. We drove in the same direction for about fifteen minutes.

The streets were barren at 4:45 in the morning, so I passed the time reading the lighted signs on the facades of the factories. I noticed a fiberglass factory. You can always tell them by the pungent, burnt smell they leave in the air. We passed carton companies, printing companies and a few we missed.

Bob turned right, onto a tree lined street. This new area took on a look of affluence. I missed the name of the street but picked it up at the end of the long block. How appropriate for this street's name, Old Maple Drive. Bob was silent during our drive.

I sat on the jump seat next to Bob, enjoying the thrill of riding in the truck, listening to the full bottles of milk dancing in their secluded cases. We drove down Old Maple Drive for two more long blocks. Bob pulled over to

the curb and said, "Jess, this is the beginning of my route. Grab two carrying cases and fill them with Homo."

The two cases each held six bottles of milk. *Homo means "Homogenized."* I followed Bob's instructions. I was eager to get started. "Bob, what's next?"

"I like your enthusiasm, Kid. The houses on this block start with odd numbers on your side and even on the other side. You work the odd and I'll work the even. We are in front of 1501 . . . 1501 takes three bottles, 1503 takes two, and 1507 takes one. Skip two houses and leave six at 1511. By the time you finish those houses, I'll be in front of 1511."

I took it all in but I was missing one thing, "Bob, where do I leave the milk bottles?"

"Oh, that's right, you're still a virgin. On the driveway side of these houses, look for a trap door. It's usually located next to the side entrance door. There's a handle about four feet up from the ground. These doors are called 'Milk Chutes.' Open the door. Take out the empties and leave the milk. Whenever the customer wants anything extra or less, they'll leave a note in one of the bottles. Got that?"

"Yes, sir." I grabbed my two six packs and headed for my first delivery.

Bob called to me, "Psst . . . Be quiet. We don't want to wake up our paying customers."

I nodded and tiptoed my way up the driveway, hoping to find the chute. *There it was.* Right where he said it would be. I looked over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching me. *Now, ain't that silly? I'm no burglar . . . I'm a Milkman.*

I ran for the truck after I finished my first four houses. The bottles were rattling so I slowed to a fast walk. *I've got to figure out a way to move faster without making noise.*

The truck was just pulling up to where I was standing. I jumped in. I automatically filled my two cases with Homo.

Bob looked at me smiling, "Well, how did it go?"

"Just fine. What's next?"

"Good, since you've picked up so quickly, I have a log book. It's coded and simple to figure out. I only have time to explain it to you once."

"You only have to explain it to me once."

"Come here." Bob turned over two empty milk cases, creating a makeshift desk. He opened the log book.

"Okay, now listen carefully. It's an easy system to follow." Bob was pointing at the book with his pencil.

"Name, addresses and days delivered are circled. The dots, dashes and Xs above the days are codes. Each dot equals a quart of milk; each dash, a pound of butter; each X, a dozen eggs. When a dot has a circle around it, that means to bring one quart of chocolate milk per circle." Bob looked up and started to laugh, "If you get this, you'll be the first."

"I got it. You want to lay some odds?"

I smiled and Bob messed up my hair as he said, "Go, get em."

It was easy to decipher Bob's hieroglyphics. . = qt, - = lb.butter, X = dz.eggs, 0 = choc. I figured out a way to move quickly without making any noise. I strove forward with my left foot and arm moving simultaneously, as did my right foot and arm. I got so good at it, I could even whirl the cases in circles. Bob and I finished the remaining three long blocks of Old Maple Drive. We turned right for a block, then he took another right onto Castle Place. We delivered milk to almost every house for three blocks. Bob asked, "How about a sandwich and a quart of chocolate milk?"

"You bet. I'm starved."

Bob opened a large paper sack and as he threw me a sandwich, and said, "Milkmen need their energy."

We ate without saying a word. I don't know where he gets his stamina, loading trucks is nothing compared to delivering. *If this keeps up, I'll need new tennis shoes. I do like it.*

Bob took his last swig of chocolate milk and wiped his face with his sleeve. "Okay, Kid, let's get with it." He started the truck and made a quick left turn for one block, then turned left again. "This is it. Do you know the name of this street?"

"Yes. It's Rand Drive."

"Good. Do I need to say anymore?"

"No. I have everything under control."

I checked the log book for Rand Drive. Only milk for the first six houses. I loaded two carrying cases with Homo. With my new stride working, I was able to get up and down driveways quickly. *Only one drawback - Bob worked at a slower pace.* This made me run back and forth to the truck for refills. The light bulb went off inside my head. I checked the log book for the next twelve houses. I needed twenty-four bottles of milk, two pounds of butter and four dozen eggs. I loaded my two six packs with a pound of butter and two dozen eggs. I grabbed the case of twelve Homo, with a pound of butter and two dozen eggs. I carried that case for six houses, set it down, and then ran back to the truck for my two other loads.

I worked my way toward the full case and exchanged empties for a new load. *It's a good thing I have an analytical mind.* Bob picked up on what I was doing. He stopped where I had left the empty cases, just as I walked up to the truck.

"Hey, slow down. This isn't a marathon."

"Don't worry, Bob. I was just checking out my brain."



"Do whatever you want, Kid, but you're going to be very tired tonight."

*Tired tonight? That's okay for tonight but not tomorrow night. I can't wait. Popcorn and A&W with Janet at our preplanned rendezvous. No one will see us at the cemetery.*

I finished off the odd side of Rand Drive, then worked my way back toward Bob on the even side. Bob threw me another sandwich as we were driving to another location. By the time I finished my sandwich, we pulled up to the curb on Sussex Place. Bob looked at me, smiled, "I can't believe it. We only have these two blocks left for today. You know, Kid, I'm impressed. I've never been finished this early before. We'll be back at the Dairy by two o'clock instead of four . . ."

We finished off the two remaining blocks. I leafed through Bob's Route Log during our drive to the Dairy. I was amazed by the size of Bob's route. He had two giant sized routes.

Today's route was serviced Monday, Wednesday and Friday. We would start tomorrow, Tuesday, on a new route and continue that route Thursday and Saturday. *Bob must make a ton of money. I was thinking of how much money I would make this summer. If I saved all of my loot, I would be able to buy a car.* Dad mentioned that if I had enough money for a down payment, he would help me find a car and co-sign a loan for the difference as a birthday present. *I would be able to drive to school the middle of September, if all went as planned.* Bob brought me out of my dream world, "Jess, you keep up the good work and I'll teach you how to drive this truck."

My face was gleaming. "Bob, I'll have my learner's permit in a few weeks."

"Good. That's when we'll start."

Tuesday was the same as Monday, with one exception. Bob's second route had an additional block to be delivered. I was home at 3:30 p.m.

I took a little snooze, had dinner and watched the news with Mom and Dad. My brother was spending the evening with a friend. Around 6:15 p.m., the television news was interrupted with static lines. Dad said, "This is getting to be a pain. The same time every night, for thirty minutes, we suffer through this. Someone must be using a ham radio."

Dad was so irritated, he threw the newspaper on the floor with disgust. I looked at my mother. She put her finger to her lips, silencing me before I could say anything.

I excused myself, took a shower, then left to meet Janet. I peddled my way up the long hill to Cross Roads Cemetery. There she was sitting on her bike, waiting, as I rolled up.

"Hi, Janet. Hope I haven't kept you waiting?"

"Not at all. I just got here."

"Janet, I noticed a large weeping willow tree as I was riding up the hill. Let's peddle through the cemetery, park our bikes and sit under it."

"I'll follow you, Jess."

The full moon and darkness brought a chill to my spine as we rode along the winding dirt road. I spotted the tree and we rode our bikes through the long hanging branches. I got off of my bike at the base of the tree. Janet pulled a blanket out of her basket and threw it open. I grabbed the flying end as we settled the blanket on the ground.

Janet smiled, "Jess, I came prepared. I have a little snack for us." She opened a paper bag and handed me an A&W and a box of popcorn.

I laughed, "Janet, you're something else. You think of everything."

The full moon filtered through the tree's, her eyes stayed focused on mine. "A woman loves to please her man. And you're the man I aim to please."

"Janet, I've thought about you all day, counting the hours, hoping you felt the same way about me as I do about you."

"Oh, Jess, you're all that's on my mind. I keep saying to myself, 'Is this a dream or reality?'"

"Maybe I'd better pinch you."

We wrestled, hugged and wrapped ourselves around each other. We undressed each other slowly. I was less inhibited this time. Janet lay there - waiting for me. I couldn't take my eyes off of her beautiful body. I kissed her breasts. They were hard like the rest of her body. I kissed her neck, her cheeks. When I found her mouth, we locked into oneness.

We rode our bikes, side by side, toward our own neighborhood. We stopped for a Dairy Queen. Two of our school chums had the same idea. Diane Davis and Michael York thought it would be fun to play tag on the way home. We agreed. Mike and I tossed a coin. The loser was IT. I felt like George, chasing his cronies. We raced up driveways, along sidewalks. I caught Diane quickly. Janet and I peddled together. Her smiles and winks were precious.

Michael was a good sport. He let Diane catch him. Michael was in hot pursuit of me, avoiding Janet. There was only one speed to keep Michael from catching me. The faster I went, the closer he came. I made a quick right turn into the entrance of a driveway, then I immediately turned left, and accidentally chewed up some of the front lawn as I headed down the sidewalk. Michael was on my tail again. I surprised Michael by slamming on my breaks and wheeled my bike to a one-eighty.

We headed back in the same direction we had just been. I noticed a short stocky man about one house ahead of me standing on the grass near the sidewalk. I turned my head to see how close Michael was. He was just behind me. I looked forward and was almost on top of the man I had just seen. He was blocking my way, screaming, "You little Son's-of-Bitches, I warned you, and I told you to keep your smart asses off my grass!"

I was going too fast to stop, so, I tried to slip past him. WHAM, I was catapulted into the air, fortunately my alert mind went into auto, telling me to reach for the grass with my hands, point my chin to my chest, and roll into the fall. I tumbled to my feet, now knowing where I was for a second, but when I turned around and saw my bike bent out of shape, I swallowed hard. Janet, Michael and Diane ran up to me.

Janet was there first. "Jess, are you all right?"

"I think so."

Michael said, "That man rammed a two by four into your front wheel spokes. Man, are you ever lucky."

"What's the matter with you?" Again, I shouted at the man. "Are you crazy?"

"I told you little bastards to stay off of my grass. Maybe this will teach you a lesson."

"Who are you kidding? We've never been on this street before."

He waved his two by four at us, saying, "You know what'll happen if you do." He raised his shoulder's back and strutted away.

Mike said, "Hey, Jess, let's come back tonight and bombard his windows with rocks."

A smile came across my face when I saw the man's roof. "Gnaw, Mike, he would know who did it. Help me get my bike home. I paused, I'll think of something."

"Jess, what can I do to help?" Janet asked. "You know I would do anything for you."

"Your being with me is all the help I need."

We got my bike home and I said goodbye to Michael and Diane. *"Mum" was the word. I would call them tomorrow afternoon.* I hugged Janet tightly and thanked her for being my girl.

*The next day I worked my tail off.*

All I had on my mind was the "two by four" man. "What's the matter, Kid?" Bob questioned. "You've been quiet all day."

"Ah, sorry, Bob, I've been a little preoccupied with some plans I have for tonight."

"Anything I can help you with?"

"No thanks, not this time."

Bob seemed to understand. We finished the route and headed back to the Dairy. While I was unloading the truck, Bob said, "Good luck tonight. See you tomorrow."

On my way home I bought a new wheel and tire. I was able to salvage the brake pads and cable. I used Dad's vice and blow torch to straighten out my front fork. My Dad is very meticulous about his tools. He didn't mind if I used them, as long as I put them away.

I met Janet, Michael and Diane at the local White Castle for hamburgers. Janet and I were holding hands as we sat in the booth facing Michael and Diane. "Jess, I like your new bike," Michael said. "Where did you get it?"

"Maybe I'd better get into the repair business if it looks that good."

"I know where to go when I have problems. Great job, Jess. What's up for tonight? We're all dying to know."

Janet snuggled closer to me as I addressed the three of them. "Mr. two by four's name is Mason. Mr. Mason's occupation is plumbing. The truck in his driveway reads

Mason Plumbing - 24 Hour Emergency Service – 313-555-0099. My plan is this. Mr. Mason is a ham radio operator and has a gigantic antenna on his roof. I have two hundred feet of marine rope. I'll climb onto his roof, from the top of his truck. Michael, your job is to wait across the street and whistle if anyone comes to the door."

He nodded.

"Janet and Diane, at the corner of Mason's street is a liquor store with a phone booth outside. Here's his number." I handed Janet the piece of paper. "After I have tied the antenna to Mason's rear bumper, I'll wave for you to call him."

"And?" . . .

"All you have to say is that you girls are babysitting and the toilet is overflowing 'Please help!' Give him the name and address I've written alongside his phone number. After you hang up, hurry back. Michael and I will be waiting for you across the street. Is everyone ready?"

Janet gave me a kiss, "Oh, Jess, you're so smart."

Michael and Diane laughed, "Yeah. Let's get that rat."

We rode our bikes past Mr. Mason's house. The truck was there. The girls headed for the corner. Michael took his position.

The full moon illuminated the street. I was dressed for the occasion, blue jeans, black tee shirt and tennis shoes, with my two hundred feet of marine rope resting over my neck and under my arm. I felt like Spiderman, moving cautiously within the tree shadows, up Mr. Mason's driveway. His truck was backed into the driveway, almost to his side door. I climbed up the side of his door, using his side mirror for a step and slowly boosted myself onto the top of his truck.

I looked across the street for Michael. He waved the all clear signal. My mouth was as dry as cotton. I swallowed

hard. The truck was close enough to the house for me to reach the sun porch's vertical and horizontal wood supports. The used brick siding and wood supports made a make shift ladder. Without making a sound I slowly climbed the remaining six feet to his roof. I scooted myself on top of the roof. I lay on my stomach for a couple of seconds to catch my breath. I stood up on top of his house, my heart was pounding.

The full moon gave me a lighted picture of his roof. The gigantic antenna looked to be about thirty-foot high located to the rear of his house. I tiptoed across the roof. The antenna was anchored with four thick guy wires leading to large rings fastened to the roof.

I hooked my metal measuring tape to the base of the antenna, then pulled it to the end of the first wire, measuring the distance from wire to wire. My mind calculated ten feet from the antenna base to the wire. Eight feet separated each wire, plus an extra fifteen feet for the return to the base for a double bolo knot. I came up with fifty-seven feet. I measured fifty-seven feet off of my two hundred feet of rope. I led the excess rope back to my exit, returning to the antenna and carefully slipped the fifty-seven feet through each fastening ring, creating a big square circle. I led the remaining fifteen feet back to the antenna base. That left five feet to wrap around the antenna a couple of times and still tie my double bolo knot. I double checked everything.

I crept back to the exit and slowly fed the remaining rope down into the driveway. I climbed quietly down from the roof and concealed the hanging rope behind the gutter. I slid under the truck and tied the end of the rope to the frame. I hid the remaining bundle of rope under Mr. Mason's truck. I sneaked away from the house and truck. When I reached the middle of the street, I waved to signal

the girls; they waved back. They joined Michael and me in less than five minutes. Janet and Diane were giggling as they approached us, jointly saying, "We did it! We did it!"

I quickly said, "Shh, not so loud. Well, what did he say?"

Janet replied in a whisper, "Don't worry, girls, I'll be there in fifteen minutes." They started to laugh again.

"Come one, let's hide our bikes behind these bushes. Now, we can sit in the shadows and watch the action."

The porch light came on. Out came Mr. Mason in a hurried manner. He opened the passenger side of his truck and slid across to the driver's side. It was so quiet, we heard the truck start and the gears grind as he shifted. The headlights came on. Mr. Mason quickly rolled his truck down the driveway and made a left turn. We saw the rope trailing the truck as he sped down the street. I said, "Watch the roof. Watch the roof."

The rope straightened tight. The sound of the cable wire echoed a snap, pole vaulting the antenna like a giant metal bird over the trees, landing it onto the street. We laughed hysterically, watching the antenna follow the truck, leaving a trail of sparks.

The scraping noise was loud enough to wake up the entire neighborhood. Sparks flew all the way to the corner liquor store. The truck stopped. Mr. Mason must have heard the noise, or saw the flying sparks in his rear view mirror. The four of us headed in the other direction for a final laugh at the White Castle.

We were sitting in a booth having A&W Root Beer floats. The laughing stopped for a minute. I said, "Look, I feel kind of guilty for doing such a stunt."

"Wait a minute," Michael said, "you could have broken your neck with that fall you took. Besides, it could have



been one of us. This was a team pay back. Ain't that right girls?"

Janet said, "You bet."

Diane blurted out, "Yeah."

I smiled, "The floats are on me."

We vowed to keep this evening a secret. *Maybe tell our children.* Janet and I said goodnight to Michael and Diane.

I followed Janet home, gave her a big hug and a meaningful kiss. "Janet, thanks for being my girl."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"It would take a team of horses to keep me away from you. See you tomorrow, sweetheart."

I peddled my bike homeward, thinking about tonight's escapade. I learned two things. *Never to ride on someone's lawn and how to rid static lines on a television.*



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Dad had taught me to drive his car when I was 12 years old. He told me he had learned to drive a tractor when he was eight. He took me to the Department of Motor Vehicles.

I passed my written test - 100 percent correctly. I was given a learner's permit that allowed me to drive only with a licensed driver. On my fifteenth birthday I could come back for my driving test to get my license. I had six long weeks to wait, and practice.

Dad let me drive the car home. I felt great. No more dirt roads to learn on anymore. *Now I can drive the streets just like an adult.*

Dad cautioned, "Son, if you get caught driving without a licensed driver you could lose your driving privileges."

"I'll never drive without a licensed driver," I promised. I pulled up in front of our house, all smiles on my face as I parked the car.

"Son, I'm impressed. Parking is always the most difficult part of driving. We'll work on parking between cars and pulling away from the curb over the weekend."

"Thanks, Dad. That'll be great. I better get going; I don't want to be late for work. See you later."

Bob and I were working Route One again today. We finished the 1500 block of Old Maple Drive. Bob pulled

the big Divco truck to a stop at the beginning of the second block. I just happened to glance over Bob's shoulder to the even side of the street. The porch light was going on and off.

Bob caught my eye, "What are you watching so intently?"

"Oh, I was looking at 1622. Their porch light keeps going on and off."

"That must be Miss Morris trying to get my attention. She may have a problem with her bill. Jess, go ahead and start on your side of the street. This might take a little time."

I loaded my cases. I didn't need to look at the log book, I had already memorized this route. After one more delivery of the second route, that one will also be locked into my ever expanding brain. I finished the 1600 block in an hour's time.

Bob still hadn't come out of 1622 yet. I scanned the log book for the even side. I was half way down the block when I heard the truck start. My legs were tired from all of the running back and forth. Bob pulled up.

His teeth were flashing, "Sorry, Kid, I didn't mean to take so long. You know how these women are, talk, talk."

We finished off his side and the last block of Old Maple Drive. Bob pulled up to the curb on Rand Drive. He threw me a sandwich. I grabbed a quart of chocolate milk and took a bite of my sandwich.

"Enjoy your lunch, Kid. I'll be right back."

My eyes followed Bob as he left the truck. I saw a lady standing on her front porch, wearing a bathrobe and sipping a cup of coffee. She opened her front door. Bob was right behind her. We got to the dairy at 4:30 p.m.

Bob left me with a, "Goodbye, see you tomorrow."

I unloaded the empties and was home at 5:30 p.m. I was so tired after working today. I called Janet to tell her I was pooped and I would see her tomorrow night.

I took a shower, had dinner and went right to my room. I lay in the bed thinking about the four houses Bob had stopped at this morning. His books are always in order. *What was he up to?*

I woke up rested but didn't feel like riding my bike to the dairy today, so I took the bus. Bob was in a good mood. "After you load the truck come inside for a cup of coffee." Bob was sitting at a table with Mack and a couple of the other guys.

Mack said, "Hi, Kid, how you doing? I'll bet you're learning a lot about the milk business from Bob."

"He's fantastic," Bob said. "Did you get your learner's permit, Jess?"

I smiled, reached into my pocket and pulled the permit out of my wallet, then handed it to Bob.

"Good. Today you'll have your first lesson."

I smiled. "Mack," I said, "I'm learning more each day."

"Yeah," said Bob, "and this is just the beginning."

Bob's second route is two miles West of his first route. We came to a stop in front of 2211 Elm Street, our first customer. "Okay, Kid, you worked your ass off yesterday, without a complaint. I liked that. There's no puss in you. Here's what I have in mind. Let's work the first half, non-stop together. We'll have a quick sandwich and start your driving lesson during our three block drive to the second part of the route. How does that sound?"

"Thanks."

I was out of the truck heading for my first six houses. Bob sure is all man, and he doesn't beat around the bush. Something tells me I had better pay attention. If I don't

learn how to drive this truck in three blocks, I'll never get another chance.

*Little does he know, I've watched him shift gears and use the clutch and brake pedals since the day we started, and I practice shifting every chance, I get! I can't wait.*

Bob threw me a sandwich. I was too excited to eat but I ate anyway.

Bob grinned. "Jess, this is first gear, this is second and this is third. This is reverse. The clutch and brake pedals are on the same lever. The clutch is the pedal that sits on top of the brake pedal. All you have to do is to depress the top and shift into first gear. Release the clutch slowly and depress the gas pedal, simultaneously. Listen to the engine, let it work but not strain. I'll tell you when to shift. Shift all three gears the same way." He continued, "If you need to stop, remember, depress the clutch and let your heel rock downward to engage the brake. Of course, take your foot off of the gas pedal then. Are you ready?"

"I sure am, Bob."

"Take your time. We have a half hour to kill."

I wiped my sweaty palms on my thighs. These trucks could be driven standing, as well as sitting. I stood. The seat stool was too high for me to reach the pedals, I swung the seat to the side. The top of the seat folded downward and locked against the flat portion of the dash.

I was ready. All I had to do was physically shift gears.

I shifted into first gear, checked for traffic and slowly let the clutch upward, while I depressed the gas pedal in one smooth motion as we whined down Elm Lane.

"Okay, Kid, shift into second."

I was in second gear for a few houses.

"Okay, shift into third."

I shifted into third, then glanced down at the speedometer. We were going 22 mph.

"Keep her at the same speed. Get ready to make a right turn. Shift into second gear. That a boy! Let the engine slow the truck down. Okay, lightly touch the brake pedal, not the clutch and make your right turn."

The truck started to jerk. "Relax. Give it a little gas. That's better. Get her up to speed and shift into third. Very good, Jess. Make a right turn at the next corner."

Bob didn't say another word. He let me use my own instincts. We drove in block circles for thirty minutes.

"Do you know where you are?"

"I sure do. We're back where we started. Where do you want me to go now?"

"Slow down and pull over to the curb. Turn off the motor."

I did exactly what he suggested. Bob smiled, reached out his hand to shake mine. "Congratulations, Kid. You've just learned how to drive a milk truck in thirty minutes. Who taught you how to drive?"

"My Dad."

"He did a hell of a job. Now, you can make both of our jobs easier." Bob started the truck. We headed for the second part of the route. "You know, Kid, you pick up real fast on everything. Most kids your age do nothing but waste time or get themselves into trouble. What do you do with your spare time?"

This was the first time Bob and I ever had this kind of conversation. *He runs my ass off, but he did keep his word. I can now drive a milk truck.* I thought for a few seconds before answering. "It varies, Bob. I cut the lawn once a week, take the garbage out every day, wash my Dad's car - whatever needs to be done, I usually do it. My parents have been good to me and I try to show my appreciation."

"What about recreation, like girlfriends?" Before I could answer, Bob pulled up to the curb on Mayberry Lane.

"Jess, the best way to practice your driving is right here and now. If you get a few houses ahead of me, don't wait for me to come back to get the truck, you know how to drive, pull it up yourself."

"Bob, my Dad said I have to drive with a licensed driver."

"Your dad's right but we can fudge a little here. You're not driving in traffic, all you're doing is pulling the truck up fifty yards at a time. If you're scared, then run your ass off." He left the truck laughing.

I filled my cases, ran the first six houses then ran back to the truck. I started the truck, shifted into first gear and slowly crept up the street. I stopped in front of my next customer. With a confident smile, I turned off the ignition.

I finished the next six houses, looked up and there was Bob. This same procedure went on all day. We had a nice rhythm going. We finished the route in record time. Riding back to the Dairy, Bob said, "I knew you could do it. Wasn't that easier?"

"You bet it was. Thanks, Bob. You're the best boss I've ever had."

"When you finish unloading, park the truck and take the keys, they're yours. You know what to do when you get here in the morning, don't you?"

"Yeah. See you in the morning, Bob." I finished unloading. *Now was the time to practice parking, backing up, stopping and starting. I spent the next two hours making an acquaintance with the Divco truck.*

The bus ride home brought my mind back to my first week at the Dairy. It's amazing, in just three months I will have been working at the dairy for a whole year. *Time surely flies when you're having a good time.*



I was home at five, took a shower, then called Janet. I left a note for my mother, saying Janet and I went to see an early movie and I wouldn't be home for dinner.

I was meeting Janet at Huntley's Fish Market for fish and chips. I was a few minutes early. I sat on the outside patio, waiting for Janet. I saw her peddling up the street. Her golden brown legs glistened from the evening sunlight. Janet parked her bike next to mine. My eyes followed her every step. She was wearing short cut-off jeans, tennis shoes with no socks and a tee shirt I could almost see through.

I pushed my chair back as Janet approached the table. We hugged each other. I whispered into Janet's ear, "You sure look exceptionally sexy tonight."

"You are going to do something about it, aren't you, Jess?"

"You bet I am. Right after dinner."

"Your place or mine?"

"Is that our favorite blanket I see tucked away in your basket?"

"What sharp little eyes you have."

"Do you feel adventurous tonight?"

"Every night with you is an adventure, Jess."

"Let me order dinner for us, then I'll explain my plan."

I waved for the waiter, ordered two fish and chip dinners.

"Come on, Jess, tell me what you have planned for us tonight."

"I should say, 'Keep your pants on' but they won't be for long."

Janet smiled. "You just love to tease me, don't you?"

"Don't interrupt me or I'll forget what I was going to say."

She put her hand over her mouth. *Janet is always so cute and amorous. I can't wait to get her clothes off and explore her.*

"That's better. When we finish dinner, we will lock our bikes to the telephone pole, grab the blanket and catch the bus for a half hour ride. Are you ready for more?"

"You said for me to keep my mouth shut."

"I was just checking. Every morning, after leaving the Dairy, Bob and I pass the same beautifully wooded golf course. The course opens at 5:00 a.m. and closes at 5:30 p.m. Some golfers are still on the course until dark but there isn't any night golfing. Our exit stop will be Drummer Street." I glanced at my watch. "Janet, the bus will be here in ten minutes. Lock up the bikes and I'll pay the check and get a couple of doggie bags."

We made a dash for the bus stop. "Whew, just in time." The bus was empty. We sat in the middle and ate the rest of our fish and chips in silence.

A kiss on the cheek and a whisper into my ear broke the silence, "How much longer?"

Drummer Street was a few blocks more. I kissed Janet's beautiful mouth. I pulled the stop cord. "We're here, you little sex fiend."

"It's about time. You lead, I'll follow."

"Ladies first, I love to watch your rear end." I gave Janet a little pinch as she walked down the stairs.

She looked at me, "You're going to get it."

"Promises, promises."

The evening was nice, not too warm, and just right. The entrance to the golf course looked dark and quiet. We walked, hand in hand, up Drummer Street. "Jess, do you know where we're going?"

"I will in a couple of minutes."

It was just light enough for me to see the trees bordering the golf course. There was an opening between the trees and the high cyclone fencing. Janet and I squeezed through.

I looked around for a land mark. The night was taking over, no moon. I held Janet's hand. I felt her concern.

"Don't worry, sweetheart, we won't get lost or caught."

I reached into one of my back pockets and came up with two pen flashlights. I turned one on and laid it on the ground with the light pointing at the base of a tree. The light created a small full moon against the tree trunk. I turned on the other penlight.

"Janet, there are two large trees about fifty yards ahead of us." I started to count our steps.

She hung onto my arm. It made me feel in total command. I counted sixty steps. It was getting dark. Every step we took sounded like a giant animal moving through the leaves. We arrived at the base of a group of huge pine trees. I pointed the penlight downward. "Okay, Janet, spread the blanket on the pine needles and sit down."

I watched her do exactly what I had asked. I took off my tennis shoes and pointed them in the direction we had just come from. I turned around and got nice and close to Janet on the blanket. I stuck the penlight in the ground. The light bounced off of the tree we were beneath. Janet seemed relaxed as she took off her clothes.

"Jess, you're so smart, I'll bet you even know the bus schedule."

"Yeah and you'd better hang onto me, I know the way back."

"I'll hang onto you forever."

I had my clothes off in a jiffy.

Making love with Janet was more exciting each time. We started to learn more by exploring each other's bodies.

I couldn't get enough of her. We made love for the next two hours.

We got dressed and made our way off of the golf course with no hitches. The last bus was at 10:15 p.m. We were on it.

My romance with Janet was getting serious. My mind was on her body. I kept asking myself, "*Is it sex? Is it Janet? Or is it just plain youth?*"

My sub-conscious mind and conscious mind both agreed. *Enjoy it to the end.*

## CHAPTER NINE

I jingled the truck keys in front of my eyes, smiling to myself. The truck turned over with my first flick of the starter. I let it idle for thirty seconds. I slowly drove the truck around the dairy. What a thrill, driving all alone.

I pulled up to the loading dock just as a filled truck pulled away. After loading Bob's truck to the ceiling, I glanced inside the cafeteria. Bob waved for me to come inside. I parked the truck and found Bob going over some paper work at a table.

"Good morning, Bob."

"Good morning, Jess. Pull up a chair and have some breakfast while I finish up these bills."

I had already eaten but could eat again. I looked up and noticed that the waitress made sure I saw her every move. Her dress was so tight it looked like she didn't have one on.

"Well, hello, young man. You sure have grown this past year. I'll bet you've got muscles all over."

I smiled. "I'm working on it. Could I have a large stack and coffee?" She walked away.

Bob whispered, "You'd better watch yourself. Sally would love to get you all alone." I gave Bob a quizzical look - playing it dumb.

Sally returned. "Here you are handsome. My name is Sally."

Sally's red hair and beauty mark just below her right cheek bone, along with her fantastic body, put her in the category of a Playboy Centerfold. WOW! I swallowed, "Nice to meet you, Sally. My name is Jess Sterling."

Bob said, "How about some more coffee, Sally?" She slowly walked away. "You know, Kid," Bob said. "I just love her ass."

I wondered, *Why would Sally flirt with me? Why weren't the other guys chasing her around the cafeteria? She sure is exciting. I'll bet Bob knows all about her. Be patient.*

I finished off my stack. Bob filled his thermos with coffee. "Come on Kid, let's go. You're driving to the route today."

My ears perked, Sally left my mind. I made one quick adjustment on the driver's stool. Bob took my usual spot on the passenger jump seat. He opened up his big brown lunch bag, smiling all the time. He pulled out a white baseball cap with "Jess" written in red letters across the front and handed it to me. I gave the hat a good look and put it on.

"Now, you look official."

*What a guy!* "Thanks, Bob. I will do my best to never let you down."

"I believe you, Kid. Come on, we'd better get going. Just one thing, do be careful when stopping this truck while you have a full load. We have a couple thousand pounds of added weight. Make sure you allow yourself plenty of room to stop. You'll pick up that second nature feeling the more you drive. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

Bob didn't say a word as I drove to Route One. I stayed within the speed limit. When I caught one red light, I realized he was right. The truck kept pushing me. I felt a sudden awareness as I applied the brakes. I had a de`ja`vu

feeling as I drove down Old Maple Road. Bob was preoccupied going over his billing. The bottles didn't rattle in their cases as I came to a complete stop in front of 1501 Old Maple Drive. I turned off the engine.

"What's wrong, Jess? How come you stopped?"

"Bob, doesn't this street look familiar? We're on it every other day."

"I'll be damned. What do you do, practice at night?"

"Well, I've had a good teacher."

"You blow my mind, Kid. Let's have a quick cup of coffee before we start."

I filled our thick round cups with coffee while Bob sorted out his billing. I'm sure glad I fill my pockets with sugar packets every time I go into the cafeteria.

"Jess, today is going to be a long one. I've made out bills for every customer on this route. Here, this stack is for your side. Do I need to explain what to do?"

"No. You've done that before."

"Thanks for being with it, Kid."

"See you later."

"Wait a minute, Jess. If I get caught up with some of these ladies about their billing, carry on without me. You know how to drive. Try to keep an eye on where I am. If you get too far ahead, come back to get me."

"You bet."

We worked the first block with no hitches. Stopping the truck in front of 1617, I watched Bob cross the street. He entered 1622 without a knock. The flashing porch light stopped. The last time Bob went into 1622 he was gone for an hour.

I worked the odd side of the 1600 and 1700 block in an hour's time, and headed back to 1622. My timing was perfect. Bob was walking backward down the sidewalk,

waving goodbye. A naked body could be seen through the screen door. A hand was waving back at Bob.

Bob looked brand new. His blond hair was newly slicked back and he had that just-took-a-shower look. He jumped into the passenger side as I turned the truck around. "Well, how did it go, Kid?"

"I finished the 1600 and 1700 blocks on my side. Something told me to head back and pick you up. Is it anyone I know?"

Bob started to laugh. "Come on, Kid. Loosen up."

"You know, Bob, you've got to be the cleanest milkman in the world. You sure take a lot of showers some days. Don't your fingers ever crinkle?"

He gave me one of his pearly grins. "You can't part the hair until it's clean."

I stopped the truck opposite 1626. Bob leafed through his undelivered stack of bills. He was all business now. *Could he think I'm that naive? Maybe it's best he thinks that. I'll just play it smart. He'll let me know in his own way.* I kept quiet, waiting for his next command.

"Oh, ah, Jess, give me a hand so we can catch up to where you left off."

"You bet."

We worked his side in perfect team work. I would pull up. He would pull up. The two blocks went by quickly. Bob sat down on the jump seat and opened his brown lunch bag. Before taking a bite of his sandwich, he said, "Jess, drive us to Rand Drive. You do know how to get there, don't you?"

I started the big truck with a knowing smile. Rand Drive was just a few blocks away. I pulled up to the curb in front of 1921 Rand Drive. Bob threw me a sandwich.

"As soon as you finish your sandwich, start your side."



He jumped out of the truck and headed across the street. There she was, the bathrobe lady with her coffee cup. When Bob walked closer to her, she opened her robe for Bob to enter. Her naked body brought Bob into her clutches. They disappeared into her house.

I could see the forest through the trees. Like writing on the wall in BOLD letters - *"The Kid can drive. He's learned both routes. Now, I can take my time while I'm fucking the neighborhood. I might as well get a manicure while I'm at it."* I tried to keep my mind focused and not explicate Bob's mind. I finally reasoned with myself, *"Bob is paying me to run my ass off. So who am I to expect anything but, . . . but . . . ?"* I concentrated on learning the even side. I finished off Rand Drive.

I kept hearing a distant whistle in the background. The thinking bulb went off inside my head. I hurriedly turned the truck around to find Bob walking a few blocks back. He'd only walked half a block.

"A million pardons, master," I said as I approached Bob, "I got carried away learning the even side."

He laughed. "I'll settle for that excuse. At least you've got good hearing."

"The best."

"How about a sandwich before we head for Castle Place?" I wolfed it down. "Since you don't swallow, drive us to Castle Place."

I got behind the wheel. My confidence level was extremely high. The neighborhood had become very familiar and I had no difficulty finding my way around. I turned right onto Castle Place, parked and turned off the motor in front of 2121.

"I have two ladies to talk to this morning, on this same block. The first one is at 2126 and the second at 2140. Take your time. I'll be through by 2:00 p.m. The bills are

on top of the log book. See you later." I couldn't help but look. My eyes almost popped out of my head as she casually opened the front door. She stood there in the nude as she handed Bob a steaming cup of coffee. The door closed, shutting off my view.

I decided to keep my own log of how many women he visited daily on each route. I knew the addresses - Nancy Morris, 1622 Old Maple Drive; went in at 6:15 a.m., came out 7:20 a.m. on August 18. Beverly Ness, 1936 Rand Drive; in at 8:45 a.m., out 10:00 a.m. Sylvia Spencer, 2126 Castle Place; in at 11:00 a.m., out 12:00 noon. Monica Hammer, 2140 Castle Place; in at 12:05 p.m., out at 2:00 p.m. *The way he's been going, it's a good thing I have a new pad to work with.*

Each street has its own significant distinction. Castle Place reminds me of photos I've seen of England's narrow streets. Houses with cement walls, brick siding and slate roofs, and this made them appear like little castles. Sussex Place has a bit of English tone to it too. Old Maple Drive looks like it sounds, with maple trees lining the streets. Rand Drive has a unique characteristic. Each house has South African lily plants surrounding their front yards. The blue, violet and white flowers compliment these houses.

Rand is a South African dollar. Rand means "horny" in England. Bob has been with four women today.

I pulled in front of 2140 Castle Place at 2:10 p.m. I beeped the horn politely. The door opened in a few seconds. *Bob was a little slow getting into the truck this time. I wonder why.*

"How come you're ten minutes late?"

I looked at Bob in bewilderment. *Boy, can't I ever please this guy?*

"Sorry, Bob, I had to make a judgement call. I had a few more houses to finish and felt it was foolish to drive all the way back. I finished all of them and the route."

Bob replied, "Are you putting me on? There's no way you could have finished all by yourself."

I didn't say a word. I just turned around and pointed to all of the empty milk cases. Bob ran his fingers through his hair. "I owe you, Kid. Let's head home. You drive. I need to catch up on some paper work. Next week is collection week. We'll collect from both routes Wednesday and Thursday."

Route Two had similarities of Route One. Interesting streets, flashing porch lights and cups of hot coffee.

I made a quick mental glance into my log book. August 19, Taffy O'Brien, 2648 Elm Street; in at 5:30 a.m., out at 6:15 a.m. Jennifer Foster, 3002 Elm Street; in at 7:30 a.m., out at 8:30 a.m. Patricia McNally, 3388 Mayberry Lane; in at 10:30 a.m., out at 11:45 a.m. I looked at the portable clock fastened to the dash - 1:15 p.m. The past few blocks had gone by quickly. All I had on my mind was for us to finish the two remaining blocks on Mayberry Lane and scoot over two streets to Handover Court for the last three blocks.

I needed my own female company. Janet was just a few hours away.

I pulled the big Divco truck to a stop in front of 3889 Mayberry Lane. A magnet seemed to pull my eyes to the left side of the street. The water from a hose was creating a rainbow. The spray from it was going straight up and landing on the girl holding the hose. Her white T-shirt, cut off at the waist, was soaked with water, exposing her large beautiful breasts. She slowly shook her head. The water sprayed a light mist as it left her long raven black hair. The

little bikini bottom exposed the rest of her. I've never seen a girl like that in my life. WOW!

Bob was mumbling something in my right ear, "Jess, I said carry on. There's just the lady I've been waiting to see about servicing." Bob walked confidently toward that vision of beauty. He had her laughing in a matter of seconds. She waved for him to come inside.

*How does he do it? Servicing . . . hmmm. He sure knows how to drum up business.*

I wrote down her address and time of day that he entered, as I chuckled, *Servicing? Now there's a double entendre. Like I'm going to forget where she lives. After all, I am only human. Ah forget it. There has to be more beauties like her.*

I forced my mind back to the job at hand. I finished Mayberry lane at a slower pace. Handover Court is three blocks long, ending at a culdesac. The houses on this street are large and very expensive. The driveways are steep and deep. My shoulders were tired from carrying hundreds of bottles of milk, eggs, and butter and whipped cream. The dash clock read 2:40 p.m. I left Bob at 1:20 p.m. *I'm sure he won't mind if I finish these last few houses before I pick him up. He's probably taking a nap.*

I found my way back to 3888 Mayberry Lane, like I'd been there a hundred times. I sat patiently. Ten minutes passed. I had to have one more look at that girl. The one time I'm not watching the door, I hear it close. Bob entered the truck all smiles.

"Well, Kid, we've got ourselves a new customer. Candy and her sister, Dolores, live together. They need two bottles of Homo, so run them up, and leave them on the porch and ring the bell."

*Maybe she will answer the door before I leave. Wouldn't that be great!* Before I could touch the doorbell button, the door opened. I wasn't about to leave.

"Oh, thank you. Please hand me the bottles. We don't want them to break do we?" She pushed the screen door open. It was she. I felt frozen looking into her hazel eyes.

Her long black hair encircled her face and rested on her shoulders. The short peach dress she wore was all that she had on. She even smelled like a peach. Her soft, chiseled features and full lips were inches from my face.

My male hormones were squirming inside. I wanted to grab her and hold her tight against my body as I kissed those beautiful lips. *It wasn't going to happen today.* She smiled at me as I handed her the two bottles. I had to say something, "Thank you. Have a nice day."

"You're welcome, and you do the same."

Her soft, inviting voice gave me a feeling of *some day . . . some way . . . some day.*

Bob was waiting as I approached the truck. He started the truck. As we turned around to head back toward the Dairy, Bob remarked, "Did you see her sister?"

I didn't say a word. *But how about Candy first? Yeah!*

Janet's phone answered on the first ring. She was crying, really crying.

