

A KEG OF TROUBLE

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Chapter One

Brad

The road to Riley was especially picturesque on days like today. A brilliant blue sky was punctuated by occasional cottony cumulus clouds that drifted slowly from the eastern horizon. The puddles along the country blacktop's shoulders reminisced of a recent refreshing afternoon shower. An awesomely majestic cumulonimbus storm cloud still dominated the sky off to the west. Any time now, the sun would be breaking out of hiding from behind the dark thunderhead's bright golden lining to spatter an ocher overspray on the deep green foliage along the hilly roadside.

The ancient deep metallic-green pickup truck seemed in tune with the whole melodious scene. The vintage grade Ford V-eight was in perfect condition. Today it seemed almost anxious to blend its mellow harmony with the gorgeous day. Brad exulted in its smooth, throaty purr, for he had spent a good deal of his spare time this summer carefully rebuilding the original engine.

Brad Davis had purchased the splendid old vehicle for his use at college at the bankruptcy sale of a fly-by-night auto body shop. He could never have afforded the antique machine, except that no one else at the sale had envisioned its possibilities. The partially completed job had been strewn as rusty pieces throughout the shop, but virtually everything was there. The suspension had already been lowered expertly. All the shiny parts, still wrapped in dirty old shipping paper, had been richly re-chromed. The old seat had been exquisitely reupholstered in a deeply quilted dark green vinyl. And most of the body work was actually complete except for the priming and painting. As he assembled the newly primed body, Brad wondered if the expense already encountered had not contributed largely to the demise of the shop. The crowning glory of the resulting vehicle was Brad's artistic pin striping job that turned the old machine into a piece of tasteful beauty. Even his mother had liked it in the end. But her initial name of the Green Monster had stuck tight.

Glancing at the speedometer, Brad eased his foot back until the truck slowed to the legal limit. It wouldn't do to start his first week on his own with a speeding ticket. And Brad was sure that the police would be extra mindful as he neared the college town where so many young adults would be converging today. With a reluctant sense of duty, he set the cruise control at the slower pace. He was sure that installing the cruise control had already saved him several citations.

Just as the truck topped a small rise, the sun escaped its heavenly veil in a resplendent display of golden-orange radiance. The road dipped into a deep valley, crossed a quaint bridge, and climbed straight up the other side of the valley again. A meandering stream reflected the deep blue of the sky back from the sun-gilded greenery of the valley. A "Wow" of appreciation escaped Brad's lips, for he loved nature with a passion that approached reverence.

Through the mirror, Brad noticed a red vehicle topping the hill behind him as he approached the little bridge. Another glance at the mirror as he started up the far side of the valley startled him at the proximity of the bright red automobile. The car was coming up on him at a tremendous rate of speed. A continuous yellow no-passing stripe in the center of the road was clearly visible ahead as the late model Corvette swung into the left lane to pass the truck. Brad instinctively checked the shoulder, contemplating his escape route should an oncoming vehicle top the hill. Not promising! He had only half a car's width of shoulder between him and the drainage ditch beside the road.

The alert young man tapped the brake pedal lightly to release the cruise control and start decelerating. Suddenly the anticipated complication--an old farm truck--topped the hill. Brad instantly crowded toward the ditch, braking as hard as he dared in the loose gravel. Grabbing all the room Brad could manufacture for it, the squalling sports car slued sideways, skillfully side-slipping back into the proper lane. One could scarcely conceive how it had averted the impending disaster.

The emergency over, Brad eased the Green Monster's right wheels carefully back onto the pavement. His thumping heart and shaking hands wouldn't let him brush off his close call too easily. He couldn't help but be angry at the way someone had carelessly risked his life. This could have nipped his college career in the bud before it even got a start. But he had to admit that whoever was driving the Corvette was skillful. He had foolishly gotten himself into a nasty situation, but he obviously had an admirable mastery over his machine. Brad wondered if the stupid recklessness he had observed was characteristic of the unknown driver.

The spell of the scenery so rudely broken, Brad's thoughts drifted back to the home he had left forty miles down the road behind him. He loved the comfortable, sedate house on the boulevard in the nicer "established" section of Hillside. The massive oaks on either side and in the middle of the boulevard formed a double arch of foliage that cooled and subdued the neighborhood in the summer. The houses were mostly two-story brick homes on large wooded lots that were kept to perfection. They gave a general impression of comfortable quietness rather than touted wealth.

Brad's father was the president of an electronics components factory that had landed some excellent contracts over the years. He was appreciated by the townsfolk as a man whose business genius had provided a significant number of jobs for the community.

His bearing exuded confidence without arrogance, and he had a pleasant smile that lit up for friends and factory workers alike.

Mrs. Davis was a good-looking woman whose only fault, at least in Brad's eyes, was too much emphasis on the town's society structure. Although she was genuinely nice to everyone, she valued Hillside's social echelons to a fault. Her every move was influenced to some degree by the impression she thought it would make on the establishment. Nevertheless, Brad was pleased that she did not look down on those who moved in less elite circles.

It was abundantly evident to Brad that both his parents really cared about him beyond anything else. He appreciated their devotedness to their only son. He was confident that whatever their faults, their final aim was always for his eventual good. On rare occasions, significant conflict had arisen. But when the smoke of the battle had cleared, he had invariably seen that they had only insisted for his benefit rather than their own interest. It was not so much that he thought that they were always right, but he recognized that they were always sincerely seeking his gain. And deep down, he recognized the validity of their parental authority.

Still, Brad was not extremely close to his parents. He did not share his father's business interests, and the good man was generally too busy to get really close to his son. Nor could Brad relate comfortably to his mother's social ambitions. To him, they were frivolous. So the family relationships consisted of reserved love, loyalty, respect, and congenial tolerance of each other more than any close sharing of thoughts and interests.

Last spring, Brad had graduated third in his high school class. He had taken the honors in math and science, but had gotten a couple of "B's" in the humanities. He was not terribly disappointed in missing the valedictorial honors, though he wouldn't have minded winning them for Dad and Mom's sakes. He was confident of his abilities in his areas of interest and knew well that he could have gotten "A's" in the less interesting subjects with just a little more effort. But he was happy to congratulate those who bested him with a little good natured ribbing, knowing that he beat them soundly in the subjects that interested him. And none of his teachers, even, would challenge his self-learned understanding and ability with computers.

It was with keen anticipation and few regrets that Brad had packed his things into the Monster this afternoon, and headed out for Riley College, just fifty miles north of Hillside. He wouldn't admit it to himself, but Mom's tearful good-bye had raised a small lump in his throat. He had manfully kissed her and reminded her that Riley was only an hour's drive away. Dad's hearty handshake had quickly restored his self-confidence. It was good of Dad to take off from work to see him off. As the truck had left the driveway, Brad was finally on his own in a world full of promise.

Chapter Two

Riley College

Occupied with his thoughts of home, it seemed that the remaining ten miles to Riley took but a moment. Brad felt a thrill of excitement when the "Riley, Population 10,500" sign appeared. Two blocks into town he turned into the parking lot of the administration building, where a large sign advertised, "Riley College, Home of the Riley Raiders." As he got out of the Green Monster, his confidence wavered a moment. Bracing himself, he started toward the double brass and glass doors of the sedate, old, stone structure to get his dorm assignment. As he ascended the wide stairway, his nerves steadied comfortably with the exhilaration of being on his own at last.

If he had thought about it, Brad would have anticipated the long line at the Housing Office. The staff was up against a mammoth task. Practically the whole student body of Riley had the same business as Brad today. Despite the length of the line, he was at the desk within a half an hour or so. He received his dorm assignment and registration envelope and purchased a meal ticket for the dining hall from a businesslike secretary who obviously had little time to answer his many questions. Opening the registration envelope on the way back to the truck, he was relieved to find a campus map to help him find his way around.

Brad was assigned to Regent Hall, Room 411. The campus map led him back the two blocks to the edge of town, and a block to the left, where he found a tasteful, brick, four story dormitory on the hill overlooking the countryside south of town. Carrying a suitcase in each hand, he entered the building, eyes searching for the elevator up. There didn't seem to be any easily accessible way upstairs.

"Can I help you?" rang a somewhat challenging voice from the reception desk directly across from the door.

"Yes, how do I get to the fourth floor?" answered the perplexed youth.

"You don't," said the decisive voice. "Just leave the bags at the desk, and she can pick them up here."

"She? I'm assigned to room number 411 in Regent Hall."

"Not Regent Hall, Freshman! This is a women's dorm."

Brad blushed from ear to ear as he glanced around. At least no one was watching. Pulling out his dorm assignment slip, he showed the mocking woman behind the desk that it indeed read, "Regent Hall, # 411." She wiped the smirk off her face and dialed the Housing Office. "Their apologies," she said more congenially, "You should be in Raintree, two blocks West. They'll have your room number at the desk there. It'll probably be the same number in the men's dorm."

More subdued, Brad found his way to Raintree Hall, stopping timidly at the desk. "Sure, we got you down for 411," said the upperclassman behind the desk. "Here's your key. Other key's still here so your roomie won't be there yet. Yer a freshman, aren't ya? Roomie'll be one too, then. First one here gets his pick of the beds. Not that it makes any difference. There all the same. And say, yer welcome here. We have a lot of fun here." Gratefully, Brad took the key and found his way up the elevator to room 411.

Brad pitched his belongings onto one of the beds. Looking around, he saw that the two halves of the room were mirror images of each other. "Isomers," he thought with a smug little grin. Each half had a bed with its head toward the window, a student desk and chair with an overhead bookcase, an easy chair, and a dresser. A large walk-in closet on one side was balanced by a bathroom on the other. The room was air conditioned and decorated practically. It would be pleasant enough.

Absentmindedly, the new student spread the drapes to let in more light. The view below immediately caught his attention. The campus stretched several blocks to the north, but Brad's view was restricted by the backside of the Student Union building on the far side of the large block the dorm occupied. A large permanent awning, or porch, stretched the entire width of the block-wide modern structure. Its grey flagstone pavement extended onto the lawn to form a relaxed patio shaded by strategically planted medium sized trees. Wrought iron patio furniture graced the whole complex, spilling sporadically out onto the surrounding courtyard that stretched across the block to Brad's dorm.

Brad brought the rest of his belongings to the room. He set up his computer on the desk nearest his bed, making sure that the plug was grounded. This was the first time he had moved it since he had installed his hard disc, and he was a mite insecure about how the move would affect the fragile equipment. He plugged in the spike protector and booted up. Everything looked good. Satisfied, he plugged the modem wire into the

telephone jack to connect the computer to all the outside services available. He set up his small stereo on the bookcase, put his clothes away, and looked at his watch. Only twenty minutes before the dining hall closed. Better hurry!

The dining hall was just across the courtyard in the Student Union building. Had Brad known it, he could have entered it directly from the patio he had been admiring. But he took the walk around the block, arriving there just fifteen minutes ahead of closing time. The line was thin and moving fast, but the full tables suggested that things had been busier a few minutes earlier. He found his way to an empty table near the back and tried the food. The meat was reasonable, though under-seasoned. The bread was good, probably made in the house. The vegetables and gravy were obviously canned. He was reasonably satisfied. It was about what he expected. You couldn't expect home cooking at an institution.

Brad's reveries were suddenly broken by a melodious feminine voice. "Oh Brad, it's you. I'm so glad to find someone I know. I feel so lonely here tonight." Brad looked up with mixed emotions. It was Daphne Jones, one of his classmates from Hillside. He had heard she was coming to Riley, but she changed her mind so often that he hadn't really expected it. She was considered an outstanding beauty, but Brad felt that her shallow personality somehow detracted from her looks. Still, he almost gasped as he glanced up at her. She had dressed to take every advantage of all her assets, and she was indeed startlingly endowed.

No son of Brad's mother could be a social nerd. Brad was instantly on his feet showing Daphne to the chair across from him. And it was a mite comforting to see a familiar face--especially such a pretty one--in the stress of strangeness. He wondered that he hadn't noticed her more back home. He would have carried on a conversation, but there was no chance. Daphne kept up a running commentary on everything and everybody that chanced into her line of sight until Brad was thoroughly disgusted. Finally, she finished her meal, and Brad rose, relieved to be escaping. But the artful girl latched hold of his arm, and the gentleman in Brad found himself escorting her gingerly to Regent Hall, quite ready to deposit her at the first polite opportunity.

It was after nine before Brad was able to get back to his room. As he opened the door, light flooded into the hall, telling him without a glance that his roommate had arrived. Assuming the best, and fearing the worst, Brad broke into a smile as he entered the room and stretched out his hand to the other young man. "Hello, my name's Brad Davis."

The other youth stood up awkwardly from his seat at Brad's desk. "Ah'm Lonnie Hackney. Proud to meet y'all. Looks like you've got a nice computah heah. Neat! Maybe y'all can teach me how ta do moah than play Pac Man some time." Lonnie's handshake was firm and likable.

"I don't imagine I can teach you much," said Brad guardedly as the two young men sized each other up. "I've never had a course in computers."

Lonnie was short--a good four inches shorter than Brad. Must be about five feet six inches tall, Brad thought; and wouldn't weigh over a hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet. Both boys observed that the other dressed neatly in acceptable style to their peers. Though not fastidious, both would probably be habitually neat enough to live peaceably together.

"Ah'm from Kentucky," Lonnie drawled, "An' A'hm goin' back thea jist as soon as Ah kin."

"Meanwhile," asked Brad, "What are you going to study?"

"Books, Ah reckon," was the reply. "Ah'm a'tryin' ta learn book keepin' 'n be a CPA like ma Daddy. What's y'all steadyin'?"

