

Chapter 4

THE PARK WAS ABOUT two blocks square, with a fountain in the middle and a small swimming pool for the little kids. The pool was empty now in the fall, but the fountain was going merrily. Tall elm trees made the park shadowy and dark, and it would have been a good hangout, but we preferred our vacant lot, and the Shepard outfit liked the alleys down by the tracks, so the park was left to lovers and little kids.

Nobody was around at two-thirty in the morning, and it was a good place to relax and cool off. I couldn't have gotten much cooler without turning into a popsicle. Johnny snapped up his jeans jacket and flipped up the collar.

"Ain't you about to freeze to death, Pony?"

"You ain't a'woofin'," I said, rubbing my bare arms between drags on my cigarette. I started to say something

about the film of ice developing on the outer edges of the fountain when a sudden blast from a car horn made us both jump. The blue Mustang was circling the park slowly.

Johnny swore under his breath, and I muttered, "What do they want? This is our territory. What are Socs doing this far east?"

Johnny shook his head. "I don't know. But I bet they're looking for us. We picked up their girls."

"Oh, glory," I said with a groan, "this is all I need to top off a perfect night." I took one last drag on my weed and ground the stub under my heel. "Want to run for it?"

"It's too late now," Johnny said. "Here they come."

Five Socs were coming straight at us, and from the way they were staggering I figured they were reeling pickled. That scared me. A cool deadly bluff could sometimes shake them off, but not if they outnumbered you five to two and were drunk. Johnny's hand went to his back pocket and I remembered his switchblade. I wished for that broken bottle. I'd sure show them I could use it if I had to. Johnny was scared to death. I mean it. He was as white as a ghost and his eyes were wild-looking, like the eyes of an animal in a trap. We backed against the fountain and the Socs surrounded us. They smelled so heavily of whiskey and English Leather that I almost choked. I wished desperately that Darry and Soda would come along hunting for me. The four of us could handle them easily. But no one was around, and I knew Johnny and I were going to have to fight it out alone. Johnny had a blank, tough look on his face—you'd have had to know him to see the panic in his eyes. I stared at the Socs coolly. Maybe

they could scare us to death, but we'd never let them have the satisfaction of knowing it.

It was Randy and Bob and three other Socs, and they recognized us. I knew Johnny recognized them; he was watching the moonlight glint off Bob's rings with huge eyes.

"Hey, whatta ya know?" Bob said a little unsteadily, "here's the little greasers that picked up our girls. Hey, greasers."

"You're outa your territory," Johnny warned in a low voice. "You'd better watch it."

Randy swore at us and they stepped in closer. Bob was eyeing Johnny. "Nup, pal, yer the ones who'd better watch it. Next time you want a broad, pick up yer own kind—dirt."

I was getting mad. I was hating them enough to lose my head.

"You know what a greaser is?" Bob asked. "White trash with long hair."

I felt the blood draining from my face. I've been cussed out and sworn at, but nothing ever hit me like that did. Johnnycake made a kind of gasp and his eyes were smoldering.

"You know what a Soc is?" I said, my voice shaking with rage. "White trash with Mustangs and madras." And then, because I couldn't think of anything bad enough to call them, I spit at them.

Bob shook his head, smiling slowly. "You could use a bath, greaser. And a good working over. And we've got all night to do it. Give the kid a bath, David."

I ducked and tried to run for it, but the Soc caught my

arm and twisted it behind my back, and shoved my face into the fountain. I fought, but the hand at the back of my neck was strong and I had to hold my breath. I'm dying, I thought, and wondered what was happening to Johnny. I couldn't hold my breath any longer. I fought again desperately but only sucked in water. I'm drowning, I thought, they've gone too far . . . A red haze filled my mind and I slowly relaxed.

The next thing I knew I was lying on the pavement beside the fountain, coughing water and gasping. I lay there weakly, breathing in air and spitting out water. The wind blasted through my soaked sweat shirt and dripping hair. My teeth chattered unceasingly and I couldn't stop them. I finally pushed myself up and leaned back against the fountain, the water running down my face. Then I saw Johnny.

He was sitting next to me, one elbow on his knee, and staring straight ahead. He was a strange greenish-white, and his eyes were huger than I'd ever seen them.

"I killed him," he said slowly. "I killed that boy."

Bob, the handsome Soc, was lying there in the moonlight, doubled up and still. A dark pool was growing from him, spreading slowly over the blue-white cement. I looked at Johnny's hand. He was clutching his switchblade, and it was dark to the hilt. My stomach gave a violent jump and my blood turned icy.

"Johnny," I managed to say, fighting the dizziness, "I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Go ahead," he said in the same steady voice. "I won't look at you."

I turned my head and was quietly sick for a minute.

Then I leaned back and closed my eyes so I wouldn't see Bob lying there.