"Oh, Jess, I've been waiting for you to call. I must see you. Can you come over?"

"Sure. Are you all right?"

"Yes, just come. I need you. I'm alone."

*What could it be?* My mind had a panic feeling, *Oh . . . please don't be pregnant. I'd been so careful. Are you sure?* My legs pumped the bike pedals faster with each revolution. *Why is my heart pounding so hard? I'm too young to have a heart attack.* One more block to go.

Janet came running down the stairs to greet me. Her face and eyes were red from crying. We hugged. I asked gently, "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

She squeezed me harder. Her tears were running down my neck. Sobbing, she said, "Everything. Please, let's go inside."

She rested her head on my shoulder as we walked up the steps together. "Jess, I need to freshen up. I don't want you seeing me like this. Please, wait in the den. I won't be long."

Janet finally entered the den. The few minutes she took seemed like an eternity. I looked at Janet's sweet face. The tell tale tears were washed away. I kissed her cheeks and lips lightly. I slowly pushed away from our closeness. My heart was pounding harder while I waited for her to say something. I couldn't wait anymore.

"Tell me, Honey, what is it, what's troubling you?"

She controlled the building up of her tears with a tissue. "Jess, Darling, I'm scared. I don't know what to do. I don't want to lose you.

I've fallen in love with you. I may never see you again."

She started to cry again.

"Janet, please control yourself. I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm sorry, Jess. Just give me a second." The seconds turned into a couple of minutes. Finally, she smiled. "Jess, you're so sweet and patient. I've never cried like this before. I'm all right now." She took a deep breath. "My father received notice to report to Kelly Air Force Base. That means moving permanently to San Antonio, Texas. The Air Force has arranged for the sale of our house. We have to leave next Tuesday. Jess, this happened last night. My parents left early this morning. I've been going nuts."

*Did I hear her right? Or is this just a dream?*

I swallowed. The saliva felt like a pebble running down into my throat. I could feel the tears getting ready to pop. I reached for Janet.

My arms brought her close to me. *I didn't want her to see my tears. Guys are supposed to be tough.* My strength left me. I hung on long enough to gain my composure.

"You know something, you're even pretty when you cry."

She tried to smile, I continued. "Janet, you've been everything to me. Without you, I'll be lost. I need time to think .

..

Let's get out of here. How about a movie. A funny one?"

"OK. Yeah, yeah, that's a good idea." We walked out the door, holding each other.

"Janet, we can ride double on my bike. I want you close to me."

"Jess?"

"Yes."

She paused. "My mother and father return from San Antonio, Texas in the morning. Say you'll stay the night with me."

"We won't get much sleep."

She looked at me with her loving eyes, "Promise."

"Just one thing, Janet. I'll have to go home after the movie. My parents go to sleep early. I'll be back by eleven."

"Oh, Jess, I can't wait."

The bedroom door to my parents room was closed.

Janet was sitting on her porch in the dark, waiting for me. She watched me hide my bike behind the bushes in her front yard. I felt like a mini Bob as we closed the front door behind us.

Janet's sheer bathrobe was held together with a thin ribbon. She jumped up into my arms, wrapping her bare feet around my waist. We kissed passionately. I didn't have time to think about her leaving. I knew I only had five nights to store up on our lovemaking, and all I wanted to think about was the now. Janet's legs slid down mine.

The look in her eyes meant only one thing. "Jess, let's go to bed." I followed her. She closed the door, saying, and "Take off your clothes, Jess I'm way ahead of you." With that, she opened her robe, showing me her beautiful, inviting nude body.

We made love the night and morning through. Our only conversation was about how much we loved each other. The clock chimed three. Janet was wide awake. I whispered into her ear, "Janet, I have to take a shower. I have to be at the dairy at four thirty."

"Will I see you tonight?"

"You'll see me this afternoon and tonight. I've gotta go. I'll call you the moment I get home."

"I love you, Jess."

"I love you too, Honey."

Janet was on my mind as I drove the Divco truck to Route One. I glanced at Bob. He was fast asleep. His head moved in rhythm from the ruts in the road.

*Was I ever lucky today. Bob had no pit stops. Twenty-five to one, he's still tired from yesterday. Not me. I called Janet the moment I got home. I couldn't get enough of her. The chill of fear shivered its way down my spine, knowing she will be leaving me in a few days. We spent the night together but still hadn't discussed our plans.*

*What plans? I'll be fifteen in two weeks. I have a lifetime to make plans. I know she's going to bring up the subject. I need time to think. Yeah, how about spending Sunday going over everything.*



I remember saying to Janet last night during our bus ride to our favorite place of concupiscence (*lust*). "The end of August - the days are shorter for golfers and the nights are early for lovers."

*Dad let me drive the car home from church. If I had been Catholic, I could have confessed all my sins and gone out and done them all over again.*

I met Janet at 11:00 a.m. She said, with a smiling face, "Hi, Jess. I have everything packed and ready for our picnic at Lake Chumong."

"You don't mind the long bike ride?"

"Don't worry about me. I can keep up."

"That's my girl. Let's go."

We pedaled up James Cousins Highway. I figured we could make the twelve mile trip in an hour's time, if we averaged twelve miles per hour.

We pedaled side by side all the way to Lake Chumong. We didn't talk much, due to the heavy traffic noise. We just enjoyed each other and read each other's smiling eyes.

We found a nice, secluded place under a weeping willow tree that was close to the water.

"How about a little dip in the lake before lunch?"

Janet unloaded her bike and came up with a blue and white striped sheet, our favorite blanket went on top. *I've got to hand it to her. She's always thinking about beds.* I watched Janet take off her clothes. She rolled her jeans into a loaf, placing a shoe on either end. Her long yellow man's shirt opened to expose her lemon colored bikini. Janet's eyes rose, catching mine.

My pants were off with a blink of the eye. *I've had a lot of practice lately. Am I going to miss this.* I looked at Janet, "I'm going to give you a head start. The last one in becomes the first one's slave for the day."

Janet took off. I caught up to her a few yards before the water. We were cheeks to cheek, racing for the lake. I dove. When I came up, I turned around to find Janet kneeling on the lake's edge, bowing to me, saying, "Yes, master."

I hollered, "Come here, you little serf."

"Your command is my desire, master."

The water was clear. We took our suits off. They sank, finding the sand below. We held hands as we dove to the bottom. We looked at each other, exhaling all of the water out of our lungs, making us non-buoyant. Our nude bodies united. We made love and swam for the next hour.

Janet said, "Master, I will go prepare our lunch."

The thoughts of her leaving were becoming apparent. "Okay, sweetheart, I'll be there in a few minutes." *How am I going to handle this? I don't want her to go. I can't move to Texas.*

We ate our wonderful, moist chicken breasts, coleslaw, and French fries with lots of ketchup and cokes to wash it down, in silence. Janet put everything away, then came to sit close to me. We hugged and kissed, working up a high tense passion.

Janet's teary voice worked my ear, "Jess, what am I going to do? I don't want to live without you."

I kept quiet.

Janet continued. "I want to have your baby. If I can't have you, I'll have part of you."

Have my baby? *Come on! I could just see little sperm cells working their way toward the egg. That would take a lot of explaining!*

"Janet, listen to me. I love you more than I know how. Look at me." She gave me a longing look, as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Janet, we have a future. Let's finish school, then we can talk about babies."

Her eyes bubbled up again. "You mean that?"

"Of course I do."

"Jess, there couldn't be anyone but you."

"There won't have to be. Three years is just around the corner." *I had to reassure her. That's all she wanted.* Janet's head was resting on my chest. I stroked her hair, saying, "Why don't we head back, we'll beat the traffic. Besides, I've found a wonderful place for us tonight."

"Anything you say, Jess. Will you write?"

"Will you forget about babies?"

She started to cry again. "Jess, will you wait for me?"

"You know I will. I promise."

We kissed. *I was getting a little confused. I kept our conversation to a minimum.*

My timing was right on. We got back just as the dark curtain came down. The silhouette of the new housing project was in eyesight. Janet followed me, dodging the debris littered work streets.

The last house at the end of the block was nearly finished. We drove our bikes through the front door opening. I handed Janet one of my trusty pen lights. We carefully climbed the stairway. I reached for Janet's hand. She was nervous. "Jess, isn't this called trespassing?"

I gently pulled her toward me. "Slaves don't ask questions, they take orders."

"Yes, master."

We entered the first opening to the right. I pointed my pen light downward. Janet's light was flashing all over the room. I cautioned, "Janet, we don't need to announce our arrival." She turned off the pen light. As we walked around the large room, I whispered, "This must be the

master bedroom. Look, there's a fireplace at the other end of the room."

We spent the next two nights making love in front of that fireplace.

The car's flashing turn signal would be the end of Janet and me. I could feel the tears running down my sad face.

## CHAPTER TEN

Bob wheeled the big Divco truck to a stop in front of 1501 Old Maple Drive. I had asked Bob why he collected delivery charges every two weeks instead of each week. His answer was simple, "Too much paper work."

We worked Old Maple Drive, collecting checks and cash from each chute. I logged in the amount from each house as I collected them. Bob had a locked box fastened on the dash for the checks and cash. I deposited all monies and checks into the slot on the box.

Route One was completed on Thursday. We went through the same procedure Friday.

Tonight was a lonely night for me. No Janet to call or be with. I didn't realize I would go through such pain.

My parents were aware of what I was going through. I remember my Dad saying, "Son, everyone experiences difficult situations growing up. Do the best you can to face up to them."

*I fell asleep with thoughts of the future.*

Saturday was pay day for me. I loaded the truck, then went inside the cafeteria to tell Bob the truck was loaded. I found Bob sitting at a table going through his paper work.

"Good morning, Bob, we're loaded. I'm ready when you are."

He raised his head with an angry reply, "Go wait in the truck. I want to talk to you."

I searched my mind trying to figure out the reason for his being angry. *What had I done?*

Bob arrived fifteen minutes later. I was sitting in the jump seat. His huge body and angry face stood over me. I said softly, "What's up, Bob?"

"I'll tell you what's up, you little fucking thief. Last night I went through all the cash and checks. We were short \$346.00."

I looked Bob straight in the eyes. "I don't understand what you're talking about. I put all of the checks and cash in the box and logged in each one who left a payment."

Bob's face was turning red. He blurted out, "I spent the better part of last evening calling the odd and even sides of the routes, asking customers if they had forgotten to leave their payments. You know what they all said?"

"No, I don't."

"You don't know? For your information, they all said, 'There must be a mistake.' They all left their money in the empty bottles as usual."

I took all of this in. "Bob, why would I take money that didn't belong to me? I never have in the past and I haven't now."

"Bullshit! You're the only one who knows the routes as well as I do. You knew which days were collection days."

My whole body was shivering from this accusation. I had not taken his money. I looked at Bob with tears in my eyes, saying, "Bob, I swear I did not take any money from your customers."

He looked at me, shaking his head. "Jess, I trusted you. I believed in you and I gave you total responsibility." I tried to defend myself. He interrupted me. "Kid, I don't know how you did it. You think you're so damn clever, but not

this time. You probably took the cash from both sides of each route and tried to make it appear the customers had forgotten to leave their payments."

"I . . . "

"Don't open your mouth. I don't want to hear anymore of your lying. Get your ass off of my truck. You're through here and you can forget about your salary. You've stolen more than enough to make up for what you've earned. Now, get out of here before I throw you out."

My head hung low walking away from his truck. The long bike ride home was the loneliest I had ever had. I felt like the victim being sent to the gas chamber without a chance for an appeal.

My bedroom was my only place to run and hide. *Face things? Yeah, face things. Sure.* I didn't want anyone to see my face. *What am I going to do?* I spent all day and night in my room.

Sunday morning my mother knocked on my door. "Good morning, Son. Come on, get up. We're going to church after breakfast."

I didn't think God or anyone could help me. I had to make an excuse. "Mom, I don't feel well. Do you mind if I sleep in?"

"Are you coming down with a cold?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'll be all right."

"Do you need anything?"

"No thanks, Ma. I'll see you later, okay?"

She let me be. I heard the car leave.

The cold shower pounding on my head gave me the energy to get dressed. I walked up Treasury Way to get some air. Maybe I could think better with a little oxygen. I turned the corner onto Finkle Street. I heard a familiar voice, "Hey, Jess, where are you going?"

I looked up. That voice came from my Uncle Harry, my Dad's twin brother. *I did my best to hide my feelings.*

Uncle Harry was behind the wheel of his powder blue 1957 Thunderbird. This car was his fun car, and it was in pristine condition. The top was off and he was puffing on a cigar. I crossed Finkle Street and went around to the passenger side.

"Come on, Son, get in. I haven't seen you these past few weeks."

The blue leather seats matched the exterior of his car. I opened the door and sat next to Uncle Harry. He squeezed my left thigh. Uncle Harry knew something was troubling me. *I don't know how he did but he did.*

"Jess, let's take a little ride together.

"Sure. Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

He shifted into drive, the tires screeched and the mufflers bellowed. We drove for about five minutes. Uncle Harry pulled to the curb and parked the T-Bird in front of a place called Ben's Beer Garden. "Come on, Son, we'll get a couple of stools and talk a bit."

The bar was filled with men and women drinking and laughing. Harry knew everyone in the place. Several people asked, "Who's the good looking young man?"

Harry said, "My nephew. We've got some man talk." We found two stools at the end of the bar.

Ben the bartender owner came over, "What's your pleasure, Harry?"

"The usual. And give my nephew a beer in a coke glass."

Ben smiled and obliged. I knew this was illegal. Uncle Harry looked at me, "Don't worry, no one is going to say anything. Besides, Ben's a good friend of mine."

*Maybe this is just what I need.*



We sipped our beers in silence. Uncle Harry broke the silence.

"Come on, Son, tell me what's ailing you."

My tongue seemed to loosen up. I told Harry my story about the so-called stolen money. He listened, ordered us another round and a hamburger. I felt great. My troubles left me as I listened to him explained what I should do.

"Son, the first thing you do is prove your innocence."

I thought, then asked, "How am I going to do that?"

"Easy, all you have to do is wait two weeks for Bob's next collection days. Then go to his route at 3:00 a.m. and wait. Thieves like these repeat the same crimes."

"You know, Uncle Harry, I think you've got something there. I'll do exactly what you said. One thing, what do I do if I see someone robbing the milk chutes?"

Uncle Harry smiled, "If you recognize them, fine, if not, follow them to see where they live. Keep this to yourself. When the time's right, convince Bob to go with you. This will give you the chance to prove him wrong."

"Thanks, Uncle Harry. I'll get them."

"I know you will, Son. One more thing - don't say a word to your Dad . . . about having a beer with me."

"I promise. Mum's the word."

Uncle Harry called Ben over for the check. He dropped me off at the corner of Finkle Street and Treasury Way. Before he left, he said, "Good luck, Son. Let me know how things work out."

I was thrilled with his plan. "You bet, Uncle Harry. And thanks. You're the best uncle a guy could have."

I watched him drive off. Dad and Uncle Harry are best friends. They're very much alike. Except Uncle Harry likes to have a few beers, Dad doesn't. I won't make it a habit, but it sure took off the edge. I smiled to myself, "thanks again, Uncle Harry."

I held my head high as I walked the two remaining blocks home.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

High school registration was next week. I spent that time working around the house. My jeans were getting a little tired looking so I bought two new pairs.

Cooley High School was two blocks square and made of solid brick, with windows surrounding the building's three floors. This was the largest school I had ever been in. I had to use a map to find my way around. The long hallways were lined with lockers on both sides. The rooms were twice the size of Guest Grade School. *I'm in the big time now.*

The gymnasium was much larger than a professional basketball arena. It was stocked with hanging ropes, rings and bars, high jump stands and pole vault pits, with deep cushions to land on. A running track above the gym circled the floor. The swimming pool was a hundred meters long, with twenty-foot-high diving platforms. I walked the school yard, which held a regulation baseball diamond, a full-sized football field, and a running track that was set up around the football field.

There was even a small golf driving range encircled by netting. My classes consisted of Mathematics, English, Science, History and a foreign language class. I decided upon French. For sports, I chose golf. My classes commenced at 8:00 a.m. and continued through 2:30 p.m.

*It feels great being a freshman.* My classes would be full of new information. The teachers were older, stricter and expected all work to be finished on time.

The twelfth grade seniors maintained the third floor. The eleventh grade junior students had the second floor. That left the freshmen and sophomores on the first floor. Seniors and juniors looked down upon freshmen as 'breathers of their air space.' When we saw them, we held our breath. Our humor and antics kept them happy. I wasn't about to overstep my boundaries.

My classes were evenly divided, half girls and half boys. This first week was get-acquainted week with classmates and teachers. I hoped I might see some of my friends from Guest. Not one!

My mind drifted back to Guest and the night of our Prom. A beacon of light brought Sara Fuller's face into my mind's eye. I hadn't thought of her since that night.

*I'm thinking of her now. What did she say about what street she lived on? I've got it. Mumford High, Grand Point Drive, Jack Fuller.*

I called Sara the moment I returned home from school. The phone was picked up on the first ring.

"Hello."

The whispering 'hello' sounded like Gail Russell. "Hi, Sara, this is Jess Sterling."

"Jess, how are you? I was hoping you would call."

"I was hoping you would answer."

"I just walked in. How have you been?"

"Busy with enrollment at Cooley. How about you?"

"I've been doing the same at Mumford. Did you have a nice summer vacation?"

"Yes, it was nice. How about yours?"

"A bit lonely but okay."

*A bit lonely she says? Maybe I can fill that void.*

"Sara, tomorrow's Saturday and I have the whole day with nothing to do. Would you like to meet?"

"Jess, I would love to. You just tell me the time and the place and I will be there."

"Well, how about meeting at noon? Do you know the White Castle on Hubble, it's near you?"

"I sure do. I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"Me, too, Sara. I'll see you tomorrow. Goodbye for now." *She sure is adventurous. I wonder what I'm getting into? Does it matter?*

The mailman just left, leaving a letter from Janet.

*My Darling Jess,*

*These past few weeks have been miserable for me. I miss you with all my heart. Texas is hot and boring. Why can't you be here with me? I need you close to me. I want you ever so close to me. Please write and tell me how much you miss me. I hope you do.*

*All my love,  
Janet*

It was so good to hear from her. I'll answer her letter tomorrow. I rolled up to the White Castle at 11:55 a.m., and locked my bike to the light pole near the front door entrance. Sara was sitting in a booth at the rear of the restaurant. How could I miss her? She had on a pink jump suit and her dark hair and eyes radiated. She smiled as I walked toward her. *How could she have been lonely?*

I took the seat opposite her. "Hi, Sara, you're even more beautiful than I remember."

"Jess, you say the nicest things."

*I wasn't about to tell her, she was the girl of my dreams, yet.* "Sara, you sure are punctual. I love that quality."

"Jess, you're someone to be early for."

*She even says all the right things.*

"Sara, what would you like to eat?"

"I'd like whatever you're having."

"How does a hamburger and a thick milk shake sound?"

"That does sound good to me."

I went to the counter and ordered our lunch. I waited for the burgers and shake. Sara got up, walked over and stood next to me. I handed Sara the shakes and carried our burgers to the table. I took a bite out of my burger. Our eyes locked. Her eyes captured mine. I needed a swig of my shake to cool me down.

"Sara, I asked you yesterday how your summer was. You said 'lonely but okay.' How could someone as beautiful as you be lonely?"

"I worked all summer as a cashier at Insta-Photo, and I had been seeing too much of Bob Doyle. You remember Bob, from your prom. Anyway, we parted friends and I just wanted to be alone."

I looked at her. "Were you broken hearted?"

"No. Just alone."

"Sara, how about us spending the afternoon together?"

"I would love that, Jess."

"Do you like action adventure movies?"

"Yes. What movie did you have in mind?"

"There rerunning James Bond movies, today's showing is, 'From Russia With Love'. How about that?"

"Great."

"We can just make the matinee. How did you get here, Sara?"

"I took the bus."

"How about riding double on my bike?"

United Artist Theater was just a few blocks away. Sara looked cute riding on the handle bars. She rocked back and forth as I peddled. We found a seat in the rear of the theater. The movie was fun. What action! We held hands throughout the movie. She squeezed my hand every time 007 got into a jam. During the end titles she turned my face toward hers and gave me a big kiss. Her lips were soft and moist. I felt my male hormones rise.

Sara didn't want to go home just yet. She said, "Jess, is there somewhere we can sit in privacy?"

"Sara, I don't know this area. Isn't there a park close by?"

"Good idea. Turn right. There's one at the end of this block." We found a sunny spot in the center of the park, next to a duck pond.

We got off my bike and sat on the grass. I looked at her fabulously beautiful face and kissed her lips gently. We fell backward, and she rolled herself on top of me. We kissed and kissed. She was breathing hard, saying, "Jess, I wish we could make love right here."

She caught me off guard. *Is it that easy? I thought quickly.* "What are you doing tomorrow night?"

"Nothing. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I don't know!"

"We'll find out. See that group of trees at the far end of the park? It gets real private there around 7:00 p.m."

"Fine. I'll be here at seven."

"Jess, I'll even be a few minutes early."

"Come on beautiful, I'll drive you home."

"I only live a few blocks from here. Now, don't you be late." We kissed.

I checked the names of the streets while riding Sara home. My thoughts of tomorrow night made my ride home a fun one.

I felt great Sunday morning. I even went to church. Dad and I went for a long drive after church.

Dad said, "You handle this car beautifully."

"Thanks, Dad."

*If he knew I had been driving the milk truck without a licensed driver. Well, he isn't going to know.*

Sara was at the park when I arrived. I brought a blanket, and my trusty penlights to see Sara's face. We nestled ourselves into the dense trees.

She said, "Jess, how sweet of you to think of bringing a light."

"I don't want to lose you in the dark." We both laughed.

Sara had her clothes off in seconds. *I thought we would work up to making love.* Thoughts of Janet's innocence raced through my mind, and my subconscious mind reminded me to be careful. But, my hormone conscious mind led me on. My conscious and subconscious battled back and forth.

I finally said, "Sara, we have to be careful."

"Don't worry, Jess, I'm on the pill."

My mind finally gave me the word, *Don't worry, she's the kind of girl you can't let get your heart.*

Sara was more experienced than I was used to. I fell prey to her every wish. I couldn't help it, and let myself go. I've never felt like this before. We made love for the next two hours.

We lay there exhausted, but completely fulfilled. Finished . . . After a long moment, Sara turned, looked at me, smiled and then got up. "Jess, you're better than I ever imagined. We should get dressed, I have to be home by 10:00 p.m."



She smiled again, "Jess, I'll be busy all week. Maybe we can get together this coming weekend."

*I thought about what she said.* "Sure, Sara, I'll give you a call."

"You know, Jess, you remind me of James Bond."

"How's that?"

"He always gets the girl."

*Yeah, and who is she? The female SPECTRE? She hardly knows me. She didn't even ask about Janet. "Wham, bam, thank you, sir." Well, have her when you want, not until then.*



## CHAPTER TWELVE

I thought this morning would never arrive. The seven mile bike ride, in a constant rain drizzle, gave me determination. I peddled up Old Maple Drive to the end of the first block. I hid in the shadows, out of the rain, under the ominous branches of Maple trees. I had a view for two blocks. My watch read 3:05 a.m. I waited and waited. It seemed like hours. I looked at my watch again. It was only 3:20 a.m. *Oh, please be right, Uncle Harry.*

Sounds of running feet splashing through the puddles in the street brought my attention to the middle of the second block. I quietly rode toward that sound. I came to an abrupt halt. My eyes followed someone running up and down driveways on the even numbered side. My peripheral vision picked up another person running on the odd side. I followed the two, making sure they didn't see me.

The rain stopped, as did my pounding heart. *How am I going to recognize who they are? I had to take a gamble.* I spun around and headed one block over to Castle Place. I know these streets like the back of my hand. I peddled up Castle Place for two blocks. *If I'm going to see who they are, this is the perfect place. No trees.*

I pulled into one of the driveways in front of the car that sat opposite the milk chute. I quickly opened the chute. I flicked my pen light on, exposing the inside of the chute. I

saw money stuffed into an empty bottle with a note. The parked car hid me and my bike. I waited. In a matter of minutes, I heard running footsteps coming up the driveway.

*Well, aren't they smart. They even have flashlights, big ones.* The chute opened. A face was exposed by the reflection off of the empty bottles. *Well, what do you know? Mr. Trouble, himself, Curt Johnson.* He ran off with the money. I had to see who his accomplice was. I circled the block and went through the same procedure on the other side of the street. I'd seen this strange looking guy before, leaving Curt Johnson's house. His red hair stood straight up on the top of his head, like the pimples that protruded from his ugly face. I didn't need his name. I knew who they were.

I got home at 5:00 a.m., took a hot shower, washing the early morning shivers away. These past two weeks have been miserable, waiting for this moment.

*Curt Johnson, I've got your ass now. I can't wait. First school today, then Bob.*

Bob pulled the big Divco truck onto the unloading dock. I ran up to his truck and shouted, "Hey, Bob, "I'll unload your empties, if you'll give me two minutes of your time."

"Don't try to con me. I told you to keep your ass away from my truck."

"Please, Bob. This is life or death for me. I need this chance to prove my innocence. That's all I ask."

He looked down at me, "All right, make it snappy."

I detailed everything I had gone through this morning. I think he half believed me. I pleaded, "I know how to catch these guys. Look, if they don't show up tomorrow morning, I'll pay you whatever you've lost, including today."

"Kid . . . ,," he paused for the longest time. Finally,  
"The one thing I like about you is your guts. Okay, unload  
and park the truck."

"Thanks, Bob, ah . . . Bob, we can't take the truck, it  
would be too conspicuous."

"All right, all right."

"Tomorrow at 2:30 a.m.?"

"I'll be here."

*Whew . . . ! I did it. I did it. They've got to show up.  
What if they don't?*

I locked my bike next to Bob's truck. I glanced up into  
the sky. The moon was full. What a break. Thank you,  
God.

Bob rolled up at exactly 2:30 a.m. The window of his  
car slid down. "Jess, run in and get two coffees?"

I was prepared and held up a thermos. Bob smiled.  
"Get in."

The big Cadillac was quiet. Bob didn't say a word,  
neither did I. He turned left onto Elm Street. I whispered,  
"Bob, would you pull down to the end of the block?"

"What are you whispering for?"

"Just caution."

We parked. We waited and waited. Fifteen minutes  
went by . . . twenty minutes . . . it was too quiet. The back  
of my neck was getting wet. My eyes kept searching.  
Nothing. I looked at Bob. "Maybe they're on the next  
street."

"They'd better be!"

We slowly rounded the corner to Mayberry Lane. He  
pulled to a stop and turned off the lights. We waited. Bob  
didn't bug me. But, I had the feeling he was losing his  
patience. The seconds seemed like minutes, finally, half  
way down the block I saw the familiar shadows of last  
night. "Bob, look to your left. Do you see what I see?"

He was quiet for a second or two. I didn't wait for him to answer. "Look, at the other side."

Bob finally spoke, "Let me watch a little longer." His face had a look of surprise. I heard the click of his door handle.

"Wait a second, Bob. I have a plan."

"Okay, Kid . . . What?"

"Let's circle the street for a block. We'll park and catch them coming toward us."

Bob didn't hesitate. We circled the block, parked and got out of the car. Bob said, "Let's go get 'em!"

"It's too hard to chase them, Bob. As soon as they run up a driveway, we'll run up the driveway a few houses ahead of them. We'll have to wait until we see them take the money out of the chute."

"Good plan, Kid. You take the odd, I'll get the even."

When the coast was clear we both took off in opposite directions. *This is the moment I've been waiting for.* I stooped behind the parked car in the driveway. *Here he comes.* I could see Curt Johnson's face clearly. The moon and his flashlight gave him away. I crept up behind Curt, and I waited until he raised his head. With both of my hands I shoved Curt's face into the brick siding of the house.

Curt dropped, grabbing his nose. *I hope I broke it.* I pulled his right arm behind his back and shoved it up to his neck. He screamed in agony. I smiled in relief. *I had my thief.*

My arm lock on Curt Johnson had him walking on his toes. Curt's accomplice was on his knees in the driveway, facing me, as I pushed Curt toward him. I let go of Curt's arm. "Get down on your knees, Curt." I pulled off Curt's jacket.

Curt mumbled, "I didn't do anything."

I slapped the top of Curt's head. "Shut up!"

Pimples spoke up, "What do you think you're doing? You're not the police. We have our rights."

I pulled off his jacket, then handed both jackets to Bob. "Bob, take a look in the pockets."

Bob went through both jackets, finding hands full of money and notes. He read some of the notes before he said a word.

"Boys, where did you get this money?"

Curt spoke up, "It's our money. You have no right going through our pockets."

Pimples spoke up again, "Yeah. What do you think you're doing. It's our money, you son-of-a-bitch." He started to get up.

*I've been waiting for this moment.* "What bitch are you a son of, you bastard?" I grabbed his slippery, grimy, disgusting red hair and gave him a solid punch to his kidneys, and he quickly fell back to his knees.

"Bob, I know this one, his name is Curt Johnson. He lives two houses from me." I looked at grease ball.

"What's your name?"

"Fuck you."

The porch light went on, lighting up the driveway. A man came out and inquired, "What's going on?"

"Call the police, Mr. Murfield," I yelled. The door closed.

I looked down at nameless. "That's all right, shit head. The police will get your name."

Bob said, "Boys, stay right where you are. Can you handle these two, Jess?"

"You bet I can, Bob."

Mr. Murfield came out again. Bob walked over to him and explained the situation. The police arrived in a few minutes. We both gave the police a complete rundown.

Officer Mc Mann asked, "Do you want to press charges?"

Bob said, "I don't know."

I interrupted, "Yes, officer, I want to press charges. These guys have cost me my job and a lot of money."

My outspokenness brought Bob around. "Officer, the kid's right. I do want to press charges."

The officer sent his partner to the car for the paper work. I said, "Officer Mc Mann, will this take long?"

"You're looking at forty-five minutes."

"Officer, would it be okay if I left? I have to get ready for school."

"That will be fine, son. Mr. Servo can sign the complaint."

"Thank you, officer. You are going to sign the complaint, aren't you, Bob?"

"Yes, Jess, I sure am."

"Good. I got to run."



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*I can't believe it. Three weeks of school have gone by that quickly?* My classes are becoming fun. We get into some heavy debates in our History and English classes. I've really taken to French. Must be the luck of the Irish, I met a French girl.

Bridget is the class beauty. She came to America as an exchange student. We sit next to each other, exchanging looks, winks and smiles. Her oval face, green eyes, thick brown eyebrows, curly brown hair and full red lips keep me watching. And, when she smiles, I automatically blush after I've seen those perfect white teeth and dimpled cheeks.

My French is improving rapidly with Bridget's expert tutoring, especially, "Voulez vous coucher avec moi cherie." She responds, 'Oui monsieur, apre school.' And, I respond, "Oui, oui, mademoiselle." We've become fast friends, we go everywhere together. Tonight I will introduce Bridget to Pizza.

I came directly home from school to knock off my homework, freeing my evening for Bridget. To my surprise, my sweet mother was home earlier than usual. Mom always has a smile on her gorgeous face. Dad had said she was the most beautiful woman he had ever met, and still is. He's right. Mom is a darker, older,

sophisticated version of Mrs. Gladstone. Dad and I share similar tastes in the female gender. *Must be hereditary.*

"Hi, Mom, you're home early. Are you sick? Do you need anything?" I liked to pull her leg. She let me.

"Son."

I looked at her, "I didn't do it."

"Put your books away and come into the living room, I have something to discuss with you."

"Sure thing, Mom. I'll be right in."

*I wonder what's on her mind? Did I do something?*  
*Nah.*

I entered the room and sat opposite my mother. "What's up?"

"Jess, Bob Servo just left. To my surprise, he had some very interesting, secret happenings to tell me . . . about you."

"Oh?"

"Son, how come you didn't tell your father and me about being fired and why? You know we both live and breathe for you."

"I . . . I guess I was too ashamed to say anything."

"You hadn't done anything wrong. Even if you had, your Dad and I were here to help."

"Mom, I had to prove my innocence, in my own way."

"Son, Bob told me the whole story. He feels terrible about the way he treated you. The man had tears in his eyes. He left a letter for you." Mother gave me the look every boy wants from his mother. "Son, I'm proud of you. Your father has always said, 'Jess is a man, not a boy'. He knows the apple of his eye will shine."

She got up from her chair, walked over and gave me a kiss on the cheek while handing me the letter from Bob. I hadn't seen this kind of emotion from my mother before.

Tears rolled down her lovely face. Ma left, giving me privacy. I opened the letter, it read:

*Dear Jess,*

*I thought I had a better grasp of people.  
You're perspicacious, and your moxie  
thinking has blown my mind. Thanks for  
being the person I now know. Kid, please  
come to the Dairy on Saturday. I need your  
help.*

*Bob*

There was a smaller envelope enclosed with the letter. I opened it. It contained three hundred-dollar bills. *All's forgiven.*

"Hey, Mom, look what Bob left for me." I gave her the letter. She read it and smiled, while she held my three hundreds in her hand.

My money was soon stored with the rest of my cache. Dad knocked on my door. He entered, saying, "How's my man?"

"Oh, hi, Dad. I'm fine. How are you doing?"

"I've never felt better, Son. You proved yourself to be the kind of young man who makes a father glad that he is a father. Son, what would you like to do on your fifteenth birthday this Sunday?"

"How about stuffed cabbage and a birthday cake? And I would like to invite my new girlfriend."

"How about taking her for a ride in your new car?"

"What do you mean, new car?"

"I don't mean new, newer than you have. That was our deal, Son. Sunday morning, we'll find you a car. What do you say?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Thanks, Dad. I have enough money for a down payment. All I need is a co-signer."

"You've got one, Son. I'll even put you on our insurance."

"Thanks, Dad. Don't worry, I'll keep up the payments. I promise."

"I never had a doubt, Son." He left.

*I'm very lucky to have parents like I have.*

I finished my homework, took a shower, dressed, then headed for Ma Cheri Bridget.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bob's truck was sitting at the loading dock when I arrived. I hollered, "Servo," then pushed the red buzzer. The truck was loaded. I reached for the starter, no keys. Bob knew I had my own keys. *I missed driving this big truck.* I slowly pulled away from the loading dock, parked and headed for the cafeteria.

The booming voices of laughter echoed throughout the crowded room. Bob hollered, "Jess, over here." I walked over to Bob's table. Bob got up, wrapped his arm around my neck, "I'm glad to see you, Kid." Keeping me by his side, Bob shouted and waved for the crowded room to be quiet. You could hear a pin drop. Standing his full height, Bob spoke up, "Men, I have done a terrible injustice to this young man. All of you know I have been shooting off my big mouth, calling him a thief. Jess proved to me how wrong I was about him. He, single handedly, solved and caught the milk chute thieves." Bob looked down at me. There was a long silence. A slight murmur from the crowded room. "Jess, do you have it in your heart to forgive me?"

I was dumbfounded. I smiled at Bob, "You bet, boss."

"Thanks, Kid." Bob spoke to the men. "And you bunch of 'rub dubs.' how about your forgiveness?"

The men cheered, saying, "After you pay for breakfast."

"Breakfast is on me." Bob replied.

The men roared with laughter, "Glad you're back, Kid."

*Bob has a lot of class.* It took a man like him to admit he was wrong. *I can't wait to tell Uncle Harry.*

Bob called Sally over. "Sally, give 007 here, whatever he wants. It's on me."

Sally sauntered over to where I was sitting. "What's your pleasure, handsome?"

*If she only knew, it was her.*

"Hi, Sally. I would like three scrambled eggs easy, hash browns, thick bacon, wheat toast and coffee.

She blew me a kiss. I watched her walk away.

Mack walked over to our tables. "Hi, Kid, welcome back."

"Thanks, Mack. Won't you join us?"

"Next time, Jess. I've got to get an early start. Help like you ain't easy to find." He lightly punched Bob's arm.

Bob glanced over at me, "Jess, I'll fill you in when we get to the truck."

Sally arrived with my order. She put her lips to my ear and whispered, "Are you old enough yet?"

I turned, brushing her nose with mine. Man is she pretty. I whispered in return, "Any day now."

She smiled, "You know where I am."

Bob brought me out of my dream world. "Jess, eat up. I've got to go settle up before these guys decide to have lunch."

Talking with my mouth full, "I'll be with you in a jiffy."

We were on the road in no time. Bob was the first to break the silence. "Kid, I've sure needed you to help take up the slack. It's been lonely out here. You want to switch sides for a change?"

"Sure, Bob. Thanks for being the kind of man I knew you were. Thanks for the three hundred dollars. What was the extra hundred for?"

"A well deserved bonus."

"Okay, Bob, all the cordial stuff is over with. What happened with the milk chute thieves?"

"They were arrested and spent the weekend in jail. Their arraignment was Monday. I went to court. They pleaded guilty."

"Well, what was the sentence? Did they get life?"

Bob smiled, "Those two were lucky you weren't their Judge."

Bob was quiet for a few minutes. He turned right onto Old Maple Drive, stopped, cut the engine, and spun his stool around facing me. He licked his lips. "Kid, I met with the judge in his chambers, at his request. He explained that Curt and Rudy could get six months in jail."

"Good. When do they start their time."

"Jess, the Judge said, 'These two boys have clean records. If they go to jail, they may come out worse.' He suggested a three year probation. They also have to make restitution. And they are never to approach you or me. If they break any part of their probation, the Judge would not be lenient."

I looked at Bob during his whole explanation. I was thinking . . . that's why we have a court system and a judge to uphold that system. "Well, Bob, what did the Judge do?"

"He gave them three years probation, restitution of the stolen money and to pay for all damages. They'll avoid us like the plague. The Judge told them he had better not see them in his court again."

I was elated. "Bob, thanks. Let's go to work."

I started for the odd side. "Hey, Kid, has your memory gone?"

"Nope . . . just checking yours."

We both started to laugh, and Bob stuck out his hand for a five-fingered slap. The ice was broken.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Happy Birthday to me. Happy Birthday to me. I'm fifteen. I get a car today. I get a car today.*

Mom and Dad knocked on my door.

"Come in."

They sang Happy Birthday to me in unison. Dad said, "Catch."

I saw a shinny object come at me in slow motion. I opened my right hand. A set of car keys was attached to a silver chain. "Wow, what are these for?"

"For you, Son. It's in the garage."

"I thought . . ."

"Never mind son, I'll explain after you've seen it."

I was out the door in a flash. I opened the garage door and couldn't believe my eyes, a 1968, black, hatchback Mustang. The car looked like it had just come off the assembly line. Dad said, "Well, get in." I undid the large red ribbon they had wrapped through the front door windows. I got in, sitting on my black leather seats.

I looked at Mom and Dad in amazement, "This is just the car I've dreamed about. How did you know?"

Mom said, "A little bird told us."

I started the car. "Come on, let's go for a ride."

"You and your Dad go. I'm preparing dinner."

I felt the thrill of the engine through the seat of my pants. I shifted the automatic transmission into reverse. I backed the car down our long driveway. "Where do you want to go, Dad?"

"It's your car, Son, drive on."

I cruised the neighborhood. *What a thrill! Power steering, power brakes and power windows. I'll keep this car forever.* I pulled back into our driveway. I turned off my 318 Cleveland motor. "Dad, I can't thank you enough. You've got to tell me where you got this beauty."

Dad smiled, "Son, I got lucky. One of the men at work sold it to me instead of trading it in."

"Dad, how much did it cost?"

"Can you afford fifty dollars a month with six hundred down?"

"You bet I can. How many months?"

"Thirty six."

My mind was working out the financing. "Dad, can I pay off the eighteen hundred dollar balance sooner?"

"Very good calculating, Son. You could save a little interest. What's the rush?"

"None really, Dad. It sure would be nice to not owe any money. You know what I mean?"

"I sure do, Son. Oh, tomorrow morning, you and I will go to the DMV to get your license. Then, we'll go to the bank and work out the paper work. How does that sound?"

"Great, Dad. Would you do me one favor?"

"This is your day, Son."

"Could we pick up Bridget in my new car?"

"You bet we can. And we'll drive her home too."

I reached out my hand to shake my Dad's hand. *What unity.*

Dad and I purred to Bridget's. I went to fetch her while Dad waited. Bridget was waiting on her front porch as I

approached. Her smiling dimples greeted me. She was wearing a checkered, red and white, gingham dress.

I said, "Bonne soir, moi cheri."

She rushed down the stairs and kissed both of my cheeks. She spoke with her adorable French accent. "Bon soir, darling, comment-allez vous, ce soir."

"Tre bien, Bridget. Come, I want you to meet my father."

Her curly brown hair bounced as we walked to my car. Dad got out to greet her. "Bridget, I would like you to meet my Dad. Dad I would like you to meet my friend, Bridget Bouchet."

Dad smiled. *By the look on his face, I'm sure he was thinking how wonderful it is to be young.*

Dad threw me when he said, "Bon soir, Bridget, nice to make your acquaintance."

"Merci, Monsieur Sterling, the pleasure is all mine."

"Bridget, I'll sit in the back seat. I know you'd rather sit next to Jess, while he drives us home in his new car."

Bridget's eyes popped open, "Oh, Jess, what a beautiful car. You didn't tell me you were getting a car."

"Dad surprised me with it this morning."

Dad said, "Bridget, he'll have his driver's license tomorrow, then he can pick you up on his own."

I looked back at Dad and smiled.

