

Chapter 6

JOHNNY GAGGED AND I almost dropped my hot-fudge sundae. “Cherry?” we both said at the same time. “The Soc?”

“Yeah,” Dally said. “She came over to the vacant lot the night Two-Bit was jumped. Shepard and some of his outfit and us were hanging around there when she drives up in her little ol’ Sting Ray. That took a lot of nerve. Some of us was for jumping her then and there, her bein’ the dead kid’s girl and all, but Two-Bit stopped us. Man, next time I want a broad I’ll pick up my own kind.”

“Yeah,” Johnny said slowly, and I wondered if, like me, he was remembering another voice, also tough and just deepened into manhood, saying: “Next time you want a broad, pick up your own kind . . .” It gave me the creeps.

Dally was going on: “She said she felt that the whole

mess was her fault, which it is, and that she'd keep up with what was comin' off with the Socs in the rumble and would testify that the Socs were drunk and looking for a fight and that you fought back in self-defense." He gave a grim laugh. "That little gal sure does hate me. I offered to take her over to The Dingo for a Coke and she said 'No, thank you' and told me where I could go in very polite terms."

She was afraid of loving you, I thought. So Cherry Valance, the cheerleader, Bob's girl, the Soc, was trying to help us. No, it wasn't Cherry the Soc who was helping us, it was Cherry the dreamer who watched sunsets and couldn't stand fights. It was hard to believe a Soc would help us, even a Soc that dug sunsets. Dally didn't notice. He had forgotten about it already.

"Man, this place is out of it. What do they do for kicks around here, play checkers?" Dally surveyed the scene without interest. "I ain't never been in the country before. Have you two?"

Johnny shook his head but I said, "Dad used to take us all huntin'. I've been in the country before. How'd you know about the church?"

"I got a cousin that lives around here somewheres. Tipped me off that it'd make a tuff hide-out in case of something. Hey, Ponyboy, I heard you was the best shot in the family."

"Yeah," I said. "Darry always got the most ducks, though. Him and Dad. Soda and I goofed around too much, scared most of our game away." I couldn't tell Dally that I hated to shoot things. He'd think I was soft.

"That was a good idea, I mean cuttin' your hair and

bleachin' it. They printed your descriptions in the paper but you sure wouldn't fit 'em now."

Johnny had been quietly finishing his fifth barbecue sandwich, but now he announced: "We're goin' back and turn ourselves in."

It was Dally's turn to gag. Then he swore awhile. Then he turned to Johnny and demanded: "What?"

"I said we're goin' back and turn ourselves in," Johnny repeated in a quiet voice. I was surprised but not shocked. I had thought about turning ourselves in lots of times, but apparently the whole idea was a jolt to Dallas.

"I got a good chance of bein' let off easy," Johnny said desperately, and I didn't know if it was Dally he was trying to convince or himself. "I ain't got no record with the fuzz and it was self-defense. Ponyboy and Cherry can testify to that. And I don't aim to stay in that church all my life."

That was quite a speech for Johnny. His big black eyes grew bigger than ever at the thought of going to the police station, for Johnny had a deathly fear of cops, but he went on: "We won't tell that you helped us, Dally, and we'll give you back the gun and what's left of the money and say we hitchhiked back so you won't get into trouble. Okay?"

Dally was chewing the corner of his ID card, which gave his age as twenty-one so he could buy liquor. "You sure you want to go back? Us greasers get it worse than anyone else."

Johnny nodded. "I'm sure. It ain't fair for Ponyboy to have to stay up in that church with Darry and Soda worryin' about him all the time. I don't guess . . ."—he swallowed and tried not to look eager—"I don't guess my parents are worried about me or anything?"

"The boys are worried," Dally said in a matter-of-fact voice. "Two-Bit was going to Texas to hunt for you."

"My parents," Johnny repeated doggedly, "did they ask about me?"

"No," snapped Dally, "they didn't. Blast it, Johnny, what do they matter? Shoot, my old man don't give a hang whether I'm in jail or dead in a car wreck or drunk in the gutter. That don't bother me none."

Johnny didn't say anything. But he stared at the dashboard with such hurt bewilderment that I could have bawled.

Dally cussed under his breath and nearly tore out the transmission of the T-bird as we roared out of the Dairy Queen. I felt sorry for Dally. He meant it when he said he didn't care about his parents. But he and the rest of the gang knew Johnny cared and did everything they could to make it up to him. I don't know what it was about Johnny—maybe that lost-puppy look and those big scared eyes were what made everyone his big brother. But they couldn't, no matter how hard they tried, take the place of his parents. I thought about it for a minute—Darry and Sodapop were my bothers and I loved both of them, even if Darry did scare me; but not even Soda could take Mom and Dad's place. And they were my real brothers, not just sort of adopted ones. No wonder Johnny was hurt because his parents didn't want him. Dally could take it—Dally was of the breed that could take anything, because he was hard and tough, and when he wasn't, he could turn hard and tough. Johnny was a good fighter and could play it cool, but he was sensitive and that isn't a good way to be when you're a greaser.