"Engineering," said Brad.

Lonnie rolled his eyes expressively. "Lands! Y'all a'goin' ta college jist ta drive a train?"

"Well...," Brad started to explain. Then he saw the twinkle in the other boy's eyes and realized he'd been sucked into a friendly dupe. "I haven't decided just what I want, so I'm just going to hit the maths and sciences hard and see what appeals most along the way."

"Best way," said the other boy sagely. "Jist don't be a'hittin' the bottle 'long with it."

The young men spent an hour or more getting to know each other. Their conversation was sometimes serious, sometimes funny, but always pleasant. Brad found that he'd have to be on his toes to stay ahead of this likable stranger from the South.

The roommate hurdle satisfactorily resolved, Brad realized how tiring the unfamiliar events of the day had been. He wearily got ready for bed while the other lad curled up in an easy chair with a magazine. Sleep came slowly with the light on. Through the night air the squeal of competing tires on the lonely country roads brought his thoughts back to the skidding Corvette he had almost encountered earlier. Slowly his scattered thoughts exaggerated into grotesque dreams, and fitful sleep drifted into settled rest.

Chapter Three

Registration

A crack of light between the drapes seemed to tease Brad out of bed too early in the morning. Reluctantly, he rubbed his eyes and crawled over to the window. As he pulled back the heavy fabric, he was surprised at the activity on the bright campus below. An occasional jogger trotted along the street on either side of the courtyard. A few Frisbees floated lazily among scattered students across the grass. A small game of touch football was in progress closer to the dorm. Busier pedestrians scurried past strolling couples on the concrete walks that crisscrossed the lush, grassy lawn. The drift was decidedly toward the dining hall.

A glance at his watch jarred Brad to action. It was already past eight, and registration started at nine. A quick brush and shave, and he was out the back door scurrying towards the dining hall. The long breakfast line took twenty or more anxious minutes to conquer. The bacon-and-eggs reward would have been nice if there had been time to enjoy them. As it was, Brad wolfed them down with a slug of orange juice and hurried out for the gym, where registration was already supposed to be in progress.

"Y'all git 'nuff sleep?" Brad turned to see Lonnie grinning up at him.

"Maybe too much," he rejoined. "Now it looks like I'll be late for registration."

"Ain't cha preregiste'ad?" Lonnie asked the question as they entered the gym.

"Yes, but the papers they gave me in the administration building said we have to sign up for our courses at the gym today. Sounded like first come, first served," said Brad. "It doesn't make sense to me, but I don't want to miss out on any important courses."

"If you're preregistered, your names should already be on the course sign-up lists," interrupted a helpful monitor at the door. "If you got a registration envelope, they might have had you mixed up with someone else. Better check each course list to make sure your name is there."

"Thanks," said Brad. "I guess there was a mix-up of some kind yesterday. I hope my class scheduling wasn't involved."

Anxiously the two freshmen searched through the class sign-up lists. Brad found his name on the Chemistry I, Calculus, and Biology I lists. Relieved, he went on to find that his English and Spanish courses were also in order. He'd just as soon they weren't, but he understood that those necessary evils could keep a guy from graduating if they were ignored too arrogantly.

Lonnie was also pleased with his schedule, except that he had been transferred from track to Brad's football class by the P.E. department because the track courses were grossly overcrowded. "Hit could be fatal foh a guy mah size," he argued. But football was all that was available when Lonnie was free, so he accepted it with a grin. "I reckon they can't hu't me ifin' they can't ketch me," he said slyly. "Ah kin run."

"Good," said Brad. "I was quarterback for my high school team. But I never was good enough for college ball."

The guys paid their fees, got P.E. locker assignments, and suddenly found themselves free for the rest of the day. Brad headed for the bookstore while Lonnie turned towards the dorm. Suddenly he swung around and called to Brad. "Mind ifin' Ah try some Pac Man on thet computah?"

"OK by me if you know how to run it," Brad called over his shoulder.

"Ah kin," Lonnie called back, already on his way. "Ah brung mah gamin' disc from home."

Brad found his books easily and paid for them with difficulty. He could hardly believe that five textbooks and a few miscellaneous supplies could add up to so much. Next time he'd get used books for the minor courses, like English and Spanish. "They'll probably require more work than the important courses," he grumbled.

Dragging his load of books to the room, Brad found Lonnie deeply engaged in a high level Pac Man game. It seemed like the real McCoy rather than a the cheap imitations available on the software market. "Wow! I didn't know that was available for P.C.'s," said Brad.

"Probably ain't," murmured Lonnie. "Some of mah frien's back home helped me...a, made it up foa me. It's a good game. Nice of y'all ta let me play it on this heah computah, Brad."

"Any time," said Brad. "We can both do some of our homework on it, too. I've got word processing and a fair bit of other software."

Lonnie's eyes lit up. "Maybe Ah kin learn how ta do thet," he said hopefully.

Chapter Four

Orientation

Wednesday was orientation day. The whole freshman class of over six hundred students was required to attend. The school president gave an hour's address in the morning that was supposed to inspire everyone to scholastic excellence and personal fulfillment. It inspired several of them to an enthusiastic nap. Lonnie leaned over to Brad half way through the speech and whispered, "Y'ud think a big wheel like this 'd know the fust law of the wheel."

"What's that?" asked Brad.

"The longah the spoke, the greatah the tiah," Lonnie replied smugly. Brad grinned and tried a little harder to concentrate on what the man was trying to say.

Next, the Dean of Students congratulated them on choosing Riley College, where everyone is special. He went to great lengths to laude the advantages of attending small private colleges and finished up with the school's aspirations to enlarge if they could only obtain more state monies.

"What a paradox!" Brad thought. "I came here because it's close to home, and it has a good engineering department," he confided to Lonnie.

"Ah came 'cause mah grandaddy's sistah used ta teach heah once't," said Lonnie. "She left a foahune ta this place. Mah folks kind 'a wanted ta see what came 'a all that money."

The class then broke up into broad categories of major interests. Each student was assigned an appropriate faculty advisor to whom he was to report for any special scheduling requests, etc.

Finally, each group met with the appropriate department heads to review major requirements for graduation in their fields. Brad and Lonnie both came to the conclusion that it was all in the school catalogue anyway, and the morning was mostly a waste of time. They sincerely hoped that the teaching faculty would be better communicators than the administrators seemed to be.

"Reminded me of a longhorn steah," Lonnie drawled, placing a fist lengthwise on either side of his head to represent horns. "A little point heah," he said wiggling the outside finger on one side, "'N a little point heah;" wiggling the tip of the other horn. "'N a whole lot 'a bull in between," he concluded drolly.

When the futile exercise was finally over, the roommates strolled towards the Student Union to get some Cokes. They told themselves that they deserved it. Approaching the building, they saw a couple of upperclassmen hazing a few freshmen mercilessly before a half-hearted group of onlookers. Lonnie thought the victims would be fraternity pledges, but Brad wasn't so sure. They nearly slipped through the area unnoticed, but Lonnie's short stature caught the attention of one of the big guys wearing an official athletic department "Riley Raiders" tank top.

"Hey, Squirt," said the bully, "Get over here and tell us about your mommy. How'd she come to let you out of her sight, anyhow?"

The friends tried to ignore the hazing, but the other troublemaker reached out a massive hand and grabbed Lonnie by the front of the shirt. "Say, Sonny, pay attention when you hear a Riley Raider speaking to you." He shook the smaller boy effortlessly. "Here Butch," he growled as he shoved him backwards into the big football player's arms.

As the surprised Brad stepped in closer to take the pressure off Lonnie, Butch grasped the little guy by the shoulder and swung him around to where they were face to face. "Now, what'd your mother tell you before she let you come here? Be quick and tell us if you ever want to see her again," glared the bully.

"Mah Mama tole me nevah ta speak ta strange ugly men," said Lonnie in a mocked feminine voice as he slapped the bully sharply across the face. The surprised bully dropped his guard for a second, and Lonnie was off like a deer. The two big Raiders were instantly after him, but he easily lead them on a taunting chase to the other side of the courtyard. Once they were well away from their other victims, he sprinted away to the loud guffaws of all who were watching.

The laughing freshmen "victims" proceeded into the Student Union and sat down together at a table in the canteen. They spent a few minutes getting acquainted and trying to figure out who Butch was.

"He's a second year paramedic student," volunteered one of the group. "Riley has a two-year Associate degree paramedic program. The students run with the Riley ambulance and are farmed out to all the surrounding hospitals for experience."

"I know he's not on the Raiders' regular squad," said another. "Must be a substitute."

"He's a handsome brute!" muttered another, "But a mite mean."

"And he drives a mean little red Corvette when he's not running on the ambulance," added the first speaker a bit enviously, as Brad suddenly jerked to attention.

Just as they moved spontaneously towards the Coke machines, Lonnie sauntered in as if nothing had happened. "Don't Ah recall thet defection is the bettah part of vallah?" He grinned.

"Let us buy you a Coke," said one of the guys.

"He's not even out of breath!" exclaimed another.

"Hope they don't come after you later," said a third.

That evening as they were going to bed Lonnie said, "Ah seen ya comin' in ta he'p me today, Brad. Thanks, but don't y'all worry none 'bout me nix' time. Fellas mah size got ta learn how ta fend foh themselves eahly. 'N Ah really kin run."

Chapter Five

Getting Started

The remainder of the week was the real orientation to college, to Brad's way of thinking. All his academic classes were scheduled at least once during that period. Sensing the need for adjustment, most of the professors of freshman level courses seemed reluctant to jump right into the heavy course matter as yet. Class time was spent detailing what the students could expect the courses to be like and delineating what would be expected of them. Some professors seemed to think that their particular courses were the primary reason for the school's existence. Others seemed more realistic, encouraging the students to seek broad bases early in their academic careers.

Dr. Purdy, the Biology I instructor, made an excellent first impression. He talked in a suave, knowledgeable manner that seemed to exude a deep philosophical and academic superiority. Sometimes one got the impression that the man's logic was just a bit beyond the listener's ability to comprehend. Still, his whole bearing inspired the confidence that, even though one couldn't quite follow each conclusion at the instant, it was sure to become clearer with more familiarity with the facts.

After a few prefacing remarks on course requirements, Dr. Purdy launched into a brief introductory history of the hallmarks of biological discovery. He delightfully painted the personalities of the fathers of modern biological science so vividly that Brad was as much impressed with the greatness of the men as with the greatness of their discoveries. He stressed how much remained to be discovered about the biological sciences, and how much was being learned through research even right on this very campus. He inspired the students with the possibility that they too could become significant actors in this drama of unfolding the mysteries of life. Though he never suggested it, they left the class with the distinct feeling that Dr. Purdy himself might one day be listed in the annals of great biologists.

Brad was also quite impressed that his English prof seemed to comprehend that many of his students were there because of graduation requirements rather than personal preference. The man seemed almost sympathetic to their dilemma and was at least partially successful in winning Brad over to an acknowledgement of the necessity of studying English as a mode of communicating one's deeper interests to others. The man's eyes twinkled actively as he talked, giving the impression that his sense of humor was probing every topic for something genuinely worthy of a laugh. The course promised to be more tolerable than he ever imagined it could be.

Dr. Baxter, The Chemistry I professor, struck Brad as the best teacher of the lot. The didactic part of his introductory lecture flowed in a precisely logical pattern so that one could usually anticipate what would follow half a sentence or so ahead of the speaker. He left no doubt about what would be expected in that course. He seemed to have the students' good at heart as he reminded them that they were away from home without parents to insist that they get their work done. He warned them that academics was for real at the college level. Courses like this one required concentrated studying rather than trying to second-guess what might be considered test material by the teacher. The concerned man finished up their first encounter by actually pleading from the very depths of his heart with the students to avoid the pitfalls of alcohol and drug abuse and the moral debauchery that ruined so many college careers and scarred so many lives.

Such a lecture coming from any other source might have been generally despised, but Brad noticed that most of the students recognized the good man's sincerity, and seemed at least to appreciate his concern for them. He concluded by inviting any student who developed troubles during the year to come and talk them over with him. The freshman students left that first chemistry lecture rather subdued, except for a few who could hardly wait to get out of the room to make smirking cracks about the "preacher-teacher."

Saturday came as a welcome break to everyone, even though it rained off and on all morning. Brad left Lonnie at the computer with his beloved Pac Man and moseyed over to the Student Union in the mid-morning. He had always considered himself a fair Ping-Pong player, but found himself no match for the guys at the tables. After losing a couple of games, he sat back and watched a well-matched game between a good slamming offensive player and an exceptionally good defensive receiver. He noticed that the offensive player used an upward slice to bring his slams down to the table, but the defensive receiver generally used a downward chop to slow the momentum of the slam. From that moment, he was determined to master the game of table tennis. Brad had just returned to his table after getting a Coke when he heard Daphne's voice behind him. "Oh, there you are, Brad. I was beginning to think you had gone back home. Haven't seen you since biology class. Come to think of it, that was just yesterday wasn't it. My how time flies."

"Hi, Daphy," he answered. "Have a Coke," he said as he handed over his unopened drink. He helped her to the other chair at the table, got another Coke from the machine behind her, and took his seat again.

"How's it going so far?" he continued.

"Pretty lonely over in that women's dorm," said the girl. "Why does this place have to be so old fashioned that we can't have co-ed dorms, anyway?" she chafed. "And it seems like all the men I know have turned anti-social all of a sudden. You haven't even been to see me once," she teased coyly.