Arriving home, I introduced Bridget to my mother. To my surprise, mother spoke French. Bridget and Mom were having a good time in the kitchen, going over the evening's dinner. William, Dad and I sat at the dinning room table, waiting to be served. William remarked, "Jess, I like your new car. When are you going to take me for a ride?"

"How about tomorrow after school?"

"Jess, can I invite a buddy of mine to go along?"

"You bet, little brother."

Dad said, "William, when you become fifteen, I'll make sure you get the same opportunity as your brother."

"Really? You mean that, Daddy?"

"That's for sure, Son."

Mom and Bridget brought our salads. Bridget sat next to me. I said grace. My brother couldn't take his eyes off of Bridget. Between mouthfuls, he said, "Bridget, do you have any sisters?"

"Yes, William. I have two sisters and a brother. My youngest sister is your age."

"Maybe you can introduce us, sometime."

"That would be tre difficile. My family lives in France."

"How come you're here, alone?"

"I came to America as an exchange student."

"Oh, . . . what does that mean?"

"Our two governments have encouraged both countries to exchange family students to learn each other's customs and languages."

"Bridget, how long are you able to stay in America?"

"I think I can stay for at least a year."

William continued, "Gee, that would be terrible if you had to go back to France."

"I know. I don't want to go back now." She looked at me with a searching look. I returned the look, smiled.

"William, she's only been here for a few weeks. I understand if her grades are good enough she will be invited back next year."

William seemed satisfied with my explanation and shut up for a while. I watched Mom and Dad during William's inquisitive questioning. They listened with interest, all the while smiling at each other.

Mom and Bridget cleared the salad plates. Bridget came out with a towel over her wrist, saying, and "Dinner is served."

One huge sliced ham, all kinds of vegetables and a large bowl of stuffed cabbage. We filled our plates. Bridget wanted to know what stuffed cabbage was. Mom explained, "Bridget, stuffed cabbage is a Rumanian meal. It's made with ground round, rice and onions and rolled into cabbage leaves. They're put in a large pot and simmered with sauerkraut and whole tomatoes. Try one. Its Jess's favorite."

She took a bite. "Mmm, I can see why Jess likes it so much."

I ate and ate, to my heart's content.

Mom and Bridget cleared the table again. Dad and I sipped our coffee. William was happy with his coke. The lights went dim. In came Mom with a candle-lit cake. Everyone sang Happy Birthday to me. I counted fifteen candles and blew them all out with one blow. "This is the best birthday I've ever had."

William excused himself and returned with a present for me. The crudely wrapped package he handed me was the size of a shoe box. I thought, maybe he bought me a pair of tennis shoes.

I opened the package. A gray metal bank with its own lock inside. I looked at my brother, holding the key and lock in my hand. "Thank you, brother. Are you sure this is the only key?" Everyone laughed.

Bridget handed me a nicely wrapped, small package and card. The card read:

*Happy Birthday Jess,  
I hope to spend many birthdays with you.  
Amour,  
Bridget*

The opened package revealed a silver ID bracelet, Jess Sterling, was written in script lettering. I leaned over to give her a kiss on the cheek. *The real kiss will have to wait until tomorrow.*

I passed the chain around for my parents and brother to see. Mom handed me a package with a card. I opened the card. The card had a big numeral 15 on its face. Inside, was written:

*Your age is beginning to show.*  
*Love,*  
*Mother and Dad*

I turned the card over to lay it down on the table. On the back, I saw my favorite color, green. A brand new, fifty-dollar bill was taped with a note written below: *For your first car payment.*

I thanked my parents then opened their package. It contained two polo shirts, six pairs of white sweat socks, and two three-packs of jockey under shorts. *They came just in time.*

We adjourned into the living room, after a great meal, for a little relaxation. *What a birthday dinner.*

Mom appeared with a tray of five glasses and a decanter of red wine. She filled the glasses, handing each of us one. William was given half of a glass of wine.

Mom said, "Happy Birthday, Son." We raised our glasses in a toast. She said, "Noroc." *Grandma was right when she had said, "Your mother will offer you some wine when the time is right."*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bob was pleased for me to work four hours every morning before school. I needed the extra money to make my car payments, for gas and Bridget.

I started loading Bob's truck at 4:00 a.m. We'd be on the road at 4:30 a.m. I followed Bob with Black Beauty. He picked me up on Rand Drive. By the time we finished Rand Drive, it would be close to 7:30 a.m. I'd run for my car and head for school.

The same procedure worked for the second route. Bob picked me up on Elm Street. When we got to the end of Elm Street, it would be close to 7:30 a.m. I'd be off for school again. The hours added up. Pay day was Saturday. Saturday was my favorite day.

The next three months went by quickly. *Bridget and I were getting hot and heavy.*

Mom and Dad invited Bridget for Thanksgiving Dinner. Bridget called to ask if I could pick her up a little earlier than planned. She wanted to talk something over with me.

*I wonder what she wants to talk about? I know she's not pregnant. Well, I'll know in a few minutes.*

I pulled up to the curb in front of Bridget's. Two light taps with the door hammer, and "Dimples" was looking me right in the face. She greeted me, "Bon soui moi darling. I missed you."

I grabbed her and planted one. *Humphry Bogart said that, or was it Jimmy Cagney?* She made me feel desired. It was a short kiss. *I didn't want the neighbors talking.*

"Bridget, come on, we'll drive a few blocks then park so you can tell me what's troubling you."

I turned off Black Beauty. Bridget had the saddest look. I didn't speculate. My fingertips touched her cute chin. "Sweetheart, please tell me why you're so sad." Tears were starting to bubble up in her eyes. I handed her my handkerchief. I waited.

"Oh, Jess, I must return to France tomorrow morning."

*Talk about being stunned. All I thought about was myself. I didn't want to lose her.* "What do you mean, tomorrow morning? What about school?"

She mumbled, "My mother's ill. The special letter arrived this afternoon, with a plane ticket. The letter said not to worry about school."

*Not to worry about school? No school, no Bridget!*

"Honey, this sounds serious. How ill is your mother?"

She sniffled through her stuffed nose and mumbled, "I don't want to leave. I have to. Jess, I'll go crazy without you."

"I'm going crazy, right now. Bridget, can you be a little more specific?"

"Darling, all I know is what I've just told you."

"Bridget, what can I do to help?"

"Darling, please be patient and wait for me."

"You know I will. You've got to let me know as soon as possible. I'll go nuts if I don't hear from you."

"Darling, I will write you when I know more."

"If I don't hear from you within a week, I'll call you." I grabbed my pen and scratch pad from my visor. "Give me your address and phone number."



"I live in a little town named, Eze, 166 La Neille Fontaine. My number is 23249."

"Good. Now I know where you are."

My parents were shocked. They were very sympathetic to Bridget. I knew the moment I took Bridget home; my Bon Voyage kiss would be the last kiss.

*First Janet, and now Bridget. My romances don't last. Maybe someday. I have two things going for me; very good grades and still making money. Yeah . . . big deal. What does the future hold?*



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

My first cup of coffee took off the early morning chill. The Dairy cafeteria was quiet, as was I. Sally came by to refill my cup.

"What's got handsome down?"

Her beautiful face was smiling. It's too bad mine wasn't.

"Would you believe, in two days it'll be New Year's Eve and I don't have a date."

She smiled, "Excuse me. I'll be right back." I watched her walk over to the counter. She came right back and handed me a piece of paper, reading, "I don't either, here's my phone number and address. I'll see you Friday night. How does 8:00 p.m. sound?"

*Did I hear her right?* I pointed my finger at her, then me. "You and me, Sally?"

"Yes. And don't be late!"

"Don't worry." *I have a car.*

"Not a word to anyone. See you Friday."

My whole insides lit up.

*I've got the best looking girl in the world for New Year's Eve. If you think you're too young, why did she ask you? Who cares. I'm going to have a ball.*

I reasoned with my guilty feelings, simply, Bridget's mother is very ill and she's not coming back.

Bob whistled, "Come on, Kid. We don't have all day."

*He was right. I have two days.*

We were rolling along in the truck when he asked, "Kid, where are you going for New Year's Eve?"

I smiled to myself. "Well, I'm not sure where. Yet."

He chuckled, "If you don't have a date, I could fix you up with one of my girls."

*One of his girls? If he only knew, and he won't.*

"Thanks, Bob. I have a date."

"Good, Kid. Now, if you ever get lonely, let me know."

"I sure will. And thanks, Bob."

*I'll bet he could spare one. He has hundreds.*

Bob would know. My curiosity was getting the better of me. Finally, "Bob, how come you haven't taken Sally out?"

He looked at me, "Oh, there's some interest, huh? I wondered when you'd ask."

"Gnaw, it's not that. Just conversation, you know, man to man."

"Don't think I haven't thought about her cute little quiff. Look, Kid, I don't like my meat bleeding."

"What do you mean?"

"Kid, she's too young. She may not look it but I've heard she's only 17 or just turned 18 years old. Plus, her father is a detective with Detroit's finest. You know what I mean?"

"You mean jail bait, is that right?"

"Good perception, Jess. Anything else you want to know?"

"No. Not right now."

Bob stopped in front of 1501 Old Maple Drive. "Kid, I've got to go across the street. Pick me up in an hour. By the way, this is for you."

He left. I opened the envelope. The note read:

*Have a Happy One on Me.*

*Bob*

I stared at General Grant. Bob made two pit stops this morning. I finished most of the route myself and was glad to. I was home at 4:00 p.m. I called Uncle Harry and took him for a beer. I was home at 6:00 p.m., just in time for dinner.

My mind went back to the conversation I'd had with Bob. 'She's too young, jail bait, father's a detective. Interested, huh?' *You bet, I'm interested in her. I'm sure glad the guys at the Dairy have kept their hands off. I wonder how long it will take me to keep mine off. After all, I am only human. And two young humans should be together.*

My dark blue suit fit better since I had it altered. I've grown two inches. I'm probably five feet ten inches now. And ten pounds heavier in less than a year. *Nature sure is funny.* I ran into one of my friends from Guest. Norman Thompson grew six inches and he towers over me now. Six feet would make me happy. *Maybe, by the time I'm eighteen.*

What a coincidence, Sally lives one block from the park where Sara and I had our one affair. I turned right onto Bloomingdale Avenue, stopped in front of 2629 - Sally's house. I knocked on the door at exactly 8:00 p.m. Sally's mother opened the door. She looked like Sally's older sister.

"Mrs. Blaine?"

She smiled, "Yes. And, you must be Jess Sterling."

"Yes, Mam. For a second, I thought you could have been Sally's sister."

"Why, thank you, Jess. You've just made my evening. Please come in. Sally will be with you shortly."

I followed her into the living room. "Jess, please take off your overcoat and have a seat next to the fire. Please, excuse me. I'm in the middle of cooking our New Year's Dinner," she said, as she went toward the kitchen. "My husband is expected home shortly. I'll tell Sally you're here."

What a great room, used brick covered the whole fireplace wall. High beamed ceilings and knotty pine walls. *I could live in a room like this.*

Sally entered, "Good evening, Jess." I got up to greet her. *I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. A real live angel.*

Her curly red hair rested gently on her shoulders. The beauty mark on her right cheek was a little darker. Her full lips were painted a light red. Her white evening dress was held up with two spaghetti string shoulder straps. I walked up to her. *I was surprised how tall she is.* We looked eye to eye.

"Sally, I've never seen a girl as beautiful as you." I handed her the little box I had hidden behind my back.

"Why, thank you, Jess. What a beautiful orchid. Pin it on me, Jess." I looked for a place to pin it. She pointed to one of her straps just above her right breast. I gently attached it. She moved close to me, kissing me lightly on my right ear.

She whispered, "You're very thoughtful, Jess."

I was lost for words. "Sally, maybe we should leave. I have nine o'clock reservations."

"I'll tell Mother we're ready. I know she would like to say goodnight to you."

Mrs. Blaine came out of the kitchen with Sally. Sally came over and stood beside me slipping her arm under mine. "What do you think, Mom?"

"Honey, the two of you are just beautiful. I wish your dad were here to see for himself."

"They'll be other times, Mom." I helped Sally with her coat.

I reached for Mrs. Blaine's hand. "Very nice to have met you. Happy New Year to you and Mr. Blaine."

"Thank you, Jess. You two be careful and have a wonderful time. Don't be too late, darling."

"We won't, Mom. Give Dad a kiss for me. Good night."

We drove on Grand River Boulevard toward Downtown Detroit. Sally commented, "I like your car. Have you had it long?"

"I bought it over three months ago. You know, Sally, you are an unexpected pleasure. I wouldn't have guessed you didn't have a date for New Year's Eve. I hope you don't mind me asking."

"Not at all, Jess. No one of any consequence asked me. Besides, you seemed too shy to make any moves in my direction."

"I thought I was too young for you. Am I?"

"Age is only a number, Jess."

"Sally, do you know what number I am?"

"Does it matter if I'm a couple of years older? Besides, I know how old you are anyway."

"Since you know my age, how old are you?" *I had to know.*

"I will be eighteen next September."

"Isn't that a coincidence, my birthday is in September also."

"Maybe that's why we're going to get along."

"Enough questions, Sally. I feel this coming New Year is starting off in the right direction."

I pulled up in front of the new Hyatt Hotel. The parking lot attendant appeared out of nowhere. "Please be careful with my car." I exclaimed.

"Don't worry, sir. Your car will be parked and locked with watchful eyes."

I pointed upward. "Sally, we're having dinner in the Sky Room Restaurant, 67 floors up."

"I've never been that high up before."

"Neither have I. Shall we?"

I pushed the button on the elevator reading, Skyroom Restaurant 67th Floor. The elevator was silent as we sky rocketed upward. The door opened. The sounds of music and the crowded room echoed throughout.

A man dressed in a tuxedo approached us with a pleasant smile on his face saying, "Good evening. How may I help you?"

I answered, "My name is Jess Sterling. I have a reservation for two."

"I've been expecting you. Please follow me."

I ushered Sally in front of me. The table-filled room and dance floor mirrored onto the windows encircling the room. The maitre d' seated us at one of the window tables. I reached in my pocket to tip him.

He said, "Thank you, Mr. Sterling, everything has been taken care of. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to summon me."

I said, "Thank you very much, Henry."

The view was incredible. We could see the city lights flashing in the distance, along with Lake Michigan and the Ontario border lights.



"Jess, this is simply beautiful. I don't believe I'm here. How did you arrange this? The maitre d' seemed to be looking for you."

"Us, Sally. My Uncle Harry made the reservations. The maitre d' is a friend of his."

"Please thank your uncle for me. I'm impressed."

*So was I.*

We sat staring at each other. The waiter came. "Good evening, my name is Charles. I will be serving you this evening." We both said good evening. He opened a menu and handed it to Sally, then did the same for me. "I'll return when you've decided on your entrée."

The menu offered a shrimp cocktail appetizer, a choice of two different salads, Caesar salad or mixed greens and for the entree - Rack of Lamb Bouquiere; New York Steak, with mustard-topped cauliflower; Stuffed Cornish Hen, with green beans almandine; and Chicken Saltimbocca.

I asked, "Sally, has your mouth started to water?"

"Everything looks so good. What are you having?"

"Caesar salad and the Rack of lamb bouquiere."

"I was thinking of the same thing. I'll have the Caesar salad and the Cornish Hen, if I can have a taste of yours."

"Would you give me a bite of yours?"

We both started to laugh. The waiter returned. I ordered for us. *Uncle Harry suggested, 'Be the man and take over.'*

The music began to play, again. "Sally, would you like to dance?"

"Thank you. I would love to."

We weren't the only ones. The dance floor soon became nice and snugly. I held Sally close to me during the medley of slow get-to-know-you music.

I whispered into her ear, "You follow gracefully, Sally."

"You're easy to follow. I like being close to you, Jess."

*I liked being close to her.*

The music continued, "Sally, our appetizers are ready. We can dance the evening away after we eat. What do you say?"

"Jess, I'm with you. Besides, I'm starved."

The shrimp were large and the red sauce had a nice bite, making them very tasty. The flashing city lights became a game of what landmarks we were able to distinguish.

The waiter came, carrying a large domed silver tray. The aroma oozed its way into our awaiting nostrils as he lifted the domed cover.

Sally took a bite of her Cornish hen. "Mm, Jess, you've got to try this."

I ate from her fork. "Wonderful, Sally, very moist and tender." I offered her a bite of my lamb.

"Jess, I'll make a deal with you. Cut me a piece of lamb, and I'll match it with my hen."

I smiled, "That's it, and no more."

"Oh, Jess, you're so good to me. You can't have any of my salad."

"Sally, you're the most charming beautiful girl I've ever met. The Gods must be looking down upon me."

We both cleaned our plates. *Sally can eat. I should talk.*

The table was cleared. We each had chocolate mousse for desert. The waiter came by, giving Sally a gold colored cardboard cone hat with a gold tassel. He handed me a blue Sea Captain's cap, with gold braids across the bill.

I put our two horns into my breast pocket. "Sally, you look like a Princess."

"And you're the Prince Pirate who came to take me away!"

"My boat has four wheels to hurry you off."

"Hurry me off to the dance floor will you?"

We danced every number the orchestra played.

The lights flashed on and off as the orchestra played Auld Lang Syne . . . it was one minute to twelve. I looked into Sally's eyes. She looked into mine. The seconds ticked away . . . our mouths met.

We broke away. Our cheeks rested against each other. I whispered . . . "Happy New Year, Sally."

"Happy New Year, Jess." I gave her one of the horns. We tooted at each other, laughing and hugging.

People began to table hop, sharing the New Year together. Sally and I danced one more number. "Honey lets leave before the crowded room gets the same idea." I paid the check. I thanked Henry, shaking his hand with a five-dollar bill in my palm. He smiled.

Large snow flakes covered the streets. I helped Sally into my car. *No scratches.*

Sally rested her head on my shoulder as I drove her home. You could hear the snow crunching under my tires as I slowly crept down her street. We looked at each other before we kissed good night. While walking Sally to the door she said, "Jess, thank you for a wonderful evening. I hope this New Year brings us luck, happiness and togetherness."

"Thank you. Sally, you've made it all happen, and I can't wait to see you again. Let's keep our relationship quiet at the dairy."

"Jess, it will be our little secret. I want you to know, I've only flirted with you."

"Keep it that way. Are you working in the morning?"

"No, not until Monday morning. Will I see you or hear from you before?"

"I'll call you tomorrow after work."

"Good night, my Prince Pirate."

"Good night, Princess."

The drive home was slow. I spent that time thinking about Sally, this evening, and the future. *Sally is two years older and two years ahead of me in school. My study room teacher advised me I could skip half a grade and make up the other half in summer school. I can advance a year if I keep my grades at A+. I can graduate High School at seventeen and have a year to plan college.*

*Sally doesn't have plans for college as of yet. When she said 'good luck, happiness and togetherness,' I shared those same sentiments.*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I didn't have time to make many friends in school. The tenth grade required a lot of studying. Mr. Spinner, our school golf coach, encouraged me to spend time with him, working on my swing technique. I took to golf, like a duck does to water. I allocated two hours every afternoon to hit golf balls into our indoor net. My swing soon became second nature. *I can't wait for spring.*

Whenever I didn't see Sally at the dairy in the mornings, I made certain I saw her in the evenings. Three months have gone by since we met. We still haven't made love. *I think she wanted to, as much as I did. Maybe I need a little more experience.*

Bob and I worked Route Two today. Bob stopped in front of 3889 Mayberry Lane. His pearls smiled at me. "Hey, Kid, when's the last time you got laid?"

*Did I hear him right?* I blushed for a second. "Ah, that's kind of personal, Bob."

"Kid, not with you and me it ain't. Listen to me. You remember Candy, don't you?"

*How could I forget her.* "Sure, Bob."

"Dolores, the older one, is mine. Candy is too young for me. Guess what? She wants you."

"Bob, I don't even know her. I'd better not, I have a girlfriend."

"Don't give me that girlfriend shit. You'll have plenty of time for her. Men don't tell on each other, if they're men. You get what I mean? Don't let me down now. I can't handle all this pussy alone."

*I thought he was doing very well on his own. I can't resist.*

"You're the boss Bob, let's go."

"I knew I could depend upon you."

I followed Bob through their open door into the house. Candy and Dolores were sitting in front of their fireplace, drinking coffee. Dolores got up and ran over to Bob saying, "What kept you so long, you big brute?"

"Nothing. Say hello to Jess, Dolores."

"Well, HELLO. Bob, you didn't tell me he was so cute."

He slapped her behind. She gave a little squeak, "Oh, I just love, the way you beat me, Bob."

Candy came over to where I was standing. "Hi Jess, I'm Candy."

She took my hand and pulled me toward her. "Come, sit by me in front of the fire." She smiled, "Bob and Dolores disappeared into another room." Candy then poured me a cup of coffee. She broke the silence. "Jess, what a nice name. What's your last name?"

"Sterling."

"Mine's Stafford. I've asked about you. Relax, I won't bite."

*I almost wished she had, I needed something to stir me.*

Candy's long raven hair draped down her back. She moved closer and her sheer robe fell from her shoulders, exposing her milky voluptuous body. She put her palm to the back of my neck, pulling my face toward hers. She slowly kissed my eyes, working her lips across my face to my lips. Her warm mouth worked down my neck, shoulders. My clothes

were off. We lay nude in front of the crackling fireplace. It was warm and cozy. She kissed me all over. This was all new to me. My insides felt like they were going to burst. I found myself worked into body positions I never knew existed. She was on her knees, I was holding her large breasts from behind her. *I wanted experience. And, I'm getting it.* I closed my eyes for a second, and when I opened them, I was watching Candy slip into her robe. "Jess, please come back any time. I need to shower and dress for work, please help yourself out."

I quickly dressed. I just hope Bob isn't a Voyeur, a peek freak. The cool air revived me. I unlocked the truck. Checking the clock on the dash, forty-five minutes had gone by. I worked Mayberry Lane for the next thirty minutes. I spun the truck around to gather Bob. Two quick beeps, Bob walked down their stairway into the truck. Smiling ear to ear. "Well, Kid, are you glad you went?"

"She's invited me back anytime."

"Get used to it. These two routes are loaded with unattended ladies. Everyday a new one pops up, must be referrals." His laugh was one of great triumph.

I was starting to get the guilt's. *I wouldn't want Sally to find out.*

We were close to the end of deliveries. "Well, what do you know. Ah, there's Jennifer Swingfield. Ain't that a moniker? Kid, I won't be long, she's a little jack rabbit."

I sneaked a look. Miss Jack Rabbit was short, with a pixie haircut. Her short jacket gave me a view of her slim legs. Bob graciously helped her unload groceries from the trunk of her car. The side view mirror captured his cocky gate following her. I continued delivering the remaining few blocks. When I returned, they were sitting on the porch.

They approached me. Bob said, "Jess, Miss Swingfield is a new customer.

Jennifer, say hello to my right hand man, Jess."

"Hello, Jess."

"How do you do, Miss Swingfield? Do you need milk today?"

"Yes, I would like a quart of chocolate milk, a pound of butter, and you don't have to be so formal. Call me Jennifer."

She looked as if she had just come out of the shower. *I'll bet Bob scrubbed her real good, all over.* Her mellifluous voice had me mesmerized.

Bob said, "Let's go, Kid. We'll see you Saturday, Jennifer." She waved as we drove away.

Bob whistled some unintelligible tune during our drive back. I couldn't hear another second of it. "Hey, Bob."

"Yeah, Kid."

"You sure have a way with women."

He smiled, "Stick with me, Kid. In a few months you'll have plenty of them chasing you down the street, with mattresses on their backs."

"Bob, would you do me a favor?"

"Sure Kid, what do you need?"

"Would you pick me up a bottle of wine?"

"What's the occasion?"

"A surprise."

"You're learning. When do you need it?"

"Saturday, after work."

The phone was ringing as I walked into the house.

"Hi, Jess, Sally here. You've been on my mind all day."

"Hello, Princess, I was just about to call you. I like it when you call."

"Am I going to see you tonight, Jess?"



"Can we wait till tomorrow night? I've had a screwy day, I'm plum worn out."

"Of course we can, sweetheart. I'll be counting the hours."

"Princess, don't hang up yet. I have a little surprise for you tomorrow. It's worth the wait."

"Honey, I don't mind waiting. Maybe I'll see you in the morning, at the dairy."

"You bet you will. In case I can't talk, be ready at 6:00 p.m. See you tomorrow."

"Bye, Bye, Sweetie."

*I don't know how Bob does it. My extended experience took the chomp out of the bit. More vitamin E, that's what I need. The first chance I get tomorrow, I'll stock up.*

The next morning, Bob said, "We don't want to forget our new customer. I'll deliver her order personally. Carry on, and pick me up when you finish."

"I'll take my time, Bob. Jackie Rabbit may want to play bunny tag with you."

"Good boy. I have your package in my car. Can't you give me a little hint?"

"Later."

Ninety minutes later we headed back to the dairy.

Bob sat in the jump seat with his feet resting on the dash. His elbows were pointing forward, while his hands were clasped behind his neck.

"Okay, Kid, what are you doing tonight?"

"First off, I need your permission to use the truck tonight. I won't be driving it, just using it."

He chuckled, "I love it. Make sure you lock the doors and cover the windows."

"Thanks, Bob."

I pulled into the unloading dock.

"I'll be right back, Kid."

He returned, carrying a duffel bag. The bag was heavier than it looked.

"What's in the bag, Bob?"

"I've included some snacks, you may get hungry. Have a good time, Kid. I'll see you Monday morning."

"Thanks Bob," I hollered. He raised his hand in the air as he kept walking.

I unzipped the bag. Two bottles of red French wine. A jar of cheese spread. Another jar of caviar. I wonder what it tastes like? An assortment of crackers. Two wine glasses and a cork screw. He sure is first class.

I washed the truck down and prepared it for tonight.

Sally was at the door, waiting for me to climb the steps. *She gets better looking every time I see her.* Her yellow cotton pants, yellow fleeced lined boots and black, long sleeved cotton shirt went great with her red hair.

"Hi, Princess. I like your outfit. You should be on the cover of Vogue Magazine."

"Oh, Jess, you say what a girl wants to hear."

I smiled, "Grab your coat and let's go."

The snow had subsided, just windy flurries.

I knew where I was going. Sally and I held hands while I drove. She recognized the neighborhood. I pulled into the dairy entrance.

She spoke up, "Jess, what are we doing here at the dairy?" I pulled alongside truck number 24.

"Sally come with me. I've arranged a little guest house for two."

She gave me a quizzical look. "I can't wait to see!"

"Sally, close your eyes and wait here." I unlocked the truck door, and quickly lit the candles and small Coleman heater, then I stepped out of the truck and helped Sally in.

She spun around in a slow circle, stopped, then she sat on my gray air filled mat that I'd placed on top of the milk

case runners. "Jess, I feel like we're inside a cozy room. You even covered the windows with black cloth. I love it!"

"I'm glad you like it. The doors are locked, no one will bother us." I held up one of the bottles. "Sally do you like red wine? It's French."

"I sure do, what else do you have?"

"Well, let me see." I picked up the silver tray I'd brought from home. I lifted the white towel to expose the assortment of crackers, cheese spread and caviar. "Voila."

"Jess, you amaze me. What a delightful surprise!"

I tugged the cork out, smiled and handed Sally two glasses, filled hers, then mine.

"Sally, welcome to my humble abode." We raised our glasses, clanked them together. I watched Sally sip her wine.

"Jess, you are my Prince Pirate and a romantic one."

"Sally, have some Caviar."

She spread two crackers. I looked at the reddish tiny eggs on my cracker. I took a dainty bite.

She tasted her Caviar. "Jess, doesn't it taste a little fishy?"

*I put her on with my authoritative attitude.* "Princess, these are Bulgarian fish eggs. The fish would get tired from that long swim, so they put their eggs into jars."

She gave me a playful kick in the butt. We laughed together. The caviar covered crackers and cheese spread kept us thirsty. The wine bottle was soon empty. I started to feel a little light headed, so I sat next to Sally on the air mattress before I fell down.

We started to laugh at nothing. Everything was funny. We both found ourselves falling backward. When my head finally stopped spinning, I rolled to my side finding her beautiful face. We stared, searching each others minds.

Our lips met. We held each other tightly as we kissed. The feeling of closeness was wonderful. I needed her.

Sally whispered, "Darling you've been such a gentleman since the first day I met you."

Her eyes sparkled. The words she spoke slurred a bit. *I'm glad she was talking.*

"Jess, I want you to know, I really appreciate you and the respect that you give me. Now that you've gotten me drunk, not that you had to, please take advantage of me."

"Princess, you're not the only one who's drunk. Since you insist, let me help you. Drunks have a tough time undoing buttons."

"Mr. Pirate, I think you need help with your zipper.

We were both getting excited as piece by piece of clothing came off. Sally's beautiful body lay there, flawless.

My hands glided down her silky smooth legs. I felt the cashmere tuft of hair between her legs. Her toes were painted the same color as her lips. I rolled on top of her. My chest squeezed against her large firm breasts. We touched each other, finding familiarity. Sally helped insert me. We locked ourselves into inseparable bliss. It didn't take us long to reach a climax.

Tears were running down Sally's face. She spoke slowly and softly.

"Jess darling, I'm so happy. I've dreamed of making love with you. I knew we would someday. Hold me, sweetheart, hold me."

I could feel her heart pumping against my chest. My mind and heart were totally hers.

Finally breaking my silence, "Sally, you've been on my mind since the first day I saw you at the dairy cafeteria. My imagination was working overtime, hoping for realization.

Now that it has evolved, I won't let you go. Tell me you want to be with me."

She wrapped her arms around me ever so tightly. "Sweetheart, my instincts told me to capture you. I'm yours. I won't let you get away from me."

We kissed and hugged ourselves into lovemaking. Sally helped me clean the truck. The second bottle was hidden away in my trunk.

I walked Sally to her door. "Princess, I mean everything I say. I'll call you in the morning."

"Prince Pirate, that's a big ditto from me. Good night, sweetheart."



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Coach Spinner posted a bulletin today, announcing the twelve-man golf team.

We have keen competition to contend with this Spring and Summer. Tryouts for the four-man playing squad and alternates will commence April 10th. Sign up in my office no later than April 8th. Late sign IN's will not be excepted.

We will play nine holes every day at 3:00 p.m. sharp. The Saturday following our first week will be our 18-hole team playoff. Good luck, boys. Coach Spinner

I felt lucky to be one of the twelve. Coach Spinner was a touring professional before he took his job at Cooley. His physical strength was still apparent.

The coach's freckled face and movements reminded me of my favorite golfer, Tom Watson. I'd worked hard with the coach this past winter. His no nonsense attitude was responsible for developing top players. I liked his dedication to golf and to his students.

I went directly to his office to sign up. Coach Spinner looked up from his desk. He said, "I expect you to make the team, Jess. Good Luck."

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I bogeyed every hole. My putting was atrocious. I had three-putted fifteen greens. Coach Spinner gave me some different thoughts about putting. They worked. Thursday I had six par's and

three bogeys. It was important for me to post a better score on Friday. If not, I wouldn't have a chance on Saturday's play off. I putted on my bedroom carpet for hours Thursday night.

I was even par through the first five holes on Friday. I bogeyed the sixth and seventh holes. The demanding, par three, eighth hole is 187 yards long, over water, with a green that appeared to be the size of a postage stamp. With a wet towel, I wiped off the grip of my five-wood. The now tacky grip felt good in my hands. The water in front of the hole looked like Lake Michigan. I was as nervous as a virgin on her wedding night. I gave my best swing.

The ball took off low to the ground. It was so low, the ball skipped over the water like a flat rock. The ball hit a small mound in front of the green, then it bounced up into the air and landed ten feet from the hole. My three playing partners were poking each other, laughing and saying, "You lucky ass-hole."

I turned and smiled, "Look who's putting . . . let's see you three ass-holes cross the water." They didn't.

I sunk my ten foot birdie putt and pared the last hole.

Oak Hills Golf Course is a half hour drive from my house. Sally was my gallery, she sat close to me as I drove. Last night I used the diagram of the golf course to help me familiarize myself with the layout of the course.

After parking, I put on my shoes and carried my clubs to the driving range. Sally was sitting on a bench next to an older man, watching me hit balls. I finished my warm up.

Sally waved for me to come over. "Jess, I want you to meet Mr. Walters."

I glanced at the elderly gentleman. His tweed sport coat, light tan slacks and shinned shoes gave the appearance of wealth. He smiled, taking his pipe out of his mouth.

I said, "Hello Mr. Walters." We shook hands.



He put his pipe back into his mouth, and cubed his palm over the bowl, and puffed until the aroma of tobacco filled the air.

Sally said, "Jess, Mr. Walters has played this golf course for 50 years."

I looked at Mr. Walters saying, "I'll bet you know every blade of grass on this course."

"That's right, son. Sally and I have been talking about the undulation and speed of these greens."

"Mr. Walters, could you give me a some information about the greens?"

"What would you like to know, Jess?"

"How can I tell the speed and the way they break?"

"The greens grow toward the sun. When you view the hole from behind your golf ball, the greens are the fastest whenever the color is light green. That means you're going with the grain. Now, if the green appears darker, that means they will be slower because you will be going against the grain."

I watched him and listened to every word he said. He gave his pipe another puff then continued, "The greens tend to lean toward the North. To know where North is, use the clubhouse as your guide."

I reached down and shook his hand again. "Gee, thanks Mr. Walters. I need all the help I can get."

He patted Sally's knee. "Son, stick with this young lady. She'll guide you to North. Good luck."

We waved as we walked away. I pulled Sally's hand. "Thanks Princess, you're very resourceful."

"You'd better play good, or I won't let you have any of that French wine you've been hiding."

"Princess, how can I miss with you at my side to tell me where I am?"

She smiled and pinched me.

The practice putting green was crowded with contestants. I looked at the green before hitting my first putt. The shade was light. I cautiously stroked the ball. It was fast. It went in. I turned to Sally and smiled.

I lined up my next putt in the opposite direction. The shade of green was darker. I hit the ball a little harder. It went in. I made four putts in a row and quit. No sense in overdoing it.

Sally and I sat on the first tee and watched the first three groups tee off. I was next. Sally gave me a good luck kiss on the cheek. The butterflies were churning in my stomach.

The first tee announcer called my foursome, "Clifford Henning will tee-off first. John Marshall second. Peter Scott third. Jess Sterling will be last to play."

We all shook hands wishing each other good luck.  
*Sure!*

Clifford killed one down the middle. John sliced to the right. Peter hooked to the left. I hit right down the middle, twenty yards behind Clifford's drive.

Sally was with me every step of the way. I hit my second shot twenty feet past the hole. Clifford hit his shot six feet short of the hole. John and Peter were short with their second shots. They chipped up short of the hole.

Sally whispered into my ear, "Dark green and straight."

I stood over my putt and took a deep breath. The ball rolled straight to the hole, stopping inches short. I tapped in my par.

John and Peter missed their putts for par. Clifford's putt went straight into the middle of the hole for a birdie. Sally applauded. Clifford bent down to pick his ball out of the hole. Mr. Adonis, Cooley High's number one player, on and off the course. His hand casually brushed back his wind blown blond hair. He stood up and flashed his blue eyes at Sally, with a cocky smile and a wink just for her.

Clifford played the next seven holes to perfection. I had a tough time. My putting saved me.

Clifford couldn't take his eyes away from Sally. His obvious attraction to her started me thinking. "Princess, do me a favor."

"Sure, honey, what do you need?"

"Flirt a little with Clifford. Let him think you're interested."

"I'm not. You know that."

"I know you're not. I need some help."

She rolled her eyes, "OH!"

"Yeah!"

Clifford turned and smiled at Sally as he teed his ball up for the ninth hole. The 350 yard hole was short but narrow, with out of bounds to the right. Sally smiled at Clifford. He hit his tee shot out of bounds! I decided to use a five wood. The ball carried about two hundred yards down the middle of the fairway. I parred that hole. Clifford had a double bogey.

Sally and I walked down the tenth fairway holding hands. She turned around and gave Clifford a look. His concentration was waning. He went out of bounds again.

I looked at Sally, "Princess, thank you. Now ignore him."

She smiled at Clifford, and whispered to me, "You're the Pirate."

Clifford was all over the course the next seven holes. John and Peter settled down. Clifford must have intimidated them. *Not me, just smarter.*

Clifford and I were putting for birdies on the eighteenth hole. I need this birdie to shoot 75. Clifford was away. His putt went in. I had a downhill putt about eight feet. The club house was to my right. I aimed my putt six inches outside the left side of the hole. I nudged the ball with my

putter, and I watched it roll straight until it was just about a foot from the hole, then the ball made a hard right turn into the hole.

Clifford walked off of the green, disgusted with his play. Sally and Mr. Walters stood together, applauding. Sally was my saving grace; she met Mr. Walters, and she sure kept Clifford off balance. I gave Sally a big hug. "Thank you, Princess."

I shook Mr. Walter's hand. "Thanks for your help, Mr. Walters."

"Son, you've made my day." Mr. Walters took a puff on his pipe. "That downhill putt you made brought back wonderful memories." He reached over and patted Sally on her cheek. "You two be good to each other, good bye for now." We watched him walk away. Sally whispered into my ear. "Why don't we celebrate with some red wine in truck number 24?"

*What a wonderful idea.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Spring and summer rushed by, and, I met my goals, finished with A's, and became the number two man on the golf team. Now, summer school.

I worked every morning with Bob, then went to school in the afternoons. Sally graduated from high school, and I had one more year to go. My savings account was building, and I had enough money to pay off my car.

Bob and I were finishing up our Saturday deliveries. *I wanted to spend more time with Sally. The milk business wasn't my life long dream.*

Bob said, "Why are you so pensive, Kid?"

*I'd better speak up.* "Bob, I have a tough schedule at school this year. I won't be able to work week days for awhile."

His smile was understanding. "I'll make a deal with you, Kid. You work the route every Saturday, on your own, and I'll pay you a hundred. How does that grab you?"

My eyes lit up. "You've got a deal, Bob. Thanks"

"Good. You know the fringe benefits."

"Yeah, I sure do. Don't worry I'll take care of your customers."

He started to laugh. "You've had the best training. Don't forget to push in my regards." His laughing was infectious.

I picked up Sally on the way home. Mom knew Sally and I were serious about each other. Mothers have a sense of knowing what's best for their children. Mom approved of Sally and they were becoming good pals. I was lucky, Sally's parents liked me also.

Sally and I kept our love making to ourselves. *There couldn't be anyone but her.*

The grocery store was crowded. I had a mile long list to fill for Mom. I pushed my shopping cart to the produce department and stopped at the potato counter. I chuckled to myself, watching a lady going through the potatoes. She couldn't make up her mind which potatoes she wanted. She would pick up one, look at it, and then put it down. She did this several times. I filled my sack with her discards. I smiled at her. She looked at me like she wanted them back. I walked away snickering to myself.

I filled everything on my list, except the meat. The aisle lanes were filled with hurried shoppers, so I patiently followed a lady with long blond hair. Her graceful walk reminded me of someone. Who?

She walked over to the meat counter, and picked a cue number off of the counter. I reached over to grab one for myself, and I accidentally bumped her. "Excuse me, I didn't mean to . . ."

She turned to look. I watched her lips move. "Jess Sterling, what a pleasant surprise."

My mouth dropped. "Mrs. Gladstone. How are you?"

*I'd forgotten how beautiful she was. Incredibly beautiful. I wonder if she's still married?*

"I'm fine, Jess."

Our conversation was interrupted by a booming voice, "Number 74, number 74."

"Excuse me a second, Jess." I listened to her order four New York Steaks. "Jess, please forgive me, I'm in a bit of a

hurry. John and I are having guests over tonight." She looked at me and smiled, "I'm most anxious to hear all about you. Let me make up for my rudeness. Please, would you be my guest for lunch tomorrow?"

*Would I have lunch with her?*

"Sure, I'd like that. Where would you like to meet?"

"The Chop House on Woodward Avenue at noon."

"I know right where it is. See you tomorrow."

She hurried off to the check stand. *The Yellow Pages know where the Chop House is.*

I wanted to impress Mrs. Gladstone. My dark blue blazer, light blue dress shirt and the red and gray paisley tie looked snazzy with my gray slacks.

I walked into the Chop House Restaurant. The crowded restaurant made it difficult to find Mrs. Gladstone. *I hope she's here.* I slipped through groups of men and women standing around the reservation desk.

A man wearing a black suit and tie, with a gold nameplate on his lapel reading Captain, stood behind a tall slanted desk. "Excuse me, Captain, I'm to join Mrs. Gladstone."

His fingers worked down his schedule. "This way young man." I followed him. Red table cloths covered each table and booth. Mrs. Gladstone was seated at a candle lit table for two near the rear of the restaurant. The Captain said, "Excuse me, Mrs. Gladstone, your guest is here."

She looked up from her menu. "Thank you, Joseph."

He pulled a chair back for me, saying, "Enjoy your lunch."

*You bet I'm going to enjoy my lunch with her.* Mrs. Gladstone was wearing a tan suit with a white scarf draped around her neck and shoulders.

I looked into Mrs. Gladstone's eyes as I pulled my chair forward.

"Hello again, Mrs. Gladstone."

Her eyes quickly blinked. "Good afternoon, Jess. Last night I thought you had grown. You take my breath away, you're most handsome."

*Take her breath away. What about mine?* I didn't show any shyness. "Thank you, Mrs. Gladstone. You're the most beautiful lady I've ever had lunch with."

"Your compliments are appreciated, Jess. Please, call me Sharon."