"Blast it, Johnny," Dally growled as we flew along the red road, "why didn't you think of turning yourself in five days ago? It would have saved a lot of trouble."

"I was scared," Johnny said with conviction. "I still am." He ran his finger down one of his short black sideburns. "I guess we ruined our hair for nothing, Ponyboy."

"I guess so." I was glad we were going back. I was sick of that church. I didn't care if I was bald.

Dally was scowling, and from long and painful experience I knew better than to talk to him when his eyes were blazing like that. I'd likely as not get clobbered over the head. That had happened before, just as it had happened to all the gang at one time or another. We rarely fought among ourselves—Darry was the unofficial leader, since he kept his head best, Soda and Steve had been best friends since grade school and never fought, and Two-Bit was just too lazy to argue with anyone. Johnny kept his mouth shut too much to get into arguments, and nobody ever fought with Johnny. I kept my mouth shut, too. But Dally was a different matter. If something beefed him, he didn't keep quiet about it, and if you rubbed him the wrong way—look out. Not even Darry wanted to tangle with him. He was dangerous.

Johnny just sat there and stared at his feet. He hated for any one of us to be mad at him. He looked awful sad. Dally glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. I looked out the window.

"Johnny," Dally said in a pleading, high voice, using a tone I had never heard from him before, "Johnny, I ain't mad at you. I just don't want you to get hurt. You don't know what a few months in jail can do to you. Oh, blast it,

Johnny"—he pushed his white-blond hair back out of his eyes—"you get hardened in jail. I don't want that to happen to you. Like it happened to me . . ."

I kept staring out the window at the rapidly passing scenery, but I felt my eyes getting round. Dally never talked like that. Never. Dally didn't give a Yankee dime about anyone but himself, and he was cold and hard and mean. He never talked about his past or being in jail that way—if he talked about it at all, it was to brag. And I suddenly thought of Dally . . . in jail at the age of ten . . . Dally growing up in the streets . . .

"Would you rather have me living in hide-outs for the rest of my life, always on the run?" Johnny asked seriously.

If Dally had said yes, Johnny would have gone back to the church without hesitation. He figured Dally knew more than he did, and Dally's word was law. But he never heard Dally's answer, for we had reached the top of Jay Mountain and Dally suddenly slammed on the brakes and stared. "Oh, glory!" he whispered. The church was on fire!

"Let's go see what the deal is," I said, hopping out.

"What for?" Dally sounded irritated. "Get back in here before I beat your head in."

I knew Dally would have to park the car and catch me before he could carry out his threat, and Johnny was already out and following me, so I figured I was safe. We could hear him cussing us out, but he wasn't mad enough to come after us. There was a crowd at the front of the church, mostly little kids, and I wondered how they'd gotten there so quickly. I tapped the nearest grownup. "What's going on?"

"Well, we don't know for sure," the man said with a

good-natured grin. "We were having a school picnic up here and the first thing we knew, the place is burning up. Thank goodness this is a wet season and the old thing is worthless anyway." Then, to the kids, he shouted, "Stand back, children. The firemen will be coming soon."

"I bet we started it," I said to Johnny. "We must have dropped a lighted cigarette or something."

About that time a lady came running up. "Jerry, some of the kids are missing."

"They're probably around here somewhere. You can't tell with all this excitement where they might be."

"No." She shook her head. "They've been missing for at least a half an hour. I thought they were climbing the hill . . ."

Then we all froze. Faintly, just faintly, you could hear someone yelling. And it sounded like it was coming from inside the church.

The woman went white. "I told them not to play in the church . . . I told them . . ." She looked like she was going to start screaming, so Jerry shook her.

"I'll get them, don't worry!" I started at a dead run for the church, and the man caught my arm. "I'll get them. You kids stay out!"

I jerked loose and ran on. All I could think was: We started it. We started it. We started it!

I wasn't about to go through that flaming door, so I slammed a big rock through a window and pulled myself in. It was a wonder I didn't cut myself to death, now that I think about it.

"Hey, Ponyboy."

I looked around, startled. I hadn't realized Johnny had

been right behind me all the way. I took a deep breath, and started coughing. The smoke filled my eyes and they started watering. "Is that guy coming?"

Johnny shook his head. "The window stopped him."

"Too scared?"