"Too busy for the pretty things in life," he excused himself.

"You'll be sorry," she laughed, batting her eyelids tantalizingly. "Say, Brad, did you see that biology prof? You know, Mr...a...Dr. Purdy? Isn't he something? I don't think I've ever seen such a smart man before. Most of 'em are so dumb."

"Thanks," laughed Brad. "He does seem to know his stuff. And he has a good presentation, too. Probably left the pretty things of life alone and did some studying in college."

"Ugh!" said the girl. "There must be a better way. But you've always been a good student, so I probably can't count on Sir Davis to rescue me from yon boring castle very often, can I?"

"We'll see, good lady, we'll see," Brad chortled, suddenly becoming aware of the number of male eyes drifting towards their table. He knew that it was not he that they were admiring, but he couldn't help a certain smug feeling anyway.

Liking the feeling more than the girl, Brad suggested that they play a game of Ping-Pong. Despite the quality of the game, a small crowd of spectators soon concentrated at the far end of the table. Daphne made less effort at the game than at the spectators, leaving Brad a little miffed by the time twenty-one points finally rolled around. When she got into a flirtatious conversation with some of the guys, Brad excused himself. As he headed towards his room, he determined that "Sir Davis" would have little time for lovely maidens held captive in boring dorms.

Saturday afternoon found Brad and Lonnie riding around the town of Riley in Lonnie's old beat-up compact car. They used this opportunity for seeing what shops and quick food restaurants were around. Brad was glad to find a couple of pizza shops that advertised free delivery. That would come in handy some evenings. Lonnie lamented that there didn't seem to be any hickory smoked barbeque stands anywhere. "They'ah larrapin'," he reminisced.

Later they took the Green Monster out for a look at the countryside around town. The country seemed quite hilly to Brad, but Lonnie was used to the Appalachian mountains.

"Shucks," he lamented gleefully. "Ya couldn't even spit down youah neighbors's chimney 'round heah."

But Lonnie was impressed with the amount of small wildlife in the area. They saw an opossum ambling out of the road into the brush ahead of them. They smelled a skunk that must have experienced a close encounter along the road in the fairly recent past. Brad stopped on the shoulder to examine a large snake that had been run over on the pavement. "Pilot Black Snake," he murmured. "Nice specimen. Too bad it had to get killed."

"Let's go," called Lonnie from the safety of the car, where he had remained firmly ensconced. "Theah's no sech thang as a nice sahpent," he shuddered. As they moved on, he broke the silence pensively. "We could do some coon huntin' sometimes, Brad."

"What on earth for?" asked Brad.

"Ain't y'all nevah had no barbequed coon oah roasted possum?" teased the southerner.

"Not me," answered Brad. "Wouldn't know what to do with it if I had it. Surely no one eats vermin like that!"

"Oh yeah!" insisted Lonnie. "But they'ah vahmits, not vehmin. Snakes is vehmin. Ah nevah cared much foa coon maself, but lots a folks really considah it a treat."

"Y'all evah been on a snipe hunt?" Lonnie broke a brief pause.

"Nope! What are they, anyway?" answered Brad casually.

"We'll have to hunt one up 'n show ya," drawled Lonnie; "Ifin' theah's enny this fah noath. Ah wondah ifin' thet theah bugology teachah'd know one ifin' he see'd it?"

Chapter Six

The "Big Church"

Sunday was a hot, sultry day. Brad strolled idly out of the dining hall, trying to think of something to do. He was tempted to drive home, but he feared that it would be interpreted as homesickness by his folks, or anyone else who found out. He walked slowly to the gaming area, but no one was around. Finally he headed back for his room with an empty feeling, devoid of any real emotions at all.

Lonnie was coming out as Brad reached the room. "Goin' ta church?" he queried.

"Hadn't given it much thought," admitted Brad. "Where would we go?"

"Ah'm gonn'a try that big one across from the administration building," Lonnie answered. "Ah heard that the preachin's real inspirin' theah. Y'all might as well come, Brad. We don't wann'a turn bad 'n spoil oah nothin' heah."

"Sounds OK by me," said Brad. "That's the same denomination I joined back home. Maybe I'll transfer my membership if I like it."

Brad and Lonnie entered the building just as the choir got into the opening hymn. The large organ reverberated the deepest, richest bass they had ever heard throughout the building, making Brad's toes tingle with sheer delight. As the choir harmonized faultlessly to, "**Are Ye Able?**" **Said The Master**, Lonnie leaned over and whispered, "Glad Ah don't have enny loose fillin's ta rattle." Brad was too thrilled with the awesomeness of this beautiful setting to appreciate the humor.

After announcements of a heavy weekly schedule and a special welcome to any new college students that might be present, the message was launched. "Are Ye Able?" The

minister had a faultlessly cultured speaking voice that would have made anything he might have said sound pleasant enough.

In contrast to the dull "Do unto others" sermons Brad was used to, this was a genuine pleasure. The minister took his congregation graphically back to the times of Christ. He painted the scenes of poverty that must have been Christ's boyhood lot with an intensity that literally transposed the listeners two thousand years back to old Jerusalem. How they empathized with this Jewish youth who was raised a vanquished national under an oppressive alien empire. They marveled with his contemporaries how this man could know "letters," never having had an opportunity to go to school. What ingenious fortitude this self-made man must have possessed! They thrilled at how he amazed the doctors of the law at only twelve years of age. What an example was the Christ! And if he could rise above the hurdles of his nearly impossible situation, who could fail to succeed in this day when civilization has all but removed the word "Impossible" from mankind's vocabulary?

"Is there an insecure new college student in this congregation today? Does he question his ability to succeed in his chosen course of study? Let him find new faith in himself through our supreme example of the Christ. Even faith as a grain of mustard seed can move aside the mountains of doubt and insecurity that well up within us, setting us free to accomplish that which seems, for the moment, 'Impossible.' Yes, with such a faith, nothing is impossible."

To the resuming peals of the organ, Brad rose inspired. What a message! How appropriate! Who could leave this place insecure today? Yes, he certainly would transfer his membership here right away.

At the doorway out, the boys were greeted by a well-dressed, wholesome-appearing church leader. He flashed them a big smile as he introduced himself. "Tom Hawkins, college program director," he said. "Hope you guys enjoyed the sermon."

"Great!" responded Brad. "Never heard better! I think I'll transfer my membership from Hillside here this week."

"That's the stuff! We have special postal forms where students can sort of retain their membership back home and have it here at the same time. It keeps us working together with your church, whatever its affiliation, instead of against it. The big thing is unity, you know. No point in fighting over nothing," he said as he handed Brad the form. "Be sure and attend our weeknight college social hours too, won't you?" Brad took the form and hurried out to join Lonnie, who had moved on out while Tom was talking. "Best sermon I ever heard," said Brad enthusiastically. "I'm glad you brought me, Lonnie." Then noticing his friend's bewilderment, he asked, "Didn't you like it?"

"Ah can't explain it," said the puzzled boy. "Ya ended up feelin' big enough ta whip the world, but....well,...jist kind of lost inside. Kind'a like the biggah ya got, the emptiah ya was." After a minute's pause he continued. "Ah guess it was OK, Brad, but Ah'm jist not used ta them highah concepts about faith 'n all. Ah'll git ovah it soon 'nuff."

Chapter Seven

Classes

The first couple of weeks of school seemed to be going smoothly for Brad. He really enjoyed all of his classes, except Spanish and P.E. He listened attentively to all his lectures and was learning to take good notes at a reasonable rate of speed.

He attended the social hour for college students at the "Big Church," as he and Lonnie called it. He found that the church had a collegiate fellowship room not unlike the Student Union, except smaller and considerably less crowded. He attended vespers there regularly, where Tom Hawkins generally gave a morale boosting mini-sermon every weeknight except Wednesdays, which was the usual worship night for the whole congregation. He enjoyed the congregational sings that preceded the services as well, usually singing tenor or bass. Lonnie usually stayed home with his Pac Man game during this time.

Gradually, Brad was developing a flexible routine that seemed to work pretty well. After dinner he went to the fellowship hall, where he played Ping-Pong with several guys about his own skill level. He then attended vespers and headed home to study at about eight-thirty or so. He reserved evenings for the important courses, the sciences and math.

True to his suspicions, Spanish was his real bugaboo. It met for an hour at two o'clock Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoons. It took both the free hours that followed to memorize his vocabulary and translate his exercises. Spanish-to-English was not so bad, but when it came to putting English into Spanish, he had real problems. He just couldn't seem to grasp any rhyme or reason to Spanish word order. If he put it one way, it was wrong. But if he put it the other way, it was "wronger yet," he lamented. He could find no workable solution and told Lonnie that he found it best to guess what he

thought it should be and then change it to the other way. "But," he grinned, "Even that doesn't work unless you keep yourself honest by writing it down and then erasing to change it." Writing the first version in ink made the paper sloppy, but seemed to work best, he averred dolefully.

English was not nearly so gross as he had anticipated. The professor was as good as the first impression he had made. His subtle sense of humor suited Brad to a tee. His lectures were downright fun to listen to. For the first time in his life, the rules of grammar began to take on a real sense of meaning to Brad, though he had an inkling that studying a foreign language had as much to do with that phenomenon as the skill of his English prof did. Brad was maintaining an "A" on the pop quizzes, and he aced his first English test solidly.

Biology was largely a course of memorization. Brad was intrigued enough with nature to find it interesting, and thus easy to remember. About the middle of the first real week of course work, there was a pop quiz that tripped up almost everyone except Brad. It was mostly on that first lecture on who's who in biological history. Everyone had thought it was only prefatory so no one had bothered to study it, but it had been so vividly presented that Brad remembered every name and date on the quiz anyway. But for the life of him, he really could not comprehend why things like that were so important in a beginning biology course.

Biology lab consisted of dissecting various organisms from simple to more complex. Elaborate drawings of everything were required and graded on a stiff zero-to-ten point system. Ten points on a drawing was a rare occurrence, not seen at all in the first five weeks of lab. One wag asked if they were going to get a credit in art for the semester.

The professor frequently sat at his desk in the lab, smoking his pipe and contemplating philosophical topics with students interested in those things. The pleasant aroma of his perfumed tobacco helped to compensate for the not-so-pleasant other odors of the laboratory. At other times, he circulated through the lab pointing out the developmental similarities and differences of the various organisms studied. He never failed to point out how each new organism studied seemed but a small step beyond the last. Brad made the highest grade in the class on the first biology test.

Calculus was like all other math. If a person had a mathematical bent, it was easy. If he didn't, he could work hard and get it to a point, but eventually his tower exceeded its base and would support no further advancement. Brad had a mathematical bent that would go as far as he cared to take it, providing he took minimal time to strengthen his base occasionally.

Chemistry was the course that really caught Brad off guard. The course had a mathematical basis that made its basic concepts easy for Brad. But there was also a large amount of didactic knowledge that had to be absorbed. Logic alone was often

helpless. One couldn't figure out what should happen unless he knew the nature of the stuff in question.

His basic understanding of scientific principles seemed to lure him to sleep. He barely passed several pop quizzes in the lab, but told himself that the problem was only a lack of easily acquired specific knowledge rather than an inability to understand. Thus sedated, he was rather surprised when Dr. Baxter sent for him one afternoon barely three weeks into the course. He was greatly chagrined when the good man warned him that he was not doing well and that he feared the prognosis unless Brad got on the ball. Brad was shocked when the grade record was laid open to show that he barely had a "C" going. "We'll be having a major test by the end of the week," warned the doctor, "And if you don't do well, you'll have a hard time passing this course."

"Hard time passing," mused Brad. "I've got to have an 'A'". He shamefacedly thanked the good man and proceeded to apply himself a little harder in chemistry. He even got a one hundred percent on the next lab quiz.

A few days later, Brad finished eating and went straight to his room to study for the Chemistry test that was scheduled for the next morning. He began by reading over the appropriate text in the book. Then he set about memorizing several pertinent bits of information. Reasonably satisfied with his understanding, he worked the problems at the end of each chapter of the textbook. This required too much leafing back for background information, so he reluctantly reread the text more carefully, memorizing considerably more didactic facts. Finally, at about nine-thirty in the evening he strolled out to the Student Union for a Coke break, rather carelessly pleased with himself.

As Brad sat sipping his Coke and clearing all the chemical cobwebs from his brain, a couple of students he knew casually from chemistry lab strolled in for refreshments too. "Ready?" asked one of them.

"I think so," said Brad condescendingly.

"We're going over to John's house to study," they said. "He's got all the old tests for the last ten years from his fraternity. Why don't you come with us?"

"Thanks," said Brad uneasily, "But I don't know as that's fair."

"Oh, it's OK," said the other guys. "The chemistry department releases all tests. They make up new ones each year. But if you can pass all those old tests, you'll know you're ready for this year's test. Come along," they invited again.

So Brad yielded, going along confidently to check out his preparedness and tie up any loose ends.

They arrived to find several other students already gathered around John, who was reading questions aloud from one of the old tests. Hardly acknowledging their arrival,

they pressed on with the questions. Brad was shaken to the core, beyond humiliation. He barely recognized the subject on many of the questions. He was relieved to find that he wasn't a whole lot worse off than the other guys. Painfully they struggled through the questions, helping each other understand the answers. Brad ended up manning the textbook, madly looking up the smallest details that they never suspected they'd be expected to learn. On they went into the night, as much of the same subject matter came up under slightly different circumstances on test after test. Slowly the murky waters cleared as they sifted and resifted the material. Finally, at about two-thirty A.M., Brad thanked his fellows heartily for his partial salvation and scurried home to reread the chapters again. He dropped on the bed fully dressed at about five A.M. for a couple of hours of sleep before the test.