"Thank you, Mrs. . . . Sharon. Ah, . . .did you have a nice morning, Sharon?"

"Yes I did, Jess. And you?"

"Wonderful. I couldn't wait for the morning to go by to meet you for lunch."

"You've become even more charming. Let me order lunch for us. I want to hear all about you."

I listened to her order. "We'll have your famous chopped salad for two. For our entree, the white fish with new potatoes and creamed French beans."

The waiter wrote everything down on his pad. "Excuse me madam, would you like wine with your meal?"

"Yes, please bring me a Beefeaters Martini now and White Zinfandel with my entree."

"For the gentleman?"

*I would prefer wine.* "Oh, ah, water will be fine." The waiter left to get her drink.

Her drink arrived. She took a small sip. Sharon seemed more relaxed. "Jess, have you ever tasted a martini?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Would you care to have a sip?"

I looked at her holding the glass.



*With her lips on the glass, I could get a kiss by proxy.*

"Yes, Sharon, I would." I took a sip. The martini burned its way down my throat. I held my urge to cough.

"Do you like it?"

"Interesting, but a little dry."

"I like them a little dry. It takes a few to acquire the taste."

"You're probably right?"

"Perhaps . . . maybe one day I'll fix you one. Come on Jess, fill the two year void. Remembering you from class, I know you've done some interesting things."

My mind was churning. I smiled at her, "Before my graduation from Guest I had a part time job working at Twin Pines Dairy delivering milk. My boss at the dairy, his name is Bob Servo, gave me the opportunity to work full time after graduating Guest. I continued working for Bob in the early mornings before High School. Now I just work Saturdays for Bob. I studied like crazy my first year in high school. Fortunately my marks were good to enable me to skip half a grade, and I went to summer school to make up the other half. I'm now on the golf team, in my senior year at Cooley and I'm the number two player."

I looked at her while I was talking. "You're not getting bored are you?"

"On the contrary, I'm enjoying every moment. Please continue."

"There isn't too much more. Oh, I saved enough money to buy myself a car. I think that's about it."

"Jess, I'm very impressed with your scholastic record. Number two golf player and a car to boot. That's fantastic. Jess, you must have a girlfriend."

I hesitated.

"Come on, Jess, don't be so shy."

"Yes, I have a very nice girlfriend. Her name is Sally Blaine."

"Well, Jess, she'd have to be a nice girl. She must be a beauty."

"She is very much like you."

Sharon started to say something . . . just as the waiter arrived with our lunch.

I watched Sharon as she ate. Small bites, was my cue, I slowed down and ate like a gentleman. Sharon laid her fork down onto the table as she spoke. "Jess, do you enjoy golf?"

*Is she kidding? If golf were a girl, I wouldn't need Sharon. . . oops, Sally. Where did that come from?*

"Yes, I really look forward to the competition."

"Jess, I was just thinking, would you like a part time job working at a factory making golf clubs for players all over the world?"

"Are you serious?"

"Very. My husband's corporation owns that very factory I mentioned."

*People wait in lines for jobs. Here I am, given one for the asking.*

"I don't know what to say."

"Just say, yes. I guarantee, Jess, this would be a wonderful opportunity for you."

"I'm with you. School lets out at 11:30 a.m., could I work afternoons?"

"I don't see why not."

*Wow, maybe I can make my own line of clubs. Dreamer.*

"Sharon, if you don't mind me asking, why are you doing all this for me?"

"Jess, we all need help and direction in life. Another thing, you're worth it."

"Mrs. Gladstone, I mean Sharon, you've heard all about me. Couldn't we talk a little about you?"

"Let me save that conversation for a later date."

She raised her sleeve to look at her watch. "Jess, I have to run." She raised her hand; the waiter caught her signal. She raised her other hand, making an imaginary scribble. Two minutes later the check arrived. She opened her purse wallet and pulled out two twenties. She pushed the check toward the waiter and said, "Thank you." With pencil in hand. "Jess, give me your phone number. I'll call you to let you know when you start."

I exited the restaurant with Sharon. She handed her car check to the valet. A moment later her car arrived. "Sharon, thank you for a wonderful lunch."

"Oh, thank you, Jess. You'll hear from me soon."

Her Mercedes disappeared into traffic.



## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

John Gladstone was seated behind a large flat oak table desk when I entered. Several phones rested at arm's length. The florescent-lighted room revealed a vast collection of golf clubs, secured in wooden display boxes, and they were secured to the walls. The two green leather chairs became leaning posts for his newly manufactured clubs. He stood up to greet me. My blurry memory of his appearance came into focus. Black slick hair, parted on the left side, deep set brown eyes. *Must be right handed.* His large six-foot-plus frame and Rock Hudson looks probably helped open many doors. *Sure. Straight into Mrs. Gladstone's bedroom.* He extended his right hand forward. "Hello, young man. My recollection of you had me thinking you shorter."

"Must be the milk, sir." *There was something about him I didn't like. I wasn't jealous, I had no right. Time will tell.*

"Youth, my boy, youth. Anyway, welcome. Sharon gave you a big build-up. I've always approved of her instincts. Jess? Isn't It?"

"Yes sir."

"Jess, please call me John. We are one big family at Steel Rite. Great name, wouldn't you agree?"

*What else was I going to say, "Yes Sir."*

"Jess, you have a job here. I'm inundated with a lot of work and a heavy schedule this morning. Why don't I have my plant manager give you a tour?" He pushed a button on his phone. "Miriam, page Jack English and have him come to my office, directly."

He leafed through some papers on his desk. The phone buzzed, he flicked a switch. "Yes. Send him in."

Two short knocks and the door opened. "Excuse me, John."

Mr. Gladstone looked up from his paper work. "Jack, we have a new employee. I want you to give this young man a tour of the plant." He glanced at me, "Jess, Jack English will help you get started in one of our departments."

Jack English walked over to me and put his hand out. "Hi, I'm Jack English. Welcome aboard."

His handshake was weak. The tall, gray haired man, with thick black eyebrows that accented his expressionless eyes, appeared to be in his fifties. His puffy jowl and ashen face matched the stomach that hung over his belt.

"Hi, Jess Sterling. Nice to meet you, Mr. English."

"My pleasure, Jess. Call me Jack. Come on, I'll show you around."

Mr. Gladstone was on the phone, engaged in a heavy, heated, conversation. I said, "Thank you Sir." He barely waved acknowledgment. I followed Jack out the door.

Jack pointed toward a glass-caged office. "Jess, these are the executive offices. See the lady on the phone. That's Miriam, John's secretary. John likes young, beautiful girls around." *I'll bet he does, like Janet.*

He pointed at the two remaining offices. "Those two offices handle all of the accounting. Very busy place."

I followed him out of the entrance door. My car was parked a few cars down from the entrance. "Jess, did you park on this side or the other side?"

"On this side, Jack. That black Mustang is my car."

"Sleek looking car. You're all right there, temporarily. When you start working here, you'll have to park behind the plant and walk a block and a half. All employees' park there, except for the big wigs. They park in the designated area where you are now." He went on. "Our shipping trucks take up most of the outside space here. When someone parks where they're not supposed to, they will be towed away." We walked out into the middle of the wide paved alleyway.

Jack pointed to the building adjoining the executive offices. "Jess, that connecting building is our assembly and warehouse building."

I had a funny feeling this tour was going to take awhile. Jack liked to talk. It was obvious he enjoyed being in charge . . . I didn't dare interrupt him with a simple question.

"Jess, this warehouse is two stories high. All clubs are assembled here. We also keep all of our expensive tooled dies and exporting stock there. This building is fifty thousand square feet. It encompasses this whole block, to the gated main entrance."

He pointed to the opposite building. "This building is our manufacturing plant. All of our injection molding is done in this building. Once the heads are made, they're sent back to the warehouse building to be assembled into Steel Rite golf clubs. This building is twenty thousand square feet. Now, you've seen the outside, let's go inside and see how clubs are made." We entered the manufacturing building. The noise was deafening. Jack pointed toward two gigantic ovens. "Those are used to heat the steel that

forms inside the plastic molds. This is called 'cast investment.' Do you know what forging steel means?"

I gave Jack a quick, intelligent answer, "To forge is to heat metal in a furnace and hammer it into a desired form or shape."

"I couldn't have said it better, Jess. The cast investment method is cheaper and simpler. These two big ovens melt down the steel. The one on the left forms our Pittsburgh Persimmon." He snickered, "That means metal golf heads."

I got used to the pointing finger, as he aimed it at the other oven.

"This oven is used to make iron heads. You know, like a three iron or a pitching wedge. The melted steel is poured into plastic molds. After the steel cools, the molds are broken away from the steel. The crude looking metal heads and iron heads ride down this conveyor belt, and they end up in the lathe shop. Follow me, Jess."

The conveyor belt fed through rubber opening flappers, into another room. We exited the hot, noisy oven room. Jack sneezed a couple of times. He pulled out a large white handkerchief from his back pocket. He blew his nose, sounding like a fog horn.

We entered the lathe room. The heads were honed and polished. They rode on the conveyor belt into another area. Jack said, "The lathe room was self explanatory, that's why I didn't say anything."

Jack sneezed again. "Excuse me, Jess, I'll be right back."

Jack returned in a few minutes. He seemed refreshed. We left the hot manufacturing building, and I followed Jack across the paved driveway into the warehouse and assembly building.

On each side of a conveyor belt sat a table, at least a hundred-feet-long. Some thirty Mexican women sat on one



side of the table. They painted numbers onto the metal woods and irons. Jack volunteered more information, "Jess, the ladies on this side paint the numbers in red on each club."

On the other side of the table sat the same amount of Oriental women. He continued, "These women paint the manufacture's name in black. The paint dries quickly. They put each numbered head into its own box. These boxes are taken to the other side of the room, to be weighted."

The rear of the room had tables set up against the walls. Jack was eager to explain, "These tables are divided into two sections. The section to the left works on the metal woods. They fill the heads with a liquid foam, which hardens as it dries. The foam helps to deaden the "clink" sound of metal when the club hits the ball. They add a feral, the small black cylinder. The head is weighted with powdered lead. Each head is then scaled to regulate the head weight."

Another point of the finger, "The other side of the work table is used to weight the irons. The feral is added and the irons are weighted with small, lead BB pellets. The iron heads are scaled to their requirements. After each head is weighted, they are put into trays of ten."

*I've never seen so many busy little beavers in my life.*  
The workers don't talk. Jack does.

"Now, these trays are taken to the shafting and grip room, next door." We followed one of the workers with a tray full.

Jack continued talking as we entered another large room, "Now, Jess, this room is the shafting and gripping room. The drill press type machines are used to lock the shafts into the heads. The tip of each metal shaft is dabbed with epoxy glue. Each shaft is secured by the drill press.

The heads sit underneath the shaft. The shaft is guided downward, to a secure fit. Epoxy glue sets quickly. These shafted clubs are moved to the other side of this room to be gripped."

My eyes followed the clubs to be gripped. Six men were working on the gripping. Three men wrapped two sided tapes to the barrel end of the shaft. One man painted the tape with a thick paste. The two remaining men shoved the rubber grips onto the shafts.

Jack spoke up again, "Well, Jess, you've just seen how club heads are made; how they are cleaned, polished, painted, weighted, shafted and gripped. Steel Rite is a nifty operation. Jess, do you have any questions? I have the answers."

*I'd better get this one in before he starts in again.* "Yes, Jack, I do. Two." I paused a moment to formulate my questions.

He said, "Well?"

"Jack, you mentioned the clubs are weighted to their requirements. Can you be more specific?

"Jess, each set of irons must have the same club head swing weight. For instance, D.0, D.1, D.2, D.3, and D.4 are common swing weights for men. Women have a lighter club, like, C.6, C.7 and so on. The metal woods have their overall weight and club head swing weight adjusted to our customer's requirements. Anything else?"

"Jack, the other questions is . . . Why are half of your people working here Oriental and half of them Mexican?"

"Simple, steady workers and they mind their own business."

"Jack, thank you for the tour."

"You're welcome. By the way, have you decided on which department you would like to work in?"

"Yes, I have. I'd like to work in the assembly department."

"Good choice. Jess, come with me to my office for a moment. I will get your employment and insurance forms."

Jack's office was next door to the assembly room and that room was about twenty feet square. No windows. His six-foot by three-foot desk is cluttered with paperwork. I noticed his waste paper basket held two empty Vodka bottles.

The wooded guest chair, in front of his desk, had a pile of newspapers on the seat. The only other piece of furniture, besides a standing lamp, was a day bed. The florescent lighting was harsh.

Jack went through one of his drawers. He handed me the forms. I glanced at the forms. "Jess," Jack said, "fill them out at home and have your parents sign the insurance forms."

"Jack, I can only work afternoons. I can be here at 1:30 p.m. Is that okay?"

"Sure. We'll work out your hours tomorrow."

I left. *He seems like a nice guy. Boy, can he talk. I'll bet he drinks as much.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

*Learning the manufacturing and assembly of golf clubs is exciting. I hadn't realized there was more to golf than swinging the club.* Jack English kept his eye on my work. I'm sure he reported my weekly performances. Christmas was just around the corner. I wanted to put my four-month experience into single handily assembling a new set of clubs for Sally. Jack English approved and gave me manufacture's cost. I was given the same cost for my own clubs. The consumer sure gets screwed.

Every Saturday morning Sally comes with me to work the milk route. I love the company. I pay her twenty-five dollars for the day. After work we make love in Number 24.

"Prince Pirate, I feel like a kept woman. You pay me twenty-five dollars and you do most of the work. Let me pay you twenty-five dollars for making love to me."

"Princess, save your money. Someday it may be both of ours."

"I will, I will, Mr. Pirate."

Mr. Gladstone returned from a short trip to the Orient. Four afternoons this week, I've ended up working eight hours. The afternoons have turned into nights. *Delivering milk is a snap.* I'm the only Caucasian working. Jack English has cracked the whip. I almost feel like an

American/Asian/Mexican. Five thousand sets of a dozen clubs per set will be shipped Sunday.

*Mr. Gladstone made a big deal. Today, will be the challenge.*

We've manufactured one thousand, specially designed jumbo metal wood heads that will need grips this afternoon. Streams of sweat kept rolling down my face. My hands were so busy I didn't have time to wipe off my steaming forehead.

Mr. Vang, the Oriental project manager, stood five-feet-three-inches. His speckled, spongy skin was yellow brown with no pigment. The crude, knife scar across his right eyebrow gave him an ominous appearance. His fingernails are neatly manicured, except for the elongated left little finger. Mr. Vang was followed by his assistant, Hong Chow.

Mr. Chow, is also short and wore very thick glasses. His long black hair swished from side to side as he walked. His right elbow rested on his hip, while his wrist hung limp and moved to the same cadence as his hair.

Mr. Chow was pushing a wheel cart, full of metal woods.

Mr. Vang's dominant, commanding voice echoed in Japanese to Mr. Chow. The only thing I understood was "grips".

Mr. Chow answered, "That's right, that's right, . . . etc, etc, etc."

Mr. Vang spoke English. "Shut up, you babbling idiot." He looked at me saying, "Please excuse my assistant, he doesn't speak any English, and he doesn't know what he's saying."

I smiled, "Oh, . . . Mr. Vang, do you require the same sized grips as the last group of metal woods?"

"Yes, Jess, same size, thank you." Mr. Vang left with Mr. Chow at his heels. Mr. Vang and Mr. Chow returned several times with the three tiered rolling carts. Each tier carried seventy-five metal woods for gripping. I put on the last grip as the clock struck 8:00 p.m.

Jack English approached me. "Hi, Jess, you worked your ass off this week. I'll bet you could use a drink. Let's go to my office, I'll fix you a screwdriver for the road." I didn't know what a screwdriver was. My thirst was about to find out.

I headed for the men's room. I was hot and felt grimy, the odor I was carrying was a bit gamy. I soaped my neck, arm pits, splashed water and washed my tired face. When I returned, Jack English was sitting behind his desk. Holding a half full bottle of Vodka.

He dropped two pieces of ice from the overfilled bucket into a round squatty glass. He filled the glass with Vodka. Feeling my presence, he looked up. "Good to see ya, Jess."

He opened the left hand, side drawer. He raised his hand, waving a large bottle of orange juice. "I bought this just for you. Take the weight off your feet. I'll fix you a screwdriver."

"Thanks, Jack, don't make it too strong, I don't drink."

"Stick with me, you'll learn to love it."

Jack handed me my first screwdriver. My thirsty throat swallowed my first gulp. "Nice taste Jack, and it doesn't burn."

"Jess, cheap Vodka burns, Russian Vodka is the finest tasting Vodka there is." I took his word to be valid. Jack finished off his drink and made another one. I was half way through mine when Jack made his third, to my knowledge. *Russian Vodka must have a kick to it.*

Jack started to mumble about the many thousands of clubs being made at Steel Rite. He chuckled to himself.

"Good thing I have a profit share percentage. These long hours sure wear on my old bones."

Jack made his fourth drink. I wasn't counting, just waiting for his collapse. Jack stood, and he swayed back and forth like he was on a boat.

"Jack, make me another one, will you?"

He stumbled back to his chair. "That a boy, I knew you were all man."

Jack threw the empty bottle into his wastepaper basket. He reached into his right side drawer, and smiled as he waved another fresh bottle of Russian Vodka. His left hand raised into the air with his index finger and middle finger spread apart. "A good Scout is always prepared." He started to laugh. I started to laugh.

I was half way through my second drink when the light bulb went off in my head. I had to find out about Mr. Vang and Mr. Chow. Jack's chair was stationary but he was rocking back and forth to his own beat.

"Hey Jack, I've got a question for you."

"Suuth, spit it out. I got answers."

"Jack, you know Mr. Vang and Mr. Chow?"

"Of course I do, I've seen those two runts twenty-four hours each day this week. What about em?"

"I was wondering about Mr. Chow. He kind of sashays and waves his wrist as he walks. Isn't that a bit strange?"

Jack nearly fell out of his chair with laughter. He laughed so hard his face turned beat red. He said, "Excuse me a minute, kid, I've got to hit the head. Hang in, I'll be right back with your answer."

Jack was laughing as he left. I reached over for more ice and orange juice. *No more Vodka for me.*

Jack returned, almost sober. *How could he be so loaded one minute and sober the next?*



He fixed another drink. "Hey, Jess, how about another one?" I held my glass up. *I wanted to see if he knew he had made me a fresh one. He hadn't, I made it.*

"Oh yeah, I guess I just made you one. What was I going to tell you?" He started to laugh again. "Sorry, Jess, that Vodka sneaks up on a guy. Oh, you asked about Mr. Chow. Jess, that little fruit squats to pee. The other slant eyed motherfucker watches. I can't wait for those two cock suckers to leave. Get what I mean?"

*I now know.* Jack swayed back and forth, back and forth. *Time to leave.*

"Jack, thanks for your hospitality, I've got to run."

"Seeee - ya later, Jess."

I called Sally from the pay phone outside the building. I observed Sally outside standing on her front porch as I pulled in front of house at 9:30 P.M. sharp. I jumped out of my car to receive her running kiss. I needed that. Sally spoke, "I missed you, Honey." I kissed her again.

"You have no idea how much I've missed you, Princess."

"Tell me, Mr. Pirate, tell me."



## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Mrs. Gladstone called and left a message with my mother to have me call her Sunday morning before 11.00 a.m. I dialed her number. The phone was picked up on the third ring. "Hello." It was Sharon.

"Hello, Mrs. Gladstone, ah, I mean Sharon."

"Jess, I'm so pleased you've called. I'm in our summer home in Bloomfield Hills." She paused, then said. "Why don't you drive up and have an early dinner with me?"

*I had to think quickly. Alone with her would be very nice.* "I don't want to intrude on you and Mr. Gladstone."

"Jess, you wouldn't be intruding. Please come. John took his new plane to Jamaica on business. He won't be back for several days. I would love the company."

"You've convinced me. What time?"

"Jess, 5:00 p.m. would be a good time. Take the Interstate 5 to the Wadsworth turn off. Go left for a mile, turn left onto Beaconville Terrace. Follow Beaconville Terrace for six blocks."

I wrote as she spoke, "Turn right onto Shantase court, 1149. Jess, do you think you can find me? I'll leave the garage door open, pull in."

"Good directions, Sharon. I'll have no problem. See you at 5:00 p.m." I hung up. I stared at the phone. Husband out of town. *Can I find her? The garage is open,*

*pull in. Would you like a Beefeaters Martini? Bob always said, 'Let them make the first move.'*

I called Sally right away, "Sally, I won't be able to make it tonight?"

"Why, Darling?"

"I have to go to the plant for some new plans that need to be hand delivered to the plant manager. He needs to examine them and sign them off. And, I don't know how long this will take. Please understand."

"Jess, you don't have to explain. I love you."

"Thanks, Princess. You know, I love you too. See you tomorrow. Bye for now."

"See you later, Prince Pirate."

*I hated lying to her.*

The small bunch of roses smelled nice sitting on my passenger seat. "Wadsworth turn off 1/4 mile." My bright headlights created a pathway down Beaconville Terrace. I turned right onto Shantase Court.

The country dampness and fog blew across my windshield. A post with a lighted sign read "1149 Shantase Court." I turned right, onto the driveway leading to the house.

Sharon's Gray Mercedes was parked in the garage next to a bright red sports car. I pulled in, next to Sharon's car. The red sports car glistened. The trunk lock had a silver medallion with a rearing black horse. "Ferrari" was written below the medallion. *Wow, I'd only seen a car like that in magazines. I'll bet this baby cost a fortune. I'd never have that much money in a million years.* I left my dreams in the garage.

The main entrance was a hundred-foot hike. The lighted walkway was just bright enough not to step on a snail. Two eight-foot-high oak designer doors stood there

waiting for me to bang the horseshoe door-knocker. One whack and Sharon opened the door, she smiled.

*God didn't spare her beauty. She seemed too elegant to be a school teacher.* Her faded blue denim wrap-around dress was neatly tied with a matching belt.

"Good evening, Jess, please come in." She locked the door after me, pushing a button next to the door lock.

I handed Sharon the flowers. "For the most beautiful teacher in the whole world."

She kissed me gently on my left cheek. "Oh, Jess, you have grown. Thank you so much. I love roses. Come with me to the kitchen, I must put these into water."

I followed Sharon through the wide entrance hallway into the living room. There were two steps down into the sunken living room. The spongy, gray carpet accumulated each step I took. The vaulted ceilings reminded me of a cathedral, very high and beamed. The living room was large enough to play a game of four man touch football. The Navajo white walls were covered with life sized paintings. The dark gray marble mantel framed the fireplace.

My eyes roamed in awe, then they followed Sharon. She went through a swinging door into the kitchen. "I'll be with you in a second, Jess."

"Take your time, Sharon, I've never seen a kitchen like this one."

"Isn't it great. Home magazine photographed it last year."

I casually walked from one end to the other. Wood counters, cupboards and drawers covered one side. There were two large, stainless steel, refrigerator and freezer doors on the opposite side. The two kitchen sinks were also stainless steel. Spanish mosaic tile covered the kitchen

counter and back walls. A canopy of stainless steel shielded the eight burners on the stove.

The simmering glow of coals in the brick barbecue pit smelled like hickory. My finger tips danced on top of the butcher block island. I counted fifteen steps as I approached two Western styled swinging bar doors. I gave them a Clint Eastwood push! *A private breakfast nook. I wonder where the dinning room is?*

I detected the scent of her arrival. Her warm hand touched my shoulder. "Jess, let's relax in the den."

"Sharon, this kitchen must be forty-five feet deep and twenty-five feet long. The carpenters did a beautiful job on that long butcher block island. Where is the dining room?"

"Through this door. We'll pass it on the way to the den."

"Lead the way."

Just a few feet on the other side of the door, she opened two sliding maple wood doors. The dining room walls were also maple, from floor to ceiling. The dark parquet floors were flawless. The ten-foot-high ceiling was accentuated with wide wood beams. Two glass chandeliers lighted the large, highly polished, wood table for ten. *King Arthur never had it this good.*

I closed the sliding wood doors for her. The gray plush carpeting continued down the wide hallway to another door. Sharon opened the door.

"Jess, this is the den."

I followed her down two carpeted steps into the most fabulous room my eyes have ever seen. Wood walls, beamed ceilings, a pool table. The brick walled fireplace created a romantic gleam in front of three large couches.

Sharon called, "Jess, come over to the bar." She was standing behind a bar with six stools in front. I approached the well stocked bar. The mirrors behind her reflected her

every move. I sat on one of the soft leather stools. *Her husband must make a ton of money. This woman has everything.*

"Sharon, I've never seen a house like this before."

"Jess, there is more to see."

She shook a covered glass container a couple of times.

"What are you making, Sharon?"

"I'm making my special. Beefeaters Martini's. Will you have one with me?"

"Yes, I would like to try one."

"Jess, carry the glasses for me?"

"Of course."

"Thanks. I'll pour our drinks. Why don't we sit in front of the fireplace?" She set the container onto the thick wood coffee table.

She sat down demurely. She patted the couch seat next to her.

I sat facing her. The chocolate brown velour couch was soft and comfortable. She filled our glasses. "Welcome, to my house, Jess." She raised her glass in a toast. Our glasses met.

"Thank you for inviting me, Sharon." I took a sip of my martini. The taste was her taste, smooth. "You do make a better drink than the Chop House."

"Thank you, Jess. That personal touch makes the difference."

The soft music in the background filled the room. Sharon's face was lighted by the fire. I couldn't take my eyes away from hers. Her beautiful full, light red lips gently squeezed her martini glass. Her moist blue eyes were looking right into mine. A light touch of red hue accented her high cheek bones. A perfect nose, soft lightly oiled skin, and no make-up. *Didn't need any. PERFECT.*

*I could look at her forever. I felt myself staring. Say something.*

"Sharon, I want to thank you for your influence. I really like working at Steel Rite."

"You're welcome. Stick with it Jess, this could lead to a profitable future for you."

"I think you're right. I can't believe the business Steel Rite does."

She answered, "John told me his Oriental connections have increased his exporting."

I added, "Jack English, the plant manager told me we're only in the embryo stages."

"He's right. Golf will soon be the number one sport in the world."

Sharon leaned forward to place her drink onto the table. She moved closer to me. Her face was inches from mine. She looked into my eyes, "How handsome you are. You're easy to look at, Jess. I used to envy the girls in your class."

I gave a quizzical look.

"Do you know what I mean, Jess?"

"I'm not sure."

Her hand caressed my face. "They could have you. I couldn't."

*She could have had me anytime she wanted. How about now?* "I've dreamed about you, Sharon."

She kissed my cheek. I felt her back away just enough to be nose to nose. Her wet lips glistened. I couldn't stand it anymore. Our lips met.

Her gentle lips moved slowly all over mine. I felt her arms wrap around my neck. I pulled her closer. Her full breasts were against my chest. I felt levity.

We slowly broke away. Her face was still close to mine. She softly said, "You bring chill bumps to me Jess."



She opened her dress. My eyes focused on her beautiful standing full breasts. "Please . . . Kiss me, Jess, kiss me."

I held her firmly as I kissed her. She responded.

*My flag was up. I surrender, I surrender.*

She gently grabbed my left hand and placed it on her right breast. Her hard nipple fit between my open fingers. I gently massaged her breast.

Her fingers moved down my back. She pulled my shirt tail out. Her hands roamed my bare back lightly, like a tickle. My hands slid inside her dress, down her sides, to her firm tiny waist.

I felt her moan of excitement. We broke away, slightly facing each other. Her eyes were wet.

She kissed me lightly, "Jess, would you excuse me, I need to powder my nose."

I stood up for her. She whispered as she walked away. "Fix us another drink. I'll be back in a minute."

*Yeah, I need another drink. I heard that said before, it will straighten you out. If I get any straighter it'll break.*

I went to the bar for some olives and I poured the remaining martini mix into our glasses. On the way back to the couch I unbuttoned my shirt, sat down and took off my shoes, leaned back and watched the glow of the crackling fire.

Sharon's bare legs moved in front of my view. My eyes moved up her long legs. The V cut of her white thin robe covered the rest of her body. She handed me my drink, and put out her hand. I held it.

"Come and sit by the fire with me." We sat on the thick white Grecian rug in front of the fireplace. We were eye to eye, sipping our martinis. Her nose had a little extra powder under it, so I gently brushed it away with my fingertip. I set my glass onto the brick hearth. She put her arms around my neck. Our lips met. The weight of her

body descending, pulled me on top of her as we drifted onto the rug.

She whispered between kisses. "I want you, I want you. Be inside me, I need to feel you."

She pulled off my shirt. "Stand up. I want to take off your trousers." She opened my belt and unzipped my fly. I stepped out of my pants. She grabbed my erection through my shorts. She slowly pulled my shorts down. Her hand gently fondled my erection. She put my erection into her mouth. Her hands slid back and forth over my hardness from the moistness in her mouth.

The sensation had me standing on my toes. I couldn't hold back. I exploded into her mouth.

She slowly pulled away. Her robe fell away from her body. She laid back on the rug, holding her arms open for me. The excitement of her magnificent body kept my hardness. My arms held my face above hers. She pulled me closer. Our hungry lips met.

She guided me inside of her. I worked in and out to her rhythm. She moaned and screamed. "Oh Jess, I love you inside me. I'm cuming I'm cuming. Oh, darling, oh, darling, I've needed you so much. I've been so lonely for this kind of touch. Oh, God! Hold me, darling, I'm exploding."

I couldn't stop. Our joined bodies were wet with perspiration. We slid back and forth, up and down. My excitement was coming to an apex. "Jess, I feel you're getting ready. Yes, darling, yes. Oh, cum inside of me. Please . . ."

A euphoria explosion. We lay next to each other, her head rested on my chest. The warm fire slowly dried our wet bodies.

Sharon lifted her head, she looked down at my face.  
"Jess, darling, you make me so happy. I need you, I need your wonderful touch. I've never felt like this before."

I started to say something.

"Sh . . . don't say anything, darling. Let me talk. John pays little attention to me. He gives me freedom and all the money I could ever spend." Tears were swelling up in her eyes. "Darling, what I need most," she paused, "you're giving me. You make me feel like a woman." She gave a deep sigh. "I know you have your own life. I know you have your own girlfriend. Just let me be a small part of it. No one will ever know. It can be our own secret."

She came forward and kissed me. I could feel her tears running onto my face. She whispered, "You won't be sorry, I promise you."

*I'm falling for her. I'm too young. I won't give her up. She's captured me. But I love Sally. What am I going to do?*

I looked at Sharon. I couldn't tell her my feelings. I'm too confused.

"Sharon, I like being with you . . . " The phone rang.

"Excuse me, Jess. I have to answer it. It's probably John." I watched her beautiful nude body run across the room. She picked up the phone. "Hello." She spoke quietly. I couldn't hear. I got up and dressed. Sharon was back in a few minutes. "Don't leave, darling."

"Sharon, it's getting late. I should be on my way home before it gets any later."

Sharon put on her robe. "Jess, wait just a second."

She scribbled something onto a pad. "Jess, this is my private number at school. Call me anytime. I will meet you anywhere, anytime."

I looked at the number. Then put the piece of paper in my pocket. "Thanks for a wonderful evening, Sharon. I

will call you the first of the week." We kissed. Her moist kiss made me feel warm, fulfilled.

"Good night, darling. I will be waiting for your call."

"Good night, Sharon."

The big heavy electric garage door opened as I approached. Interstate 5 was quiet at 11:00 p.m.

I goosed Black Beauty to eighty miles per hour. The bouquet of Sharon permeated my clothes. My power windows slid down. Sharon's scent trailed out the window. *She was air-tight in my mind.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Jack English wore his drinking mask into the Assembly Room. "Jess, come over and have a drink with me after work." Jack's glazed eyes and fast speaking manner demonstrated his urgency to talk.

I smiled, "Just one, Jack. I can't keep my girlfriend waiting."

"Jess . . . never mind, I'll tell you later."

*Jack knows everything about this operation. I'm going to learn fast. I could turn out to be his boss.*

Jack was sitting at his usual spot, gulping his Russian Vodka. "Hi, Jess, pull up a chair." He smiled at me while he opened his left hand drawer. "Fresh orange juice, my bonus came in. No more cheap shit."

He was half in the bag. *I wonder how much money he got.* "Hey, that's great Jack. I hope it was a big bonus, you deserve it."

"You're right, young man. I got ten big ones."

"Wow, that's a lot of money. Jack, as the plant manager, you must have heavy responsibilities?"

He handed me my screwdriver. "Jess, I'm responsible for everything." His hand waved a ring full of keys. "These keys open every door in this place. I open the doors and lock the doors. The late shift is locked in when I leave. I live three blocks from here, and if there's a problem, the

foreman can call me at home. I sign off all exports, and I sign in all imports."

"Jack, that sounds like you are the head man around here."

"You bet I am. Nobody fucks with me." He made another drink. "I like you kid. You're all right in my book. I gave John Gladstone a glowing report about you."

"Gee, thanks Jack. I appreciate that."

He started rocking in his chair. He grunted, lifting his feet with difficulty. His feet swung around, landing on top of his desk. His Vodka-filled gut hid his belt. Jack smiled, his messed up hair and heavy jowls hung over his unkempt collar. He was taken with himself. "Jess, when do you get out of school?"

"I graduate in a few weeks."

"You keep up the good work. I'll get you a promotion and a raise. You can be my right hand man." He took his feet off of the desk and stood up shakily. "I gotta take a leak. Tell me your decision when I get back."

Jack fought for his balance as he swayed out of the room. *His right hand man? Yeah, just as soon as I finish eating this watermelon.*

Jack returned. He was confident. His walk was purposeful, no stumbling. *How does he do it?*

"Ah, the pause that refreshes. Well, what do you think, Jess."

"Great, you wouldn't josh me would you?"

"When you're in my position, you don't need to bullshit. I call the shots."

"Thanks, Jack, you're a real pal." I glanced at my wristwatch. "Jack, I have to be going. You don't mind do you?"

"Nah, go ahead, see you tomorrow." I heard the familiar sound of ice dropping into his glass as I walked

out. *Ten thousand dollar bonus? To lock and unlock doors? Sign papers? Mm.*

The restaurant was crowded. Sally looked ravishing in white. "I love Italian food. How did you find this cute place?"

The hanging wine bottles and private booths at Louigis were famous amongst the Italians. I looked into her beautiful eyes. "I asked one of the drivers at work if he knew of a nice little restaurant. Being Italian, he steered me here."

"Speaking of work. How are things going there? Do you like making golf clubs all day?"

*Actually, I'd rather make love to Sally in Truck 24. Bob met Richard Mararella in one of the local bars. Richard, brought his donut business to Detroit, from New York, looking for more action. He found it. Bob and Richard are now partners. Donut dunks and all. Bob reminded me, 'life's great Kid, call me, we can always use another man.' He made a man out of me. I'd better keep in touch, I may need the keys to Truck 24's door.*

"There's something about Steel Rite that intrigues me. Besides, I need extra money to take care of my girl."

"Honey, I work too. Let me buy dinner."

"How about the next time."

"Promise?"

"Would I lie to you?" *Did I say that?*

We decided on Linguini with clam sauce. The waiter brought our dinner. I kissed her hand before dinner. The food was so good we ate quietly, enjoying each other. Sally was in deep thought, something was on her mind. Our coffee arrived. Sally smiled sheepishly, "Jess, I've been thinking about our future. You do love me, don't you?"

I swallowed my coffee. "Princess, as much as I know how."

"Jess, I do want to go to college this fall. I've waited for you."

"Sally, I know you have. I graduate in a few weeks. I have an A+ average. I'll be able to go to the school of my choice."

"Have you thought about what you want to study?"

"To be honest with you, no, I haven't. I'll make a deal with you."

Sally took my hand and held it with both of hers. "I'm listening, Prince Pirate."

"After I graduate I can be more specific. Please be patient. We will go to school together."

"Jess, do you mean that?"

"Yes I do. I want us to learn and grow together."

Sally leaned over, put my face in her hands, and kissed me hard.

"Oh, Honey, you make me happy. You're my whole life. We can build our lives together. Just you and me Jess."

The lights were low at Louigis. The music was romantic . . . Volarie.

*I meant everything I said to her. Sharon Gladstone must be a fantasy. I have to be careful I don't screw up. Sharon made her bed. I like being in it. But . . .*



## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

I'd seen Sharon several times these past few months at her townhouse on Clarence Street. She depended upon my meetings with her. I couldn't stay away from her.

*All the time Sally thinks she's the only one. She is, or is she?*

John Gladstone left today for the Orient. Jack English gave me orders to deliver Mr. Vang's specially designed metal head drivers to the Gladstone house in Boomfield Hills.

Sharon called the plant. "Darling, spend the night with me."

Sally picked up the phone on the first ring. "Hello."

*What kind of a lies am I going to make up this time?*

*Well, It's only half a lie.*

"Hi Princess. How's your day been?"

"Thinking of you. Only you. How about yours?"

"Thinking of you and how much I'm going to miss you."

"What do you mean, going to miss me?"

"I have to deliver some new clubs to Bloomfield Hills tonight. I'm still at the plant."

Her soft groan was full of disappointment. "I won't be finished working for a few hours," I explained. "They've made arrangements for me to spend the night."

"Sweetheart, when will you be back?"

"I'll be back tomorrow afternoon."

"Can't someone else take them?"

"I'm the only one they trust. It has something to do with a large shipment to the Orient."

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Yes, Princess, we'll spend the afternoon and evening together."

"Be careful driving, sweetheart."

"I will, Honey. See you tomorrow. Bye for now."

"Goodbye, Prince Pirate."

The garage door closed behind me. Sharon entered the garage through the laundry door. "Hello, darling."

"Hi, Beautiful, I'll be with you in a second."

I opened my trunk. Clubs were everywhere, must have been that bumpy turn off. I gathered the loose clubs and the empty box.

"Jess, John keeps all his new designs in this cabinet."

Sharon opened one of the metal doors. The cabinet was filled with an assortment of golf clubs.

I packed the loose plastic wrapped clubs back into the box and placed them inside the metal cabinet.

Sharon closed the door. I took the keys from my trunk lock and closed the lid. Sharon put her arm under mine leading me into the house. "Darling, you must be worn out. Come with me."

We walked up a wooden stairway to the second floor. The opened door revealed more plush carpeting; it was a darker shade of gray than in the living room. There were two wide hallways. One went straight ahead. The other to the left. We went straight ahead. Sharon swung open a pair of doors that revealed a complete home gymnasium. "Sharon, this is fantastic."

"Darling, we have a walk-in shower room and leather couches to relax on. The sauna is warming up for us."

"Sharon, you think of everything. I do need a shower, I feel grimy from the plant."

"Darling, towels and robes are hanging in the shower room. I'll fix us martinis. Meet me in the sauna after your shower."

The warm water pounded onto my head. She had a tooth brush and hair brush set out for me. I looked through the little window on the sauna door. She looked inviting, wearing her short pink terry cloth robe. Mine was blue. I closed the thick wooden door behind me. The room was almost hot. "The shower was great. I feel a hundred per cent better, thank you."

"You're welcome, precious." She patted the bench. "Come, sit and relax."

The wood benches were covered with thick, white towels. *She thought of everything.*

The martini serving tray was wood. *Wouldn't want to burn those pretty legs.* Our brief foreplay was the same. I examined her beautiful face and body. I loved looking at her. My martini glass automatically moved to a toast. The martini oozed down my throat. I couldn't wait to kiss her beautiful mouth. I sucked on her lips and tongue. I opened her pink robe. My hands slowly slid up her waist, finding and fondling her lovely breasts. Her hands worked up my thigh. She felt my hardness. Her tongue tickled my ear lobe.

I felt her hot breath whispering into my ear. "Darling, I'll be right back." I crossed my legs and leaned my head back.

*She pees on Que.*

Sharon returned with a wide awake look in her eyes. She threw the remainder of our martinis onto the hot coals. "Darling, the martinis are steaming in the air. Inhale."

The hot burning steam went into my nostrils, Sharon's eyes looked glazed in the dimly lit room.

Again, I noticed a little powder under her nose. Her face was into mine. Our perspired bodies slipped into our practiced rhythm. Sharon's perspiration dripped into my mouth. My lips felt a little numb. *Wow, what she does to me!*

Her wet mouth worked all over my body. I felt her soft hands slip me into her bent-over body.

She went into a sexual frenzy. She couldn't get enough. She screamed, "FUCK ME. FUCK ME." She turned around. "Darling, I love you. You make me really high."

Her legs wrapped around my back. Her energy level was incredible. She bounced up and down. The wonderful friction brought us both to a climax. She screamed. My heart pounded, I felt like I was on fire. I leaned back trying to catch some air. The room was extremely hot.

Sharon felt limp in my arms. She mumbled. "Help me, darling, I feel faint." I picked her up. I was scared. My bare foot pushed open the wooden door. The outside room air revived me immediately. I laid Sharon onto one of the leather resting couches. I quickly covered her over heated body with one of the large towels. I went in the bathroom and soaked a wash cloth in cold water. I gently patted her face with the cool cloth. I relaxed when I saw her beautiful face come to life.

She looked up at me. "That feels better. Thank you, darling. The heat got to me." Her hands touched my face. "Jess you've gotten to me." She pulled my face to her lips. We kissed.

I held her in my arms. I listened to her soft breathing. My eyes closed. . . Time drifted. I don't know how long. . . A soft voice was speaking into my ear. "Wake up, sleepy head. Aren't you hungry? I'm starved. Come, let's shower."