This can't be happening. This can't be happening. This can't be . . .

"You really killed him, huh, Johnny?"

"Yeah." His voice quavered slightly. "I had to. They were drowning you, Pony. They might have killed you. And they had a blade . . . they were gonna beat me up. . . ."

"Like . . ."—I swallowed—"like they did before?"

Johnny was quiet for a minute. "Yeah," he said, "like they did before."

Johnny told me what had happened: "They ran when I stabbed him. They all ran . . ."

A panic was rising in me as I listened to Johnny's quiet voice go on and on. "Johnny!" I nearly screamed. "What are we gonna do? They put you in the electric chair for killing people!" I was shaking. I want a cigarette. I want a cigarette. I want a cigarette. We had smoked our last pack. "I'm scared, Johnny. What are we gonna do?"

Johnny jumped up and dragged me up by my sweat shirt. He shook me. "Calm down, Ponyboy. Get ahold of yourself."

I hadn't realized I was screaming. I shook loose. "Okay," I said, "I'm okay now."

Johnny looked around, slapping his pockets nervously. "We gotta get outa here. Get somewhere. Run away. The police'll be here soon." I was trembling, and it wasn't all from cold. But Johnny, except for the fact that his hands were twitching, looked as cool as Darry ever had. "We'll need money. And maybe a gun. And a plan."

Money. Maybe a gun? A plan. Where in the world would we get these things?

"Dally," Johnny said with finality. "Dally'll get us outa here."

I heaved a sigh. Why hadn't I thought of that? But I never thought of anything. Dallas Winston could do anything.

"Where can we find him?"

"I think at Buck Merrill's place. There's a party over there tonight. Dally said somethin' about it this afternoon."

Buck Merrill was Dally's rodeo partner. He was the one who'd got Dally the job as a jockey for the Slash J. Buck raised a few quarter horses, and made most of his money on fixed races and a little bootlegging. I was under strict orders from both Darry and Soda not to get caught within ten miles of his place, which was dandy with me. I didn't like Buck Merrill. He was a tall lanky cowboy with blond hair and buckteeth. Or he used to be bucktoothed before he had the front two knocked out in a fight. He was out of it. He dug Hank Williams—how gross can you get?

Buck answered the door when we knocked, and a roar of cheap music came with him. The clinking of glasses, loud, rough laughter and female giggles, and Hank Williams. It scraped on my raw nerves like sandpaper. A can of beer in one hand, Buck glared down at us. "Whatta ya want?"

"Dally!" Johnny gulped, looking back over his shoulder. "We gotta see Dally."

"He's busy," Buck snapped, and someone in his living room yelled "A-ha!" and then "Yee-ha," and the sound of it almost made my nerves snap.

"Tell him it's Pony and Johnny," I commanded. I knew

Buck, and the only way you could get anything from him was to bully him. I guess that's why Dallas could handle him so easily, although Buck was in his mid-twenties and Dally was seventeen. "He'll come."

Buck glared at me for a second, then stumbled off. He was pretty well crooked, which made me apprehensive. If Dally was drunk and in a dangerous mood. . . .

He appeared in a few minutes, clad only in a pair of low-cut blue jeans, scratching the hair on his chest. He was sober enough, and that surprised me. Maybe he hadn't been there long.

"Okay, kids, whatta ya need me for?"

As Johnny told him the story, I studied Dally, trying to figure out what there was about this tough-looking hood that a girl like Cherry Valance could love. Towheaded and shifty-eyed, Dally was anything but handsome. Yet in his hard face there was character, pride, and a savage defiance of the world. He could never love Cherry Valance back. It would be a miracle if Dally loved anything. The fight for self-preservation had hardened him beyond caring.

He didn't bat an eye when Johnny told him what had happened, only grinned and said "Good for you" when Johnny told how he had knifed the Soc. Finally Johnny finished. "We figured you could get us out if anyone could. I'm sorry we got you away from the party."

"Oh, shoot, kid"—Dally glanced contemptuously over his shoulder—"I was in the bedroom."

He suddenly stared at me. "Glory, but your ears can get red, Ponyboy."

I was remembering what usually went on in the bedrooms at Buck's parties. Then Dally grinned in amused

realization. "It wasn't anything like that, kid. I was asleep, or tryin' to be, with all this racket. Hank Williams"—he rolled his eyes and added a few adjectives after 'Hank Williams.' "Me and Shepard had a run-in and I cracked some ribs. I just needed a place to lay over." He rubbed his side ruefully. "Ol' Tim sure can pack a punch. He won't be able to see outa one eye for a week." He looked us over and sighed. "Well, wait a sec and I'll see what I can do about this mess." Then he took a good look at me. "Ponyboy, are you wet?"

"Y-y-yes-s," I stammered through chattering teeth.