A humble Brad entered the chemistry classroom for the test that day. He rushed madly through its pages answering what he could without doubts, marking the rest for further attention later. On his first time through he answered about sixty percent of the test. A slower rerun gave him another twenty or so percent of secure answers. He struggled back through the more difficult portions a third time, striving to force details from his tired mind, or even his subconscious. As the time ran low, he made calculated guesses on the questionable problems. He was doing a final check on his calculations when the papers were called in.

Following the test, the numbed students stood dejectedly around discussing it outside the classroom. Brad winced at some of the pitfalls that had caught him. Grabbing a textbook, he found that he had made several good guesses too. When he ambled off, he had hopes that he would be somewhere around ninety to ninety-five percent, between an "A" and a "B." The grade came back as a ninety-three, the lowest possible "A," and Brad was elated to get that. Actually, only one boy and one girl had done better, the girl scoring a ninety-six. "This will not happen again," Brad promised himself humbly.

P.E. was the other big problem. The football class was divided into two opposing teams. Brad and Lonnie ended up on the same team. To their chagrin, both Butch and his sidekick were also there, on the opposite team. Brad and Lonnie were amazed that they didn't have something more advanced for the better players, but that didn't change anything. At least the big guys didn't seem to hold their former incident against them.

Brad had played enough high school ball to understand the game and even distinguished himself a bit as a quarterback for this P.E. team. Lonnie scarcely knew the objective of the game. After several plays, when Lonnie asked what to do, the team captain told him to "go deep."

"What's that mean?" asked Lonnie.

"Just run straight down the field as fast as you can, and don't let anyone stop you," replied the captain.

After several weeks, Brad found himself across the line from Butch on a defensive play. When the ball was flipped, Brad hit his unsuspecting opposition with a hard low block that knocked him off balance and effectively took him out of the action.

"You gonn'a let that little fella push you around?" the instructor mocked Butch. From then on, Brad had to make his main objective to be avoiding getting run over by the bigger man.

Brad spent part of several evenings trying to teach Lonnie some of the basic points of the game, but Lonnie just couldn't seem to grasp more than the bare essentials. Without fail, he went deep on every play, regardless of the team strategy. The other team soon learned to ignore him as totally harmless.

One day Brad grabbed up a football that someone had left out behind the dorm and tossed Lonnie a pass. The smaller boy caught it effortlessly, so Brad sent him a longer one. Lonnie was after it instantly, catching it easily over his left shoulder. Soon Brad began to realize that Lonnie could catch as well as he could run.

"Why don't you catch like that in P.E.?" asked Brad.

"Don't no one evah throw it as fah back as Ah runs," replied Lonnie. "Ah been a'waitin' on ya foa a long time now, Brad."

The next time Brad quarterbacked, he began observing just how deep Lonnie could get on those offensive plays. When he found his team badly in need of a fourth down deep in enemy territory, he knew the time had come. Jerking his head sideways at Lonnie with a wink, he silently communicated his intention to his friend. Lonnie winked confidently back and moved into his usual position on the line.

The element of surprise was perfect. Lonnie sped down the right uninhibited as usual. Brad's team groaned audibly when they saw Brad's pass sail far above the designated receiver's head. Both sides stood dumbly as Lonnie reached up and snagged it lightly over his left shoulder trotting over the line with a winning touchdown.

After that, with Lonnie's speed and sticky fingers, he was a regular receiver on the team. He and Brad became a formidable coalition that frustrated Butch and his friend to no end. The larger and better players became almost vicious in their attempts to hold them back. More than once Brad was barely able to drag himself off the field when he got his pass off too late and Butch was able to catch him with the ball. And Brad was not always sure that he still had the ball when the punishment came.

Chapter Eight

Conflict

By the middle of the semester, Brad was well established in the art of being a student. True to his resolve, he was staying on top of chemistry by regular studying and close attention to detail. On the second chemistry test, he pulled a ninety-six. He was second only to a rather unobtrusive girl named Beth Hardy, who generally sat near the front of the lecture hall and minded her own business. Brad was a little smug that he had beaten her on all the biology tests, even though she seemed to have the edge on him in chemistry. "Too bad that I got off to such a bad start," he consoled himself, "or I'd be giving her a better race."

He was maintaining a comfortable "B" in Spanish by sheer hard work and some occasional lucky guesses on word order. Calculus remained easy, and simply doing all his homework was enough studying to maintain his place at the head of the class. English continued to go well. Brad enjoyed reading and boosted his slight deficiencies in grammar by better grades in literature. With a little luck, he'd pull an "A" in English too.

The conflict in P.E. was more stressful all the time. Butch and his buddy seemed to be developing a personal grudge against Brad and Lonnie that went unnoticed by the instructor. The swift-footed Lonnie could generally elude them, but Brad sometimes ended up under a pointless pile-up that almost knocked the breath out of him.

One day Brad was quarterbacking his team to victory by connecting on a long series of passes to Lonnie. The other team just couldn't keep up with the little southerner, so they turned their attention towards Brad. He saw Butch and his sidekick nodding towards him as they broke out of the huddle. At the hike, Butch came in like a freight train. Anticipating his peril, Brad handed the ball off to an end, but Butch never

wavered. The big lineman's shoulder caught Brad in the midriff, carrying him several yards backwards as his breath escaped with an audible "Oof!"

"That'll teach ya," muttered Butch through gritted teeth as Brad struggled to his feet fighting spasmodically for a breath that would not come. "Nobody makes a fool out of..." But Brad's knees had buckled as waves of darkness displaced his conscious faculties.

Brad awoke to find the instructor and Lonnie bending over him. He started to rise, but the instructor wouldn't allow him to move. "I'm all right," he insisted weakly. "Just give me a few minutes to catch my breath." But they wouldn't let him move, so he laid his head back on the grass and dozed back into a sort of stupor.

The next thing Brad knew, he was in the swaying cot of a screaming ambulance. "This is unnecessary, and embarrassing," he said to the attendant as he began to comprehend the situation.

"Probably so," admitted the attendant. "But you took quite a lick, and it wouldn't hurt to be checked out." So Brad lay back and endured the jostling ride. It seemed that they found every bump on the road, and each bump hurt all the anatomy Brad had to hurt.

The hospital emergency department was a strange mixture of super-efficiency and senseless delay. The doctor checked Brad out by tapping his knees and elbows with a small hammer, while asking him a staccato battery of simple questions to determine his state of mental orientation. When Brad finally comprehended the point of the questions, he assured the doctor that he had not been hit on the head. "Just got hit in the belly and had the breath knocked out of me," he assured him. "I'm OK now." The doctor responded by kneading his tender belly mercilessly, repeatedly asking the wincing patient whether this maneuver hurt worse than the other one. Finally, he ordered some x-rays and left the room without communicating anything to anyone.

Brad was wheeled to X-ray and left alone on a cart for an endless time. "If I were sick," he mused, "I could get rigor mortis here before anyone ever noticed." Finally, the x-ray technician showed up and wheeled him to a room where they x-rayed his chest and abdomen several times. Brad was glad when they asked him to get off the cart and stand for one of the last abdominal films, but he was forced to lie back down on the cart as if standing were harmful when it was done. And there he lay for the greater part of an hour or so.

As Brad lay on the cart waiting for the radiologist to review his films, he distinctly heard Butch's voice in the adjoining room. "How's the patient?" he asked the x-ray tech casually. "Find any thing?"

"Looks good to me," replied the girl. "Thought you were off today."

"Just dropped by to get something. What happened to 'em, anyway?" queried Butch innocently. "Car wreck, or what'd he say?"

"Football accident," She answered. "Not too bad though. He wants to go home, but they want to rule out internal injuries first. I don't see anything, but the doctor hasn't seen the films yet."

Eventually, Brad was wheeled back to the emergency room, where they took his blood pressure every ten minutes while they waited for the doctor to get back to him. Lonnie was finally allowed in to see him. He looked relieved to see his friend in good condition. "They wouldn't tell me nothin'," he grumbled.

"They should have let you sit with me in x-ray," Brad commented. "They took my vital signs every ten minutes like they thought I might really be hurt up here, and then left me unattended down there. If I'd died down there, you could at least have called the undertaker before I rotted," he chortled.

The two boys tried to piece together what had happened as they waited. "He hit ya long aftah y'all got rid a' the ball," muttered Lonnie. "Ah could see they was up ta somethin', so Ah come around ta help ya," he continued. "But what could Ah do? 'N, Brad, the big coward jist disappeahed aftahwa'ds."

The doctor finally came in to release Brad. The nurses insisted on wheeling him out to Lonnie's old car in a wheel chair. "Thanks," said Brad as he hopped out of the chair and climbed into the car.

Since it was long past dining hours, the boys stopped at a drive-in restaurant for supper. As they ate their hamburgers, they saw Butch's red Corvette flash by. Brad couldn't be sure, but the girl in the passenger seat looked a lot like Daphne Jones.

Chapter Nine

Beth

The week following Brad's accident, he was excused from P.E. He found himself quite sore for the earlier part of the week, but felt reasonably normal by the end of it.

On his second day off P.E., Brad slipped up to the biology lab to use his extra time improving some of his drawings that were due shortly. The lab was nearly vacant, but Beth Hardy was in her usual place directly across the lab desks, facing Brad's station. She was busily working on her drawings, too.

"Hi, Beth," he said coming into the room. "Congratulations on that last chemistry test. I suppose if I get a ninety-nine on the next one, you'll get a hundred."

She looked up, grinning. "Come on, Mr. Davis. You beat me in biology and calculus and then begrudge me the chemistry?" "Besides, Dr. Baxter says no one's gotten a hundred in there for several years."

The grin caught him by surprise. He wondered why he hadn't noticed how winsomely pretty her face was before. "Probably 'cause she's so quiet I've never really talked with her before," he mused.

"Say, Brad," she broke his momentary reverie reticently. "How do you satisfy Dr. Purdy on these drawings?"

"I don't, very well," he answered humbly. "I get mostly eights and nines, never a ten yet."

"I'd give a lot for an eight," she said, loosening up. "I just can't please Dr. Purdy."

Walking around the end of the lab desks to Beth's station, Brad leafed through her drawings, his brow wrinkling. "These are better than mine, Beth. You're not a bad artist. This isn't fair! These things are too subjective to count on our grades."

"Thanks," the girl smiled ruefully. "This may not help my grade, but it helps my feelings," she said as she returned to her work.

"Hey, Beth," Brad resumed after a few minutes of silent drawing. "Does Dr. Purdy have anything against you? Did anything happen?"

"Not really," said the girl, thinking back. "He probably senses that I don't go along with him in this evolutionary stuff."

"What do you mean?" asked Brad raising his eyebrows. "Do you think science is all washed up?"

"Not real science, Brad. But this isn't real science. What other science presents its unproven theories as unquestionable facts?"

"Explain," said Brad laying down his drawing pencil.

"Well," she said trying to organize her thoughts. "Dr. Baxter says things like, 'According to Dalton's theory..,' or, 'The Atomic theory would indicate..,' but Dr. Purdy always implies that everything he says is to be taken for granted." She paused a moment and then continued pensively. "And, Brad, you know that there's more proof of the basic theories of chemistry than there is for evolution."

"Go on," said the dumfounded boy.

"Experiments validate the likelihood of true scientific discoveries to the point of reliable prediction," she proceeded. "But there's not much experimental validation for evolution."

"Yes, but it's hard to match primitive conditions or compress an experiment into the extensive time frames for validating evolution," said Brad. "So we have to look at the fossil records and compare the various forms of existing organisms today to see what happened. The situation itself was the experiment," he said smugly, "And what we find around us is the data. All we have to do is interpret the results," he finished triumphantly.

"I'll buy that," replied the girl. "But our interpretations have to be consistent with all the results. We can't throw out whatever data we choose to ignore and handle fabricated suppositions as if they were the proper data."

"That's a big accusation," Brad charged. "Can you give me any examples?"

"Sure," said the girl. "But I don't exactly present them as accusations. Most evolutionists approach the subject with such faith in the theory that they don't even consider the possibility that it might not be correct. Therefore, they pitch out the inconsistent data sincerely, considering it unexplained artifact rather than significant evidence against their religion, if you will, of evolution. I have no doubt that there has been some deliberate fraud as well, but I think most evolutionists are more duped than dishonest.

"I understand that the fossil record is not as clearly progressive as we are led to believe," she went on. "The simplistic diagrams in the texts don't include the exceptions that lie outside the reasonable possibilities of progressive evolution. Did you know that human footprints have been found superimposed on dinosaur footprints in fossilized mud?"

"As to suppositions used for data", the girl continued; "the evolutionist dates his fossils by the age of the geologic layers of the earth. But the geologist dates his layers by the age of the fossils found in them. Neither has a consistent measure on a scientific basis."

"You're forgetting Carbon 14 dating," Brad chided.

"Nope," said the girl. "There are lots of possibilities for dating by nuclear decay calculations. The reason C-14 is so popular is that it's the one that fits the current time lapse suppositions the best. And even it doesn't give very consistent results. Why don't all the methods give similar reproducible results if they're valid?"

"Then how do you account for the arrangement of fossils in at least a general order of ascending complexity?" asked Brad.

"Simple, I think," said the girl winsomely. "After Noah's flood, the dead animals were either washed into mud layers, or had to sink to the mud later. I don't have my copy of the handbook on the densities of dead dinosaurs and other squeamish things handy, but I strongly suspect that the general order would probably reflect the general specific gravities of the various types of organisms. This would also allow for the considerable numbers of out of place specimens.