"Okay, I'm awake." We washed, rinsed and dried each other.

She threw a fresh robe at me. "All you have to do is open the wine. I have everything under control."

*She certainly had me under control.*

We ate dinner in the breakfast nook. Sharon was cute, playing toes with me. Her flirting winks and touch started turning me on. She knew exactly what she was doing. We went to bed. Her palpitating, warm silky body kept me aroused. Our bodies locked into love making throughout the night. I'm used to sleeping alone. *I'm not anymore.*

Sharon kissed my eyes. I woke up to her touch. "Good morning, darling. Would you like breakfast in bed?"

*Am I dreaming?* My eyes focused on her beautiful face. "Good morning, Beautiful. Yes, I would like breakfast in bed."

"What would you like?"

"How about you in the shower after we eat."

She flipped the back of her robe up, exposing her nude butt. "I'll be back in a flash."

Sharon returned with scrambled eggs, bacon, and warm croissants with butter and Boysenberry jam. I needed the hot coffee to wash it down. I finished my breakfast and part of hers. My energy level was back to normal.

I took off Sharon's robe and carried our nude bodies to the shower. I soaped her beautiful body. She smiled. "Darling, I have fresh shorts, socks and a new polo shirt set out for you."

I squirted her face with water. *Isn't she thoughtful.*

Her soapy hands slid over my new hardness. "If you were mine, you'd be wearing a new shirt every day."

*I would love to be hers. All hers.* We were standing in the shower, body to body. "Darling, I need to feel you

inside of me the rest of the day. Make love to me one more time." I did exactly that. Standing up.

We stood in the garage, kissing. "Jess, darling, I can't stand long separations from you. Please, will I see you soon?"

*I loved seeing her. It was the excuses to Sally I was running out of. Nothing could stop me from seeing her. I'll think of something.*

"I'll call you tomorrow, before I start work."

"Promise." I blew her a kiss. The garage door opened.

I was home at 3:00 p.m. I opened my trunk to get the little paper sack Sharon used for my dirty clothes. A bright reflection blinded me briefly.

*What could that have been? I examined the trunk closer. I'll be darned, one of Mr. Gladstone's specially designed metal wood drivers. I must have missed it last night. I wonder how this new artillery feels and swings?*

I yanked off the plastic sleeve and walked to the other side of the garage. I stood on the grass, facing the garage window. My reflection was a tell tale of my swing. I took a slow deliberate back swing. When my hands reached their full extension at the top of my swing, I felt like I was holding a telephone pole. *This club is too heavy. I know I had a long night. Not that long.*

Vivid flashes of Sharon filled the screen of my mind. I held the club with my right hand and then my left. *I know I'm right. I wonder what this club is filled with?* I examined the grip. *Wait a minute, I've gripped thousands of these clubs, this grip isn't the same kind I've been using. I stared at the club. Come on, what are you waiting for? You're not going to let a little grip stop your curiosity. No way. I can always put on a new grip. No one will ever know. I need to see how this club is weighted.*

I laid the club across the work bench in the garage. I ran a single edged razor down the brown and red stripped rubber grip and anxiously peeled off the rubber grip. Dad kept thick tan envelopes for loose screws and bolts. I pulled the locking tape off of the wide-barreled shaft, then put one of the envelopes over the open barrel of the shaft. I turned the club upside down and tapped the barrel hard several times onto the bench, feeling the envelope fill up. I pulled the barrel upward and out of the envelope. The end of the barrel had white powder all around it. I wiped off the powder with my hand and covered the open barrel with a piece of electrician's tape.

*Now, what's in this envelope?* The filled envelope was heavy. I poured. Chunks of white powder came out, landing onto a newspaper. My nose moved down toward the chunks. *No odor.*

I pulled the retractable sliding extension cord leading to the drop light over to the chunks. A prism of very shinny looking fool's gold diamonds flickered in the light. I dabbed some of the loose powder with my fingertip, and touched my tongue with my finger. My tongue felt a quick numbness. *Mm, that's a familiar numbness. But where? My mind searched. Yeah, television. Detective shows. Could this be cocaine? My inquisitive mind had to know.*

I called Sally. Her sweet voice said, "Hello."

"Hi, Princess. Listen, is your Dad home?"

"Yes, why?"

"Never mind why. Tell him I have to see him, it's urgent. I'll be there in fifteen minutes." I hung up. *Sally must think I'm nuts. I never said goodbye.* Black Beauty purred to my excitement. My mind was going crazy thinking about cocaine. *I'd better slow down. Hub will have the answers. I can't wait to find out.* I came to a

screeching halt. I vaulted the stairway. Sally answered the door.

"Hi, Princess." I gave her a quick kiss. "Where's your Dad?"

"He's in the den." I was on her heels, carrying the envelope and golf club. I walked passed Sally into the den. Hub Blaine was seated in his favorite green leather easy chair. I looked at the big red headed man. Hub didn't have inches of fat on his six-foot, one-inch frame. His handsome features had to account for a good portion of Sally's beauty. Constance Blaine, Sally's lovely mother, deserved the rest of the credit. They both were sitting together in the den.

Hub has shared some unbelievable stories about his detective work with Detroit's finest. We've all become good friends this past year. Mr. and Mrs. Blaine insisted I address them by their first names.

I waited. Hub raised his hand. That was his signal to keep quiet until he had finished watching the television show he and Constance were enjoying.

Perspiration ran down my face. My heart pounded. *Doesn't he understand how important this is?* I tried to calm myself. Sally stood next to me. She gave me a little bump; I leaned over, whispered into her ear. "Princess, I love you. Please forgive my shortness with you over the phone."

Her face lit up. "You're forgiven, Mr. Pirate."

Finally, Hub, lifted his head. "Good afternoon, Jess. Patience is a virtue." His inside chuckles were always noticed. They used to piss me off at first. Now I ignore them. Hub spoke seriously. "My ears are open for your urgency."

I glanced at Constance, thinking that she sure is the picture of what Sally will look like in twenty years. Her elegant, dark red hair and slight Irish brogue charms



whomever sees or hears her. "Hello Constance, please excuse my intrusion."

"Jess, you're always welcome here," she said, as she stood up. "Excuse me, while I get some refreshments. Coming, Sally?"

"Please, Mom! I'm dying to know the secret mystery Jess is holding." Constance smiled. "Of course, I understand, dear." She left.

Hub motioned us to sit down. We sat on the couch-facing Hub.

The room was quiet. My heart thumped rapidly through my chest. I licked my lips, took a deep breath, in preparation for the explanation. "Hub, let me give you a quick rundown of the chain of events. First, I have a part time job after school. I work for a company called Steel Rite. Steel Rite, manufactures the metal heads for golf irons and woods. These heads are assembled and shipped all over the world. My job is to apply the rubber grips to many of these clubs."

I took another nervous breath of air. Sally's warm hand gently circled my back muscles. My tension subsided. I continued.

"Friday night, I was asked to deliver a large box full of specially designed metal wood drivers to John Gladstone in Bloomfield Hills. Mr. Gladstone owns Steel Rite. Mrs. Gladstone opened the garage for me. She told me that her husband, John, was in the Orient and that he keeps his special clubs in a metal cabinet in the garage. When I opened my trunk, the clubs were scattered all over. Half in and half out of the box. I quickly put them into the box and placed them inside the metal cabinet."

Hub's eyes never blinked. A very patient man. *Thank God.*

Constance returned. Hub raised his arm. She knew to be still. He definitely commanded respect. He also gave it. I gave Sally a light poke in the ribs. We moved over so Constance could join us on the couch. We turned our attention back to Hub. He gave the "continue" nod.

"This afternoon I opened my trunk." I held up the club. "Hub, this club belongs with the others that I had left off in Bloomfield Hills." Sally said, "Jess, you can always return it."

Hub raised his eyebrows. "Young lady, do not interrupt."

Sally folded her fingers, "Sorry, Daddy."

Another "continue" nod.

"Hub, I tried to swing this club. It felt like a log. My curiosity got the better of me. I took off the grip to see why it was so heavy. Hub, the contents in this envelope came from inside the shaft." I lifted the envelope. "This is my urgency." I didn't speculate. *He's the expert.*

Hub got up from his chair. I stood up and handed him the envelope. He took the envelope, then walked to the other side of the room. His small oak desk and chair were soon occupied. Hub turned on his desk light. He poured some of the contents onto a blank piece of paper. He stared, then reached inside his main drawer. The magnifying glass hovered over the white rocks and powder.

We stood there watching and waiting. He looked up at me. "Have you shown or mentioned these contents to anyone?"

I answered him directly, "No sir, you're the only one, besides Sally and Constance."

Hub had a concerned look on his face. "Good. Jess, this is serious." He looked at Constance, then Sally. "Girls, not one word about what we are going to talk about. Is that clear?"

"Of course, dear."

"Yes, Daddy."

Hub was intense. "Jess, this could be very dangerous. You, too, must keep this quiet."

"Yes, sir." I didn't dare ask what it was.

He pinched a tiny piece of the white substance between his forefinger and thumb. Hub paused, his eyes and voice expressed the seriousness. His elbow rested on his desk. We all stared at his finger tips. He looked at us. "This is Cocaine. I don't know what quality it is but I'm going to find out shortly." He poured the contents back into the envelope. "Jess, I believe you may have stumbled onto something big. This must be a good omen. My closest school chum will be here Monday night for dinner. I haven't seen J. B. Clark in years. He's the number one FBI man on the East Coast."

My eyes popped. "Wow."

"Jess, J.B. and I will have many questions to ask you. Be here, Monday at 5:00 p.m. Not a word to anyone. I mean anyone."

I immediately thought about work. "Hub, I work Monday afternoon. What do I say, if the club is found to be missing?"

"Jess, you're a big boy. Admit nothing, deny everything and ask for proof."

I raised my hand. "On my honor."

He smiled.

"Aren't you two going out tonight?"

Sally and I looked at each other. I said. "Yes, sir. We're going to the movies."

Hub stood up, and put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't discuss this subject with anyone. Have a good time. I'll see you Monday night."

Sally grabbed my arm. "Good night, Mom."

"Good night, Constance. Hub, thank you." I shook his hand. "I will follow your instructions." He gave me an approval nod. Hub Blaine was serious. Very serious.

We were outside, Black Beauty was waiting.

I opened the car door for Sally. "Prince Pirate, you're always a gentleman," she remarked teasingly.

"Hurry up and get in. I need a kiss."

Kissing Sally is different than kissing Sharon Gladstone. My heart is with Sally. We do things together. Sharon Gladstone is doing something to me. *Is it the wealth? Is it sex? What's wrong with me? What?*

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Chills went up my spine when Jack English walked up to me.

"Jess, John Gladstone wants to see you, at once."

"Sure, Jack. Let me finish this grip."

"Forget about the grip. He said, 'Now!'"

"What's the problem, Jack?"

"I don't know. Let's go."

Jack didn't knock. I was right behind him as we entered John Gladstone's office. John Gladstone was pacing back and forth behind his desk. He looked disheveled and worried.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Gladstone?"

"It's about time. What do you think you're here for?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know."

His crazed eyes bore a hole into me. "Young man, I understand you were told to deliver a box full of metal head woods to my house in Bloomfield Hills, Friday night." He stopped pacing.

His finger pointed at me as he shouted, "Well, did you deliver all of those clubs?"

*Very clever phrasing, 'Did you deliver all of those clubs?'*

I glanced at Jack English for a little support. He stood there, petrified. My eyes went to John Gladstone.

"Mr. Gladstone. I delivered the box that Jack English gave me, to your house in Bloomfield Hills."

"What time was this?"

"I left the plant at 8:00 p.m. Friday night."

"What time did you get to my house?"

"Oh, around 8:45 p.m. Mrs. Gladstone opened the garage for me. She asked me to put them into a metal cabinet in front of one of the cars in the garage."

"Wasn't the box sealed?"

"I didn't notice, sir."

"What do you mean, you didn't notice?"

"Mr. Gladstone . . ."

"Don't give me that Mr. Gladstone shit."

*I said to myself, be careful with your choice of words.*

"John, Mrs. Gladstone was there when I put the box into the cabinet and when I left. Ask her."

"What do you think I am, stupid. Of course, I asked her." He walked around his desk to where I was standing. His large frame towered over me. His voice was now menacingly calm. "Jess, there were twelve clubs in that box. I counted eleven. What happened to the twelfth one?"

I took a stand. "John, I didn't load the box. I'm sorry about the mix up. I will be happy to pay for it or make you another club."

John turned around and sat on the end of his desk. He sat there for a moment in frustration, he composed himself. "Jess, that's not the point. Those were specially designed clubs. Did you look throughout your trunk?"

"For what?"

"The missing club, God damn it."

"John, I don't understand what's going on." I looked directly at him, then reached into my pocket. "Here are my car keys, I have nothing to hide."

John saw my keys. His eyes went directly to Jack English. "Jack, go check his car, thoroughly."

I stood there, not knowing what to do. I kept quiet. John moved from his perch to his desk, turning the back of his chair to my face.

*Does he think I rode the bus here? Didn't Hub say, 'Admit nothing, deny everything and ask for proof.'*

Finally, Jack returned from his hide and seeks journey. "John, nothing." John looked at Jack, then me.

"All right Jess, I'm satisfied for now. Go back to work."

"Yes, sir."

I closed the door quietly behind me. I looked over to John's secretary's cubical. She wasn't there. I listened through the closed door. "You dumb son-of-a-bitch," Gladstone screamed at Jack English. "We'd better not have any more of these fuck ups."

I quickly left, saving my sigh of relief as I closed the outside door. "Whew!"

I took my ten-minute break at 3:30 p.m. The phone booth on the other side of the plant was vacant. I dialed Sharon Gladstone at school.

"Hello, this is Mrs. Gladstone."

"Hello. Sharon?"

"Jess, darling, yes it's me. I hoped you would call."

"I wanted to make sure it was you. Listen, I just went through a grilling with your husband."

"I thought you may. He was in one of his raving tirade's last night." She paused for a moment. "Oh, Jess, I've been worried about you all day."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him you had brought them around a quarter to nine, Friday night and you left shortly afterwards."

"I said the same thing. He seemed to think I stole one of them."

"I know you wouldn't do anything like that."

"You can rest your mind. I didn't."

"Jess, I'm concerned. What was the final outcome?"

"That's the reason I wanted to know what you had told him. I think everything is okay. I like working there. I don't have to steal. I make enough money to buy my own."

"Darling, don't worry. I'm sure there was a miss count. He'll cool off. He's a very explosive person." Her voice was anxious. "Jess, when am I going to see you?"

*I can't take a chance in seeing her. Think, Think.*

"Sharon, I need to prepare for my finals before graduation. I have to get back to work. I'll call you next Monday."

"Darling, I miss you terribly. Please make sure you call. I can't stand it without you."

"I will. Bye for now."

"Goodbye, darling."

*I don't know what's going on with her and her husband. Sally means too much to me. I've got to figure out a way to sever this strange affair with Sharon.*

Jack English came into the Assembly Room. He called me away from my work bench.

"What's up, Jack?"

"Listen, Jess, I cooled off Gladstone. You're in the clear. Come over to the office when you're finished. We'll have a little drink together."

"I'd like that, Jack. Can we make it another night? I have a five o'clock date."

"Ah, come on. Just one short one."

"How about tomorrow, Jack?"

"Okay, that girlfriend of yours must be something. I'll see you tomorrow."

One turn of the ignition key had Black Beauty and me headed for Sally's. I wiped my brow. Fortunately I got



away from Jack English. He appeared to be ready for one of his binges. *Nothing was going to delay me tonight.*

Sally looked like a beautiful female Black Bart. Her red hair brushed the top of her black cashmere sweater, covering her shoulders. Black jeans and black tennis shoes completed her attire. She came running down the stairs into my outstretched arms. I kissed her ear.

"Hi, Princess. Are you as excited as I am?"

"You do mean, in seeing me as I do you, don't you?"

With a quizzical look and a question mark, I backed away from Sally. Examining her, I said. "Oh, I thought you were someone else." The look on her face was priceless. She crinkled up her cute nose in her own adorable way.

"That someone else had better be my reflection in the mirror."

*What a selfish jerk I've been. Playing Mr. Grown Up with Sharon Gladstone.*

Sally and I squeezed hands as we climbed the stairs. The reality of meeting J.B. Clark was setting in. I was anxious to meet him. I stopped our progress. We were standing in her doorway.

"Sally, is your dad's friend here?"

"Yes, he and Dad have been in the den for the past hour."

"What have they been talking about?"

"Honey, I don't know. The door has been closed. You know how my dad is about privacy."

"Well, how and when are you going to announce my arrival?"

"Jess, he has a watch. Believe me, when the little hand is on five and the big hand is on twelve, the door will open."

I looked at my watch. "We'd better hurry. We only have ninety seconds."

I shut the door. Sally pulled me into the house. I took off my black leather jacket, and Sally put it away in the guest closet. Constance came from the kitchen. Her soft Irish voice helped ease my anxiety.

"Good evening, Jess."

"Good evening, Constance. Did you have a nice day?"

"Yes. Guess I've been a little excited all day." She put her finger to her mouth and winked. We all smiled with sealed lips. Hub gave strict instructions not to discuss this subject. We were all dying to say something.

The den door opened. Hub came out. He smiled. "Good to see you, Jess. Please come into the den." He looked at Constance and Sally. "Okay, you two can come in, if you like."

*If they like? They beat me to the door and were seated by the time I shook Hub's hand.*

Hub was in a good mood. "I like your promptness, Jess. Please come in and meet my friend."

I walked into the den. Hub was behind me. His hand rested on my shoulder, that encouraged my forward motion. Hub spoke, "Jess, I want you to meet the finest man I know. J. B. Clark, shake hands with Jess Sterling."

J.B. Clark slowly raised from the chair he was occupying. He was the first to speak.

"Hello, Jess, very nice to make your acquaintance. Hub speaks very highly of you."

"Hello, Mr. Clark. I've anticipated meeting you all day long. How are you, sir?"

J. B. Clark smiled. "Jess, my friends call me J. B. I hope you will do the same."

Our hands met. His large thick fingered hand felt strong. No doubt they collared many fugitives. *I'm shaking hands with a FBI Agent.*

J.B. Clark's powerful body stood tall as we greeted. He and Hub were carbon copies. J.B. Clark appeared to be a little taller than Hub is. *J.B. is a handsome man.* He has light brown hair with a part; big expressive green eyes; high cheek bones; a straight nose; and a square jaw, with a cleft running down his chin. His neatly trimmed mustache accented his perfect white teeth whenever he smiled.

"Thank you, sir, it will be my pleasure to call you J.B."

Hub had two chairs alongside of his desk. I took one and J.B. the other. Hub spoke up. "J.B., I hope Constance and Sally listening in for a short time won't disturb you."

J.B. smiled. "Hub, you know the ladies are welcome. I'm sure they're most anxious to learn more about Jess's findings at this time."

"Good." Hub's eyes went to Constance and Sally sitting on the couch. "Ladies what you are about to hear is strictly confidential. Is that understood?"

They both answered, "Yes."

He looked at me. "Jess, I know you're aware of the heavy burden placed upon your capable shoulders."

I answered. "Yes, sir."

Hub continued. "I've had the lab run extensive tests on what I suspected to be cocaine." He opened a letter on his desk. Hub was very serious as he read.

*Detective Blaine,*

*The substance you were inquiring about is the highest grade of cocaine we have ever tested. It comes from South America. This high grade of cocaine may have originated from Peru or Bolivia. The samples in question have been purified to 99-100% pure cocaine hydrochloride. This purified*

*product is known as 'pharmaceutical quality' cocaine. This high grade cocaine is mixed with companion alkaloids for hedonistic use by their dealers.*

*Mark Garrett, Lab Specialist II*

Hub looked up from the report, then continued. "This is a staggering report on your find, Jess."

J.B. leaned forward, "Jess, the amount of cocaine in the shaft of that club you brought for Hub to examine contained twenty grams. A full ounce would weigh twenty four grams. Is it possible to load the head of that metal club with cocaine?"

I thought for a moment. "That could be possible. The interior walls of jumbo heads are one thirty second of an inch thick. They are filled with liquid Styrofoam for a solid feel. The head we have here is heavier than usual."

"Can you open that head?"

"Yes I can, J.B. Hub, do you have a hack saw in your garage?"

"Yes. J.B. come with Jess and me to the garage. Constance, will you and Sally have dinner ready for us when we return?"

Constance answered. "Of course, dear."

J.B. and I followed Hub outside. Hub pulled the garage door open. His workbench had all the tools I needed. He lifted the hack saw off of the hook above his work bench and handed it to me. I secured the steel shaft and the neck of the metal head, face down, into his bench vice.

I drew a line across the flat sole and worked the saw across the line, creating a thin groove. I followed my line over the toe of the head. Hub was standing close to me. "Hub, hold the head while I cut off the neck." The head fell into Hub's hands.

I opened the vice and removed the shaft, then pulled a piece of electrician's tape off of a small spool and taped the sawed cut side. The two men were quiet while I worked. I placed the head into the vice with the head facing upward and made another line across the face of the head. I gingerly sawed another groove into the thin shell. I cranked the vice open and laid the head onto a piece of newspaper on the bench. I gently tapped a screw driver into the thin cut line, turning the screw driver until the head opened.

Our eyes were glued on the solid white interior mold. Hub moved forward and peered through his magnifying glass. He backed away from his view. He handed J.B. the magnifying glass.

"J.B., have a look."

J.B. studied the white mold. He looked up. "Hub, this is a jack pot."

I said, "Could I have a look?"

J.B. handed me the magnifying glass. "You bet you can, Jess." The white mold looked like crystallite found in glassy igneous rocks.

J.B. said, "Hub, I think it would be best we not discuss this any further with your family present."

"You're right, J.B. Jess, I depend upon you to keep quiet about this with Sally."

"You can count on me, Hub."

J.B. looked straight into my eyes. "Jess, trafficking cocaine is running rampant in this country. Dealers are known to kill for it. We're going to need your full cooperation and trust."

I looked at both men, wide eyed. *I'm in the middle of something big. Wow, this is getting exciting.*

"Gentlemen, I do understand the severity. Tell me what you need to know." I looked at Hub. "Hub, Sally means the world to me. I want to protect her as much as you want

to. You have my complete trust and attention and mum is the word." Hub put his arm around my shoulders.

"Thanks, son, I believe you. Let's go inside and have dinner. We'll continue our talks after dinner."

Hub wrapped the white mold into the newspaper. He put what was left of the club back into his trunk. J.B. and I followed Hub into the house. Hub made a quick detour to his den, locking the white mold in his desk.

He came out with a smile on his face. "Okay gentlemen, now for the Blaine House Special, Connie's famous Irish Stew." Constance and Sally were ready for us. I sat next to Sally. J.B. faced us, while Constance and Hub were opposite each other. Constance and Sally were quiet while we loaded our plates with Irish stew. Sally passed the tossed green salad. The aroma of the stew made my taste buds bubble. Hub uncorked a bottle of red wine.

Sally gave me a nudge. I love her subtle communication, "Truck 24 where are you?"

Hub filled our glasses, then voiced a tribute to J.B. He raised his glass, "Tonight is a special night for me. I am honored to have my friend, J.B. Clark, help us eat this wonderful stew." He chuckled. "Welcome my friend." We raised our glasses then sipped our wine.

J.B. smiled. "Thank you, Hub. Constance, you're as beautiful as the first day I met you. I don't want to date us, so I won't say how long ago." Constance was enjoying the attention from J.B.

He continued, "Sally you were just a child when I first met you. Now you're a full grown woman, and one of the most beautiful I have seen."

Sally blushed, then said, "Thank you, J.B., you're most kind."

Hub spoke, "Don't be so modest, Sally, he is right."

I said, "I'll second that motion."

J.B. continued. "Jess, you're a breed of a young man that I thought was lost. I'm looking forward to knowing you better." He raised his glass. "Good luck to you and Sally."

I held Sally's hand as we both drank to his toast. "Thank you, sir."

Constance finally broke her quietness. "I think we'd better start eating before we all get drunk." We all laughed and dug in.

J.B. and Hub kept the dinner conversation light by telling stories on each other. Hub started one on J.B. "J.B. and I started our police work soon after we graduated from Western Michigan. New police officers usually get duty the older ones don't want or have had too much of. We were assigned to cover the prostitute area. J.B. always had a young looking face. We'd stop young girls trying to work the streets and the girls would proposition J.B. One night, several ladies of the evening noticed J.B.'s name on his lapel tag." Hub smiled at J.B.

"They nicknamed him 'Jail Bait.'" J.B. laughed along with us.

J.B. said, "Don't worry I have one on him."

Hub interjected. "Be merciful J.B."

J.B. smiled, "The guys used to tease Hub about his name. Horace Blaine was called 'Horse' for the longest time." Hub grimaced but J. B. just smiled and continued, "After Horse's first year of walking the beat, he was given a car to patrol with. Horse made more important arrests than most of the guys had done in a life-time. He was promoted and given a new name. The watch commander said, 'You know, Horse is like a hub on a wheel. The fugitives never know when he will roll up and bust them.'"

The two men laughed, pointing fingers at each other. All of us had a wonderful time.

I leaned over to Sally. "Princess, we haven't had a minute to ourselves. When I leave tonight, be sure to walk me to my car. I'll need a kiss."

"Darling, you know what I need." She squeezed my knee, rubbing my thigh.

Hub stood up from the dining table, motioning us to do the same.

"Constance, J.B., Jess and I will have our coffee in the den."

Constance answered. "Fine darling, Sally and I will join you."

Hub looked at Constance. "Sweetheart, for your safety and Sally's, I think it is best your ears hear no more. Sally, don't pry Jess."

"Gentlemen." We followed his gesture.

I waved to Sally with my hand behind my back. She knows her father better than I. She understands.

I sat in a chair alongside J.B. Hub sat behind his desk. He picked up his mail ounce scale to weigh the white powdered mold. He looked up. "Men, I read a little over three ounces. Assuming this is the same quality as was in the shaft. We have a collective amount of four ounces of pure uncut cocaine."

J.B. spoke, "Hub, will you take notes, while Jess gives us a complete rundown on Steel Rite and its employees?"

"Good thinking J.B. Jess, I've filled J.B. in all about your job and the delivery of the clubs. Did you have any problems today regarding the missing club?"

"Yes sir. Jack English." I looked at J.B. "Jack English is the plant manager." J.B. nodded. "Well, he came into the assembly room this afternoon to fetch me for Mr. Gladstone. He expressed urgency. Mr. Gladstone was in his office, pacing back and forth; disheveled and very nervous. I convinced them I knew nothing about the



missing club. Jack English even searched my car. He dismissed me, sending me back to work. I stood outside his closed door for a few seconds. I heard John Gladstone scream at Jack English, 'You dumb son-of-a-bitch. We'd better not have anymore of these fuck ups.' I quickly left. Later Jack English came into the assembly room. He said, he had cooled off Gladstone and I'm in the clear."

Hub's thirst for more information was insatiable.

"Don't worry about being redundant," he said, "let's start with a description of the owner and his name; his habits and all you know about him. Take your time and be as specific as you can."

I sat up straight in my chair. Both men were ready for my dissertation. I wet my throat with a sip of my coffee. "Mr. John Gladstone is the owner of Steel Rite Cast Company. John Gladstone is in his thirties. Six feet four inches tall, brown eyes and hair, with Rock Hudson looks a like. He's demonstrated his explosive personality. He's married. I understand he owns a Lear-Jet Airplane. Travels to the Orient and throughout the United States. Owns two houses. One in Bloomfield Hills, the other in Gross Point. He drives a Mercedes and owns a Ferrari. His wife also drives a Mercedes. That's all I know about John Gladstone."

J.B. remarked, "Very good observation, Jess."

"Okay Jess." Hub stirred in his chair. "Fill us in on Jack English."

"Jack English is John Gladstone's plant manager. Jack is about six feet tall. Gray hair, with black eyebrows. He is a hard looking fifty-year-old man with heavy jowls and ashen colored skin. Sloppy dresser, over weight and out of shape. Drinks Russian Vodka. I've had many lengthy conversations with Jack after work. He always gets drunk.

Then he goes into the rest room, and he returns recuperated."

My eyes darted from J. B. to Hub, "I've yet to figure that one out. Can you help explain his sudden soberness?"

Hub said, "Later. Go on."

"Anyway, Jack is responsible for all imports and exports. He carries all of the keys to the plant. After a few drinks, he tells me everything. The doors of information really opened one night, when he told me he got a ten thousand dollar bonus for his profit sharing. Jack is very close to John Gladstone. Every time Gladstone goes out of town, Jack tells me. He also told me that John recently made a big deal. We ship ten thousand sets of a dozen clubs to the Orient every month. Jack has taken a liking to me, he seems lonely and loves to spill his guts." I took a deep breath.

Hub jumped in, "Son, you appear to have total recall. We need to know every minute detail."

J.B. got up from his chair. He gave Hub a knowing look.

"Hub, it's getting late. Can we continue tomorrow night?"

Hub agreed. "Jess, can you come over tomorrow at 5:00 p.m.?"

"Yes, sir."

"Great," Hub said, "Jess, we'll have the lab tests done on the head mold. J.B. and I will digest what we have learned from you and we'll be ready tomorrow night for more of your exquisite details."

Both men got up. J.B. shook my hand. "You're a sharp young man. It's good to have you on our team."

"Be careful at work," Hub cautioned, as he shook my hand and patted me on the back.

I nodded. "Good night Gentlemen." *I felt good. Real good, tired but exuberant. I glanced at my watch. 11:00 p.m. Time sure escaped.*

Sally was sitting at the kitchen table, her elbows rested on the table with her cupped hands holding up her chin. "Psst, Princess." I walked in.

She jumped out of her seat. "Hi, Prince Pirate. You must be worn out. Are you hungry?"

"Only for you and your lips. Grab a jacket, let's take a spin around the block." We ran down the front porch steps. Sally helped herself into the car. The full moon lit up the street. We spun down the block, around the corner and parked. Not a word was spoken. Our lips met. Her mouth tasted sweet. *I've missed her.*

We both started to speak at once . . . "That's okay, Princess, tell me what you wanted to say."

"Sweetheart, I know we're sworn to secrecy but please be careful. I would die if anything ever happened to you."

"I don't want anything happening to either of us. Princess, let's change the subject. I graduate next Monday. Our prom is the following Friday. You're going to be my date."

"Prince Pirate, I would be honored."

"Good, we'll stay only for a couple of dances. I have other plans for us later in the evening."

"You're the boss. I will follow you anywhere."

"Princess, I have several tests to take tomorrow morning. Then I go to the plant. I'll be here tomorrow night at 5:00 p.m. for more detailing with your Dad and J.B." Her chin was in a pouting position. I pulled her nose lightly. "Please be patient, we'll have the weekend together. Remember, no questions, no lies."

"How selfish of me," she said. "Come on, we'd better get going. You need your rest for your tests."

I smiled at my beautiful Sally. I held her close and kissed her.

We hung on to each other for a few moments, not wanting to part. I then started my car, turned around, drove up the block and dropped off Sally in front of her house. "Good night, Beautiful."

"Good night, Boss. I mean, Prince Pirate."

*I knew she was upset. I have a job to do. I need answers to some puzzling thoughts I've had lately.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The examination rooms were quiet all morning. The only noises I've heard have been those of frustration or the sighs of relief. I've just answered the last question I will ever have at Cooley High.

I flicked my ball point pen back into its sheath. I got into the habit of using a ball point pen for all my composition tests. *Sharon Gladstone taught me that in grade school. She said, 'Teachers are impressed when a student uses a pen.' She's taught me all kinds of things. I've learned all kinds of tricks.*

The large entrance doors to Cooley High closed behind me for the last time. I looked back in respect to the fine teachers I've had these past three and a half years. Coach Spinner will always have a spot in my heart. I know I will see him in the future.

Black Beauty gleamed from the morning sun. I, from the completion of four hours of tests. I arrived at Steel Rite, parked my car, and then walked off the length of the building, taking a mental note of how many shipping doors and entrance doors led in and out of the plant.

I went right to my work bench. I heard a rattling noise. *Well I'll be darned. Mr. Vang and Hong Chow have returned to Steel Rite.* They were each pushing carts filled with jumbo metal heads for gripping.

I greeted them. "Hello, Mr. Vang and Mr. Chow."

Mr. Vang answered first. "Hello, Jess, how nice to see you again."

Mr. Chow chimed in, "Hello, that's right that's right, . . . etc, etc, etc." Mr. Vang gave him a shove, then rattled something to Mr. Chow in Japanese as they left the Assembly Room.

I waited for the door to close behind them. I meticulously felt the weight of each club. They were heavy, just like the missing one. By the time I was finished putting grips on the last load, Mr. Vang and Mr. Chow wheeled in two more carts loaded with clubs for me to grip.

Mr. Vang said. "Good job, Jess." I nodded. They left quickly.

I kept a count of how many clubs I'd been gripping. Jack English walked in at quitting time while I was taking off my coveralls.

"Hi, Jess. Listen, I need you to work a few more hours tonight."

*There's no way I can work any more tonight.* I quickly thought of an excuse. I wiped my brow. Jack was standing there, looking very impatient. "Jack, I've worn a path to the head all afternoon. I think I have the stomach flu. I'll probably feel better tomorrow."

"Jess, we need to have five thousand clubs ready tomorrow at 5:00 p.m. sharp, for immediate exporting."

"What's the emergency?"

"John Gladstone emphasized these clubs must be ready for the Orient and no excuses. Jess, you have to stay."

"Jack, am I the only one who works in this department who can put on these grips?"

"Jess, Mr. Vang insists you're the only one he trusts to do the job his way."

"Jack, I'll be here at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. I'll get them done, I promise you."

He stood there for a moment, thinking. "All right, Jess. I'm depending upon you. John is leaving tonight for the Orient. It will be my ass if they're not ready."

"Don't worry, Jack, I'll get them done. You've stood up for me and I won't let you down."

"Jess, you get them done on time and I'll make sure you get a bonus. Is that a deal?"

"You bet it is, Jack. I'll see you in the morning."

Jack looked nervous. "All right, Kid, I hope you feel better."

Jack left. I'm sure he headed for his office for a Vodka fix.

I quickly went to the men's room and washed up before I left for Sally's.

While driving to Sally's I kept my eyes glued to my rear view mirror. I went in circles, making sure no one was following me. When I was satisfied the coast was clear, I turned onto Sally's street.

Sally answered the door. "Hi, Jess. How are you, sweetheart?"

"Hello gorgeous, I'm fine, just a little tired. How about you?"

"I'm fine, now that you're here. Daddy and J.B. are in the den, waiting."

I kissed her cheek. "See you later, Princess."

I walked into the den. Both men were sitting at Hub's desk.

"Good evening, Gentlemen. Sorry I'm a few minutes late. I'll explain."

I shook hands with J.B. and Hub. Hub said, "Did you have any problems today?"

I looked at both men. "No problems I couldn't solve. But I did drive around in circles making sure no one was following me."

J.B. questioned, "What made you drive around?"

"Precautionary, J.B."

J.B. smiled.

I hurriedly tried to explain why I was late. "Mr. Vang and Mr. Chow were at the plant today. I'll tell you all about them in a minute. Anyway, Jack English came into the Assembly Room as I was preparing to leave. He wanted me to work late to finish off five thousand jumbo metal heads."

Hub said, "Catch your breath, Jess. First, tell us about Mr. Vang and Mr. Chow. Then fill us in on Jack English."

"Mr. Vang is the Oriental project manager. He's about five feet three. He has speckled, yellow brown skin and black hair. There's a crude looking, knife scar across his right eyebrow. He's a strange looking man. Jack English says Vang is a tough little bugger with a fifth degree Black Belt in Karate. Mr. Vang is responsible for the design of those jumbo metal heads. His assistant, Mr. Chow, is shorter, very long black hair. Wears thick eye-sized glasses. Very effeminate. Jack thinks they're lovers. The strangest thing about both men, is they have nicely manicured finger nails, except each one has a very long pinkie finger nail. Also, Mr. Chow speaks no English."

J.B. asked, "Jess, how often are these men at the plant?"

"Once a month, J.B. They're very meticulous, and they make sure that their specially designed heads are being assembled and gripped to their specification for shipment to the Orient."

"How many clubs do they have made?" Hub queried.

"One time it was a thousand. Several times it has been five thousand."



"Is tonight another one of those times, Jess?" questioned J.B.

"Yes, J.B. Today I felt the weight of each club I gripped. They were very heavy. I scaled every tenth one. The overall weight was seventeen ounces. The head weight was D.4. I kept count. I gripped fifteen hundred jumbo metal head drivers today."

I watched both men as they took notes. Hub looked up. "Okay, Jess, tell us about Jack English."

"Well, as I said earlier, Jack wanted me to work late to finish up the remaining thirty-five hundred grips. I told Jack I was sick. He didn't like that. He said John Gladstone is leaving for the Orient tonight and it's most urgent the clubs are ready for shipment at 5:00 p.m. tomorrow night. I asked Jack, why was it so important that I grip the clubs. He said that Mr. Vang insists I'm the only person he trusts that can do the job. I told Jack I would start on them at 8:00 a.m. tomorrow morning to finish the remaining clubs."

"Okay, Jess," Hub said. "Now fill us in on the weight of these clubs. What should they weigh?"

"Metal head drivers should have an overall weight of eleven and a half ounces to thirteen and a half ounces." Both men made a note of that. I started again. "The head weight varies from D.0, to D.4. When the clubs are shipped, the label will read what the D. weight is in each box."

J.B. said, "Jess, is the overall weight listed?"

"I've seen the shipping cases. The D.4 ones don't show the overall weight. But the D.0 through D.3 always do."

Hub looked at J.B. "Doesn't that seem a bit strange to you?"

J.B. looked back at Hub with that, in sync look that only comes with many years together and many busts.

"Yes, it does Hub. Jess, are there any returns from the Orient?"

"Oh yeah, every month, two weeks after our shipment, we get one thousand clubs returned. The label read, 'Reweight. Too heavy'."

Hub interjected, "Jess, have you seen any of these returns?"

"Yes, I have. The unusual thing about the returns is they're always returned with a different colored grip."

J.B. turned again to Hub, "I think I know what they're doing. But we have to prove it."

Hub seemed to know what J.B. was going to say, "I'll be damned," Hub said, "Aren't they clever."

I looked back and forth to each man. "Will you guys fill me in?"

Both men smiled as J.B. said, "Jess, our minds work alike. Here's what they're doing. They balance the clubs with lead or something similar, then ship them to the Orient. Then they're returned with the same weight amount of cocaine to America for distribution."

Hub jumped in, "Jess, can you get one of those clubs you're working on for us to examine?"

"I think that would be impossible. They know exactly how many clubs they bring into the Assembly Room. I have an idea though."

J.B. and Hub said simultaneously. "Don't keep us in suspense."

"This is my plan. When the clubs are brought in for me to grip, they always have a piece of tape over the barrel of the shaft. When they leave, I'll take the tape off and pour the contents into one of my pockets. I'll put the tape back on and the grip over it. They'll never know."

Hub and J.B. started to laugh. So did I.

J.B. said, "Jess, we train young men to think like you. Have you ever thought of the possibility of becoming a secret agent?"

"Since you asked, yes."

Hub interjected, "As far as I'm concerned when that time comes, Jess, we'll both help you."

I was excited. "Gee, thanks guys." *Yeah, secret agent.*

"Now", Hub said, "Jess, the lab reports about the high grade of cocaine are affirmative. We have some questions for you.

"But that can wait. We need to know the layout of the plant and how to get into their records. Is this possible?"

"Hub, the layout is in my head. I'll draw that up for you and bring it with me tomorrow. You do want me to be here tomorrow, don't you?"

J.B. said, "We sure do, Jess. You're our best inside man. I've made arrangements with Washington to have Shades Soble be here tomorrow afternoon. Shades, is the best infrared man in the business. Shades can see in the dark. Hub and I will go over everything with Shades before you get here."

Hub got up from his seat. This had been another long session. He walked over to me. "Jess, I want you to be extremely cautious at all times. These people are ruthless. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. I won't do anything stupid."

"Good boy."

"I'm with Hub, Jess. You have good instincts. Use them. See you tomorrow night."

We shook hands. Before leaving the den, I asked, "Gentlemen, can you supply me with information about the physical, psychological, and observational behavior caused by cocaine?"

"Now, you're starting to think like us, Jess."

J.B. was nodding his head. "Shades Soble will brief all of us tomorrow on that very subject."  
"Thanks, see you tomorrow night."  
My darling Sally was waiting for me outside the door.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

I was up at 6:00 a.m. drawing Steel Rite's exterior layout and interior floor plans. All the information was in my head.

The black, thick steel gate is 10 feet high, 120 feet wide. The watchman sits inside a six foot square guard house.

The buildings run North and South. They're 350 feet long and 200 feet deep. The West building is the Shipping and Assembly Building. The first unloading dock door is exactly 100 feet North of the gate house. That door is 60 feet wide. The first entrance door is 30 feet North of the first unloading dock.

The second dock is the loading dock. That big door is 100 feet North of the first entrance door. The second entrance door is 30 feet North of the loading dock.

Thirty feet North of the second entrance doors is the main office entrance. The offices are in an attached building that extends another 45 feet North. The rear end of the offices is gated for John Gladstone's private parking and entrance.

I checked the clock, 7:00 a.m., and just enough time to shower and eat, then head for Steel Rite.

The phone was ringing as I was leaving.

"Hello."

"Good morning, Jess, it's Sharon."