"Glory hallelujah!" He opened the screen door and pulled me in, motioning for Johnny to follow. "You'll die of pneumonia 'fore the cops ever get you."

He half-dragged me into an empty bedroom, swearing at me all the way. "Get that sweat shirt off." He threw a towel at me. "Dry off and wait here. At least Johnny's got his jeans jacket. You ought to know better than to run away in just a sweat shirt, and a wet one at that. Don't you ever use your head?" He sounded so much like Darry that I stared at him. He didn't notice, and left us sitting on the bed.

Johnny lay back on it. "Wish I had me a weed."

My knees were shaking as I finished drying off, sitting there in my jeans.

Dally appeared after a minute. He carefully shut the door. "Here"—he handed us a gun and a roll of bills—"the gun's loaded. For Pete's sake, Johnny, don't point the thing at me. Here's fifty bucks. That's all I could get out of Merrill tonight. He's blowin' his loot from that last race."

You might have thought it was Dally who fixed those races for Buck, being a jockey and all, but it wasn't. The

last guy to suggest it lost three teeth. It's the truth. Dally rode the ponies honestly and did his best to win. It was the only thing Dally did honestly.

"Pony, do Darry and Sodapop know about this?"

I shook my head. Dally sighed. "Boy howdy, I ain't itchin' to be the one to tell Darry and get my head busted."

"Then don't tell him," I said. I hated to worry Sodapop, and would have liked to let him know I had gotten this far okay, but I didn't care if Darry worried himself gray-headed. I was too tired to tell myself I was being mean and unreasonable. I convinced myself it wouldn't be fair to make Dally tell him. Darry would beat him to death for giving us the money and the gun and getting us out of town.

"Here!" Dally handed me a shirt about sixty-million sizes too big. "It's Buck's—you an' him ain't exactly the same size, but it's dry." He handed me his worn brown leather jacket with the yellow sheep's-wool lining. "It'll get cold where you're going, but you can't risk being loaded down with blankets."

I started buttoning up the shirt. It about swallowed me. "Hop the three-fifteen freight to Windrixville," Dally instructed. "There's an old abandoned church on top of Jay Mountain. There's a pump in back so don't worry about water. Buy a week's supply of food as soon as you get there—this morning, before the story gets out, and then don't so much as stick your noses out the door. I'll be up there as soon as I think it's clear. Man, I thought New York was the only place I could get mixed up in a murder rap."

At the word "murder," Johnny made a small noise in his throat and shuddered.

Dally walked us back to the door, turning off the porch light before we stepped out. "Git goin'!" He messed up Johnny's hair. "Take care, kid," he said softly.

"Sure, Dally, thanks." And we ran into the darkness.

We crouched in the weeds beside the railroad tracks, listening to the whistle grow louder. The train slowed to a screaming halt. "Now," whispered Johnny. We ran and pulled ourselves into an open boxcar. We pressed against the side, trying to hold our breath while we listened to the railroad workers walk up and down outside. One poked his head inside, and we froze. But he didn't see us, and the boxcar rattled as the train started up.

"The first stop'll be Windrixville," Johnny said, laying the gun down gingerly. He shook his head. "I don't see why he gave me this. I couldn't shoot anybody."

Then for the first time, really, I realized what we were in for. Johnny had killed someone. Quiet, soft-spoken little Johnny, who wouldn't hurt a living thing on purpose, had taken a human life. We were really running away, with the police after us for murder and a loaded gun by our side. I wished we'd asked Dally for a pack of cigarettes. . . .

I stretched out and used Johnny's legs for a pillow. Curling up, I was thankful for Dally's jacket. It was too big, but it was warm. Not even the rattling of the train could keep me awake, and I went to sleep in a hoodlum's jacket, with a gun lying next to my hand.

I was hardly awake when Johnny and I leaped off the train into a meadow. Not until I landed in the dew and got a wet shock did I realize what I was doing. Johnny must have woke me up and told me to jump, but I didn't remember it. We lay in the tall weeds and damp grass, breathing heavily. The dawn was coming. It was lightening the sky in the east and a ray of gold touched the hills. The clouds were pink and meadow larks were singing. This is the country, I thought, half asleep. My dream's come true and I'm in the country.

"Blast it, Ponyboy"—Johnny was rubbing his legs—"you must have put my legs to sleep. I can't even stand up. I barely got off that train."

"I'm sorry. Why didn't you wake me up?"

"That's okay. I didn't want to wake you up until I had to."

"Now how do we find Jay Mountain?" I asked Johnny. I was still groggy with sleep and wanted to sleep forever right there in the dew and the dawn.

"Go ask someone. The story won't be in the paper yet. Make like a farm boy taking a walk or something."