"Brad, how intelligent do you think Dr. Purdy really is?" questioned the girl in an abrupt change of tactics.

"Too smart to be all that wrong," said Brad.

"Educated, yes," said the girl. "But listen to his logic. I don't want to be unkind, Brad. But you'll find that you really can't follow his logic to his conclusions without a lot of supposition. He covers his loopholes with such a presumptive way of stating things that

the listener easily assumes that it is his own comprehension rather than the speaker's logic that is faulty. Don't be gullible! Watch and see if you don't agree next lecture."

"Are you sure you're not letting your raw deal on the drawings influence you?" asked Brad as he put his things away.

"I don't think so," said the girl. "I admit that there's an admirable kind of intelligence that excels in the field, but ...well ...I'm aware of several biology instructors that have to struggle with simple algebra. As opposed to most other sciences, you don't necessarily have to have a keen mathematical kind of logic to get advanced degrees in biology."

Chapter Ten

Dorm Life

The only thing routine about life in Raintree men's dormitory was the commotion. Someone was continually being thrown into a shower or duped into some other awkward situation. Brad was a serious student who was more interested in getting his work done than in joining the horseplay. On rare occasions, Brad and Lonnie participated in some of the harmless fun; but their room was generally respected as a place for serious study. Occasionally other serious students slipped into its quieter environment to avoid the pandemonium.

There were times when the ruckus in the dorm was not so innocent. A real fight would break out, or a student would be brought in drunk and noisy, sometimes exuberant, sometimes combative. Once the boys were awakened around two in the morning by Larry Harris, one of the more athletic students, who lived down the hall. He was stumbling down the hall shouting curses and threats at everyone. His wild evening had obviously ended in a fight in which he was too drunk to defend himself. The dormitory monitors tried ineffectually to calm him down, and he eventually had to be removed by the campus police. But nothing could remove Brad's sickening vision of the once respectable young man with the blood of defeat dripping from his pounded face to his torn shirt, totally devoid of human dignity in his smelly wet pants. How such debauchery could be considered fun was beyond Brad's comprehension. He was resolved never to touch intoxicants.

Brad's studies frequently took him up to eleven-thirty or so in the evenings. Lonnie had a lighter academic schedule, and he generally finished his work earlier. Then, if the computer was free, the "Gamin' Disc" appeared, and Lonnie played away while Brad studied in his easy chair at the foot of the bed. He was frequently playing away long after Brad was fast asleep.

Brad mostly used the computer for his homework. In the past he had used it to program a lot of imaginative games, but now he was becoming more proficient with his word processing. His typing skills slowly improved as he hammered out English themes at a rate of nearly one a week. The speller was an invaluable device that saved him much time and effort looking up words in the dictionary. He wondered how the kids who didn't have computers survived.

Early on, Lonnie put it straight to Brad. "Ah want y'all ta know that Ah appreciates ya lettin' me use this heah computah," he said. "But Brad, hit's youah contraption. If Ah'm a'usin' it when youah a'wantin' it, jis' tell me right now. Ah won't feel free a'usin' it less'n Ah know ya won't be shy 'bout a'takin' it." So Brad was frank about when he wanted to use it, and Lonnie was confident that he was not imposing on Brad's generosity.

True to his earlier suggestion, Brad taught Lonnie to use the word processor too. Not that it was any trouble. Lonnie asked a lot of questions about simple procedures, but he rarely had to ask more than once. Brad sometimes marveled at how the little guy could turn out papers and charts without ever having to refer to the software manual for procedural directions. "He's pretty sharp," thought Brad.

Lonnie came equipped with a pop corn popper. The two friends devoured immense quantities of the "essential" stuff almost every night. They learned to eat it without butter, which saved a lot of "fuss and muss," as Lonnie put it. The short jaunt over to the Student Union canteen made Cokes readily available compliments to the salty snack. Once they tried buying their Cokes by the case at the bottle store downtown. They were given an elaborate computerized receipt. "Is this heah so's Ah kin bring 'em back ifin' Ah didn't like 'em?" laughed Lonnie.

"Nope," said the proprietor. "We keep a record of all transactions so we can't be accused of selling booze to minors. If this sale had involved alcohol, we'd have recorded your ID number and age right here on the receipt," explained the man pointing out the blank spaces. Since the boys had no way to cool their Cokes, they decided to go back to the canteen even before all the warm Cokes were gone.

Their view of the Student Union patio gave the guys a bird's eye view of the social intrigues on campus. Had they cared for such things, they could have had a good idea of many of the interpersonal relationships among their comrades. As it was, Brad rarely noticed such things, except that it was obvious that Butch and Daphne Jones were seeing more of each other all the time.

One evening Lonnie suddenly asked Brad, "How smaht do you think that bugology teacher is, enniway?"

Startled, Brad looked up at his roommate. "Why do you ask?"
"Still wonderin' if he'd know a snipe if he see'd one," replied Lonnie.

"I don't know. I could ask him," suggested Brad thoughtfully.

"Shucks, Brad. Enny bugologist should know 'bout 'em. Ah'd like ta see ifin' he'd recognize a real live one. Ah've seen several 'round by the cornah of the dorm nights lately."

"I've got too much to do now," said Brad. "But if you really think we can catch one, I'm game. You'll have to show me how, though."

Several days later, Brad took a hopeful stroll in the woods near the campus. As he tramped along the dirt path that rambled through the trees, he caught a quick movement with the corner of his eye. A close scrutiny of the spot soon revealed a tightly coiled little Hog Nosed snake, blending almost invisibly into the dead leaves along the trail. The little "spreading adder" was blotched in fall colors remarkably like those of a copperhead. He teased it gently with a twig, noting with satisfaction that it raised up its head and spread a hood like a miniature cobra. It struck threateningly with its sharp little upturned snout whenever he approached too closely. Brad knew that although they might hit with their noses, these harmless snakes rarely bite. As he continued to pester it more vigorously, it suddenly went into a faked convulsion, ending up playing dead beside the path. "Perfect," he grinned, picking up the harmless little reptile with his bare hand and carefully placing it in his pocket.

About ten o'clock that evening Brad suddenly slammed his book shut and rose to his feet. "I've had it, Lonnie," he announced. "Can't you think of something to do?"

"Well," Lonnie drawled, "Theah's always thet snipe hunt."

"Really think we could catch one?" Brad asked doubtfully.

"Oh, sure, Brad. Ah've seen quite a few lately. All we need is a big papah bag 'n a couple a guys."

So Brad and Lonnie headed down the elevator and out the front doors of the dorm. They passed three friends from the third floor as they went out of the dorm. "Where ya going, Lonnie?" one of the guys asked as he sensed Lonnie's enjoyment of the prank. "Ah'm a'takin' Brad on a snipe hunt," replied the grinning boy. "Ya evah been?"

"Sure," said two of the fellows. "We'll come along if you don't mind."

"What's a snipe?" asked the third, named Tim.

"Come along and see," replied Lonnie cagily. "You 'n Brad can hold the bag, an' we'll chase one in."

"Should go deep into the woods foa the big ones," Lonnie said knowingly.

"Oh!" lamented Brad, "I haven't got that much time. Got a theme due in the morning. I thought you said you saw some at the corner of the dorm."

"Well, that'll do ifin' ya don't mind a small one," Lonnie said consolingly. So they headed towards the darkest corner of the dorm.

"Now, Brad. Y'all 'n Tim hold the sack open down heah on the ground, close to the buildin'," Lonnie instructed. "Keep real still, 'n don't make a sound. They've got good eahs. Me and the rest 'll spread out 'round the cornah 'n chase 'em into the bag. Ready now? Remembah, y'all 'll be holdin' the bag."

When the others disappeared around the corner, Brad quickly pulled his little snake out of his pocket and slipped it into the bag. "They're intending just to leave us here," Brad explained to the puzzled Tim. "They don't expect us home until we realize that we've been left holding the bag. But I've been wanting to catch Lonnie for a long time."

"We got one! We got one!" yelled the boys before the others had time to get far away.

"Got what?" called Lonnie as they turned around.

"Something ran into the bag." Brad hollered. "Must be a snipe. Come and see." Shaking the bag so the returning guys could hear that there was indeed something in it, Brad led them back into the dorm like the pied piper.

Once in the dorm, Brad reached into the bag and quickly handed the coiled snake to the unsuspecting Lonnie. It struck his opened hand with its upturned nose. "Hit's a coppah head," Lonnie screamed, dropping reptile and jumping back. "Ah've been bitten by a coppah head."

"Relax!" said Brad triumphantly. "You should be willing to taste your own medicine occasionally."

"Ifin' y'all 'll take that thing outta heah, Ah'll try ta laugh," replied Lonnie, a slow grin spreading over his face as he began to comprehend how he'd been "had."

Chapter Eleven

Faith

Friday's biology class began with unusual luster. Dr. Purdy started off by summarizing everything covered up to then with a more positive evolutionary slant than ever before. Where he had alluded to its doctrines before, he presented them distinctly and systematically today. Brad listened more critically this time. Although he was convinced of the validity of the theory, for the first time he saw it as a theory demanding proof rather than a statement of fact. And he was shocked at how astute Beth's observations about the doctor's vague logic had been. Why had he never noticed the assumptions before?

Having presented his case in his most impressive style, the professor considered the opposition. "Many people today, even as in Galileo's time, are religiously opposed to scientific advancement. Generally, the ignorant take this stand. That is understandable. They believe the Bible from cover to cover even if they have no idea what's between the covers. But occasionally, religious fanatics arise even from the educated, who presume to criticize what modern science has discovered."

Dr. Purdy went on to explain that the same insecurities that drove people to religion caused them to seek recognition by standing out against the tide of scientific progress. "If they're not astute enough to find their glory in accepted scientific circles, they may try to find it in ignorant religious circles, by championing the ignorance." Brad was rather turned off at the doctor's assumption that virtually all educated people were seeking public recognition.

The professor was really warming up now. "Such people sometimes go to incomprehensible lengths to explain the fossil record. They speculate on things like the rate that drowned animals would sink if all placed together in the ocean, and so on. I

understand they have recently published a handbook on the specific gravities of dinosaurs and the like to substantiate their postulates." The doctor pitied such miserable people.

The class time was about two-thirds over when Dr. Purdy asked if there was anyone present who didn't agree with the concept of progressive development of life as just presented. Brad wondered how any doubter would dare to respond after the explanation that such people were insecure religious fanatics. But Beth raised her hand to indicate that she was still opposed. Brad seemed to sense that this was especially hard for a naturally quiet person like her.

"The floor is opened," said the doctor magnanimously. "State your case."

As the class tittered, Brad found himself hurting for this strange girl with whom he disagreed. She came forward reluctantly, looking towards him as her only possible source of support. His face flushed as he averted his eyes. She stood totally alone before the smirking class.

"I don't think it is scientific to present evolution as a fact," said the girl. "It is a theory that should be subjected to the same scrutiny as any other theory. It is evident that, by its very nature, creation cannot be subjected to the test of reproducible predictive experimentation. Therefore, our suppositions concerning it should not be categorized with the scientific discoveries that can."

"May I ask what alternatives you have to offer?" interrupted the professor. "Have you some other, perhaps better, concept on the origins of life? What do you personally believe?"

"I believe in the Biblical record of creation," said the girl simply.

"And do you offer any reproducible predictive scientific experimentation to prove the superiority of your theory," asked the professor mockingly.

"I am convinced that the great flood of Noah's day explains the geological findings at least as well as the theory of evolution does," replied the girl steadily.

"Then you believe the Bible because of your studies of geology?" the professor stated preemptively.

"No, Sir. I believe the Bible by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."

"There you have the reasonless opposition of religion," said the professor with a toss of his upturned hands, as if handing her despicable attitude to the class for closer scrutiny. "She prefers to stake her theory on unscientific faith rather than see what modern biological science has revealed." The professor shook his head in exaggerated disbelief

as the class broke out into frank laughter. "There is none so blind as he who will not see," muttered the doctor sagely, still shaking his head.

"Is there anyone else who is not convinced?" the professor pressed his advantage.

Brad was more startled than anyone else when he found himself spontaneously stating, "I think she's got a point that we should label things we can't absolutely prove as theories, instead of accepting them as facts."

"Absolutely!" said the doctor. "And would you like to refute all the evidence accepted by the scientific world as proof, or do you share the girl's faith?"

Brad blushed silently, all eyes awaiting the challenge.

"Sir," interrupted Beth to Brad's intense relief. "Don't you also resort to faith to explain our existence?"

"Certainly not," came the indignant answer. "I've gone to great lengths to prove to this class today that we evolved from simpler species over the years. That's science, not faith, for those who are capable of understanding it."

"And where did those lower forms come from?" the girl continued.

"From lower and lower forms yet," said the nettled doctor.

"So you come to the amoeba or some other one-celled form of life," Beth persisted. "And where did they come from?"

"Some incidental hydrocarbons serendipitously developing into strands of primeval DNA," replied Dr. Purdy warming up to one of his favorite topics.

"And how did they happen to develop into something as complex as a strand of DNA?" asked Beth again.

"The proper circumstances had to have just happened by chance," explained the man.

"So your concept is based on a faith that the proper circumstances just happened to develop to start your long chain of supposed events." replied Beth.

"That's different," muttered the Professor as the bell rang.

"Not too different, especially when you don't have a system of cell membranes and organelles to organize and support your DNA replication," Beth pleaded earnestly as the class arose to leave.