"Hi, good morning to you. What a pleasant surprise. How are you?"

"Lonely for you. I've missed hearing from you. Is something wrong, darling? Why haven't you called me?"

"Nothing's wrong. I'd planned on calling you this afternoon. You just beat me to the dial."

"Jess, when I don't hear from you, I get nervous. I know you've been busy with school. By the way, how did you make out on your finals?"

"I felt I did well. The results aren't due until next week."

"Jess, darling, I leased that town house for us. I've been staying there these past few days hoping to hear from you. You have your own keys, please use them."

"I didn't know you were in town. I've misplaced the phone number. Give it to me now, I'll memorize it."

*I've known the number from day one.*

"Darling, it's, 341-1716. I have the next two days free. John took off for the Orient again last night. Come over, tonight. I'll have dinner for us, you don't have to stay late."

"I'd love to Sharon but your husband left strict orders for me to finish the job I'm presently working on."

"Why can't someone else do the job?"

"I guess he doesn't want to change horses in mid stream."

"You're probably right, Jess. He can be very demanding at times. Jess, darling, what about lunch?"

"That's out of the question. I'll have to eat lunch on the run. Sharon, I want to see you. After next week I'll have plenty of time. Can we both suffer until then?"

"Yes, Precious, I'll be counting the days, hours and minutes."

"Thanks for understanding, Sharon. Will you be in Bloomfield Hills next week?"

"Yes, darling, I will be there the rest of the summer."

"Can I call you there next Wednesday morning?"

"Of course, you can. If John answers, hang up. I'll find a way to call you."

"You'd better. See you later, Beauty Queen."

"Goodbye, darling."

*I only feel bad when I make up stories to Sally. Am I growing up, or just the wiser?*

Walking into the Assembly Room I observed Jack English standing at my workbench, talking to Mr. Vang.

Jack saw me coming. "Ah, there he is now. Hi, Jess, you're a man of your word."

"Good morning, Jack. Mr. Vang."

Mr. Vang held up a non-gripped club. "Jess, I need to have the grips made thicker for the remainder of my clubs."

"How much thicker, Mr. Vang?"

"Jess, wrap one more piece of tape."

"Sure. Do you mind if I use double thickness, instead of wrapping them twice?"

"Jess, you're very smart. I had not thought of that. Will you have them ready before 5:00 p.m.?"

"Yes, sir, you keep them coming and I'll keep them going."

Vang looked relieved. I started to slip on my coveralls. Mr. Vang left.

Jack English was smiling. "You know, Kid, I just made twenty bucks on you being on time. See you later, Jess."

Mr. Vang and Mr. Chow reappeared from their usual door.

*I wonder what's on the other side of that door. I've tried the doorknob at times. It's always locked.*

They wheeled up their two carts, full of jumbo metal head drivers. Mr. Chow didn't say a word. He gave me his nod bow.

Mr. Vang said, "Thank you." I watched them leave. I heard the click of the door lock.

I pulled out a case of double tape. I loaded the first spool. My heart was pounding as I pulled the tape off the first club I put my hands on. I'd made sure I wore a pair of jeans with deeper pockets. I slipped the butt end of the barrel through the flapping pocket of my coveralls. I felt the weight of whatever was in the shaft pour into the right pocket of my jeans. I re-taped the barrel, then applied the tape over the barrel and onto the shaft. My heart palpitations subsided.

Mr. Vang appeared as I gripped the last club left on their carts. Mr. Chow followed. They wheeled two more full carts of clubs. They left, without saying a word.

The clock above my work bench read 12:00 noon. They'd wheeled in eight full carts in the past four hours. I calculated I'd gripped twelve hundred clubs in that amount of time. Jack English appeared, smiling and carrying a sandwich and a coke. Talking as he walked, "Jess, I hope you like ham and cheese on wheat?"

"That will be fine, Jack. Do me a favor. Will you bring me another one in an hour?"

"Sure, Kid, anything you want. You're doing a hell of a job."

He walked out and Vang and Chow came in with two more loaded carts. They were all smiles. "Good work, Jess," Mr. Vang said, as they left and locked their door. I quickly grabbed the first club, tore off the barrel tape, and then I dumped the contents from the shaft into my left pocket. I gripped that club with half of the ham and cheese sandwich in my mouth.



Jack English was back at 1:15 p.m. with my other sandwich and another coke. "I know you're busy, Jess. I'll have a Vodka and orange juice ready for you when you finish." I didn't say anything. I watched him leave.

I was getting tired. My hands were starting to throb from my marathon gripping. Vang and Chow came in to pick up the last two cart-loads of gripped clubs. Mr. Vang reached out his hand to shake mine, and his palm left a hundred-dollar bill in my hand.

He smiled, saying, "A little bonus from us. Thank you, Jess."

*I love hundred dollar bills.* "You're welcome Mr. Vang. Are you leaving tonight?"

"Yes, we are. See you next time."

They were talking in Japanese to each other as they left.

Jack English poked his head inside the room. "Hey, Jess, I'll be in my office waiting for you."

"Fine, Jack, I'll be there. I want to wash up first."

He closed the door. I took off my coveralls, hung them up on the hook I always used and locked the bathroom door. My right hand went into my right pocket. I pinched a portion of the substance from inside my pocket. I looked at black powdered lead. I tried the left pocket. More powdered lead. I washed the lead off of my hands. I looked into the mirror. *J.B. is right. Keep your cool. One drink and you're off to Sally's.*

I walked into Jack's office. He was on the phone. I overheard his conversation. "Yes, John, everything is under control. See you Monday." He hung up the phone.

Jack had just made my drink. "Here, Jess, relax for a minute. I'll be right back."

The bottle of orange juice was on his desk. I drank half of my drink, then filled the remainder of my glass with orange juice. Jack was back.

He took his seat behind his desk. Jack was happy, smiling, then laughing. His eyes were glazed and moist. He gulped his drink. Then poured another one.

Jack reached into his desk drawer. He stood up and handed me two crisp hundred dollar bills. "Jess, I promised you a little bonus. You worked your ass off today. There's more where that came from. Stick with me, Kid, I'll make you rich."

I watched Jack as he rocked back into his chair. When his head tilted backward, I noticed his nostrils were caked with something white.

"Gee, Jack, that's a lot of money. Thanks, I sure can use it."

"You're welcome. Come on, drink up, it's time to celebrate. You've just made me a lot of money."

"How's that?"

"I get a piece of that club action. Listen, in a couple of weeks I'm going to need you to work overtime again. I'll make it worth your while."

I sat back in my chair. *Be cool; see what he'll tell you.*

"Jack, I like money. You just let me know when and I'll be available for you."

He poured himself another drink and gulped that one down. "I'll be right back Kid. Time for a leak."

*Yeah, he's got to take a leak. Through his nose.*

Jack returned, full of energy. He saw his empty glass and filled it with vodka. "I'll be a son-of-a-bitch, I thought I just made one. Oh well, who's counting?"

"Not me, Jack." I placed my empty glass onto his desk.

"Jack, I'm beat. I better be going, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Hey, come on, just one more. We're celebrating."

"Honest, Jack, I must be going."

"Okay, Kid. Look, you can take the rest of the week off. You'll still be paid. See you, Monday."

"Great, Jack. Thanks, I need a paid vacation."

He was starting to slur his words. "You're the best man I got. Have a good, time. See you later."

The fresh air filled my lungs. I stretched, glancing at my watch, 5:30 p.m. Once again I circumvented Sally's house. I pulled up in front of Sally's at 5:45 p.m.

Constance answered the door. "Good evening, Jess. You must be starved. Sally's in the kitchen making you a sandwich." Constance smiled. "She's dying to see you. Join her and have your sandwich. I'll tell the boys you're here and you'll be with them shortly." I gave Constance a kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks, you're right, Constance, I am a bit hungry."

The kitchen table was set for two. Sally was washing her hands when I walked into the kitchen. I walked over to the sink, as Sally turned, I grabbed a kitchen towel and helped dry her hands. "Hi, Princess. You sure know my stomach."

Sally was all smiles. She moved in on me, close. She wrapped her arms around my body and gave me a wonderful kiss. "Jess, I knew you'd be hungry. I also wanted to see you, before your meeting."

"You little mind reader, you. What did you prepare us?"

"A nice, hot roast beef sandwich, with mashed potatoes and peas."

"Great, I'm hungry, my poor body is aching for a good meal. How was your day, Sweetheart?"

"My day was fine. Now, it's complete with you here. I've missed you, Honey."

"I've missed you, too. Surprise, I don't have to work tomorrow.

Hopefully, we can be together."

"You mean that?"

"Of course I do. Now, if I'm needed with your father, you will understand. Keep your fingers crossed."

"With both hands. I hate to say it, but you'd better eat up. You know how impatient Dad is."

"Yeah, you're right." I wolfed down my food. "That hit the spot. Will I see you when I finish my meeting with your Dad?"

"Sweetheart, of course you will. Aren't I your girl? I'll be like a little puppy waiting at the door for her master."

As I left the kitchen, I kissed Sally. "See you then." I winked. "Thanks, Princess, you really make me very happy."

I knocked on the closed den door. Hub's voice answered, "Come in."

"Hello, Gentleman, sorry I'm a bit late. I was hungry."

Hub got up from his desk, greeted me. "Jess, you don't need to apologize for an empty stomach. We ate just before your arrival."

J.B. also was on his feet, and he shook my hand. "Nice to see you again, Jess. I want you to meet my associate, Shades Soble."

Shades Soble was standing next to J.B. Shades Soble was also a large man. His black polo shirt exposed his massive chest and large biceps. He looked like an Indian warrior, without the long hair. His black, deep set eyes were expressive. His large nose gave him the appearance that he may have been a professional fighter at one time. Shades Soble's smiled, showing a full set of undamaged teeth. Our hands met.

"Hello, Mr. Soble, nice to meet you, sir."

"Hello, Jess. Your reputation precedes you. I feel like I've met you before."

I looked into his open face. "You haven't been following me, have you?"

He laughed. "Your two biggest fans have brought me up to date, and I'm most eager to know more."

"Well," Hub said, "Now that we all know each other, let's not waste time. Jess, please take your seat and tell us about today's events."

Shades Soble sat next to me. He put his hand on my shoulder and smiled, "Jess, you can forget the Mr. stuff. We're all friends here. I like to be called Shades."

I smiled back. "Thanks, Shades." I sat for a second, formulating my thoughts. "Today, when I arrived at the Assembly Room, I found Jack English talking to Mr. Vang. Mr. Vang asked me to make the grips thicker. That means putting extra tape on the shafts before I slip the grips on, and that also makes the clubs a little heavier. Mr. Vang left, then returned with his associate, Mr. Chow, and they were pushing two carts full of jumbo metal head drivers. When Jack English, Vang and Chow left, I pulled the barrel tape off of the first club to be gripped. I then poured the contents from the shaft into my right pocket."

All three men listened intently to my monologue. "Jack English brought me a sandwich for lunch. I asked him to bring me another one in an hour. I knew he would be gone for that length of time and since Vang and Chow had just left me with another load I'd have enough time to check out another club. I'd gripped twelve hundred clubs by that time. I poured the contents from another club into my left pocket through the opening in my coveralls into my pocket. I finished at 4:30 p.m. Mr. Vang came in and thanked me for a job well done. He gave me a hundred dollar tip. I asked him if he were leaving tonight. He said, 'Yes,' and that he would see me the next time when he returned."

Hub stopped me. "Jess, what was left in your pockets?"

I stood up, and picked up a part of a newspaper off of the coffee table, then I moved to Hub's desk and emptied my pockets onto the newspaper.

Hub looked closely at the pile of powdered lead. He voiced, "J.B., you were right about the powdered lead. Jess, that was very smart of you to try two clubs. We now know they all must contain powdered lead."

I said, "That's what I surmised gentlemen."

"Jess, did Jack English talk to you before you left?" J.B. asked.

"Yes, he did J.B. He asked me to come to his office for a drink."

"And?"

"He was in a very happy mood. He gave me two hundred dollars and said, 'There's more where that came from, Kid. Stick with me and I'll make you rich.'"

Hub asked, "What did you say after he gave you the money?"

"I said, Thanks, Jack. What do you mean more?" He said, 'Kid, I get a piece of that club money.' He drank two quick Russian Vodka's, then excused himself. He came back very jolly, saying, 'Come on, Kid, let's celebrate.' I noticed when he leaned back into his chair, his nostrils were caked with something white. He also said, he would need me in a couple of weeks to work overtime. I told him, just let me know when and I would make myself available. He gave me the rest of the week off, with pay. He said, 'Come back, Monday.' He was getting very drunk, making no sense. Oh, another thing. When I first came in, I overheard him talking on the phone. He said, 'John, everything is under control, see you Monday.'"

J.B. said, "Can you think of anything else that happened today."

I sat going through the day's events in my mind. "One more thing, J.B. When Vang and Chow would come and then leave, they would always lock the door behind them."

Shades Soble was walking around in circles. He turned to me.

"Jess, do you know what's on the other side of that door?"

"I've tried to look inside to find out, it's always locked."

Shades continued. "Jess, where are the clubs weighted?"

"The club heads are usually filled with liquid foam in the weight room. They also fill the heads with powdered lead for the desired weight in that room. They're shafted in the same room I work. The clubs Mr. Vang and Chow bring in, are already put together, and all they need is grips."

Shades continued. "I get the picture. The so called custom clubs aren't from the weight room. They're from the locked room, right."

"Right, Shades."

"Could there be another weight room behind that closed door?"

"Shades, there would have to be. How else could they be weighted and shafted?"

"I don't know, but we're going to find out."

"Jess," Hub said, "Did you bring the drawing of the plant with you?"

I reached into my back pocket. "Yes, Hub, I worked on it this morning." I handed Hub the drawing.

Hub turned on his Xerox machine on a table next to his desk and made three copies. He handed one to each of us.

They studied the drawing. "Jess, this is fantastic." J.B. said. "Excellent job. We'll go over this in a minute, I want

to bring you up to date." He glanced at Hub, "Do you want to add anything before I begin?"

"No, J.B. Please, go ahead."

"Jess, I've contacted Washington and they've given me a complete breakdown on John Gladstone's air travels. The bureau faxed several photographs of Oriental men arriving in Detroit from all parts of the Orient." He handed me four photographs and continued, "Jess, do you recognize any of these men?"

I studied the black and white photos.

"Yes, I do, J.B." I handed him the first photograph.

"That photo is of Mr. Vang." I handed him the second photograph. "This is Mr. Chow."

"Jess, what about the other two?"

"I've never seen these two men before."

J.B. handed me another photo. My eyes popped. "Jess, is that John Gladstone?"

*I felt sad inside. What's going to happen to Sharon? I can't see her going to jail. Is she involved? I hope not. Keep your mouth shut.*

"Yes, J.B., that is John Gladstone."

J.B. continued, "Jess, Gladstone is under surveillance twenty-four hours a day. Your description of Vang and Chow was good. They're being tailed, day and night; wherever they go. We don't have any information on Jack English, as yet."

Our meeting had gone on for a long time when Hub said, "Jess, I know you must be tired. It's 9:30 p.m., can you stay for another hour?"

"Oh, I want to Hub. Can I take a ten minute break for a cool A&W with Sally."

"Take your time, son."

I closed the door behind me. I whistled. "Where are you little puppy?"



Sally was behind me, "Ruff, ruff, eh, eh."

I turned around, there she was. "Hi, Princess. How about a cold A&W Root Beer?"

"Come with me to the kitchen, master." We sat down at the table. She poured my A&W over a tall glass filled with ice.

"Thanks, Sweetheart. This tastes great."

"Jess, you look tired."

"I am a little. Sweetheart, I'm going to stay for another hour or so. Please don't wait up for me. I'll call you the moment I wake up."

"Okay, Prince Pirate, or should I say, Detective?"

"Shh, we can't talk, remember."

Sally smiled warmly. "Yes, dear, I remember."

I swallowed the remainder of my A&W. "See you, tomorrow." I kissed her cheek. I walked toward the den door, turned and said to Sally, "You bet you're going to see me tomorrow." I flapped my fingers behind my back to her. I opened the den door and took my seat.

Shades broke the silence. "Jess, to save time, I've made up a Cocaine habit chart for you. Study it after a good night's sleep."

"Thanks, Shades." I folded the paper and put it into my back pocket.

Hub leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk folding his hands together. "Jess, we're going to need some real proof of what Gladstone is doing. Can we get into his files?"

I thought for a moment. "Jack English is very proud of his position, so he twirls his keys every time he needs to show that authority. He'd have to drink a lot of Vodka to make him pass out."

J.B. smiled, he spoke softly, but meaningful. "Jess, you won't be working alone. Shades is here to guide you

through the plans he has in mind." J.B glanced at Shades.  
"Shades, the game plan is all yours. Take over."

Shades spoke slowly with serious undertones. "From now on, Jess, it will be you and me. You've said that Jack English drinks Russian Vodka. Does he keep himself well stocked?"

"Shades, I've yet to see him run out."

"Good. When does he invite you in for a drink?"

"Always after I finish work."

"Is Gladstone in his office when he does?"

"I'm not sure, but Jack lets me know when he isn't."

"We know Gladstone will be there Monday. Here's what I want you to do." Shades, reached for a duffel bag at his feet. He pulled out a small brown bottle. "Jess, this bottle contains strong knock out pills. The next time Jack invites you in for a drink, be sure he's alone and Gladstone is gone. Make sure he has a few drinks?"

"That's easy, within an hour he will have had five or six drinks."

Shades thought to himself for a second or two. "Good, keep him there, we must make sure it's dark outside and all the office worker's are gone for the day."

"Shades, all of the office personnel leave at 5:30 p.m."

"Double check. Make sure the lights are out. Can you do that?"

"I'll go to the men's room at 5:45 p.m."

"Jess, when you're sure everyone is gone and the lights are out, go back to Jack's office. Keep Jack occupied with conversation until he leaves the room. When he does, drop one of these pills into his drink. If the bottle is sitting on his desk, make sure the bottle is at least half full, and then drop two pills into the bottle. Jess, if he tries to make you another drink, don't drink any of that tainted Vodka. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will be outside of the main entrance door. Do you know which key opens that door?"

"I had the opportunity to look at his keys while he was outside of the room. They're all marked with codes. The codes are simple, like, FE, front entrance, GO, Gladstone's office."

Shades Soble, spoke in a knowledgeable, confident manner. "Jess, when Jack finishes the loaded drink, be patient. He'll start getting woozy within ten minutes. His mouth will get dry and he'll want another drink. When Jack is out cold, and believe me, he will be after one of those pills hits him; lock him in his room and come let me in."

"Shades, these pills won't kill him. Will they?"

"No. Jess, when we finish our job, you'll have to go back and revive him. I'll give you something for that. You want him to think that he just nodded off for a second or two."

Hub and J.B watched intently, not saying a word.

Shades chuckled, "Jack will have the worst hangover he's ever had," he opened his duffel bag again and came up with a pair of goggles, small cameras and a leather waistband.

"Jess, these are infrared glasses. You can see in the dark with them. These two small cameras are loaded with high speed infrared film." He handed me the goggles and cameras. Shades stretched out the leather waist band.

"Jess, this band has slots all around it. Each slot carries a flat wax key press. I'll explain how all this stuff works."

Shades handed me the belt. The brown leather belt was a little wider than the belt I wear. He continued. "Jess, I'm going to need to work with you at night for the next few nights. We're going to be a team. Do you have any questions?"

"Yes, when do we start."

That remark broke the tension in the room. The three men started laughing. We all stood up. They shook my hand.

Hub put his arms around my shoulders. "Son, and I hope you are one day, and I want you to know what Shades and you are attempting to do is extremely dangerous. Shades will protect you at all times. Don't try to be a hero. I must emphasize, these meetings and everything that has been planned, must never leave this room."

J.B. said, "Jess, he's right. Are we a team?"

*I was ecstatic I'm working with secret agents. Wow!*

"Gentlemen, I'm honored, to be in the same room with you. Thank you, for your trust and confidence. I only have one request?"

"You name it," J.B. said.

"You must promise to never let my parents know about this, whatever happens. I don't want my family involved or hurt."

The room became quiet. Hub spoke softly. "Jess, you have our word."

J.B. said, "You have my word."

Shades said, "Partner, you have my word."

I smiled. "Thank you. Well, Shades, what time tomorrow night?"

"Jess, be here at 7:00 p.m. I have a warehouse at my disposal for us to rehearse."

My body was aching. I was excited but tired. I looked at my three new partners. "I think I'd better be hitting the road gentlemen, I've had a long day. You might say I'm plum worn out."

J.B. said, "Jess, Hub and I will be working with you and Shades. After all, one of has to be Jack and the other the watchman."

I shook hands with the three men. "Good night."

They all said, "Get some rest, partner."

*Sally has been a good sport. I would love to share the Steel Rite caper with her, but I can't. And won't. I guess it's just me and my subconscious.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The ringing phone awakened me. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Prince Pirate, did I wake you up?"

"No, I had to get up to answer the phone. Hi, Sweetheart. I was just being facetious. How are you this morning?"

"Fine but hungry."

"Sally, I need to go over some paper work. I'll be over to get you at noon. I'll take you to lunch, then shopping and a movie."

"Shopping?"

"Never mind, it's a surprise. See you at noon."

"See you then, Honey." I hung up the phone.

I needed a shower to wake up. I decided to dress up a bit. I'm tired of wearing Levis. I took a sip of coffee, while I scanned the cocaine chart Shades Soble had given me. It was very specific. According to the chart, it looks like Jack English is a prime suspect in the use of Cocaine. I'll bet Vang and Chow also suck up a lot cocaine.

### COCAINE

STIMULATES THE CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM.

IT IS EXTRACTED FROM THE LEAVES OF THE COCA PLANT.

OLD MEDICAL PRACTICES - MEDICINAL - USED  
IN COKE CRYSTALLINE - "SNOW"

FREEBASING - SMOKE - INJECT - SNORT

EFFECTS - PHYSICAL

- COLD SWEATS
- COMA
- CONVULSIONS
- DILATED PUPILS
- HEADACHE
- INCREASED PULSE  
RATE
- INSOMNIA
- NAUSEA
- NOSE BLEEDS

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- ANXIETY
- DEPRESSION
- HALLUCINATIONS
- PARANOIA
- SELF-CONFIDENCE
- LOSS OF  
CONCENTRATION
- PSYCHOSIS
- IRRITABILITY
- TALKATIVE

OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOR

- IRRITABILITY
- ANXIETY
- DEPRESSION
- NOSE IRRITATION (POWDER AROUND NOSTRILS)
- PARANOIA
- DILATED PUPILS
- NOSE MAY (RUN) OR PERSON MAY "SNIFF"  
OFTEN
- ALWAYS NEEDS MONEY
- MOOD CHANGES
- IF TAKEN INTRAVENOUSLY THERE MAY BE  
NEEDLE MARKS
- UNRELIABLE

HOW OFTEN TAKEN

ADDICTED USERS TAKE IT 4 TO 12 TIMES DAILY



PERSONS WHO ARE HABITUATED BUT NOT YET  
ADDICTED VARY:

ONCE OR TWICE A WEEK	7%
TWO OR MORE TIMES PER WEEK	30%
TWO TIMES DAILY	15%
MORE THAN TWO TIMES DAILY	48%

#### HOW LONG PRESENT IN URINE

NORMALLY CAN BE DETECTED FOR 6 TO 10  
HOURS.

#### WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS

LACK OF ENERGY, INSOMNIA, MUSCLE ACHES,  
DEPRESSION, LOSS OF INTEREST IN ALL  
ACTIVITIES.

#### RELAPSE

VERY COMMON WITH MANY USERS SWITCHING  
TO ALCOHOL.

IT NORMALLY TAKES AT LEAST ONE MONTH TO  
SIX WEEKS TO OVERCOME WITHDRAWAL

I studied the chart to memory. *One thing puzzles me about traces of cocaine in the nostrils. I know for sure Jack is on the stuff. Could Sharon Gladstone also be using cocaine? I'm going to find out, one way or the other.*

The kitchen clock read 11:45 a.m. *Sally's been patient, I don't want to keep her waiting.* The sun was shining after a morning rain. I always wondered what it would feel like having a bundle of money in my pocket, and three hundred dollars sure makes a guy feel secure. I like it. I

parked in front of Sally's, leap-frogged her steps and tapped on her front door. There she was, smiling as she opened the door for me.

"Hi, handsome."

I looked around behind me. "Are you talking to me lady?"

"I don't see anyone else standing there, looking as good as you. Honey, you look great in tan slacks, that white polo shirt and chocolate brown sport coat. Are we going to the Ritz?"

"This is your day, Princess. By the way, I like your yellow knit outfit. Are you ready?"

"All I have to do is close the door."

We were in my car and on our way. My right hand caressed her beautiful red hair. She moved closer to me.

"What are you hungry for, Sally?"

Laughing she said, "Your lips, Jess."

"Wait until I pull over." I didn't hesitate, I pulled over to the curb. I've missed holding her, our love making and kissing her beautiful full mouth. She wiped my lips with a tissue.

"I love to blot my lips on yours."

"I've missed your attention, Honey. Okay, let's have lunch. If we don't, soon, I'll be forced to rent us a motel room."

Sally put her arms around my neck, "How about after lunch?"

"Good thinking, Sally. Shall we go to Louigis for Italian food? Then, I will take you shopping. Maybe after that, we'll skip the movie and relax with a bottle of red wine."

"What an organized young man you are. I like your itinerary."

Louigis was crowded. We sat and people watched for ten minutes. I ordered Linguini and clam sauce for us. Halfway through our lunch Sally eyes were getting moist.

"I thought we were having a good time. Why the sad face?"

"Oh, Jess, I'm scared. I know you can't tell me what you're up to with my Dad. Everything is so confidential. All I do is wait and worry . . . Can't you tell me what's going on?"

*I had a sneaky suspicion she couldn't hold out. I don't blame her. I know I'd have to know.*

I held her hands. "Sweetheart, I understand your feelings. Please, please, don't ask me. Trust my judgement, I know what I'm doing. Honey, I have enough on my mind, in a short time you'll know everything. Okay?"

She dried her tears. "I love you, Jess. You're everything in my whole life. I know I'm not supposed to ask, I just had to."

"Honey, I need your support. No questions."

Her beautiful blue blood shot eyes glowed. "I promise, no more. Well, now, what did you say about shopping and wine?"

"I say, let's get out of here. I saw a pair of leather boots that look just like the ones you're going to get."

"Oh, Jess, really? How did you know I wanted boots?"

"A little bird told me, and he only tells me." I paid the check and we left Louigis.

Sally looked great wearing her new black leather boots.

Good thing I kept this hard earned, cocaine gripped-club money. She could have been crying all day. I can't wait for us to nab those no good dope dealers.

*Making love with Sally today has thoroughly convinced me, I've been a bad boy. I'm promising myself right now,*

*no one, but Sally. My subconscious was saying, "Do you really mean that? Yes, yes, yes."*

We had a wonderful afternoon. I told Sally that I would be busy the next few nights from 7:00 p.m. on but that we'd have the mornings and afternoons to spend together. I pulled up in front of Sally's house.

Sally moved over to my side of the car. "Jess, thanks for the boots." She nudged me. "I know what we're going to be doing these next few mornings and afternoons."

"You mean a repeat?"

"Sweetheart, no questions."

I went around the car, opened her door, grabbing my gym bag, that was full of work clothes. We went into the house together. She started walking backward up the stairway to her room, and said, "Have a nice night, Honey. I'll be waiting for you in the morning."

"See you then, Princess."

I knocked on the den door, then entered. My three partners were talking as I walked inside the room. Hub was saying. "I think we should take two cars, Shades." He looked at me. "Oh, hi, Jess. I was just going to suggest that Shades and you ride together."

"Hi, everyone. That's fine with me, Hub." Shades and I went in my car. Hub and J.B followed us in Hub's car.

Shades pushed his seat back and settled into a relaxed mode.

"Jess, do you know where Woodward Boulevard and Markey Street is?"

"I sure do, Shades. That area is called 'Used Car Valley.' I haven't noticed any warehouses though."

"Jess, the one we're going to is located behind Homer's Towing Service. Homer's is owned by the Detroit Police Department. The Department keeps their unmarked

vehicles parked in a subterranean garage at the rear end of Homer's. We'll be using the underground facilities."

"I'm learning something new everyday."

"Jess, in a few days time, you'll be highly educated in search and discovery. I will also personally drill you in self protection."

My ears perked to that remark. He knows and I'm listening.

*I wanted to know more about Shades.* "Shades, where are you from?"

"I was born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma."

"Did you go to college there?"

"I finished high school in Tulsa, then went to Washington University to study law."

"What made you change your mind about being an attorney to become an FBI Agent?"

"I got my Jurist-Prudence law degree, then passed the Bar exam." He became quiet for a moment. "In a short time I realized the citizens of this country needed help in curtailing mobsters and the never ending river of drugs. Jess, the dragon has just awakened."

I had more questions to ask Shades, but that would have to wait. I saw the flashing neon sign, HOMER'S TOWING SERVICE.

Shades directed me toward the subterranean ramp. Hub was behind me. We went in circles down two sub floors. Shades pointed his finger. "Jess, park next to those dumpsters." Hub pulled alongside of us.

Shades put his hand on my shoulder. I looked at his interesting face. He seemed emotional. He spoke quietly. "Jess, I had a brother very much like you. Unfortunately he got involved with the wrong kids. He died, due to an overdose of cocaine." Shades paused for a second. He turned and looked at me. Shades continued speaking

quietly, but fervently. "The thought of him not being around anymore has haunted me through the years. I like you, Jess. You're the kind of young man I hoped my little brother would be like. Jess, I will be watching your every move to make certain no harm comes to you. We now have a golden opportunity to catch some big dealers who are responsible for spreading this terrible drug in our country." He paused a second. "Trust my judgment, Jess. Together, we'll set these guys up." He smiled. "Are you ready?"

"Shades, thank you for telling me a little about yourself. You bet I'm ready, let's go."

We followed Shades through a large metal door. He locked the door behind us. We walked down one flight of stairs. He opened another door, and he turned on the light switch. The room was made up to resemble a makeshift office, with desks, filing cabinets and doors leading in and out of the offices.

Shades put his duffel bag onto one of the desks. I quickly changed into my night outfit; black shirt, dark pants and tennis shoes. Shades brought out the brown waist belt. He demonstrated how to make key molds. I caught on quickly.

I put on a pair of the infrared goggles. Shades turned out the lights. I was able to see the outlines of the desks, file cabinets, doors and hallways.

Shades had J.B. sit behind the desk like Jack English would. Hub observed the mock operation.

"Okay", Shades said, "Jess, let's pretend Jack is out cold. Here's how to tell. Take your finger and raise his eyelid. If his eyes are rolled back into his head, you'll know he's out."

We went through the moves I'd make while leaving Jack's office. I would lock Jack's door; turn off the light;

put on my goggles; then let Shades inside the main office passage.

Shades would come in the building and go into Gladstone's office to bug his phones. I would be busy making wax impressions of all of the plant keys. When I finished the keys, I would go through the files, searching for all the export and import documentation. The infrared cameras were easy to use. I'd brought my two trusty little penlights, they would help me choose the right files.

Over and over we practiced for several hours, then J.B. and I sat back and watched how Shades would subdue Hub. Hub walked around the makeshift gatehouse, portraying the watchman, then he walked inside the gatehouse. One pretend blow to Hub's neck and he would fall to the floor. Shades gagged him and tied him securely. Shades went through this procedure several times. He used several different methods in subduing Hub until he was satisfied.

Shades said, "Guys, this has been a good session. We'll repeat everything tomorrow night." We followed Shades back to our cars.

Before getting into his car, Hub shook my hand. "Good night's work, Jess. Are you coming over to the house?"

"Yeah, for a second, I'll drive Shades back."

"Good, see you in a few minutes, Jess."

Shades and I rode together. I asked, "Shades, can I take a pair of these goggles home with me to practice with?"

"You sure can, and also take one of the cameras. I'm very proud of you. You don't mind me being your big brother, do you?"

"Shades, I'm honored. Thanks for your self defense pointers." He smiled.

We joined J.B. and Hub in front of Hub's house. J.B. walked over to me. "Jess, I've watched you all evening.

Your mind works like a machine. You'll be a super cop, one day."

"Gee, thanks, J.B." I looked at the men. "See you guys tomorrow night. Shall we meet here, or Homer's?"

"Jess," Hub said, "I'd rather we all travel together."

"You got it. See you all tomorrow."

While driving home, I listened to my radio. Frank Sinatra was singing, 'What a day this has been, it's almost like falling in love.' *I am in love with Sally.*

The next two nights were as exciting as the first night at our underground training camp. There was very little conversation.

Shades knew best, we did our jobs in silence. He was taking no chances.

There was no confusion, only disciplined concentration.

After our last session on Sunday, the three of us sat in Hub's den.

Hub verbally went through all of our steps.

Shades and I went over my drawing of the building entrance, and the interior offices, hallways and entrance doors. Our minds were well rehearsed and ready.

Hub said, "Jess, tomorrow when you're working and you feel it is the right time to tackle Jack, make a call to our three-way phone hook up. Do you have the number memorized?"

"Yes, I do, Hub. 555-3131."

"Good boy. Son, you're totally prepared. One reminder. You'll be nervous when the real thing starts to go down. Take a couple of deep breaths to relax yourself. Do you have any questions?"

"No, but I hope tomorrow is the day."

"We do too, Jess. You will have to be the judge of that."



Shades walked up to me, handing me my own special duffel bag. "Jess, I have everything you'll need in this bag. The top layer has a dummy bottom. When you get home, put a clean shirt and a pair of socks onto that first layer. When you go into Jack's office, change your shirt and socks. Jack will think you have clothes in that bag. Zip the bag closed. To get to the bottom portion, where all your tools are stored, unzip the middle portion of your bag." I studied the bag.

"Jess, the top part will just fold over. Try it now."

I picked the bag up and opened the top portion, put my jacket inside and zipped it closed. I unzipped the middle, the top folded over. My brown key belt, cameras, goggles, were easy to access. The tiny brown bottle of knock out pills and ammoniac stimulant was secured inside a Velcro pocket.

"Shades, this is very clever. I'll work with it when I get home."

The three of us studied each other in silence. J.B. spoke, "Well, men, I'm confident of your capabilities. Let's get those bastards."

We all stood up and moved toward the door and shook hands.

"Well, partners," I said, "I'm off to a good night's sleep. I will keep you apprised either way."

"Good luck." They all answered.

Shades said, "Guys, I'm going to walk Jess to his car."

Shades and I stood outside, leaning against Black Beauty. "Little brother, I'll be hovering near the plant all day. Good luck." He gave me a brotherly embrace.

"Good night, Shades. And thanks."

"Good night, Jess."

When I got home. I showered. My sweet mother was standing in the hallway, waiting for me to come out of the bathroom.

In her sweet voice, she said. "Jess, your school report arrived today. Your Father and I have been waiting, sitting on pins and needles, dying to know the results." She handed me the letter.

The envelope pronounced, in red letters, **FINALS REPORT**. I eagerly opened the letter and read the contents . . . A big smile of relief showed on my face. "How about A plus, Mom and Dad."

Dad got up from his favorite chair. Put his arm around my shoulders. "Congratulations, son." He shook my hand.

My mother had tears of joy on her face. She kissed my cheek, and gave me a big hug. "Jess, you've made us both very proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom and Dad. I'm thrilled, now I can choose a college of my liking."

"Son," Dad said, "We will help you financially."

"Thanks, Dad, I've been saving my money. In case I don't have enough, I would appreciate your help."

Mom said, "We want the best for you, son."

"I know . . . Thanks Mom. Today's really been a full one. I'm a little tired. I'm off to bed. Good night, you two, see you tomorrow."

I sat on the foot of my bed, thinking of how lucky I was to have parents like mine. I practiced the usage of my duffel bag for the next hour. My eyes closed, thinking of tomorrow's plan and the potentiality.

I awakened at six o'clock, feeling full of energy. I went through the contents of my duffel bag with my eyes closed. I knew where all my goodies were. Once satisfied, I prepared to leave the house for Steel Rite. I kept my duffel bag locked inside of my trunk.

I whistled as I walked to the other side of the plant, putting myself into a relaxed mood.

As I slipped into my coveralls, Jack English announced his arrival. "Hey, Jess, how was your weekend?"

"Hi, Jack, thanks to your bonus, I had a great weekend. Boy, Jack, money sure is fun. Maybe someday I'll be in your category, money to burn."

Jack was very proud of himself, strutting about. "Yeah, Kid, you're right, someday you'll have a bunch of loot. You keep up the good work, that two hundred dollars was nothing. Oh, Jess, that reminds me, speaking of work, we need to have you put shafts in clubs today. Clive is off sick today, so pick up his slack, will you?"

"You're the boss, Jack. What kind of shaft flex do you want on these heads?"

"Stiff, like a prick." He laughed as he left.

I was so busy working on shafting I hadn't noticed the time.

1:30 p.m. I'm starved.

As I walked out the main entrance heading for the local cafeteria, I bumped into Jack English.

"Hey, Kid, where you heading?"

"Across the street for a sandwich. Want to join me?"

"I'd like to but I have to make some calls. Tell you what, bring me some knockwurst and beans. I'll be in my office." He handed me a twenty dollar bill. "Lunch is on me, Jess."

I devoured a bowl of ham and pea soup, while eating a BLT.

Jack was on the phone when I entered his office. I placed his lunch onto his desk in front of him, along with his change. He waved his hand for me to wait. His conversation didn't last long. He hung up his phone. "How about a quick Vodka and orange juice?"

"Thanks, Jack, I'm filled up from lunch and I don't like to drink on the job."

"You know, Kid, you do everything by the book. That's why I trust you so much. Look, Gladstone just left in his fancy jet for the West Coast, come on over for a few with me when you finish working."

"Okay, chief. How is your orange juice holding out?"

He looked into his drawer, then his Vodka drawer.

"Jess, I'm glad you reminded me. Do you know Tiny's Liquor Store on the corner of Yale and Vernon?"

"Sure, I pass it everyday on the way to work."

Jack leaned back in his chair. He reached into one of his pockets and handed me a fifty dollar bill.

"Jess, go to Tiny's when you finish work. I'll call Tiny, he'll have two quarts of Vodka and a quart of orange juice ready for you to pickup for me. Pay for it. See you later."

"You bet, Jack."

I closed Jack's office door. I didn't dare use one of the office phones. I ran to the phone booth around the corner. I dialed 555-3131. Shades answered. "Did you dial the right number." (That was the password.)

I answered. "The only number I know. It's a go, it's a go."

"Affirmative, message confirmed." We both hung up.

I was back at the shafting table in less than five minutes. My eyes found the wall clock every fifteen minutes for the rest of the afternoon. When the clock finally read five o'clock, my mouth became dry. Perspiration was coming out of every pore in my body. I hurriedly pulled off my coveralls and walked to my car.

Tiny's Liquor was less than a mile away. Tiny looked to weigh over 300 pounds. I had to fight back the laughter. *What a moniker.* I gave him my name and he handed me the package Jack had ordered.

I paid Tiny, then headed back to Steel Rite. I parked my car, opened my trunk and grabbed my duffel bag. I carried the package carefully, saying to myself, *don't you dare drop it.*

I inhaled deeply before I entered Jack's office. Jack was sitting with his feet propped on top of his desk. I put the paper bag on his desk. He immediately took his feet off of his desk and stood up. Jack wanted a drink. "Jess, you're a sight for sore eyes and a dry throat." He placed the Russian Vodka onto his desk. "I'll be damned, kid, you even brought ice. Now we can get down to some serious drinking."

"Hey, chief, Tiny didn't give me any change. Is that how much Vodka costs?"

"Kid . . . I mean, Jess. You're no kid in my book. Sorry about that. Shit, you're almost as tall as me." He waved the bottle of Vodka. "Jess, this Russian Vodka is the best. You pay for what you get. We don't want to drink rot gut, do we?"

"Whatever you say Jack, you know best." He put the orange juice in front of me, then filled our glasses with ice.

Jack poured our drinks. He handed me mine. "Here's to us, Jess. Your old buddy Jack is feeling good."

He downed his Vodka on the Rocks like it was water. I added orange juice and sipped mine. Jack poured himself another one.

He smiled. "I need two or three to get the dust out of my throat." He laughed. "You know what I mean, plant dust."

I held up my duffel bag. "Jack, I brought a clean shirt and a pair of socks. You don't mind if I change my shirt and socks while we drink, do you?"

"Jess, you do whatever pleases you." I changed, placing my soiled clothes on the top layer. I didn't zip up the bag.

Jack leaned back in his swivel chair. My bag was at my feet. I held my drink in my left hand. Jack's head rested back against the back of his chair. I held my index finger over the top of my glass. I poured my drink onto my shirt and socks in my bag, keeping the ice in my glass.

"Hey, Jack, you're not asleep are you?"

He snapped upright. "Shit, are you kidding? I was just feeling that smooth Russian Vodka drain into my stomach."

"Well, how about a refill, this stuff's great."

"You got it. It's about time you've had more than one, ain't it?"

"It's about time you started pouring."

Jack started laughing. "Hey, you're funny. I like it."

Jack handed me my drink.

"I'd make a toast, Jack, but your glass looks empty."

"How stupid of me, Jess." He filled his glass full.

"Well, Jess, what would you like to toast to?"

"Here's to more late night bonuses."

"I'll drink to that," he said. He drank his down. I sipped mine.