"I don't look like a farm boy," I said. I suddenly thought of my long hair, combed back, and the slouching stride I used from habit. I looked at Johnny. He didn't look like any farm boy to me. He still reminded me of a lost puppy who had been kicked too often, but for the first time I saw him as a stranger might see him. He looked hard and tough, because of his black T-shirt and his blue jeans and jacket, and because his hair was heavily greased and so long. I saw how his hair curled behind his ears and I thought: We both need a haircut and some decent clothes.

I looked down at my worn, faded blue jeans, my too-big shirt, and Dally's worn-out jacket. They'll know we're hoods the minute they see us, I thought.

"I'll have to stay here," Johnny said, rubbing his legs. "You go down the road and ask the first person you see where Jay Mountain is." He winced at the pain in his legs. "Then come back. And for Pete's sake, run a comb through your hair and quit slouching down like a thug."

So Johnny had noticed it too. I pulled a comb from my back pocket and combed my hair carefully. "I guess I look okay now, huh, Johnny?"

He was studying me. "You know, you look an awful lot like Sodapop, the way you've got your hair and everything. I mean, except your eyes are green."

"They ain't green, they're gray," I said, reddening. "And I look about as much like Soda as you do." I got to my feet. "He's good-looking."

"Shoot," Johnny said with a grin, "you are, too."

I climbed over the barbed-wire fence without saying anything else. I could hear Johnny laughing at me, but I didn't care. I went strolling down the red dirt road, hoping my natural color would come back before I met anyone. I wonder what Darry and Sodapop are doing now, I thought, yawning. Soda had the whole bed to himself for once. I bet Darry's sorry he ever hit me. He'll really get worried when he finds out Johnny and I killed that Soc. Then, for a moment, I pictured Sodapop's face when he heard about it. I wish I was home, I thought absently, I wish I was home and still in bed. Maybe I am. Maybe I'm just dreaming . . .

It was only last night that Dally and I had sat down behind those girls at the Nightly Double. Glory, I thought with a bewildering feeling of being rushed, things are happening too quick. Too fast. I figured I couldn't get into any worse trouble than murder. Johnny and I would be hiding for the rest of our lives. Nobody but Dally would know where we were, and he couldn't tell anyone because he'd get jailed again for giving us that gun. If Johnny got caught, they'd give him the electric chair, and if they caught me, I'd be sent to a reformatory. I'd heard about reformatories from Curly Shepard and I didn't want to go to one at all. So we'd have to be hermits for the rest of our lives, and never see anyone but Dally. Maybe I'd never see Darry or Sodapop again. Or even Two-Bit or Steve. I was in the country, but I knew I wasn't going to like it as much as I'd thought I would. There are things worse than being a greaser.

I met a sunburned farmer driving a tractor down the road. I waved at him and he stopped.

"Could you tell me where Jay Mountain is?" I asked as politely as I could.

He pointed on down the road. "Follow this road to that big hill over there. That's it. Taking a walk?"

"Yessir." I managed to look sheepish. "We're playing army and I'm supposed to report to headquarters there."

I can lie so easily that it spooks me sometimes—Soda says it comes from reading so much. But then, Two-Bit lies all the time too, and he never opens a book.

"Boys will be boys," the farmer said with a grin, and I thought dully that he sounded as corn-poney as Hank

Williams. He went on and I walked back to where Johnny was waiting.

We climbed up the road to the church, although it was a lot farther away than it looked. The road got steeper with every step. I was feeling kind of drunk—I always do when I get too sleepy—and my legs got heavier and heavier. I guess Johnny was sleepier than I was—he had stayed awake on the train to make sure we got off at the right place. It took us about forty-five minutes to get there. We climbed in a back window. It was a small church, real old and spooky and spiderwebby. It gave me the creeps.

I'd been in church before. I used to go all the time, even after Mom and Dad were gone. Then one Sunday I talked Soda into coming with Johnny and me. He didn't want to come unless Steve did, and Two-Bit decided he might as well come too. Dally was sleeping off a hangover, and Darry was working. When Johnny and I went, we sat in the back, trying to get something out of the sermon and avoiding the people, because we weren't dressed so sharp most of the time. Nobody seemed to mind, and Johnny and I really liked to go. But that day . . . well, Soda can't sit still long enough to enjoy a movie, much less a sermon. It wasn't long before he and Steve and Two-Bit were throwing paper wads at each other and clowning around, and finally Steve dropped a hymn book with a bang—accidentally, of course. Everyone in the place turned around to look at us, and Johnny and I nearly crawled under the pews. And then Two-Bit *waved* at them.

I hadn't been to church since.

But this church gave me a kind of creepy feeling. What do you call it? Premonition? I flopped down on the floor—and immediately decided not to do any more flopping. That floor was stone, and hard. Johnny stretched out beside me, resting his head on his arm. I started to say something to him, but I went to sleep before I could get the words out of my mouth. But Johnny didn't notice. He was asleep, too.