Chapter Twelve

Duped

The second week of November was unseasonably warm, like an Indian summer had been granted a stay of execution. October's colorful leaves clung desperately to the trees as if pleading daily for just twenty-four more hours of November life. Light jackets or sweaters for the morning chill were freely shed by afternoon, only to reappear again at sundown. But the glorious weather granted no reprieve for the freshman science majors, as three major tests loomed ominously in the same week.

Both the calculus test and the biology test were scheduled for Wednesday. Brad had kept up with his homework and understood the material well. He was aware of the various formulae encountered, but didn't spend much time memorizing them. "You can always derive a formula if you know what you're doing," he explained to a couple of students who came to him for help. "But if you try to get through by rote memory of the formulae, you're up a creek if your memory fails you." Thus, with reasonable confidence he only lightly reviewed for the calculus test, opting wisely to concentrate more on biology.

Brad had reservations about the biology test this time. It would include Dr. Purdy's whole review of comparative species development. There would be a lot of rote memory involving scientific names and the like. He was reasonably confident that he could handle the multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank sections as well as before. But if there were many essay type questions, he feared that Dr. Purdy's objectivity might suffer from his unwise statements in support of Beth. Brad still wasn't sure just what had prompted him to open his big mouth that day. Probably just his natural sympathy for the underdog. She had seemed so alone that he felt she needed his support, he guessed. Anyway, it was done and over, and even if he were a mite sorry, he felt no repentance.

"I guess it's Wednesday, just as scheduled on the calendar," groaned Brad as he arose that morning. He took a refreshing shower and stopped at the dining hall for a light breakfast before the tests. As the students flocked into the calculus room, Brad found himself walking beside Beth. "Ready?" he asked as his confident eyes met hers.

"I hope so," she replied with a wry face. But there was unmistakable challenge in her eyes that transformed the whole room into an arena of determined contest.

The test was too long. Brad began to wish he had put a little time into memorizing the formulae as he realized that time was running out. He was not quite through with the last problem when the time expired. The exaggerated groans of anguish that accompanied the bell told Brad that he was not the only one who could have used more time.

The biology test started out a snap. It consisted of a few pages of objective questions, and Brad felt that he knew virtually all the answers. But the last page was an essay question that was worth twenty percent of the grade. "Discuss the progressive development of species from fossil evidence. Relate this to current forms of life, and discuss its implications on the origins of life on the earth." "Might as well have asked us to turn in all our lecture notes," Brad muttered to himself as he outlined his approach carefully. He answered the question in considerable depth, carefully avoiding any reference to the word, "theory." He felt more successful than honest as he left the room.

An already exhausted Brad began his review of chemistry that evening. He struggled to read the material over in the textbook, but would suddenly find that he had read several paragraphs without even thinking about what they said. Strangely, his mind kept wandering back to the tests of the day. He wondered how Beth had done. Had she beaten him in calculus? How did she handle the biology essay? He hoped the enigmatic little girl had done well. She deserved it! Finally, thankful that he had been keeping well abreast of chemistry, he closed his book and hit the sack. Lonnie, seeing that his friend desperately needed his sleep, put the Gamin' disc away and quietly left the darkened room.

Brad rose refreshed and ready to tackle his study as soon as his Thursday classes were finished. Spanish droned on interminably, but was finally over. He was more tempted than ever before to cut P.E., but hesitated to let himself get into that habit. He was relieved that someone else was chosen to quarterback so he could concentrate on staying out of Butch's way.

After supper, Brad was able to review the test material effectively, and found himself pretty well prepared down to the smallest details. At about nine-thirty he met the guys at John's house to review the old tests. This time he found himself their teacher instead of their debtor. His late return to his room in the wee hours of the morning was more

because he saw that he was needed than that he needed to study. "Thanks Brad," the guys said gratefully as he took his leave.

Brad arose feeling relatively secure on Friday morning. He broused calmly over the familiar facts at the breakfast table before walking over to take the test. "Touche," he grinned at Beth, drawing an imaginary sword as they entered the chemistry castle together.

"You are as good as dead, vain fellow," she laughed back confidently. "Pray remember that prophetic utterances have already sealed your doom."

The test was comprehensive and strenuous. More than once Brad scrambled to recalculate as he saw the pitfalls that lurked in seemingly simple problems. "You've got to consider everything in here," he grinned as he suddenly saw the reason behind one question. He carefully reviewed his math a second time and turned in his paper with satisfaction as the bell tolled. He could see by her smile that Beth was exiting every bit as pleased as he was.

A physically and emotionally drained Brad left his last class of the day and walked aimlessly over to the Student Union. Grabbing a Coke and some peanuts, he took a seat at a small table. His tired brain rehashed the chemistry test mercilessly as he stared vacantly into space.

"Oh, Brad," Daphne's wheedling voice interrupted his circular thoughts. "I'm in such a bind. You're just the man to help." She was dressed in outdoor clothing that left little to the imagination, as usual.

Ambivalence flooded through Brad's soul as he rose to greet her. He desperately needed something to restore his sanity, but Daphne was not known for dispensing that entity to guys. Besides, why didn't she ask Butch, since she seemed to enjoy his company so much. Maybe she was catching on to him.

"Hello, Daph," he tried to say exuberantly. "How can this poor benighted soul help yon beautiful lady in such dire distress?" He hoped his lack of enthusiasm didn't show.

"Brad," she implored placing her arm around his shoulder. "I really do need your help." She snuggled up closer, pressing her body tightly into his. "You will help me, won't you?" A couple of whistles from the patio revived that smug feeling of being envied in Brad.

"Sure, Daphy," he replied more genuinely. "What's the problem?"

"Everybody's so tired this week, and the weather can't hold out much longer. We're having a wiener roast this evening, and I'm supposed to bring the refreshments. The

guy who was going to help me can't get free, and everyone else has already left. You've got to help me get the stuff out there in your truck."

"You've got a whole truckload of food?" laughed Brad. "I'll help with anything associated with good food."

"Of course, you'll be expected to stay and eat with us if you'd like," said Daphne. "I've got to make a couple phone calls, and I'll be ready. We're already late," she said untangling herself gracefully.

"I'll have the Green Dragon here in five minutes or so," Brad promised as he started towards the parking lot.

"Where to?" asked Brad as Daphne slid into the seat and up against him cozily.

"To the delicatessen by the bottle shop first," she directed. "I need to pick up some chips and dips. Someone else is bringing the hot dogs and buns."

They went into the little store where the clerk had a couple boxes of groceries ready. "That'll be eighteen forty-nine," said the lady pointedly as they started out the door.

"Oh," cried Daphne. "I thought they were already paid for. Brad, can you loan me a twenty?"

"If I've got it," said Brad checking his wallet. "Here."

"Old Grouch thought we were trying to cheat her," Daphne grumbled darkly as they walked back to the truck.

"What's that?" asked Brad noticing a large cardboard box in the back of the truck as he looked behind to maneuver out of his parking place.

"The bottle store loaded the Cokes and stuff while we were in the delicatessen." Daphne moved artfully over to Brad's side. Wiggling tightly against him, she said, "I called and told them to load it in the neat antique green truck when it arrived, because we were running terribly late. Everything's ready, so let's get going. I really appreciate your helping me out, Handsome."

"I hope it's not what it looks like it could be," thought Brad uneasily as he let out the clutch. "Surely they wouldn't give booze to minors without checking ID's."

"We're going north out the highway about seven miles," instructed Daphne. "Then to the right a couple miles to an abandoned gravel pit. It's partly full of water and makes a pretty neat picnic spot. The guys will already have the fire going, and be wondering where we are by now. It took me a while to find you." Keeping her wriggling body

delightfully close to his, Daphne kept up a constant stream of conversation that displaced Brad's uneasiness all the way to the isolated spot.

As they swung into the area, Daphne moved quickly towards the door on her side. The truck had barely stopped before the crowd began to drift towards the impatiently awaited vehicle. Daphne hopped triumphantly down into Butch's arms saying, "We owe Brad twenty dollars."

"Thanks Brad. Here's your twenty," said Butch, almost friendly as he shoved a twenty dollar bill into Brad's shirt pocket.

"No, that's OK," said Brad, trying to fend off the money politely.

"Take it, kid. It's my party," growled Butch as if offended. So Brad left the money in his shirt pocket, turning his eyes to the crowd. They were a motley, hardened looking crew of guys and girls obviously bent on an evening of debauchery. Brad was amazed at how well Daphne fit in with the rest.

"HEY GUYS!" Butch called loudly for everyone's attention. "Help us unload the keg. Brad Davis brought the booze. Three cheers for Brad Davis." A great mocking cheer was raised, as Brad realized how deliberately he had been used. The mocking spite in Daphne's eyes clearly declared what she thought of his gullible boyish "innocence."

"I think I'd better head for home," stammered Brad, a burning blush creeping to the tips of his ears.

"Sure thing," guffawed Butch. "This ain't gonn'a be no place for mama's cuddly little boy tonight."

* * *

An utterly mortified Brad drove slowly back to Riley that evening. He was humiliated, frustrated, and so angry he couldn't think. He hardly knew whether to direct most of his anger at Daphne, at Butch, or himself. "Probably myself," he admitted. "I knew what she was like and who she associated with, and I let her wriggle her way right into my common sense. Then I didn't have the guts to back out when I began to suspect that all was not right. Never again," he promised himself later.

The humiliated boy ate alone at a drive-in restaurant that evening. Well after dark, he found his miserable way back to his room without greeting anyone. Lonnie looked up questioningly as Brad came in, but saw at a glance that it might be best not to speak.

Sleep came hard. Every ruckus in the dorm irritated the exasperated boy. The competitive squalling of distant tires drove sleep far away. He heard several drunks come in quite late and wondered if they had been at the gravel pit to witness his

naivety. Throughout the night grotesque mocking faces that resembled Butch harassed him. Freight trains wearing caricaturized masks of Butch's face charged him. Apes with Butch's head jeered him in front of the whole student body. A red Corvette with a grille like Butch's face ran him off the road. A giant paramedic like Butch forced him to ride forever in a painfully jostling ambulance. Once he even thought he actually heard Butch's sirens accompanying this apparition.

Chapter Thirteen

Accused

Brad awoke late on Saturday morning, less tired than he would have anticipated with his uneasy sleep. His ruffled spirits were somewhat mollified by the night in bed. "Guess I got more sleep than I thought," he admitted to himself. He had a solitary breakfast in the rear of the dining hall and made his way to the chemistry office to see if the grades were posted yet.

He was elated to see a "ninety-nine" posted against his code number, but he had no doubts that the "one hundred" on the list belonged to Beth. "Better be careful what I prophesy," he chuckled to himself.

Strolling aimlessly back to the Student Union patio, Brad took a seat on a more isolated bench near the trees and shrubbery along the road. The weather was warmer even than yesterday, but a steady north breeze hinted that this might be the last balmy day of the year. The relaxed youth lounged lazily on the bench soaking up the warm morning sun.

Brad didn't exactly notice the sight before him; he just became aware of it imperceptibly. A beautiful young woman sat against a tree some forty or fifty feet away totally absorbed in a book. It must have been her soft brown hair waving gently in the breeze that caught his attention. From Brad's viewpoint, the surrounding variegated red and golden autumn foliage framed the artistically balanced scene almost perfectly. Golden morning sunlight enhanced the natural frame, reminding Brad of one of those massively ornate gilded picture frames his mind associated with those large old heirloom portraits.

The girl's light flowing cotton dress hugged her body gently in the breeze, turning Brad's attention more to her than to the broader scene. He was as unconsciously absorbed in

contemplating her as she was in reading her book. She was positively the most intriguingly proportioned woman he had ever observed. He would most certainly have flushed inwardly had he been aware of his total captivation with her.

Closing her book as she arose, the girl suddenly broke Brad's reverie. He couldn't have guessed whether he had been contemplating her a moment or an hour. Still absorbed in her thoughts, she modestly shook her clinging garment loose and turned absentmindedly towards the patio. A totally dumfounded Brad found himself staring into the innocently lovely face of Beth Hardy. As she approached, Brad blushed lightly at his unsuspected intrusion into her modesty, but he knew he'd never be able to keep his eyes off her again.

"Hi, Beth," he broke into her preoccupation. "How's everything?" He hoped she wouldn't detect the tremor in his voice as he rose to join her.

"Fine," she answered pleasantly. "I was just going back up to see if they've got the chemistry scores posted yet. I was too early a while ago."

"If you're number twenty-three, you got a hole-in-one," he announced. "Congratulations, kid. I'm happy for you," he said genuinely.

"Really? I was afraid to even hope," she rejoiced. "There's always some little point, or some careless error."

"Not for you this time," he said admiringly.

"How about you?" she asked concerned.

"I'm a better prophet than I am a chemistry student," he laughed.

"Oh," she sympathized. "Sorry you made some little goof. I'd gladly share the wreath with you, you know."

"Can I get you a Coke?" he asked hopefully as he steered her toward a table.

"Lemon-lime, please," she answered. "How'd the calculus go?"

"I think you beat me there, too," he said, almost glad that she had. "I only got half credit on that last one. Didn't finish."

"Yeah," she said. "It was too long. I finished, but didn't have time to check my math. Missed three points on addition 'n stuff."

"Beat me by two points," he admitted.

They lingered silently over their drinks a few minutes more, hardly knowing how to approach the obvious next topic. Finally Brad asked, "Did Purdy treat you fairly?"

"I don't think so," she said reluctantly, wrinkling her brow. "But he gave me some eights and a ten on my drawings."