"You know, Jess, you must be a mind reader. Vang's gonna be here Thursday. Gladstone, said, 'We have a shit-load of returns arriving Wednesday night or early Thursday morning.' It looks like you're going to be working your ass off."

*The more he drinks, the more he opens up.*

"How many clubs are you talking about, Jack?"

"He said fifteen hundred were too heavy."

"Wow, that's a lot of returns. When do they go out?"

"Yeah, I know that's a lot of returns. Vang and that little 'squats to pee' Chow fucked up. They have to be gripped and shipped by 8:00 p.m. Thursday."

I looked at Jack. His face was starting to show that sinking look before he takes his stroll to the head. I thought

quickly. "Jack, you don't have a thing to worry about. I'll work my ass off to get those clubs ready for you."

"You're gonna have to, Jess. Gladstone will be here to make sure. He said this is a big deal, and he doesn't want to lose Vang's account."

"Isn't Vang one of his biggest shippers?"

"Ah, don't worry, Gladstone likes to show his power. Vang and Gladstone make a ton of money together. They're real buddy, buddy."

While Jack was talking, I poured the rest of my drink onto my shirt and socks. Jack picked up the bottle of Vodka.

"I'll be a son-of-a-bitch, Kid, you drink too much." He started to laugh.

Jack is funny when he drinks. He can make his face into so many different expressions. He even has a pompous look, like W.C. Fields, when he gets drunk. Jack opened the second bottle of Vodka. He poured himself another drink and downed it.

I waved my glass. "Hey, Jack, what am I, an orphan?"

"Ah . . . Jess, just a minute, I gotta take a leak. Pour us another one. I'll be right back."

I watched the door close. I opened the middle compartment of my duffel bag. I took three pills out of the brown bottle and put one into Jack's glass. I poured Vodka on top of the pill. The bottle was too full. I poured more Vodka onto my shirt and socks, good thing I had a big towel underneath. The bottle was now a little over half full. I dropped the two remaining pills into the bottle. Then I poured myself a full glass of orange juice. I leafed through Jack's desk to find his keys.

I looked everywhere. *Darn it, no keys.* My heart was thumping and I was shaking. *Where are his keys?*

I could hear Jack coughing as he approached the door. I sat down just as he opened the door.

Jack was revived. "God Damn, it's dark in those halls. Everyone's gone for the day. Those fuckers never leave any lights on. Can you imagine all the money Gladstone makes and he worries about electricity bills. Cheap fucker."

My eyes glanced at my watch, 6:30 p.m. Jack looked at me. "Jess, drink up. I feel great and Anacin doesn't even upset my stomach." He laughed until tears came down his face.

I raised my glass. "Jack, a toast to you and your becoming the president of Steel Rite."

"I like that, Jess. I could take over this place." He winked at me.

"With all that I know and shouldn't know. Ha, Ha." He swallowed the whole glassful of Vodka. Jack immediately filled his glass with more tainted Vodka.

*I hope this stuff works.* I watched him like a cat on the prowl for a mouse. Jack was slowly sinking. "Hey, Jack, how about you making a toast?" His chin was resting on his chest.

He mumbled, "Let's see, ah, what, who, am I thuuu . . about?"

Jack's right hand collapsed, releasing the drink he was holding. It fell to the floor. His whole body fell limp, and his arms dangled over the chairs arms. He looked dead to me.

I went over to his chair, and I lifted Jack's chin up from his chest. My right thumb peeled his left eye lid open. The sight of his blood shot eye ran a shiver down my spine. I opened his eye a little more, and I finally saw his pupil. Jack was motionless.

*I kept thinking, please don't be dead. Please God.* My cheek was resting against his nose. I felt a slight tickle of



breath. *Thank you, thank you. The keys, where are the keys?*

I felt Jack's pockets. There was a big bulge in his right hand pocket. Jack must weigh 220 pounds. I pulled on his right leg until I could slip my hand through and under the arm of the chair, into his pocket. I removed a huge wad of hundred dollar bills from his pocket. His keys were in the center of the folded money. I put the money back into his pocket. The keys were locked into my left palm. My right hand picked up the bottle of Vodka, and I went to Jack's office door, opened it, and my head went first. It was dark and quiet; I only had a few feet to the men's room. I poured the remainder of the tainted Vodka down the sink and rinsed out the bottle. After checking the hallways and finding no one and all the lights out, I fumbled my way back to Jack's office. I checked the key ring.

*Ah, Jack's key, front office entrance key and Gladstone's key.* I separated the keys with my fingers. With my duffel bag in hand, I locked Jack into his office. My goggles gave me a clear view of everything in front of me. I opened the plant entrance to the main office door. I got onto my knees and looked along the floors for any sign of light under the office doors. Dark, very dark. I inserted the front entrance key. The lock clicked, the door opened. Shades slipped by me into the foyer. We were dressed alike. We didn't talk. He followed me to Gladstone's office door. I opened the door. Shades went in and closed the door behind him.

I slipped on my pair of surgical gloves. I used the hallway table to make my wax impressions. I took one key off, made my imprint, then set the waxed key to the right of where I was working. The waxed impression went into its slot onto my belt. I had completed fifteen keys. *Just one more to make.*

My peripheral vision picked up something moving in the quiet room. I accidentally dropped the key I was working on. I didn't move a muscle. I stood there shivering. I dropped slowly to my knees and adjusted my goggles. The pen light was shining at two tiny red eyes. *Oh, you baby, it's only a rat.* I found the dropped key at my feet. My last impression was made. *Wow, what a relief.*

I picked up the lined up keys one at a time to restring them onto the key ring in the same order.

Shades came out of Gladstone's office. I locked Gladstone's office door. Shades moved like a cat. He worked on the phones in every cubicle while I unlocked the file cabinets. I searched for the import and export files. I leafed through the first several drawers. Nothing. Finally, I discovered them in the bottom drawer, under "Miscellaneous." The little camera automatically fired off shot after shot. I dropped that camera into my bag and finished photographing all of the files with the second camera. I put the files back into their folders and locked the file cabinets.

Shades, now at my side, whispered, "Let's go open Vang's secret room." Shades followed me. We arrived at my work room.

I pointed at the door Vang uses. Shades rested his ear against the door. He got down on his stomach looking through the bottom crack of the door. No noise or lights. Shades opened a leather pouch he kept in his back pocket. He picked the lock open in seconds.

I couldn't see a thing, even with my goggles on. I tapped Shades on his shoulder. I handed him one of my pen lights. He scanned the floor, then worked the light up the corners of the adjoining walls.

This work room was very much like mine. Shades unzipped his jacket just enough to reach inside. I watched

his every move. He brought out an accordion folding plastic envelope. He pointed for me to keep the light under the work table. He spread the accordion folder open. He pulled out a piece of plastic tape. Shades pressed the tape onto the wood floor, then peeled it back and put it into one of the sleeves. He was thorough in his search for residue cocaine. He kept taping the floors under the workbench and around the table legs, then he made impressions of the work table bench. He folded his accordion envelope, securing it back in his jacket. We left the room. Shades re-locked the door, and we walked through and out of my workroom.

Shades whispered. "Jess, give me the cameras and key belt. Let me out of the main entrance door. I'll see you back at Hub's."

Shades moved quickly out of the door into the darkness. I locked the main entrance door and went back to Jack's office.

Jack hadn't moved. I stepped on the glass Jack had been drinking from to make sure it had broken into tiny pieces. I then slipped my hand into Jack's right pocket, putting the keys back inside the folded money and stuffed the wad back into his pocket. My eyes shifted all around his office, making sure everything was in place. I went to my duffel bag, unzipped the bottom portion and opened the Velcro fastener.

I grabbed one of the ammoniac stimulants and zipped my bag closed. Jack's face felt cold and wet. With his head tilted backward, I noticed his nostrils were packed with cocaine residue. I cracked the ammoniac stimulant in half and waved it under his nose. Jack stirred from the burning sensation left by the stimulant. *Oh, am I glad you're not dead.* His face started to change from dead blue to his

normal ashen white. He slurred. "What's happening?" He slowly raised his head.

I said. "Jack, Jack, are you all right?"

He slowly worked his hands to the chair's arms and boosted himself up. His eyes opened, staring at the ceiling. He ran his hands through his hair. "Oh, shit, my head's killing me. What happened, Jess?"

"Jack, we were sitting telling jokes and laughing, and all of a sudden you fell back into your chair and dropped your drink. I thought you'd had a heart attack."

His eyes focused on me, glaring. "How long was I out, Jess?"

"Two or three minutes. Man you really had me scared."

Jack was confused. His face was dripping from perspiration.

"Jack would you like a glass of water?"

"Yuck, water? . . . Fish shit and piss in water. I don't drink water. I need a shot of Vodka." His recuperative power was unbelievable.

"Jack, you drank all the Vodka. Well, you didn't drink all of it. I helped."

"What time is it, Jess?" I looked at my watch.

"Jack, it's 7:30 p.m. Hey, I got to get my butt home."

"Okay, Jess. I need a bromo. I don't get headaches like this. Man, my head feels like it was hit with a hammer."

"Can you get up, Jack? I can't get out of here until you unlock the door."

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry, Jess, I forgot. It's a good thing you were here, someone could have broken in. Man, am I shaky."

I helped Jack to his feet and guided him to the front entrance.

"Jess, not a word about this to anyone. Okay?"

"Hey, Jack. My lips are sealed. I'm your friend, you know that. Listen, let me fix you a bromo before I leave."

I chuckled to myself; *yeah I fixed him my own Bromo - Vodka Knockout.*

"No, thanks, I'll sleep it off. You're a real pal. See you later."

I walked toward the gate. The watchman wasn't there and the gate was left ajar. I slipped through, and forced the gate to close. I arrived at Sally's fifteen minutes later. Hub answered the door. The look on his face was one of excitement. He was truly glad to see me.

He shut the door behind us "Come in, come in, Jess. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Hub. Mission accomplished. Where's Sally?"

"She and Constance went to a movie. J.B. is on the phone with Shades. Let's join him in the den."

He put his arm around me as we walked down the hallway to his den. "Damn, Kid, I'm so glad you're safe. J.B. and I have been pacing ruts into the floor. Shades called about thirty minutes ago. He's in route to get the film developed and the keys made. He said to tell you, the missing watchman is in the slammer. He'll be there until we want him out."

We walked into the den. J.B. cradled the phone while he took notes. He looked up at us. His handsome face expressed elation with the news he was receiving from the other end. He hung up the phone and stood up. His eyes became wet while he was shaking my hand.

"Jess, I've become fond of you these past few weeks. I'm so grateful no harm came to you. I just hung up from talking to Shades. He'd like you to wait. He'll be here in twenty minutes."

I smiled. "Guy's it would take a team of horses to get me out of this room." The two men laughed. Hub took his usual seat behind his desk. J.B. and I sat in our well-used chairs.

Hub smiled. "Jess, with great alleviation, I look at your young face with amazement. Your marvelous team work and unselfishness warms my heart. We're both eager to hear how you handled Jack."

"J.B. and Hub, everything went down just the way we rehearsed the whole program." I smiled, then continued. *I couldn't wait to tell them.* "First, Jack English came into my work room with instructions for my day's work. I shafted clubs today. Jack told me Gladstone took off for the West Coast in his fancy jet. He was out of booze and sent me to a liquor store to pick up a readied package. He made me a Vodka and orange juice. Jack downed three drinks in a matter of minutes. While he drank, I changed my shirt and socks. I left my duffel bag open and poured my drink's onto my soiled clothes." I smiled at my own cleverness they laughed. "Anyway, I worked on getting Jack drunk. His jaw started flopping. He told me Vang screwed up and would be here Wednesday night or Thursday morning to oversee the re-gripping of fifteen hundred returns. It seems the clubs were too heavy." I was so excited, I had to stop for a minute to catch my breath. I looked back and forth at both men.

"Gentlemen, Thursday night the newly gripped clubs must be ready for shipment by 8:00 p.m."

Hub stated. "We know Gladstone is on the West Coast. He can't break wind without us knowing. His stench is felt everywhere. Is Gladstone going to be here, Thursday?"

"Jack said he'd be there to oversee the whole operation. But I'll double check."

J.B said, "Men, this could be the night for us to take over. Shades should be here any minute with the files."

The door bell rang. "Speaking, of Shades, that must be him at the door."

Hub returned with Shades at his side. They walked into the den. Shades arrived very enthusiastic, lots of energy. His smile became mine. He talked as he walked.

Shades came over to me, put his hand onto my shoulder. "Jess, you did it, these pictures are fantastic. All seventy-two were clear, almost like originals." I sighed, relieved. Shades laid the stack of pictures onto Hub's desk. "Hub and J.B., my partner here, did his job. The grass doesn't grow under his feet. He worked to perfection. While working in the dark, with Jess, I felt like I'd had a seasoned professional with me. Thanks, Jess, you were great."

I felt a little embarrassed. "Thanks, to your training, Shades. It was scary. But, you know something, I really enjoyed it."

Shades laughed, "Yeah, it's always scary. The real fun is catching them. Jess, you've just made it possible."

I responded. "Shades, I'm afraid I've made a mess out of your duffel bag. I poured so much Vodka and orange juice into it, I think I may have fogged up the goggles."

Shades laughed. "That's okay Jess, throw it away. I'll have another one for you, filled with all kinds of new toys for you to practice with." Shades continued. "Men, you'll find included, photos from the FBI of Gladstone hand delivering his special cocaine loaded clubs to three key suspected king pin dealers on the West Coast." J.B. and Hub were listening intently. "We've tailed him to Dallas, Phoenix, Seattle, Washington D.C., Chicago and New York. These new pictures give us proof that he's been

delivering to the cream of the underworld all over the United States."

I was deeply engrossed in Shades acute findings. *One golf club in my trunk has led us to the bee's sting.* Hub leafed through the photo's of Gladstone, then passed them around. J.B. was elated, he said. "Shades, through Jess's intelligent vacuuming of Jack English, we're certain this Thursday night will be our night to apprehend Gladstone, Vang, Chow and English. I'll alert our team in the Orient. We'll secure all of Gladstone's dealers at specific locations in the United States."

He added. "Our timing is critical, this bust must be coordinated at the same hour on the minute all over. We sure as hell don't want any panic phone calls to Gladstone from any of his contacts."

Shades was focused, his eyes and ears were glued to J.B. I watched Shades, the little twitch of his right eyebrow had showed me in the past that his mind was scheming of how he'll orchestrate the Steel Rite bust Thursday night.

Hub spoke, "Gentlemen, I've been going over the figures I've compiled of Gladstone's distribution of his jumbo metal head drivers. We know one club carries approximately four ounces. I've multiplied one club times four clubs. It takes four clubs to amass one pound. Dividing four clubs into one thousand clubs, comes to, two hundred fifty pounds. Dealers buy by the kilo or pound. A kilo is two point two pounds." Hub licked his lips then continued. "The buying money rate varies. This stuff is pure uncut cocaine, and it is bought in the neighborhood of one hundred thousand dollars per pound. Two hundred fifty pounds, times one hundred thousand dollars, equals two million, five hundred thousand dollars for the shipment of one thousand clubs. That's chicken feed to suppliers.



Gladstone's got to be shipping five to ten times that amount to keep his suppliers happy."

"You've got a point there Hub", J. B. said. "And, we know the dealers will step on the two hundred fifty pounds at least five times. They make a quick twelve and a half million off the streets." He picked up the files. "Once we've gone through these files, we'll know exactly how much business Gladstone does in a month."

We all listened to J.B.'s optimistic view. I glanced at Hub. He seemed pensive as he spoke. "Jess, we have a long night ahead of us. Why don't you go home and get some rest. You've done enough work today. These next few days are going to take a lot of preparation. I want you to keep your ears open at the plant. Call us if something develops. We'll fill you in tomorrow after work?"

I thought for a second. "Sure, Hub. If I'm a little late, you'll know I got tied up at the plant. Good luck tonight. See you tomorrow."

Shades came over and put his arm around my neck and walked me to the door. "See you tomorrow, little brother."

"You bet you will, Shades." *My head was piercing the clouds.*

I stopped at a street Dumpster and threw away my Vodka soaked towel, shirt and socks. I'll wash the bag and goggles and keep them as a souvenir. *Sharon Gladstone's name came out of my mouth. Is she or isn't she using cocaine? I've got to know for sure.*



## CHAPTER THIRTY

Mom and Dad were sitting at the breakfast table when I walked into the kitchen. "Good morning, Son, we haven't seen much of you lately. Sit down and spend a few minutes with your mother and me."

"Good morning, Mom and Dad. Sorry I haven't been around much. I've been working overtime at the plant this past week. It looks like I will be for the next few nights."

Mom advised. "Son, try not to make those long hours a habit. You're too young to worry about making money. Besides, I don't want you wearing yourself out and getting sick."

"Okay, Mom. After this week I have a feeling the hours will be much less."

"Jess, I'm just about to start making an omelet for your Dad and me. Would you like a ham and cheese omelet?"

"Yes, please. Hey Mom, make mine a little gooey. Want some more coffee, Dad?" He held up his cup. "Fill her up, Son."

I joined Dad at the table. I tried drinking my coffee black, *yuck*.

I watched my Dad drink his black. I needed sugar. Dad was uncapping a bottle of ketchup. His fingers made an easy twist, off came the cap. I've had to bang the bottle on the floor to help loosen the cap.

"Hey, Dad, how did you open that bottle so easily?"

He had a mischievous gleam. "Oh, your Mom loosens the cap with pliers for me."

"Don't you believe that, Jess. Your Dad's fingers are the pliers."

Mom and Dad have fun together. I've known kids who don't have Mom's and Dad's. I really am grateful for them and thankful.

"Hey, Dad, I have something to tell you." He glanced up from reading the morning paper.

"Dad, I paid off the loan on my car. The banker said, I'm building up my credit."

A warm smile came across his face. We looked at each other in silence. I felt our closeness. He was proud sensing I was growing up.

"That's great, Son, you're also making me look good at the bank. Thanks for being the man you are."

Mom handed Dad and me our omelet's. She joined us.

Mom finished her first bite. "Jess, how is Sally?"

"She's fine, Mom. I sure am lucky to have her. We've become the best of friends. Which reminds me, where's my brother William?"

Dad said, "I dropped him off at your Grandparent's yesterday. He wants to stay with them for a few weeks."

I snickered . . . "Well, that means there's more to eat." Mom and Dad laughed.

I finished my last bite, cleaning my plate. "Thanks for the free meal. I'm off to the slave den. Have a nice day you two. See you later alligator." I squeezed Dad's shoulder on the way out.

Mom said, "Give our love to Sally, Jess."

I said, "I will", as I walked out the door.

I arrived at Steel Rite in less than twenty minutes.

*I remembered Hub's remark last night, 'keep your ears open.'* Clive was back to work. I waved to him as I walked by. I started gripping the clubs he had shafted. The hours went by quickly. Lunch time, I'm hungry. I took off my coveralls, hung them up and started toward the local cafeteria. Jack English was walking into the Assembly Room as I was reaching for the door.

"Hi, Jess, you're the man I'm looking for."

"Oh? What's up, Jack?"

"John Gladstone wants to see you."

"Sure, Jack. Have I done something wrong?"

"No, he's cool. Come on, I don't think this will take long."

I followed Jack to Gladstone's office. Jack knocked once and we both entered. John Gladstone was sitting behind his desk. He looked like a million bucks, with his dark blue suit and red tie.

"Good morning, Jess. I've asked you here to congratulate you on the fine work you've been doing these past few weeks."

I listened to him propitiate me. "Thank you, sir."

Gladstone pointed to a chair in front of his desk. Jack took the chair next to me.

"Please, sit down. Jess, we've had an unfortunate turn of events. Mr. Vang made a mistake in asking you to make the grips thicker on his last shipment. They've returned all five thousand clubs to be re-gripped with the normal sized thickness."

I listened to the handsome man speak to me in a very friendly tone. "Jess, I know you've worked very hard getting those clubs ready for us. I need a favor, Jess." He paused.

*I'll bet he was waiting for me to say, sure, Mr. Gladstone.*

"Mr. Vang insists you grip the clubs. He will pay you a large bonus if you would do the five thousand clubs over again."

*Vang will give me a big bonus to grip his cocaine-loaded clubs to supply their dealers and put more dope on the streets. Yeah, I'll oblige to help you set your own destiny.*

"Mr. Gladstone, when do these clubs arrive and how soon do you need them?"

"Jess, they will be here late tonight. I will need all five thousand ready for shipment by eight o'clock Thursday night. I know it's a lot to ask. Can you work all day tomorrow and Thursday?"

"I'm pliable to your needs, Mr. Gladstone. I'll be here at 7:00 a.m. tomorrow morning."

Gladstone smiled. "Jess, I appreciate your understanding. Jack suggested you be paid triple time, plus a cash bonus. I certainly agree with him."

I smiled earnestly. "Mr. Gladstone, Jack, is a great guy to work for. He does crack the whip but not too hard. I want to thank both of you for the raise. Will I see you here Wednesday and Thursday night?"

"That's one thing you can count on. Mr. Vang knew he made a mistake. There's too much money involved in these costly shipments."

*Good. Now we know for sure that he will be here.*

Gladstone stood up. He reached his hand across his desk. We shook hands. "Thank you, Jess."

"Thank you, sir." I left with a smile on my face that they couldn't see. I stopped at the corner phone booth before grabbing my lunch.

"Are you sure you have the right number?" I recognized J.B.'s voice.

"It's the only number I know. Five thousand to be ready Thursday at 8:00 p.m. Gladstone will be there."

"Affirmative, message understood." J.B. disconnected.

I had two bananas and a pear for lunch. Jack English was sitting on my work bench when I returned.

"Jess, didn't I tell you I'd get you a raise?"

"You're my man, Jack."

"John was most impressed the way you handled yourself in his office." Jack smiled. "We're all going to make money, huh, pal?"

"With you around, how can I miss, Jack?"

"You won't. See you later for a drink?"

"Ah, not tonight Jack. I have two big days ahead of me. We'll celebrate next week, okay?"

"You got it. I'll have plenty of Vodka and orange juice ready. So long, Jess."

"See you, Jack."

*Jack was happy, but it wasn't from Vodka. Thanks to the descriptions on the cocaine chart Shades gave me.*

I noticed Gladstone's car parked behind his office when I left.

I stopped at a phone booth several blocks from the plant. I dialed Sharon Gladstone's number in Bloomfield Hills. She answered.

"Hello."

I heard her voice and hung up. *Good, she's in Bloomfield Hills.* I got back into my car and headed for Sharon's townhouse.

I drove around the block a few times, then parked around the corner from her townhouse. The street was dark, except for the corner street lights. I quickly changed into my black outfit and hung to the shadows as I walked around the corner to her street. I climbed her stairs and

used my key to unlock the front door, slipping in and closing the door behind me.

I pulled my goggles out of my back pocket and put them on. My trusty pen light guided me upstairs toward Sharon's bedroom, bathroom and the guest bedroom. The guest bathroom was in the hallway. I opened Sharon's bedroom door and closed it behind me. Shades got me into the habit of closing doors that would be behind you. He had said, 'If someone enters they will be the surprised ones.' The room was pitch dark from the thick drapes. I turned on the light switch.

I've thought about this search for days. *Where to look? Underneath the mattress, the night stands table? Shoe boxes, her underwear?* A little voice said to me, *Hey stupid, how about the bathroom?*

*Doesn't she powder her nose all the time? Thank you, subconscious.* I pushed the bathroom door open. Sharon's bathroom sink was loaded with jars of creams, makeup cleanser, soaps, shampoo, perfume, but no box of powder. I noticed a flowery round ball sitting on top of the toilet cover.

*Maybe that's it.* The flowery ball turned out to be a fancy decorated roll of toilet paper. I chuckled to myself, *aren't women funny?* I started to put it back. *Ah, ha. I wonder what this large white round domed box is?* My subconscious was having fun with me tonight. *Come on, open it up, you know it's the powder box you've been looking for.* I gently pulled off the top. Inside the box a pink powder puff with a pink ribbon sewn on the back, covered the powder. I picked up the puff and sniffed the powder. It smelled like perfumed baby powder.

*Anyone who has something to hide, usually has a secret compartment.* I held the powder puff onto the powder with my right palm, then picked up the round box and turned it



over. The cake of powder sat in my right hand. I set the cake of powder on the bathroom sink and upright the box, then I pulled up the little pink tab near the bottom of the box. The pink tab turned out to be a thin round piece of cardboard. I stared at the bottom of the box . . . A white bag of powder.

I turned the box upside down onto a towel on the sink. The white powdered bag fell out. It was twisted and secured with a hair pin. I opened the bag.

My heart felt like it wanted to drop to the floor. Shit, shit, shit. COCAINE.

If I hadn't already seen what it really looked like, I would not have known. I put the cocaine and powder back into the box. I tidied up everything and left the town house. I sat in my car, while my mind wondered. My guts felt empty. *I have to confront her. The trick is when.*

I cranked up Black Beauty and headed toward Sally's. Sally was at the door, waiting to greet me. Her beautiful attitude evaporated the thinking of Mrs. Cocaine Gladstone.

"Hi, Handsome, long time, no see."

*Thank God, she isn't a dooper.* "Hello, Gorgeous. I've been working my tail off to pay for Friday night's surprise."

"You mean I have to wait that long to get my hands on you?"

"You don't have to wait for my lips."

I pulled her out of the doorway and kissed her passionately.

"Whew, Jess, you've taken my breath away."

"I'd better get inside before I take more than your breath away."

"Promises, promises, is that all I get?"

I pinched her butt. "I love you, Princess. Store up your energy. I'll see you Friday."

"See you then, Honey."

I led myself toward Hub's den. I knuckle tapped the door, then I entered. Hub, J.B. and Shades were standing, looking at a four by six-foot enlargement of my sketch of Steel Rite's exterior's plant.

Hub's desk was pushed to the side, making room for the enlargement on the wall behind his desk.

"Hello, guys."

Hub turned to my direction. "Jess, good, you're here. We've been going over all possible exits and entrances to Steel Rite."

We shook hands in silence. Shades asked, "Jess, I count five doors with key locks, that includes Gladstone's back exit. The two large shipping doors are controlled from the inside. Is that right?"

I studied the enlargement chart. "Yes, Shades, all the other doors are inside and they lead to passages throughout the plant."

Hub carried a wood artist's easel, with a large sketch pad. He set it down next to me. "Jess, can you sketch the inside doors for us?" He handed me a black 935 marking pencil. I drew the Assembly Room interior and the three doors that led in and out of it.

I pointed with my pencil as I spoke, "The door marked with one X, is Vang's secret door." The three men looked closely at my sketch. "Okay, the door with two XX's is the door that leads throughout the plant." I turned, they nodded, yes.

"The only door that leads to Jack English's office and the hallway to the main offices and to Gladstone's office is marked with three XXX's."

J.B. asked, "The only way to get to the main office from inside the plant is through the Assembly Room. Is that correct, Jess?"

"Yes, sir."

J.B. continued. "Once the Assembly Room is secured, one third of the exits are closed. That leaves Vang's door and the conveyor room doors. Jess, can you draw the conveyor rooms for us and where they lead to?"

"Sure, J.B." I drew the two conveyor rooms and the doors that led in and out of them. My pencil marked a line from the Assembly Room door to the conveyor rooms and their doors.

"Okay, gentlemen. We exit the Assembly Room door into the conveyor rooms. There's only one door linking these rooms together."

Shades paced as he asked. "Jess, can you show us what is on the other side of the first conveyor room?"

I drew the hallway linked to the first conveyor room, the two shipping doors and the three exit lock doors. I finished my sketch giving them a better point of view. "Shades, all the exit doors can be reached from the first conveyor room."

Shades said, "Jess, if we block the conveyor rooms, the only exit would be the shipping doors and the three locked doors." He paused, "What about Vang's exit door?"

"Shades, I saw an exit door when we were there. That door has to lead to the shipping rooms and loading dock exits. There's no other way out of the plant. Unless they try to get out through the roof. There aren't any ladders to the roof, so I think that exit is non existent."

Shades nodded. "Very good observation, Jess. I have all the duplicate keys here in this box. Let's go over each key and mark the designated door on the chart for that key."

Shades had a sheet of white, dime-sized decals. We numbered the decals one through sixteen, twice. Each key had its own number. The number on the key coincided with the numbered door on the chart that it opened.

The four of us analyzed the chart and drawings of the rooms.

Hub scratched his chin with the wooden pointer he held in his hand. He turned to us and said, "Gentlemen, please take a seat."

Hub pulled his desk back to its normal position and placed his chair behind his desk, then sat down. His warm eyes moved across the room, studying each one of us, independently. He folded his hands and spoke to us.

"Men, fate creates strange bedfellows. By chance my close friend J.B. is in town on business. Jess, my new friend and my daughter's best friend, accidentally finds a left-behind delivery in his trunk. Through these two people I'm pleased to make another friend, Shades Soble." Hub took a beat and glanced around the room with serious eyes, then he continued. "Friends, through youth and our experience, we're about to sever one of the largest cocaine veins in North America. John Gladstone has fooled us all. He has two fake manufacturing plants in the U.S."

That was a surprise to me. I said out loud, "Wow!"

"You're right, Jess. Wow. Gladstone uses his two fake plants to store his hollow clubs. Vang is the Oriental connection. Gladstone ships ten thousand sets of a dozen clubs to the Orient every month. We thought they were only returning five thousand clubs to Steel Rite. He's actually had five thousand boxes of a dozen clubs returned every month. That's sixty thousand clubs a month. Gladstone has circumvented his deliveries."

Hub held up a faxed copy photograph of another Steel Rite plant.

"The dummy factory in Phoenix receives twenty-thousand rejects a month. The second dummy factory is located in Los Angeles. Twenty-Thousand rejects go to L.A. every month. The remainder comes here, to Detroit.

Gladstone has shifts going around the clock in three states, simultaneously. Fortunately for us, Jess, you happen to be on one of the shifts. We didn't know all of this, until we studied his files last night. Jess, you discovered buried files along with the present ones."

I scratched my head in amazement. "It goes to show you. You send a new guy in for information and he comes out with the old."

The three men couldn't stop laughing. I joined them.

The laughing subsided. J.B. took over. "The Bureau will furnish us with all of the manpower we need to apprehend and arrest this whole organization. Vang, is the leader of his Oriental Mafia branch. He has his clones handling Phoenix and Los Angeles. These people have no fear of death. Workers are still missing from those sites. They probably saw or heard too much" J.B directed his attention toward me. "You've been right in suspecting a possible tail. Jess from this moment on, plug in your senses, to maximum. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

J.B. continued. "Hub's den is our command center. A bank of phones will be installed later this evening, and we'll work the phones from here. This operation is so sensitive, we're taking every precaution, and we don't want any leaks. Hub has his Chief's authority to choose the men that he knows he can depend upon. Shades, has his team ready to swarm and control Steel Rite, Thursday night. Jess, you have the toughest job at hand. This whole bust is up to your timing. Any thoughts, Jess?"

*Do I have any thoughts? These three men blow my mind. I thought I was clever and smart. They've forgotten more than I know.*

"I have a couple of questions. I feel it is imperative to take a sample from one of the shafts. We do want positive

proof." Nobody responded. They're so savvy, why interrupt me, I continued. "First when I take a sample, there will be powder left on my fingers. What will happen if I lick the powder off?"

Shades answered quickly. "Little brother, do not taste that stuff. The cocaine they're shipping is lethal. It has to be cut, to use. This is what you must do. Keep a plastic cup on your work bench. Fill it half full with water. Dunk your fingers into the cup, then spill it. To answer your first question. You're right, we do need positive proof. Your assignment is extremely dangerous. You'll be on your own, I can't be there to help you." His eyes showed genuine concern. "Jess, remember, you've been trained for this very moment, your movements should now be second nature."

"Thanks, Shades. I may not be able to get to a phone tomorrow. I'll work as fast as I can, hoping to knock off three thousand clubs by 6:30 tomorrow night. I'll have a lighter work load on Thursday. Baring no problems, I hope to be out of there, before 6:00 p.m."

Shades paced back and forth again. He stopped and turned.

"Jess, I must reiterate. Tomorrow will be most dangerous day of your young life. Vang is a highly trained killer. Nothing pleases him more than snuffing out someone's life. Can you be sure he trusts you? No, and don't you take him for granite. What about Clive? Will he be working tomorrow?"

"He's never around when Vang's in town."

"Good. Jess, I've been thinking. Instead of trying to bring us a sample. Let a little pour onto the floor." Shades went to his duffel bag. "Jess, see this small vial?" The vial was the size of my little finger nail.

I nodded, "Yes."

"There's a chemical inside that we use to measure the potency of cocaine. Put this vial in the change pocket of

your Levis. After you've poured a small sample of cocaine onto the floor, go ahead and grip the club, then pour the chemical onto the sample.

"If the white powder turns blue, you'll know its cocaine. Crush the vial with your heel and twist the sole of your shoe over the cocaine. Jess, remember to rinse your hands with the cup of water you should have on your work bench. Don't forget to spill the water. We don't want Vang to become thirsty and need a sip of your water. He can smell and taste traces of cocaine." Shades handed me the vial and I put it into my change pocket.

*The program Shades came up with takes a load off of my mind. Experience is the best teacher and mine is limited. My father always advised me, 'Listen to the gray hairs of experience.'*

"Jess, before you leave tonight, I want to have a word with you." Hub stated.

"Sure, Hub, in fact, I'm ready to leave now, if I'm not needed."

J.B. and Shades came up to me like two pieces of bread. One on each side of me. They both nudged me. J.B. said, "The Bureau needs men like you, good luck."

Shades followed up with, "I'm your inner ear, hear me."

I shook hands with both of them. "Thanks guys, see you tomorrow."

Hub walked outside of the den with me. His right hand rested on my left shoulder as we walked toward the front door.

"Jess, maybe you've been wondering where Sally is. I asked Constance and Sally to spend the next two nights with relatives. Traffic will be horrendous here, besides it's best they're not seen. Sally wanted me to tell you that she would see you Friday night for your school Prom."

Hub's long arm squeezed my neck. "I'm proud of you, son. Good luck."

I shook Hub's hand. "Hub, the cheese is in the trap and tomorrow night we'll load the spring. I know you'll be the first to put cuffs on the perpetrators. See you tomorrow. Good night, Hub."



## CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

The spotlight burned my eyes. I couldn't see. I couldn't move. My wrists were taped to the arms of a chair. My legs were spread apart while my ankles were being taped to the chairs legs. Tape ran across my forehead, locking it back against the chair.

I could hear Jack English's laugh, shrill loudly. The lights dimmed, giving me a vivid picture of Jack English. He was frothing at the mouth; his glaring eyes were soaked with red bloodshot veins running through them. He kept up his crazy laugh, while waving a bottle of Russian Vodka.

Mr. Chow was behind Jack, wearing a black bra, black panty hose and high heels. He paraded around the room snapping a whip, lisping, "etc, etc, etc."

Vang moved next to Jack, holding a hypodermic needle in his right hand, between his index and middle fingers. His thumb pushed down onto the needle plunger, spewing out streams of blue liquid. Jack English grabbed my head and forced it backward and poured Vodka down and into my throat. I couldn't breathe I gasped for air. Vang grabbed my arm and stuck the needle into a vein in my arm.

The three men went into a crazed frenzy, screaming, laughing, and showering the room with Cocaine. Vang filled his hand with Cocaine, then shoved his overflowing palm into my face, forcing Cocaine into my nose and down

into my throat. I couldn't see. The room was spinning, and the laughing became louder and louder.

Vang screamed, "Chow likes pretty boys, let's watch."

Mr. Chow took off his bra and snapped his whip. His tongue darted in and out like a serpent. His mouth was inches from mine.

HELP! . . . . I sat straight up in my bed, screaming.

The best time to run is 5:00 in the morning. The streets are usually damp from the morning dew. The only thing I saw was a stray dog looking for a garbage can to turn over. My watch read 5:18, I've averaged six minutes per mile, the last three miles. I picked up my pace in hopes of finding those hormones with pain-killing and tranquilizing ability that are secreted by the brain. I finished at 5:30 on the button. I felt the endorphins kick in at the last of my fifth mile.

I arrived at Steel Rite at 6:30, totally refreshed. The cargo loading door was open. Several Oriental men were unloading the filled truck. Mr. Vang was in the Assembly Room lining up carts, full of clubs. The sound of the door opening broke his concentration. He looked nervous.

When he saw it was I, his up tight expression changed to elation. The smiling Vang said, "Good morning, Jess, you're earlier then I had expected. That pleases me."

*Good. That's exactly what I want him to be, pleased.*

"Good morning, Mr. Vang. I came earlier, to give myself a break later." I picked up one of the clubs. "Normal size grips, Mr. Vang?"

"Yes, please. You're a dependable young man, and I like that." He left with a happy gait to his stride.

By the time I put on my coveralls and filled my cup at the water cooler, it was 6:45. My mind calculated, *if I do five clubs a minute, I'll have three hundred gripped in an hour.* I finished the first cart of seventy-five clubs in fifteen

minutes. I thought of checking out one of the clubs. *No, not yet.* I worked at the same pace for the next half hour. I glanced at the clock, 7:30. Vang arrived pushing a cart loaded with clubs to be gripped, and Mr. Chow was right behind him with his own filled cart. They were all business, not saying a word.

Vang and Chow wheeled in two more carts. I finished the last seventy-five clubs in fourteen minutes. I was one minute ahead of myself. I worked the next forty-five minutes. Vang and Chow entered, right on schedule. I wanted to make sure they came in and out every forty-five minutes. *One more time, be patient, one more time.*

Their door opened again in forty-five minutes. Vang and Chow pushed their carts in and out twice. I watched them leave. I gripped fifteen clubs in three minutes. *Number sixteen you're it.* I pulled the locking tape off, then poured some of the ingredients from the barrel shaft onto the floor under the work bench. I quickly re-taped the barrel and gripped the club. My finger dug into my watch pocket for the vial. I leaned down to break the vial. A door opened. I hid the vial in my shoe. I nonchalantly stood up and turned toward the door . . . There stood Jack English.

"Hi, Jess, catch you at the wrong time?"

"Yeah . . . Jack, I'm really too busy to talk. I had to take five seconds to tie my shoe. Can we talk at lunch time?" My shoe blocked any view Jack might have had of the white powder that was on the floor.

"I'm with you, and I sure don't want to spoil a guy's timing. See you later." The door closed.

My finger was digging into my instep. I scooped the vial out and broke it over the white powder. The white powder immediately turned blue. I dunked my finger tips into my cup of water. My foot broke the vial and squashed away all traces. I deliberately poured some of the grip paste

onto the floor, my foot worked the glue into the floor and onto the sole of my shoe. I spilled the water cup with my elbow as if by accident.

The cup lay on the bench top, and it rolled back and forth as the water slowly dripped off of the bench onto the floor.

Vang and Chow were like clock work, they'd come in with three hundred clubs and leave with three hundred clubs. At exactly 12:30, I'd finished eighteen hundred clubs and was fifteen minutes ahead of my projected schedule. Vang and Chow arrived, wheeling in full carts. Before Vang left with a gripped load, he said, "Jess, do you want to take a break? Aren't you hungry?"

"Yes, Mr. Vang. I need some fresh air and a sandwich. I'll be back in twenty minutes."

"Jess, I'll have Mr. Chow bring you some tea when you return."

I hollered "Thank you" as I walked away.

Jack English caught me as I was leaving the plant.

"Hold on a second, Jess. Do you mind if I join you for lunch?"

"Nice to have your company, Jack."

Jack smiled and tilted his head back as he talked. "Jess, Gladstone will be in to see you sometime this afternoon. I'm only telling you this to prepare yourself for another favor."

I started to answer Jack but waited until we were seated. All the tables were filled and every seat was taken, except two near the end of the counter bar. I sat next to Shades Soble, Jack sat next to me.

Jack started to hand me a menu. "I don't need a menu, I know what I want. I only have fifteen minutes to eat Jack, so let's hurry up and order."

The waitress came by. "I'll have tuna on wheat and a coke. Jack, how about you."

"That sounds good to me Miss. Skip the coke and bring me a beer. A large beer." The waitress left.

I kept my attention toward Jack. I spoke loud enough for Shades to over-hear. "Jack, Gladstone isn't going to ask me to grip more clubs, is he?"

"Jess, you and I are buddies and you always keep your mouth shut. Yes, that's exactly what he's going to ask you."

"Jack, how many more are we talking about?"

"Twenty-five hundred. He'll have a big bonus for you?"

"Jack, it's not the money." I held up my hands. "Jack, my hands are so sore, I'll bet their black and blue inside." I tapped Shades knee with mine.

"Jess, Vang told me, you've gripped eighteen hundred in six hours. Look, Jess, Gladstone will pay through the nose. He's desperate." He pleaded. "Jess, it means a lot of loot in my pocket. Think about me."

I let Jack stew, while I finished my sandwich. I hollered, "Miss, another coke for me." I tapped Shades knee again.

I took a swig out of my coke and swallowed, "Ah. Jack, I'll do anything to help you. You're my pal. Don't worry I won't let Gladstone know what you've told me."

Jack patted me on the back. "Thanks, Jess, I won't forget this."

"Jack, I got to run. I need to soak my hands in warm water to get the blue feeling out. Will you pay for my sandwich?"

"My pleasure, my pleasure."

I left. Shades stayed. *I know I gave him two hints. I just had to do it one more time. How would Jack know? He's too busy thinking about himself.*

Vang was sitting in a chair, drinking tea when I entered the Assembly Room. Vang looked up. "Jess, Mr. Chow will bring you some tea now."