"Naw . . ." Johnny gave me a grin. "Too fat."

I couldn't laugh because I was scared I'd drown in the smoke. The roar and crackling was getting louder, and Johnny shouted the next question.

"Where's the kids?"

"In the back, I guess," I hollered, and we started stumbling through the church. I should be scared, I thought with an odd detached feeling, but I'm not. The cinders and embers began falling on us, stinging and smarting like ants. Suddenly, in the red glow and the haze, I remembered wondering what it was like in a burning ember, and I thought: Now I know, it's a red hell. Why aren't I scared?

We pushed open the door to the back room and found four or five little kids, about eight years old or younger, huddled in a corner. One was screaming his head off, and Johnny yelled, "Shut up! We're goin' to get you out!" The kid looked surprised and quit hollering. I blinked myself—Johnny wasn't behaving at all like his old self. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the door was blocked by flames, then pushed open the window and tossed out the nearest kid. I caught one quick look at his face; it was red-marked from falling embers and sweat-streaked, but he grinned at me. He wasn't scared either. That was the only time I can think of when I saw him without that defeated, suspicious look in his eyes. He looked like he was having the time of his life.

I picked up a kid, and he promptly bit me, but I leaned out the window and dropped him as gently as I could, being in a hurry like that. A crowd was there by that time. Dally was standing there, and when he saw me he screamed, "For Pete's sake, get outa there! That roof's gonna cave in any minute. Forget those blasted kids!"

I didn't pay any attention, although pieces of the old roof were crashing down too close for comfort. I snatched up another kid, hoping he didn't bite, and dropped him without waiting to see if he landed okay or not. I was coughing so hard I could hardly stand up, and I wished I had time to take off Dally's jacket. It was hot. We dropped the last of the kids out as the front of the church started to crumble. Johnny shoved me toward the window. "Get out!"

I leaped out the window and heard timber crashing and the flames roaring right behind me. I staggered, almost falling, coughing and sobbing for breath. Then I heard Johnny scream, and as I turned to go back for him, Dally swore at me and clubbed me across the back as hard as he could, and I went down into a peaceful darkness.

When I came to, I was being bounced around, and I ached and smarted, and wondered dimly where I was. I tried to think but there was a high-pitched screaming going on, and I couldn't tell whether it was inside my head or out. Then I realized it was a siren. The fuzz, I thought dully. The cops have come for us. I tried to swallow a groan and wished wildly for Soda. Someone with a cold wet rag was gently sponging off my face, and a voice said, "I think he's coming around."

I opened my eyes. It was dark. I'm moving, I thought. Are they taking me to jail?

"Where . . . ?" I said hoarsely, not able to get anything else out of my mouth. My throat was sore. I blinked at the stranger sitting beside me. But he wasn't a stranger . . . I'd seen him before . . .

"Take it easy, kid. You're in an ambulance."

"Where's Johnny?" I cried, frightened at being in this car with strangers. "And Dallas?"

"They're in the other ambulance, right behind us. Just calm down. You're going to be okay. You just passed out."

"I didn't either," I said in the bored, tough voice we reserved for strangers and cops. "Dallas hit me. How come?"

"Because your back was in flames, that's why."

I was surprised. "It was? Golly, I didn't feel it. It don't hurt."

"We put it out before you got burned. That jacket saved you from a bad burning, maybe saved your life. You just keeled over from smoke inhalation and a little shock—of course, that slap on the back didn't help much."

I remembered who he was then—Jerry somebody-or-other who was too heavy to get in the window. He must be a school teacher, I thought. "Are you taking us to the police station?" I was still a little mixed up as to what was coming off.

"The police station?" It was his turn to be surprised. "What would we want to take you to the police station for? We're taking all three of you to the hospital."

I let his first remark slide by. "Are Johnny and Dally all right?"

"Which one's which?"

"Johnny has black hair. Dally's the mean-looking one."

He studied his wedding ring. Maybe he's thinking about his wife, I thought. I wished he'd say something.

"We think the towheaded kid is going to be all right. He burned one arm pretty badly, though, trying to drag the other kid out the window. Johnny, well, I don't know about him. A piece of timber caught him across the back—he might have a broken back, and he was burned pretty severely. He passed out before he got out the window. They're giving him plasma now." He must have seen the look on my face because he hurriedly changed the subject. "I swear, you three are the bravest kids I've seen in a long time. First you and the black-haired kid climbing in that window, and then the tough-looking kid going back in to save him. Mrs. O'Briant and I think you were sent straight from heaven. Or are you just professional heroes or something?"

Sent from heaven? Had he gotten a good look at Dallas? "No, we're greasers," I said. I was too worried and scared to appreciate the fact that he was trying to be funny.