"Trying to demonstrate his open-mindedness all of a sudden?" asked Brad angrily. "He owes you more than that. I wondered what he'd do to you on that essay question."

"Tore me up," she said with a tinge of bitterness. "I told him everything he ever said on the subject, but I referred to it as, 'According to the theory.' He said I was poorly organized and lacked understanding. Only gave me ten points out of the twenty."

"That's not objective. Why can't he grade more objectively?"

"I guess it's hard to be objective when you've just heard someone criticize your intelligence behind your back," Beth mused.

"You picked that up, too," he grinned. "But, Beth, you were right. He clouds logic with assumption and probably doesn't even realize it himself."

"I guess I shouldn't have voiced such an uncomplimentary opinion of anyone," she said slowly. "But, Brad, I wanted so badly for you to see what's going on."

"It's still not fair," said Brad hotly. "Cheated you right out of your 'A'. I didn't really beat you there either."

"Yes you did. I flubbed a few of the names up and lost four points fairly."

"Hey Beth," Brad said after a brief silence. "Why didn't you just say it the way he wanted it and take your grade. You wouldn't have had to change your beliefs."

"It means too much to me to compromise," she replied earnestly.

"You mean your intellectual honesty?" asked Brad.

"No, my loyalty to the Bible as God's word."

Brad's brow puckered spontaneously. "What difference does it really make?" he asked. "It's no big deal to me how we came to exist."

"Brad," she said earnestly, "if the Bible isn't reliable on creation, it isn't trustworthy anywhere else. It would totally invalidate all of Christianity, and we would have no Savior."

"I'm beginning to see where you're coming from," he said. But he secretly wondered if the example of the Christ had really saved mankind from anything when so few people ever followed it anyhow.

Their conversation ceased spontaneously as each drifted into separate thoughts. Brad's appreciative eyes eventually returned to drink in more of the pensive girl's face. Suddenly becoming aware of his attention, she flushed shyly. Their eyes averted, and she reached for her book to leave. Brad could almost feel her deliberately erecting a wall of reservation, almost against her will.

As they started to rise, Daphne's mocking voice rang out of the blue. "Well, if it's not a budding romance right in the fall of the year. Couldn't wait 'till spring, eh, Brad?"

Both Brad and Beth looked up startled. "Don't jump to such happy conclusions so quickly," Brad said trying to get control of the awkward situation. "I can't seem to get any girl to look at me twice."

"I don't suppose such a goodie goodie would be seen with you once, if she knew that you brought all that booze to the party last night. It's a shame the way you turned an innocent little wiener roast into a drunken blast. Things got so wild Butch and I had to leave."

Seeing the expression of abject horror on Beth's face, Brad dropped his politeness. "Wait a minute, Daphne. You know that Butch and you tricked me into bringing that out there. I didn't even know it was in the truck. I wasn't even part of the party."

"Ha ha ha!" she mocked coarsely. "A good chemist like you couldn't figure out what was in a beer keg. Look at the label next time. Or maybe you didn't see something as small as a beer keg in your truck."

"Beth, I'm surprised that you've apostatized for such a degenerate fellow," she said as she swung her hip rather lewdly into Brad's. "You'll soon be as bad as the rest of us. You'd better run home and do penance, or something. He had half the school drunk and misbehaving something gross last night."

Realizing that Daphne was intentionally trying to call attention to them, Brad whispered to Beth that she'd better leave. "I'll explain how they tricked me later," he said wanly. Silent tears coursed down Beth's face as she walked rapidly away.

"Shut up! Daphne," Brad commanded in a firm low voice, "or I'll be forced to tell everyone what happened."

"You'll tell everyone!" she derided. "Three cheers for Brad Davis," she mocked loudly. "Everybody knows that Brad Davis brought the booze."

Then sidling up to the defeated boy much the same as she had done under a different pretext yesterday, she whispered savagely: "You know one of the guys got killed in a wreck last night. Dead drunk when they scooped him up. And everyone knows that Brad Davis brought the booze."

Struck silent, the panicked boy turned and headed towards his room. Last night he had only half-comprehended their strategy. Now he understood bitterly that he had been purposely set up to take the blame if anything went awry. Fear and anger struggled for possession of his burdened heart.

As Brad mentally reviewed each step of their set-up, he began to realize how thoroughly cunning it had been. When he came to Butch's forcing the twenty dollar bill back on him, he reached abstractly into his shirt pocket to put it into his wallet. To his horror, wrapped together with it was the yellow copy of the computerized receipt from the bottle store. It was made out to Brad Davis, age twenty-one with a strange college ID number.

Just after lunch time that afternoon, Lonnie came into the room with another student. They were excited and upset. "Brad," he groaned, "did you know that Larry Harris was killed in a wreck last night?"

"They say he got all tanked up at a beer blast and lost control of his car on a curve north of town," exclaimed the other boy. "He was alive when they picked him up, but he died in surgery this morning. Ruptured liver, or spleen, or something. The police are looking for whoever gave him the booze. He was only eighteen years old." The boy told all he knew and ran off down the hall to bear his gruesome news to others.

Lonnie was shaken. "I heard 'em goin' out ta pick 'em up," he lamented. "But Ah couldn't 'a knowed who it was. Hope they find out who gave 'em the booze. It's a crime to help a kid kill hisself like that."

"You're looking at him," said Brad woefully.

"At who?" asked Lonnie, confused.

"At the guy who took the booze out there last night," said Brad. "At the guy whose going to get the blame for all this."

"Brad, no!" shouted Lonnie. "I know y'all too well foa that. You don't even touch the awful stuff."

So Brad recounted the whole story to Lonnie, who listened with opened mouth and clinched fists.

"That vahmit,--no, vehmin, ought ta be shot!" he declared angrily. "We'ah gonn'a find a way git y'all outn' this yet, Brad. 'N Ah hopes we kin hang it on ta Butch 'n Daffy, or whoever she is. They's responsible foa this."

"They mostly are," agreed Brad. "But, Lonnie, I didn't check that box 'cause I was afraid it might be a keg. So I'm guilty too," he moaned.

"Don't say that," insisted Lonnie. They tricked y'all into doin' it on purpose. 'N ifin' you hadn't helped 'em, they would 'a gotten some other victim ta blame."

That last statement was some comfort to the sorrowful lad.

Chapter Fourteen

Guilty

The remainder of that Saturday afternoon was increasingly hard on Brad. Several more students dropped in to tell Brad and Lonnie the news of Larry's death. Invariably they mentioned that the authorities were bound to investigate this underage drinking party. They would not like to be in the shoes of whoever provided the booze. Whoever did it was sure to be in big trouble from the police, the school, and even the civil courts as well, if Larry's parents decided to sue.

Brad walked mechanically to the dining hall with Lonnie for supper. He wasn't sure, but it seemed that all too many eyes turned his way, and too many heads nodded knowingly to their companions, as the boys found their way to a more isolated table. "Probably just my imagination," he thought to himself. But Brad was sure that Daphne's finger pointed his direction from the full table where she and Butch lingered over their trays was not imagined. He picked disinterestedly at his food, and was glad when Lonnie rose to turn in his tray. He was more than anxious to return to the seclusion of the dorm.

Walking down the fourth story hall, they witnessed a somber middle-aged couple unlocking Larry's room door. Larry's mother and father had come to collect his things. Brad's heart throbbed as he observed the woman, especially. Tears coursed down her cheeks as the opening door displayed the silent room that should have housed her son. Her husband put his comforting arm around her shoulder, but he choked up and was unable to finish when he tried to speak. At that, she burst out into uncontrollable sobs. The man's only consolation was his promise to bring the guilty party to justice, if they could find out who had provided the beer for the party. Perhaps they could prevent this from happening to others, at least.

Brad lounged on his bed the bulk of the evening, disconsolate and troubled. Several friends came in to warn Brad that there was a rumor that he had brought the booze to the party. He knew that they didn't believe a word of the story Butch and Daphne were spreading to protect themselves. But their attitude of perfect trust in him seemed to fog as he told his side of the story. "You mean you couldn't figure out that that had to be a keg?" asked one of the guys, shaking his head in disbelief.

Last night's sleep was bad; this night's was terrible. Brad rolled around on the bed fretfully, without perceptible sleep most of the night. Though he probably dozed some, he saw at least part of every hour up to four A.M. on the LED dial of Lonnie's alarm clock across the room from his bed. He was more convicted of his share in the guilt all the time. "I really knew what was in that box," he told himself. "I didn't find out for sure because I didn't want to be responsible. I tried to convince myself that nothing was amiss, but I knew I should have checked it out. I suckered in to a treacherous woman, and I was ashamed to back out, so I became guilty of contributing to Larry's death.

The tossing youth found himself wondering what his parents would think of all this. What would the other students think of him? What would anyone like Beth think? "I might just as well forget her. She could never comprehend how I could become involved in something like this," he told himself. He finally slept soundly until eight in the morning.

Lonnie escorted his disconsolate, tired friend to the dining hall Sunday morning in the hopes that a good breakfast would cheer him up. He might as well have not bothered. "I just can't eat," Brad confided. "All I can think of is Larry, and his poor mother. Why did I ever sucker in to that? Why was I too cowardly to stand up to Daphne when I suspected what she was up to. I deserve to be punished."

"We'ah a'goin' ta chuach as usual," Lonnie insisted when Brad was disinclined to leave the dorm. "You always git a lift from the suhmon. An' y'all ain't nevah needed a lift moah'n ya do now." So Brad went, or rather, was led to the "Big Church" in a state of total emotional entropy.

Brad hesitated at the entrance of the church. How could he enter into the "House of God" after all this? But Lonnie took him by the arm and gently led him in. Dr Purdy's nod of recognition was encouraging. The music was as beautiful as ever. Slowly the awesome "Mood of worship" began to soothe Brad's troubled soul. He relaxed in anticipation of another inspiring sermon.

"Father, Forgive Them," was the title of the sermon today. And what a sermon it promised to be! "Just what Brad needs," thought Lonnie as the title was announced. But Lonnie had to admit that this sermon, as so many before it, seemed a little too deep for him to follow. "At least Ah hope hits a'comfortin' Brad," he thought.

The minister had his congregation virtually reliving the crucifixion scene. They blushed at the shame and ignominy that was Christ's as he was led like a common criminal through the streets of Jerusalem. They struggled with him under the weight of his cross as he wrestled it over the Kidron and up Calvary's slope. Some of the congregation almost groaned aloud at the pain of the nails that separated the bones as they were callously pounded through his hands and his feet. They felt his loneliness at being forsaken by his friends. They resented the insults of the taunting crowd that gathered to watch him suffer. They were incensed at the offer of vinegar to quench his thirst. What suffering the Christ had endured for mankind that day! Yes, he suffered all this and still prayed God to forgive his tormentors, for they were unaware of what they were doing.

"This was the supreme example of the Christ. He had to give his life to get it across to the people. What we need to learn is how to forgive those who insult us, and forsake us, and cause us pain. And in forgiving others, we sense the forgiveness of God in our own lives. Did not our Great Example himself link our willingness to forgive others with the realization of the forgiveness of God for ourselves? And a God of love would surely like to free us from those degrading feelings of guilt that well up so easily within us."

The music pealed from the big organ as the people rose to leave. Handshakes and hugs characterized the atmosphere as compliments about the sermon floated freely. "Great sermon," said Lonnie to Brad hopefully. "Ah felt as ifin' Ah was theah a'watchin' the crucifixion. Ah nevah consideahed it much befoah."

"Yeah," agreed Brad wistfully. "I got some new insights into what it was like. He talked about forgiveness a lot, too. But, Lonnie, his approach sort of reminded me of Dr. Purdy's. I can't see that the conclusion really follows from the presentation. He just presented it as if it did, so everyone felt they had to accept it. He didn't show me where Mrs. Harris should forgive me if I forgive Butch and Daphne. And if she wouldn't be obligated to forgive me, why would God, who has far higher standards? I'm beginning to believe that you can convince people of anything if you have enough credentials and speak as if you expect to be believed.

"But, Lonnie," Brad continued wistfully, "I couldn't help thinking that there must be forgiveness somehow, or Christ wouldn't have talked so much about it. I've just got to find out how to get it."

"Maybe we should try anothah chuach that comes moah down to ouah own level," said Lonnie. "Things always sound so great heah, but Ah always feel kind 'a disappointed 'n empty when Ah leave."

Brad went to bed more cheerful that night. His tired body found real rest. And instead of all those grotesque dreams, he dreamed that he was witnessing the crucifixion first hand. He saw such love and pity in the suffering Christ's expression as he said, "Father, forgive them." He kept wanting to push his way up to the cross, to explain his situation

to Jesus and ask how he could find forgiveness. But the taunting crowd always caused his courage to fail and prevented him.

Chapter Fifteen

Charged

The week that followed the tragic beer party turned cold and blustery. Brad wore his winter coat and scurried from class to class in as little time as possible. Classes went on as usual, but Brad was not always able to concentrate on the lectures. On the other hand, he found a certain relief from the oppressive feeling of guilt and fear by burying himself deep in his studies.

At P.E. on Tuesday afternoon, Butch took up his mocking right away. "So there's the guy that provided the booze at the party last week," he called as Brad came out on the field. "It's a pity someone had to be killed, but what else can be expected when booze is provided for people that aren't old enough to handle it."

"Say, Brad," he said loudly in the locker room later. "Do you know what Larry kept saying when they picked him up? He kept yelling, 'Three cheers for Brad Davis. Brad Davis brought the booze.'"