He left and Mr. Chow appeared with my tea. His long black hair was covering his left eye. Chow set the cup of tea down and bowed to me. He smiled, turned and swished his way out of the room.

*Do they think I'm going to drink their tea? How do I know it's not hyped up. My senses were plugged in and turned on to maximum.* I emptied the cup into the water cooler drain.

I thought of nothing but putting grips on for the next hour.

Vang and Chow came in just in time. I'd finished the three hundred clubs. Vang was happy. "Jess, did you like Mr. Chow's tea?"

"Please tell Mr. Chow, thank you. He must use secret herbs to give energy. I feel great."

Vang said something in Japanese to Chow. They both laughed.

By their body language and laugh, I knew I was right about the loaded tea. *I let them think they turned me into their own tea-robot.*

Mr. Vang, please bring the clubs in every half hour, I don't want to lose my tempo."

He nodded politely. They left, pushing two carts and returned for the other two.

I worked non-stop for the next two hours. I was starting on my fourth load, when the door swung open, Mr. John Gladstone walked in. He smiled, "Jess, I have good news and bad news for you."

I kept working. "Give me the bad news first."

"Jess, I need twenty-five hundred more clubs gripped by tomorrow night."

I didn't lose a beat. "What's the good news?"

"I'll pay you a thousand dollars to have them ready to ship at 8:00 p.m."

I had gripped twelve clubs in less than two minutes. I looked up. "Mr. Gladstone, you want to pay me one thousand dollars to grip an additional twenty-five hundred clubs. What will my total bonus add up?" I didn't look up. I waited for his answer while I gripped.

"Jess, how does fifteen hundred dollars sound?"

I talked as I worked. "Mr. Gladstone, I like your good news. I also like cash. In order for me to finish these clubs, I can't talk right now. Mr. Gladstone, you walk through that door at 6:30 tomorrow night with fifteen hundred in cash and I'll have all your clubs ready for shipment. How does that sound?" I had to see his expression.

"Jess, you're learning to become a good business man. I'll see you at 6:30 tomorrow night." He smiled. "Thanks. I won't forget this."

I watched the big man leave. *For the first time in my life, I know what it feels like to be a con man. I enjoyed every minute of it.*

I'd finished four thousand grips at 7:00 p.m. I was spent, the only thing that kept me going all day was the thrill of catching these bastards. The money was the kicker.

Vang came into the Assembly Room as I was preparing to leave. "Jess, a small token of my appreciation." He smiled, then handed me two one hundred dollar bills. "I will be most appreciative, tomorrow, Jess."

I caught a glimpse of Gladstone and Vang talking next to Gladstone's car. I took two steps in the direction of my car before I felt something bounce off of my shoulder. I quickly looked upward. Shades Soble was on the roof. His finger covered his lips. I could see that he was carrying a rifle microphone and it was aimed at Gladstone and Vang's

conversation. Shades folded his middle three fingers, leaving his little finger pointing at his mouth and his thumb pointing to his ear. I gave a thumbs up of understanding. My car and I were on our way to a phone booth several blocks away.

I dialed 555-3131. Shades answered in a low voice, "Do you have the right number?"

I replied, "The only number I know."

"Go to Command Post Center. The message is, "Activate."

The line went dead. I remember Shades saying, "These phones are only receiving phones."

I called Hub from a pay phone. He said the password is, JUMBO HEAD and for me to come to the house.

First I called Sharon Gladstone in Bloomfield Hills. She answered on the first ring.

"Hello."

"Hi, Sharon. Sorry, I couldn't call you earlier."

"Oh, darling, it doesn't matter what time you call. I prayed it was you."

"Sharon, can you be at the townhouse tomorrow night at 7:30?"

"Of course, darling. I'll be there waiting for you. Do you have to work late?"

"I should be finished before 7:30. By the way Sharon, do you have any cash with you?"

"I don't have much cash, but I have thousands of dollars in travelers checks in my safe at the townhouse. Are we taking a trip?"

"Yeah, I was thinking of one. Sharon, I've got to run. I'll see you tomorrow night. Okay?"

"I'll be counting the hours, darling. Good night."

Hub's street was lined with unmarked cars with plain-clothes officers sitting inside of them. I walked up to the



front door, and a giant of a man opened the door. "Jumbo Head," I said. He stepped aside for me to enter.

I knocked once on the den door and entered. Hub and J.B. were standing, going over blown up maps taped to the walls. "Hi, Hub and J.B. Hub, Shades said to 'activate'."

Hub and J.B. were serious. J.B. spoke. "Jess, activate means, 'Code Jumbo Head will be in full force, all over the country and parts of the Orient tomorrow night.' This is what we've been waiting for."

Hub said, "Sit down for a second, Jess." He studied me, smiled and continued. "Son, you have one more difficult day to contend with. Shades reported your keen sense of communication." He leaned forward and rested his big hands on mine. "Jess, when you finish tomorrow night, I want you to leave as inconspicuously as you can. Once outside of the building, you'll be safe. Go directly to your car. You won't be followed, we'll make certain of that. Drive off and stay away from Steel Rite. Leave the rest to us."

J.B. touched my shoulder. "Jess, you've brought us this far. I know you'll be careful. Good luck. I'll see you, Friday."

*I won't be anywhere near Steel Rite, I'll be with Sharon Gladstone.* I looked at my two partners. "Thanks, J.B. and Hub. Your wisdom and judgement never leaves me. You guys be careful. Hub, you will have Shades here Friday, won't you?"

"Jess, we'll all be here. Get a good night's sleep."

I shook their hands. They both said, "Good luck, partner."

The giant of a man opened the front door for me. *Black Beauty and I drove away cautiously. I didn't want to get a speeding ticket. I tried to keep my thoughts casual. I've been too casual in my mind. This is for real. Parts of the*

*United States and the Orient'. Tomorrow, tomorrow, it  
scares me now.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

I saw a familiar face, the tall man at Hub's was now the watchman at Steel Rite. My earlier arrival didn't surprise Mr. Vang. His smile was much larger this morning. "Jess, we've anticipated you. Mr. Chow, has left a cup of his tea for you. Drink it, while it's still hot."

I played the game. "Thank you Mr. Vang, be sure to give my thanks to Mr. Chow for his tea, it's wonderful." I held up a club, "Same as yesterday, Mr. Vang?"

Vang grinned, "The very same, Jess, the very same. Thank you."

*That little bugger is always so polite. Yeah, get caught crossing him one time. What do they say in Japanese? Sayonara!*

Vang left. I immediately poured the tea down the water cooler drain. I rubbed my fingers onto the floor and placed my dirty fingertips around the teacup. I glanced at the clock before I started, 6:15. I was soon into my usual rhythm. One half hour on the button, Vang and Chow appeared with their carts. They were in and out swiftly. My pace was faster today. I finished three hundred clubs in forty-five minutes.

This has been their eighth trip. My eyes shifted to the clock once again. When I finish this group I will have gripped eighteen hundred and seventy-five clubs. I thought,

*why not ask these two guys for a quick sandwich?* Vang was near the door with his cart full. "Excuse me, Mr. Vang. Would you and Mr. Chow like to have a quick sandwich with me at noon?"

Vang said something to Mr. Chow in Japanese. "Jess, Mr. Chow, expresses his gratitude but must decline. He likes to cook our lunch. Jess, on our next visit we'd like to have you as our guest for lunch. Thank you, Jess, for your courtesy."

*Courtesy? I'm thinking of my neck. Sure, you're also thinking of your bonus. Who said that?*

Upon their return for the remaining two carts, Vang voiced, "Jess, Mr. Chow will have a fresh cup of tea for you when you return from lunch."

"Thank Mr. Chow for me." They left. I finished the three hundred clubs. I took off my coveralls and left for the cafeteria. *Is this a coincidence, or is Jack English keeping tabs on me?* Two days in a row Jack has caught me leaving the plant.

"Hey, Jess. How you doing?"

"Great, Jack. Come on, it's my turn to buy lunch."

"I can't. Bring me back a grilled cheese sandwich, will you?"

"Sure thing, Jack. Come to the Assembly Room at 12:30. I don't have time to deliver it."

He answered to my back, "See you at 12:30."

My eyes shifted toward the gatehouse. I didn't see the big man and no one was in the gatehouse. *Quit being so nervous, he's probably at lunch.*

The Cafeteria was crowded, standing room only. I didn't see Shades. I summoned the waitress and ordered three grilled cheese sandwiches on wheat to go . . . my two with sliced tomatoes and sliced avocado. The Detroit News

and Free Press newspaper was sitting on top of the cash register counter. The headlines read:

**"Alan Dorfman, Chicago Mafia Don, gunned down last night in the swanky suburbs. Killers fled the scene, unidentified."**

"Young man, your sandwiches are ready." I looked up at the portly waitress.

"Thank you." I paid the check and left. The gatehouse was still empty. I returned to the Assembly Room to find my steaming tea waiting for me on my work bench. I ate my first sandwich in seconds. My teeth were aimed at the second sandwich. The door opened, Jack English came in.

"Am I hungry." He reached for the bag. "Thanks, Jess. Hmm, smells like tea." He smiled. "Is this tea for me?"

"You want it, Jack, you got it."

I ate my second sandwich and drank four glasses of water. Jack ate, then drank his tea. "Jess, I know you're busy, I'll see you before you leave. I hope it's before 8:00 p.m."

"Jack, come by at 6:45 p.m. Hey, Jack, you know I didn't say a word to Gladstone."

"I owe you, I owe you big time."

"Gnaw, you don't, you've paid me enough."

Jack left. *He appeared high as a kite. Did the tea do it?*

I slapped on grips faster than Wyatt Earp's bullet. *I leaped over carts, in a single bound. More powerful than a locomotive. Jess Sterling, Super Gripper.* The clock read 6:30 p.m. when the door opened. Mr. John Gladstone strode in confidently. I held up my last gripped club.

"Hello, young man. Am I to assume the club you're holding, is the last of the seventy-five hundred clubs?"

"Mr. Gladstone, your punctuality is appreciated and your assumption is correct."

"I'll confer with Mr. Vang?"

"Please do, sir."

Gladstone opened Vang's secret door with his own key. He went in and closed the door behind him. I took off my coveralls and waited.

I sat for ten minutes. Finally, Gladstone returned with Vang. Mr. Vang quickly inspected the clubs in the carts. He smiled at me and Gladstone. "Mr. Gladstone, all seventy-five hundred clubs are completed."

"Thank you, Mr. Vang."

Mr. Vang spoke as he wheeled one of the carts toward his secret door. "Excuse me, Jess, will you be kind enough to wait a few extra minutes? We want to talk to you." Vang quickly came back after the second cart.

"Sure, Mr. Vang."

Gladstone reached inside his suit coat pocket, pulled out an envelope and handed it to me. He looked around the room, then back to me. "Young man, I like your moxie, and I plan on getting to know you better. You've done a splendid job. We'll talk about your future, in the future."

He smiled. We shook hands and he left.

The door hadn't been closed fifteen seconds, when Jack English barged in like a Rodeo bull out of the chute. Jack was completely stoned. "Hi', ya Jessss. Man, you, surr did, it." He stumbled, then up-righted himself. Jack rocked back and forth, then turned his back to me.

I heard a deliberate inhaling sound . . . Jack turned around to face me. "I really like you, Jess. I've made a lot of money with you here. You produce, that brings mucho denero. Get what I mean?" *It's hard to believe. Jack came in slurring. He turns his back to me. Now he's able to talk.*

Jack pulled a wad of money out of his pocket. The keys were in the middle of that bunch of money. *He knows where he keeps his keys. Ain't that a coincidence?*

"Listen, Jess." He peeled off four hundreds. "Stick this in your pocket. I know Gladstone paid you some money and I'm sure Vang and his It-friend will grease your palm. You deserve it." He glanced at the clock. "Hey, it's getting late. We've got to start loading in forty-five minutes. See you next week, Jess." Jack left.

The clock read 7:15 p.m. *I've got to get out of here.* I wasn't going to wait for Vang. I took two steps toward the exit door. Vang came in through his door, with Mr. Chow.

"Oh, Jess, oh, Jess, we've caught you just in time. Mr. Chow has a present for you." Chow presented me with a tea pot. Scotch tape held the lid on. "Mr. Chow, wishes you happiness Jess." I looked at Mr. Chow. His hair was neatly curled and his finger nails were painted red just like his lips. *I better get out of here, before he thinks I'm his boyfriend.*

"Please thank Mr. Chow for me."

They spoke in Japanese. Vang handed me five one hundred dollar bills. "Jess, I am most appreciative."

I looked at the money. "Thank you." I glanced up at the clock. "It's getting late. See you next time." I shook both of their hands. I exited the main entrance door at 7:25. My heart beat went back to its normal cadence. The tall man opened the gate for me.

The night was too quiet. The only sounds I heard were those of my twin exhaust pipes, growling as I sped away. My eyes were glued to the rear view mirror while I headed for Sharon's townhouse. No one had followed me thus far. I turned right onto Clarence Street and parked. Sharon's townhouse was near the end of the block. I turned off the engine and sat in my car for a few minutes, trying not to think about Steel Rite. The dials on my dash clock illuminated 7:50.

I started my car and slowly drove by her townhouse. *Good, the porch light is on.* I parked around the corner and walked to her front door. I rang the chime bell. The door opened, and Sharon appeared looking more beautiful than the last time.

"Darling." Her arms went around my neck, forcing her beautiful large breasts against my chest. We kissed passionately. I walked forward, nudging her backward into the house. I kicked the door closed. Her hands roved my body, while her lips stayed locked to mine. I gently moved my lips away from hers. We were cheeks to cheek. Sharon's hot breath whispered into my ears.

"Darling, I've missed feeling your hardness against me." She nibbled on my ear. "I've made Beefeaters Martini's for us, let's have a couple and go upstairs."

She moved back far enough for me to search her beautiful eyes. Clear, moist and vacant. "Hello, Beautiful. Yes, I would like a Beefeaters Martini. I need to wash my face and hands. Keep the Beefeaters on ice, I'll be right back." The guest bathroom was a few feet away. I returned to find Sharon facing the fireplace, holding a drink. The black body stocking she was wearing displayed every curve and crevice. She turned as I stepped down into the living room.

"Feeling better, darling?"

"Yes, thanks. I've had a long day. But I'm fine now."

She came to me, extending her hand forward. "Come, to the bar, darling. I have your Beefeaters Martini chilling." Her hand was warm and silky. She shook the metal Martini shaker, then poured my drink and refreshed hers.

We automatically raised our glasses to a toast position.

"Sharon, let's toast to an evening of perspective"

She smiled, our glasses met. I watched Sharon sip her martini.



"Darling, who's view are we talking about?"

"Sharon, the view that can be seen." I was voracious for another drink and the truth. I set my glass onto the bar. "Beautiful, would you pour me another?"

"I'd love to, darling." She poured mine and refilled hers again.

Sharon raised her glass to make a toast. "Darling, here's to the view of you on top of me in bed." She clanked her glass with mine. She laughed and I laughed with her. My eyes peeked over my martini glass rim at Sharon finishing her drink.

"Sharon?"

"Yes, Darling."

"Do you have your thinking cap on tonight?"

"Do I need it?"

"Oh, yes. Sharon, I have a game I'd like to play with you. Are you game?"

"Sure, darling."

"Let's go upstairs to the bedroom and I'll explain the rules."

Sharon grabbed the martini shaker and came around the bar. "Oh . . . To the bedroom. I like that. I'll follow you, darling."

I was half way up the stairs. *I thought you made a promise - only Sally. Shut up. I know what I'm doing.*

The bedroom door was open. I moved to the side and let Sharon pass in front of me. The candle lit room created a mood of passion. Sharon set the martini shaker onto her nightstand and then propped herself up on the bed, using the pillows and headboard as a backrest. Her hand patted a spot on the bed next to her.

"Darling, come sit next to me and explain the game."

I sat in the arm chair next to her bed. "I need to face you, Sharon."

She freshened her martini and smiled. "I'm ready, darling."

"Okay. We played a game similar to this one when I was in the eighth grade. You were the teacher then. Remember the Spelling Bee?"

"Darling, how could I forget? You were wonderful."

"Sharon, this is a culpable game."

"Jess, your intelligence and your good looks are what first turned me on. What a loaded word."

"This game is for me to balance the scale of my knowledge about you." I looked at her for a reaction. She folded her arms in readiness.

"I will give you a word, not to spell, but to define. Be patient and answer my questions. Okay?"

"Darling, do I get a prize if I answer them all correctly?"

"You bet you do. Let's play the game first. Ready?"

"Yes, darling."

"Sharon, define, VERACITY."

"Veracity, means truth."

"Define, SYBARITE."

"Sybarite, means a devotion to pleasure and luxury."

"Very good, Sharon. Define, PREVARICATOR."

"I hope you don't think I'm one."

"Sharon, that's not the definition. Define, Prevaricator."

"Prevaricator, means one who tells lies."

"Sharon, define, DIABLERY."

She raised an eyebrow, started to say something, then changed her mind and answered, "Diablerie, means mischief, crime, wicked. Darling, I don't know what you're getting at with this game . . ." She smiled. "Do you mind if I powder my nose?"

"Sharon, could I be rude and powder mine first?"

"Darling, you're never rude. You can use the guest bathroom if you'd like."

"Beautiful, I like your bathroom. I won't be long."

The frilly roll of toilet paper sat on top of the powder box. I opened her powder box. The plastic bag was there. I stuffed it into my jacket pocket, closed the powder box, and then came out of the bathroom.

"Okay, Beautiful it's all yours."

She hurried past me into the bathroom. I sat in the quiet and waited for the eruption. By the sounds that came out of the closed door, one would think someone was looking for the Holly Grail. Fifteen minutes later, Sharon appeared, distraught.

"Sharon, you look pale. Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. I've misplaced something."

"Don't worry, it'll turn up. Come on, sit down, I only have one more questionable word."

She sat on the edge of the bed, looking lonely and frustrated.

"Sharon, let me change the subject for a moment." Her facial expression was pensive, she seemed miles away. I needed the answers only she could give. "Sharon, are you all right?"

She heard me. Half smiling, "I'm sorry, darling, I was immersed in a thought. Now what did you say?"

"I said, I would like to change the subject for a moment, then continue our game."

"Fine, darling. I'm listening."

"Sharon, this is a personal question. May I?"

She smiled, then nodded, "Yes".

"Do you know how much money your husband makes at Steel Rite?"

"Jess, that's a strange question to ask."

"Well, will you answer it?"

"I don't know if I can. I've never needed any money. John insists I keep my salary from school. He pays the bills and gives me all the cash I may need." She looked away. "John and I haven't discussed his income."

"Sharon, was John a millionaire when you married him?"

"No. We didn't have much when we first met. He bought Steel Rite with several investors and eventually bought them out. Why are you so inquisitive about his income?"

"Sharon, I need to know for several reasons. One, I'd fallen in love with you and didn't know what to do. Two, you have two multi-million dollar homes, this hideaway and several very expensive cars on a school teacher's salary and your husband's income. Three, I'd never have the kind of money you're used to. Why have you pursued me and confused me?"

She answered immediately. "Darling, I couldn't resist you. I would give up everything if I could have you all for myself."

"Sharon, I'm just a kid. That doesn't make sense. A lot of things don't make sense. Has it ever dawned on you how your husband acquires such a large amounts of money?"

She looked at me quizzically, "I've never given it a thought."

The anger was slowly building up inside me. "Sharon, let's get back to the game. I've got another loaded word for you. Define, CRYSTALLITE."

"Shinny, glassy rocks."

I yanked the plastic bag out of my jacket pocket. My fingers created a fulcrum. The bag rocked back and forth while I held it up for her to see. "Like the shinny rocks in this bag?"

Her eyes stared at the several ounces of cocaine ticking. She was in a hypnotic stun. Her hand nervously reached for her martini. She downed it. She couldn't speak. I spoke for her. In a loud voice. "Sharon, this whole evening has been one big canard. You'd best start telling the truth. There isn't time for anything else."

She started crying hysterically.

"Don't give me that tear shit. You've busted my balls long enough. How long has your husband had you dependent on cocaine?"

Her face was full of tears. I threw my handkerchief at her.

She spoke beseechingly, "Jess, darling, how do you know so much?"

"You're the one who gives answers, not questions. I want the truth."

She composed herself. She hesitated. "Yes . . . you're right, Jess. John has made me dependent on cocaine. I love you and need you more than anything now. I won't lie anymore, darling. John has fed me cocaine for two years now, and he's kept me well supplied. He's a mean fucking pervert. I hate him for what he's done to me."

"You don't like yourself very much either. Sharon, you're going to change your habits." *Her beauty was gone from my eyes.*

"Jess, I don't know if I can."

I had to suppress my anger and hurt. I couldn't weaken and tell her how I really felt. First things, first. "Will you, if I help?"

She looked at me obliging. "Yes, Darling. Please help me, I don't want to lose you."

"Forget about me, Sharon." I glanced at my wristwatch, 9:15. "Sharon, we don't have much time. Where's your safe?"

"It's here, under my night stand. Where are we going?"

"You'll soon find out."

I moved the night stand to the side. The combination dial was in plain sight. "Open it, Sharon." I said in a strong edged voice.

She obviously felt my anger. *I have a suspicion her husband beats her.* She opened the safe, then looked at me and spoke child like, "How much money will we need, darling?"

"Bring it all and your passport."

"Darling, that's about fifty thousand dollars."

"I said, bring it. Come on, let's go."

"What about clothes?"

"You can buy what you'll need."

I closed the safe and returned the night stand.

"Darling, I don't know what's going on."

"Sharon, is your car in the garage?"

"Yes."

"Good. We'll take mine." I had her in my car in minutes. I maneuvered my way through the traffic to the I-15 Expressway and sped to the airport. She seemed to think I was going with her. I turned my head to her. "Sharon, listen to me carefully. I've made reservations for you on a plane to Montreal, Canada."

"What am I going to do in Canada?"

I looked into her eyes and said, firmly, "Listen, you're going to a rehab center in Montreal. I've spoken with the doctors there."

"What doctors? . . . What center are you talking about."

I reached across her to my glove box. I handed her an envelope with her plane ticket and the name of the New Beginnings Hospital, and the doctor who would be treating her.

She opened the envelope and read the contents.

"Jess, what the hell is going on? I'm not going to Canada to see any doctor!"

"That's what you think! LISTEN YOU. I know all about your habits and your husbands nefarious connections. Sharon, has anyone ever saved your life for you before?"

"No. And what do you mean 'before'?"

I screamed. "NOW, you naive fool. Sharon, your husband is in a lot of trouble. Do you know what for?" I pulled the cocaine bag from my jacket. My power window came down. I held the bag in my right hand. "See this? Now you don't." Out the window the cocaine went.

"Jesus Christ, Jess, that was a lot of money you just threw out of the window."

"Sharon, I just threw away a potential jail term for you. No more questions. Trust me and read the paper in the morning."

She started to cry. "Jess, I don't know what to think, I'm totally confused. Oh, please, darling, I need you, I need you. I'm scared. I feel like I'm in a vortex. Jess, please stop the spinning."

I pulled into the airport's International entrance. My karma was on tonight. Someone just pulled out and I took their parking place. I turned off the engine. Sharon was still crying. I gently pulled her into my arms to ease her hysteria.

"Sharon, you've gone through two years of being perplexed. I know you're frightened and don't understand what has happened tonight. Sharon, look at me." She sat up and looked at me. Her eyes were bloodshot and the tip of her nose was red from all the crying.

"Sharon, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever met. You have wit, talent and the desire to love and be loved. Don't waste it. You need professional help and I'm making sure you get it."

She looked completely spent as she listened to me.

"Darling, you're so strong for such a young man. I'm weak. I need some of your strength. Please, don't dump me. I'll change, I promise, you'll see. Honest, I will."

She wrapped her arms around my neck. Her voice cracked. "Darling, you've forced me into this, but not the way John forced me. Oh, God, will I ever see you again? I need you to come back to."

"Sharon, God, is on your side, keep him there. The program you'll be going through, will take several months. I'm not dumping you. My heart will always be with you. I'll call you soon. Okay?"

She forced a smile. "You're the boss, darling. Thank you for caring. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

I checked her in and walked her to the plane. We had a quick minute to say good bye. I spoke firmly, but softly. "Sharon, do not try to contact your husband. Is that understood?"

"Yes, darling. You said he was in trouble."

"I mean it Sharon. Do not contact him. He's in major trouble and you don't want anything to do with him, ever again."

"Jess, darling, I don't know how you know so much, but I'll take your word for it."

The Boarding Steward announced the last call. People were brushing past us, hurrying for their departure.

"Sharon, you have to board now." My guts knotted. I savored my last look at her. "Good bye . . ."

Tears bubbled up in her eyes. "Good bye, darling." I took her in my arms and kissed Sharon for the last time. She walked away. I watched the plane take off.

Heavy rain pounded my windshield. The wipers swept away the tears in my heart. *Good luck, Sharon. Your husband's cruel. The devil will deal with him. I must be an*



*old soul. My awareness and knowledge is a God send.  
Thank you.*



## **CHAPTER THIRTY THREE**

### **DETROIT NEWS and FREE PRESS DETROIT DETECTIVE, FBI, SPLINTER MULTI- STATE INTERNATIONAL COCAINE RING**

By Carl Friberg

Patience, surveillance and split second timing severed the Oriental connection to Detroit, Dallas, Phoenix, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Chicago and New York. Detroit's Detective, Hub Blaine and FBI agent, J.B. Clark, knew the veins of these city's were flowing with Cocaine. Where was it coming from? How was it delivered?

Steel Rite Casting Company, here in Detroit's industrial center, manufactures golf clubs. What do golf clubs have to do with Cocaine? Detective Blaine and Agent Clark overheard an inebriated man in a restaurant brag about all the bonus money he makes from golf clubs. One drunk in a bar led Blaine and Clark to Steel Rite Casting Company. John Gladstone, the owner and operator of Steel Rite Casting Company made frequent trips to the Orient and the seven cities.

Thousands of golf clubs were sent to the Orient each month. The clubs were returned as rejects to the seven cities. Blaine and Clark followed these shipments and

found they were going to noted king pin drug dealers. Why do drug dealers want so many golf clubs? The golf clubs were filled with high grade Cocaine from the Orient, returned to the United States for mass distribution. Detective Blaine and Agent Clark orchestrated the arrests that coagulated the veins in one simultaneous bust last night. *Cont. on page 11, see-Drug Bust."*

I finished reading the article, then I called Hub.

Sally answered. "Hello."

"Hi, Princess, I didn't expect you home so early. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Sweetheart. I've been a nervous wreck worrying about you. Daddy, said not to contact you, that you would call today."

"Is Hub in?"

"No, Daddy left a message for you, shall I read it?"

"Of course, read it."

**"JESS,**

**SUCCESS THANKS TO YOU. WE'LL BE BUSY  
ALL DAY AND NIGHT. HAVE DINNER WITH US  
TOMORROW NIGHT AT ERNIE'S, DOWNTOWN.**

**BRING SALLY AND CONSTANCE. SEE YOU AT  
7:00 P.M.**

**ANXIOUSLY,**

**YOUR PARTNERS."**

"Thanks, Sweetheart. Have you read the morning papers yet?"

"No, I haven't."

"You don't know what's happened yet, do you?"

"No, I don't. Remember? I've been kept in the dark."

"Honey its very exciting news. No more secrets between us from now on. Sally, I want you to read the

paper, you'll understand more . . I'll be over at seven to pick you up."

"Jess, can't I see you sooner?"

"I'll try to. I have a million things to do. Let me run, I'll see you later."

"I'll be ready and waiting. Bye, Honey."

I hung up the phone. I went back to the paper and read the last part of the article again.

"The drug raid didn't go without incident. A vicious fight occurred between a FBI agent and the Oriental Mafia ring leader. Agent Soble's weapon was slashed out of his hand by a Samurai sword. With his superior combat skills, Agent Soble disarmed Mafia leader, Sing Vang, and Agent Soble also single-handedly apprehended several fleeing dealers. John Gladstone, owner, operator of Steel Rite Casting, the American ring leader, was completely surprised by last night's raid. He was arrested with no contest."

Sally filled our long stemmed glasses with more Champagne. I buttered caviar onto crackers. We sat with huge pillows resting our backs against the king sized bed facing the big bay windows.

"Prince Pirate, the view is fantastic, it reminds me of our first date. Tell me, how did you arrange this Penthouse suite? The bottles of Champagne and Caviar? I've never seen a room like this before. This has to cost a fortune."

I smiled to myself. "I made a little bonus money and used my connections." *My tongue almost went through my cheek.*

She snuggled closer. "I'm glad we left the prom early. Are you sure you've been true to me?" She pinched my knee. "You'd better not have been with any of those girls I saw at the dance tonight. They couldn't keep their eyes off of you. Where did you learn to dance so well?"

"Come to think of it. Most of those girls are dance instructors."

She threw a pillow at me. We wrestled. Our bodies were close. Sally was sitting on top of me holding my arms to the bed. Her beautiful red hair hung down, covering her cheeks. "I've got you now." She teased.

"I surrender, Princess. Let's take that pretty white evening gown off of you, before it gets all wrinkled up."

"How about your tuxedo?"

"You only have to ask me once. Sally, did you know, this bathtub is built for two, with a whirlpool? If you hurry, I'll add bubble bath."

"How did you know I liked bubble baths?"

"Don't all girls?" *Good thing I can hold my breath a long time.*

The elevator dropped seventy-eight floors in seconds to Guest Parking. It was 2:30 a.m. when I pulled in front of Sally's. We kissed again. Sally is more beautiful without makeup. I walked her to the door.

"Jess, you've made me very happy. I love you."

We kissed. I held Sally in my arms. "I love you too, Honey. By the way, thanks for not mentioning the newspaper article."

"Honey, I'll hear the real story tomorrow. Good night, Jess."

"Good night, Sally."

She quietly closed the front door. I tiptoed down the front steps to Black Beauty. *What a night, what a night. Sharon Gladstone never entered my mind.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Mom, Dad and my brother were at the breakfast table when I walked in.

"Good morning, Mom and Dad." I tapped my brother on the head. "Hi, William, haven't seen much of you lately."

"Hi, Jess, how was the prom?"

"Great. What are we having for breakfast, Mom?"

"Cream of Wheat, toast and fruit."

Dad was reading the paper. "Son, I'm just reading a follow up article about the raid at Steel Rite Casting Company. Hub Blaine must have kept his eye on you, without you knowing it. Your mother and I sure are grateful you weren't there at the time of the drug bust. What happened?"

"You think you're grateful? I know about as much as you do, Dad. I know two things for sure. Hub, will have the answers and I won't be working at Steel Rite anymore."

"Jess, how about helping me paint the house this summer? The wages are low, but the food is good." He smiled.

"Dad, anytime you're ready, I'm ready. I'll get Sally to paint the trim."

"Good thinking, Son. I never did like doing the trim."

I looked at my brother. "What about you, William?"

"Forget about it, I'm too young. Besides, I'll be at Grandma's."

We laughed. William always had an excuse. I finished breakfast, nudged Dad before going outside. "Dad, help me change my spark plugs and I'll wash your car."

"I'll be out in a minute, Son."

Dad changed the plugs, as he always does. I washed both cars and polished mine.

I dressed hurriedly in anticipation for tonight's dinner. I knotted my brown paisley tie under the collar of my white shirt, then I checked my ensemble in the mirror. Dark blue blazer, shirt and tie, tan slacks and brown loafers. Black Beauty's shinny black paint gave me the feeling of opulence. The dash clock read 6:30 p.m. I knew Sally and Constance would be ready, they know Hub doesn't like to be kept waiting.

Sally and Constance were walking down their steps as I pulled up to the curb. They looked like Miss and Mrs. America walking down the gangplank, toward me. Sally was wearing a dark maroon dinner dress and Constance an emerald green dinner dress.

I quickly got out of the car and opened the door to help them in. I spoke immediately. "I watched you both walk down the steps. I said to myself. Self, there's Miss and Mrs. America."

They both smiled at me in appreciation. "Jess, you know how to make a woman feel good about herself. Doesn't he, Sally?"

"Mom, he always makes me feel good. Hi, Handsome."

"Hi, Sweetheart." Constance started to get into the back seat. "I think we can all fit in the front seat. Sally you get to sit next to me."

She winked. "Darn, I wanted the window seat."



Sally slipped close to me as I got into the driver's side. We were off to Ernie's.

Constance, asked. "Jess, do you know where Ernie's restaurant is located?"

"Oh, yes, it's a few blocks east of the Hyatt Hotel." My right leg rubbed against Sally's thigh.

The driving time was spent with chit chat. I stopped in front of Ernie's Steak House. The valet opened the door to help the ladies out. I handed him three dollars, smiled and said. "No scratches."

He replied, "Guaranteed, Sir."

The facade of Ernie's was used brick. A large green awning, with Ernie's Steak House written in white, protected the guests from the elements. We entered.

The unique thing I noticed about the interior of Ernie's was, that each table had its own large umbrella encompassing it. The used brick walls led to high beamed ceilings.

The Maitre d' arrived and politely asked how he could help us. I asked for Mr. Blaine's table. He led us through the table crowded restaurant to Hub's table. My three partners didn't see us approaching them. They seemed to be having a good time. The Wine Steward replaced the empty bottle of wine in the center of the table with a full one. Hub was quenching his thirst, drinking a full glass of wine. He caught our arrival through the corner of his eye. He stood up immediately, making J.B. and Shades aware that we had arrived. Hub smiled with pride, looking at his two beautiful ladies.

"Gentlemen, our guest of honor has arrived with two beautiful chaperones." He leaned over and kissed Constance on the cheek. Sally gave Hub a kiss on the cheek. Hub pumped my hand, then tugged my arm. "Jess, sit between J.B. and me. Sally, please sit next to Shades.

Shades, you haven't met my daughter. Sally, I would like you to meet my friend and associate, Shades Soble."

Sally shook Shades' hand and sat next to him. Shades seemed mesmerized by Sally's beauty. This was obvious when he expressed it in his tongue tied, "Hello."

"Hello, J.B." I said, as I shook hands with him. "You did a great job nailing those international cocaine dealers. I'll bet they were surprised."

"Jess, without your cooperation and hard work, those guys would still be in business."

I felt embarrassed. I responded. "J.B., it was a lucky accident, me finding that club. You guys with your expertise, organization and our teamwork is what got them."

He smiled. "I have a lot of respect for you, Jess and so does The Bureau. After you've had the chance to say hello to everyone, I'd like to continue this conversation."

"You bet, J.B., excuse me, I want to say hello to Shades."

I left my seat to get closer to Shades. I tapped him on the shoulder. "Hello, Big Brother." Shades, looked up at me, his face lit up with warmth. He stood up and gave me a brotherly hug. We both examined each other for a moment. We shook hands, the power of our friendship was there.

"Hi, Little Brother, I'm so glad to see you."

Shades looked down at Sally, smiling. "Sally was telling me how you two met. She's so beautiful, I find myself looking into her eyes and not hearing a word she's said," he laughed.

"Shades, I have the same problem." Sally was beaming. "Shades please sit down, I'll go back to my seat and we'll catch up after dinner." I glanced at Sally, gave her a silent kiss.

After all the cordials were met, everyone sat down. I looked around the table at my partners. I was pleased to attend this dinner with my new friends. I was proud.

They were all dressed for the occasion. Shades looked sharp wearing a black pin striped suit with a power red tie and matching pocket handkerchief. I observed Shades for any kind of tell tale injury, since he'd taken on so many black belt thugs. He looked healthy, brand new.

J.B. always looked great whatever his dress. This evening he had on a dark blue double breasted suit, pale yellow shirt, multi-striped light and dark blue tie. I'm not the jealous type, just cautious. I'm glad Sally sat across from him.

Hub, didn't come in last in the Ladies Home Journal of whom you'd like to go home with tonight. His tan suit, dark brown dress shirt, striped yellow and chocolate brown tie gave him a cool look.

*After all, he is married to Mrs. America.*

*My sub-conscious hasn't said a word to me so far. Isn't it about time? No, I haven't given you a reason yet. Well, how about this one? Aren't you sitting at the same table with two secret agents and a detective?*

My eyes studied their faces . . . expressions say a lot. I'll never forget Shades' Indian warrior looks and the way he paced while he thought, his genuine brotherly care and his infectious smile.

When J.B. smiled, his eyes sparkled and the clef in his chin broadened. Hub's diligence and leadership, with his hand signals of silence have been imbedded into my mind. These guys have been my hero's and always will be. *Yeah, you're right sub-conscious. Thank God for communication.*

They always seemed to have their own code, of who would speak first. Hub, broke the stalemate.

Hub's smile was enough for the room. "Jess." He chuckled. "I see you had no trouble in finding us."

I chuckled back, "Hub, how could I miss, with the two best direction finders in the world with me."

J.B.'s, charm and courtesy was felt. "Jess, I think we can sneak you and Sally a glass of wine." He winked at Hub. Hub did the honors of filling our glasses and the needy ones.

Hub looked at the empty wine bottle and raised his arm. The Wine Steward appeared and disappeared like magic. Hub, was having a good time. He smiled as his eyes circled the table.

"I told the Wine Steward he's going to need his roller skates tonight." Hub, lifted his glass, "Here's to the end of dry throats." We all followed suit. The tasty dry red wine made my palate thirsty for more. Hub, was tuned in, he filled my glass immediately.

I watched Sally sip her wine as she spoke to Shades. *I am lucky.*

J.B. gave me a psst, "Jess, what did you think of the story in the paper?" Hub overheard and leaned in.

"Great story." I started to laugh, as I said, "But don't you think Jack English is having a very difficult time explaining his big mouth?"

J.B. and Hub were beside themselves. We were so loud, Shades was able to pick up our conversation and joined the fun.

Hub composed himself, cleared his throat and raised his hand.

"Folks, I think my tongue is loosened up." He studied the table. Hub took a quick sip of his wine, he smiled, then continued. "J.B., Shades and I would like you ladies to know who the real hero of the Steel Rite raid is." He put his arm around my shoulders. "Jess, has been our, secret,

secret agent. He cleverly played a Mozart Concerto at Steel Rite, and lullabied some of the biggest drug dealers into their own private jail cell. We're very proud to have worked side by side with him. Unfortunately, I can't give you pertinent details at this time." Hub raised his wine glass in a toast position. "Son, perpetrators will soon become aware they won't have a chance if you're on the case."

I swallowed my tears of appreciation. All the glasses at the table met.

J.B. jumped in, "Jess, my personal feeling about you are first rate." He looked around the table and then spoke quietly. "The Bureau has instructed me to pay a silent reward to you. Bureaucracy has tied our hands in giving you cash. We've allocated funds for a college scholarship for you to any college of your choice.

I looked at Sally. She was elated. I was stunned. My eyes went back to J.B., then to Sally. *Come on, speak up, nothing ventured, nothing gained.* I conjured up enough lip, turning my gaze to J.B.

"J.B. only if you can make it for two."

J.B. smiled and raised his glass. "My toast is, your scholarship for two is granted."

The wine tasted exceptionally good this time around.

Sally came around the table and wrapped her arms around my neck. "Thank you, Prince Pirate."

I whispered. "You're welcome, Princess, please sit down you're embarrassing me." She took her seat, understandably.

Shades echoed his feeling. "Jess, you've earned this reward. I've had a goggle look at your future." His big teeth sparkled. "My view recognizes success for you and Sally. Jess, I'm giving you your very own, fully equipped, bag of training tools to acquaint yourself with during the

next four years." He handed me a large duffel bag and was it heavy.

"Jess, inside among your tools of trade, you'll find a coded address book with instructions. My personal phone number and J.B.'s are there for you to use. Don't be a stranger." His smile quieted as he said, "I'll miss you Jess."

My mind was working, but my mouth wouldn't move. I took a swig of wine while my eyes surveyed the faces at the table. My voice cracked. I cleared my throat. "I'll never forget this fantastic voyage we shared together. Timing, the right people and lady luck shinned down upon me, creating the happiest moment of my life. You three gentlemen, Hub, J.B. and Shades opened the door of trust, confidence and friendship to me. I am most grateful for the reward you've graciously given me." I looked at Hub. "Hub, would you explain to my parents why and how I received this reward?"

"Jess, I'm glad you asked. Loyalty is a wonderful asset. Your parents will not be left in the dark."

"Thanks, Hub. Well, when are we going to eat."

Ernie's steaks were fantastic. We bid our farewells. Sally and I rode home in Black Beauty.

"Prince Pirate, you always keep your word, I love you."

"Princess, just think, our future is ahead of us, we get to play house together while we go to college. We have Carte Blanche."

"Good, I want you to have plenty of practice . . . Jess, now, what career have you chosen?"

I looked at the most beautiful girl in the world, saying, with a wink, "Darling, isn't there room for a 0007?"

## **About the Author**

James Westmoreland, born in Dearborn, Michigan, raised in Detroit. Moved to New York, and worked a year in summer stock. Later, to Los Angeles to achieve a motion picture career. A lengthy run on General Hospital. Co-Starring in The Monroes TV Series, and Starring and Co-Starring in numerous movies. Working with Spencer Tracy, Walter Brennen, Kirk Douglas and Rock Hudson also added to his experience and knowledge. He is presently completing his second novel. James is also a teaching golf professional who has produced his own instructional golf video. In the works is a comprehensive golf instructional book for school's all over the world. A top athlete, photographer, he loves the outdoors.