"You're what?"

"Greasers. You know, like hoods, JD's. Johnny is wanted for murder, and Dallas has a record with the fuzz a mile long."

"Are you kidding me?" Jerry stared at me as if he thought I was still in shock or something.

"I am not. Take me to town and you'll find out pretty quick."

"We're taking you to a hospital there anyway. The address card in your billfold said that was where you lived. Your name's really Ponyboy?"

"Yeah. Even on my birth certificate. And don't bug me about it. Are . . ."—I felt weak—"are the little kids okay?"

"Just fine. A little frightened maybe. There were some short explosions right after you all got out. Sounded just exactly like gunfire."

Gunfire. There went our gun. And *Gone with the Wind*. Were we sent from heaven? I started to laugh weakly. I guess that guy knew how close to hysterics I really was, for he talked to me in a low soothing voice all the way to the hospital.

I was sitting in the waiting room, waiting to hear how Dally and Johnny were. I had been checked over, and except for a few burns and a big bruise across my back, I was all right. I had watched them bring Dally and Johnny in on stretchers. Dally's eyes were closed, but when I spoke he had tried to grin and had told me that if I ever did a stupid thing like that again he'd beat the tar out of me. He was still swearing at me when they took him on in. Johnny was unconscious. I had been afraid to look at him, but I was relieved to see that his face wasn't burned. He just looked very pale and still and sort of sick. I would have cried at the sight of him so still except I couldn't in front of people.

Jerry Wood had stayed with me all the time. He kept thanking me for getting the kids out. He didn't seem to mind our being hoods. I told him the whole story—starting when Dallas and Johnny and I had met at the corner of Pickett and Sutton. I left out the part about the gun and our hitching a ride in the freight car. He was real nice

about it and said that being heroes would help get us out of trouble, especially since it was self-defense and all.

I was sitting there, smoking a cigarette, when Jerry came back in from making a phone call. He stared at me for a second. "You shouldn't be smoking."

I was startled. "How come?" I looked at my cigarette. It looked okay to me. I looked around for a "No Smoking" sign and couldn't find one. "How come?"

"Why, uh," Jerry stammered, "uh, you're too young."

"I am?" I had never thought about it. Everyone in our neighborhood, even the girls, smoked. Except for Darry, who was too proud of his athletic health to risk a cigarette, we had all started smoking at an early age. Johnny had been smoking since he was nine; Steve started at eleven. So no one thought it unusual when I started. I was the weed-fiend in my family—Soda smokes only to steady his nerves or when he wants to look tough.

Jerry simply sighed, then grinned. "There are some people here to see you. Claim to be your brothers or something."

I leaped up and ran for the door, but it was already open and Soda had me in a bear hug and was swinging me around. I was so glad to see him I could have bawled. Finally he set me down and looked at me. He pushed my hair back. "Oh, Ponyboy, your hair . . . your tuff, tuff hair . . ."

Then I saw Darry. He was leaning in the doorway, wearing his olive jeans and black T-shirt. He was still tall, broad-shouldered Darry; but his fists were jammed in his pockets and his eyes were pleading. I simply looked at him. He swallowed and said in a husky voice, "Ponyboy . . ."

I let go of Soda and stood there for a minute. Darry didn't like me . . . he had driven me away that night . . . he had hit me . . . Darry hollered at me all the time . . . he didn't give a hang about me. . . . Suddenly I realized, horrified, that Darry was crying. He didn't make a sound, but tears were running down his cheeks. I hadn't seen him cry in years, not even when Mom and Dad had been killed. (I remembered the funeral. I had sobbed in spite of myself; Soda had broken down and bawled like a baby; but Darry had only stood there, his fists in his pockets and that look on his face, the same helpless, pleading look that he was wearing now.)

In that second what Soda and Dally and Two-Bit had been trying to tell me came through. Darry did care about me, maybe as much as he cared about Soda, and because he cared he was trying too hard to make something of me. When he yelled "Pony, where have you been all this time?" he meant "Pony, you've scared me to death. Please be careful, because I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you."

Darry looked down and turned away silently. Suddenly I broke out of my daze.

"Darry!" I screamed, and the next thing I knew I had him around the waist and was squeezing the daylights out of him.

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

He was stroking my hair and I could hear the sobs racking him as he fought to keep back the tears. "Oh, Pony, I thought we'd lost you . . . like we did Mom and Dad . . ."

That was his silent fear then—of losing another person he loved. I remembered how close he and Dad had been,

and I wondered how I could ever have thought him hard and unfeeling. I listened to his heart pounding through his T-shirt and knew everything was going to be okay now. I had taken the long way around, but I was finally home. To stay.