"If I were the one that bought the booze and tricked someone else into delivering it, I'd keep my mouth shut," Brad finally rejoined.

"Watch what you accuse me of, you little shrimp, or I'll maul you," threatened Butch. "Besides, the records all show that the booze was purchased by Brad Davis on the day of the party. You'll never be able to get out of that."

Butch didn't realize how hard he'd scored. The thought of Larry's drunken nonsense even after his accident really bothered Brad. He must have been too drunk to realize how badly he was hurt. "He didn't even have enough reason left to prepare to die,"

thought Brad. As the troubled young man began to wonder if it were well with Larry's soul, all the guilt feelings came flooding back full force.

Beth was in her usual place across from Brad's station in biology lab that afternoon. She was not unfriendly, but she kept busy with her work. Brad found himself glancing up to watch her more frequently than before, but he was in no mental state to carry on a conversation. He remembered his promise to explain everything to her, but could not get up the nerve to broach the subject. "What's the use?" he soliloquized dejectedly. "She'll never look at me again anyway."

By evening, Lonnie knew that his friend was in a deep depression again. "It's so unfair to see a guy who wouldn't touch the stuff blaming himself because someone else who used it every chance he could got hurt with it," he sighed. He heard Brad tossing around in his bed several times during the night but could think of no way to help.

On Wednesday evening, Lonnie coaxed Brad out to the Big Church again. When Tom Hawkins asked how they were, Lonnie quietly said, "Not so good! That's what we came tonight for, Tom. Brad's got himself a real problem that he needs help with. Can we see y'all in the office?"

"Sure thing," said the counselor. "We all need the help of others occasionally. That's what I'm here for. Can you meet me right after the service?...Or should it be sooner?" he added quickly as he saw Lonnie's disappointment.

"Now!" said Lonnie firmly. "Hit's bad, Tom." So the three of them quietly slipped back to Tom's office, where Lonnie related the problem to the sympathetic churchman.

"Wow!" said Tom when the story was over. "They really laid one on to you, Brad. How do you feel about being used this way?"

"I feel terrible, Tom," Brad answered slowly. "I'm angry enough with Butch and Daphne, but I think I could handle that. What I can't take is the guilt of it all. I have to admit to myself that I purposely abstained from investigating that box because I didn't want to know the truth. I knew that I would have to face an embarrassing conflict with the girl I was allowing to entice me, if I faced the facts. So I almost subconsciously excused myself from what I knew to be my duty and became partially guilty for Larry's death."

"Now, Brad," Tom counseled. "We've got to be realistic about this. We can't allow you to have a guilt complex about something that any other normal person your age would have done under the same circumstances. Religious psychologists today tell us that ethics are situational. Only if we do worse than others would do in the same situation are we really guilty in a moral sense. To condemn yourself here would be to condemn mankind in general, for virtually all of us would have done the same in this situation. And besides, what else could you have done without embarrassing Daphne?"

"Try and tell Larry's mother that right now," replied Brad. "She'll probably define guilt as, 'Doing what you know is wrong despite your conscience.' And somehow, I think God would even define it as, 'Doing what you should know is wrong, whether you bothered to find out or not.'"

"Larry's mother will have to learn the secret of forgiving others if she wants to feel forgiven herself," said Tom. But Brad had a hard time relating his guilt to her forgiveness. How could what she did have any bearing on whether or not what he had done was right or wrong? Was not God Himself the only judge that mattered?

"You need to talk this over with your parents, Brad," said the frustrated counselor. "You may need to get some intensive psychiatric therapy. Deep guilt feelings like this can destroy a man." So it was determined that Brad would go home for the week-end after his Friday classes were over.

Brad cut P.E. on Thursday. He absolutely could not face Butch in his present state of mind. Hardly admitting to himself why, he went up to the biology lab instead. His heart raced as he checked to see if she was there. Then, when he saw her at her regular station, he was almost afraid to go in. Her cheerful "Hello, Brad," sent shivers up his spine.

"Catching up on your drawings?" he asked a little breathlessly. He was vaguely aware of a peculiarly pleasant sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Sort of," she said. "I guess I was really just hoping you might come by." Seeing his grin, she blushed crimson. "I mean," she stammered, "You seem so miserable all of a sudden. Kind of like a little black cloud is following you about at head level. I just want to know if I can help," she finished lamely.

"Beth," he answered. "It's a big cloud, and I don't know how to handle it." Suddenly he found himself pouring out the story of how he had let Daphne dupe him.

"It's not fair," she asserted as he finished. "If you were anything like I was, you were totally exhausted after all those tests. They picked on you when you were weak. And you weren't even part of the partying crowd. I'm glad to know exactly what happened, Brad. But I knew you weren't purposely involved like that little tramp tried to imply."

"Thanks, Beth," he smiled warmly. And then he felt her wall of reserve coming up again. They both finished the hour more or less silently, working on their drawings. He glanced up hopefully several times, but she seemed to have withdrawn into a shell.

"I'll be praying for you, Brad," she said softly as they left the room. He had no more direct contact with her for the rest of the week and could only speculate on her feelings about him after his "Confession."

* * *

Early Friday afternoon, the campus police called Brad out of Spanish class to go to the dean's office. Brad followed the officer meekly to the administration building, and into the dean's office, where a sheriff's deputy sat with the dean.

"Are you Brad Davis?" questioned the policeman.

"Yes, Sir."

"There was a beer party involving quite a few college students last week," stated the deputy. "An underage student became intoxicated and was killed on the highway. In the hospital emergency room, he kept saying, 'Three cheers for Brad Davis. Brad Davis brought the beer.' He wasn't rational, but several other sources have confirmed that you purchased the beer and transported it to the party. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Brad recounted his side of the story, not mentioning his reserves about the box in the back of the truck. "Then how do you account for this?" asked the officer, pulling out the original copy of the bottle store's receipt with Brad's name on it.

"Don't you think that the people who engineered the rest of this mess could have engineered that, too?" Brad pointed out.

"You probably used a false ID card," accused the deputy, almost savagely. "You contributed largely to the death of a minor, and I intend to see that you are prosecuted." Rising to leave, he pulled an already completed paper from his pocket and served Brad a court summons on the spot.

Anger flared in Brad's face. "I told him the truth," he said. "He didn't even listen to my side of the story."

"No," the dean agreed. "It seemed that his mind was already made up. But we'll check your story out, son. And if we find you are telling the truth, we'll do what we can to help you. Meanwhile, I think you'd better get in touch with your parents right away. This could be serious."

Chapter Sixteen

Home

Brad went directly to his room from the dean's office. Opening the door, he startled Lonnie, who was at the computer. The southerner scrambled to get his screen cleared as Brad entered the room.

"Love letter, or something," Brad teased, holding back until the private material disappeared from the screen. "Hope she's worthy of you, Pal."

"Now Brad," the other boy replied. "Y'all knows that Ah'm a'scared 'a wimmen."

"I just got my summons," Brad said wryly.

"Been wonderin' when it'd come," replied Lonnie. "Those guys ain't a'stoppin' 'till they've got themselves covahed."

Gathering his things hurriedly, Brad started for his truck. The thought of seeing Mom and Dad encouraged his troubled spirits. One thing sure, they would believe him.

The Green Monster started slowly. The old six-volt starter was barely going to be adequate when the really cold weather set in, Brad mused. "I don't use it enough to keep the battery charged."

The old engine missed occasionally on the road to Hillside. Brad kept his mind busy trying to figure out what the problem might be. "I'll need to check out the points and the choke," he decided. "If they're OK, it could be the vacuum advance."

Brad arrived home at around five in the afternoon. He was a mite disappointed that Mom wasn't there. He raided the kitchen for some milk and cookies and sat down at the TV to wait for her to arrive. He was horrified to hear his name on the news. "...Charged with providing minors with liquor in an incident where a Riley College student was killed in a highway accident last week."

Mrs. Davis arrived home a few minutes later to find Brad in a disconsolate frame of mind. She was all dressed up to go out to dinner with Mr. Davis and another couple. Sensing her son's deep depression, she resolved to call and cancel the engagement. She wondered at the other woman's insight over the phone. "Yes, we understand," her friend had said. "Of course your place is with that boy tonight, no matter what."

Brad's Father arrived home shortly. "You are going with us, aren't you?" he asked, grabbing the boy's hand heartily. But Brad's mother interrupted quickly.

"I've cancelled the dinner," she said with forced lightness. "We're going to stay home and enjoy Brad ourselves tonight."

Sensing his wife's misgivings, Mr Davis began to observe the morose lad more carefully as they awaited the quick makeshift dinner the sensitive woman scurried to prepare.

"How's the school work coming, Son?" the father asked quietly.

"OK, Dad," came the forced reply.

"Are you acing everything in the true Davis tradition?" Dad quipped lightly. Brad knew that Dad wasn't interested in family records.

"Looks good in everything except Spanish," Brad replied. "And I guess that's all right, too, but probably just a 'B' coming there."

"You don't look too relaxed," Dad explored. "Is something wrong?"

"Yeah, Dad. Real wrong. Can we talk about it after supper?"

So the Davis family ate an uneasy meal, each trying to display a carefree attitude that none really felt. Mom valiantly brought out a cherry pie and some ice cream, but all three of them only half-finished the dessert. Finally Dad said, "Brad, there's no need to hide anything from each other. We're all on pins and needles, so lets have out with it and see what can be done. Tell us what the problem is."

"You're going to find this hard to believe, Dad..." Brad began.

"Wait," the older man said, placing a hand on Brad's shoulder. "We're going to believe it just as you tell it. We've lived together a long time, and you have earned our trust. We believe in you, Son."

His mind more at ease, Brad was able to spell the whole story out accurately to his folks. Dad interrupted occasionally to clarify things in his own mind. Mom listened silently, with a drawn face. Her knuckles whitened as Brad told of the news broadcast he had heard that evening."

"I'm no lawyer," said Mr. Davis when Brad had finished. "But I think we're in real trouble. This thing was expertly devised to provide a scapegoat for the perpetrators if anything went wrong. I'll try to set up an appointment with our attorney in the morning. I don't think we have a lot of time to lose when they're so actively trying to pin the guilt on you."

Mrs. Davis knocked softly at Brad's door just after he went to bed that evening. "I'm glad you came home to get our help with this, Brad," she said. "Your Dad is a capable man and will find you help if it's available. And whatever happens, we'll never believe you're guilty."

"That's just the problem, Mom," said Brad sadly. "There's a way in which I am guilty. Even if I get clear of the law, I'll always know that if I'd been man enough to challenge Daphne about that box, Larry would still be alive."

"Honey, you're being a man is what made you so gullible for a wheedling, snugly woman. I should have warned you, but you were just my innocent little boy when you left. Any woman worth your attention will never manipulate you with her body. Guard your dignity there just as carefully as you maintain it everywhere else.

"And Brad, it's impossible to speculate on what would have happened to that boy if you hadn't suckered in to their plan. I'm quite sure they would have taken that keg out there themselves if they hadn't been able to get someone else to do their dirty work for them. So let's keep any guilt you feel in its proper perspective."

"I don't know," Brad answered doubtfully. "I still don't feel right with God about it." Mrs. Davis went to her room slowly. It had been a long time since she had considered her relationship with God. It was an uneasy feeling.

Mr. Davis and Brad met with the lawyer at nine o'clock the next morning. He was a suave little middle-aged man who dressed immaculately. "It looks pretty rough," he said slowly after hearing Brad's story. "They've set up quite a case against you. It's going to be hard to beat when so many people saw you arrive with that keg. It might be best just to plead guilty and ask for leniency."

"No way!" said Mr. Davis. "Brad had no intention of breaking the law when he agreed to help Daphne, and we're not letting them pin it on him without a fight."

"It'll be expensive and pretty iffy, but we can try if you want," replied the Lawyer. "But, Brad, you'd better tell me the whole truth so I can work on all the angles."

"I've told you nothing but the truth," Brad returned testily.

"OK" said the lawyer. "I just wanted to be sure. I feel a lot more dedicated to causes I really believe in. I'll get to work on it Monday. Meanwhile, don't discuss this with anyone. Even the police officer that investigated this may be a good friend of the paramedic. Just refer any questions to me."

Brad and his parents sat around the house trying to talk for several hours after lunch. But the only topic on anyone's mind was the unpleasant circumstances Brad was caught in. Finally, Mrs. Davis said, "We may as well drop this subject before we all go nuts."

"Right," said Brad. "I'm going out to the garage to tune up the Green Monster."

"I think that would be a good idea," agreed Dad. "I think I'll watch the game on TV."

"I'm going to figure out a good place for us to go out to dinner," Mom said more cheerfully.

Chapter Seventeen

Suspect

Brad changed into some old clothes with more anticipation than he had felt for several days. Dad wouldn't know a starter from a generator, but he wished he did. He had encouraged Brad's practical interest in mechanical things by getting him automotive tools for his last several birthdays. The youth now had a respectable collection of essentials stored nicely in the workbench in the garage. "It will be good to get into the shop again," Brad thought as he put his coveralls on.

The first thing Brad did when he entered the garage was to check the choke adjustment on the cold engine. "Not far off," he muttered as he adjusted it a little richer for winter starting. Before he started the engine, he ran an old vacuum cleaner hose from the exhaust pipe of the Monster to an appropriate hole he had drilled through the garage's foundation last year to expel fumes from running engines. He knew that lots of guys ran their engines for short times without this precaution, but Brad liked to play it safe. Then he started the Monster's engine, and listened for any clues on what he should check out next.

Not finding any good clues, Brad removed the distributor cap and looked at the points. They were pitted enough that they could be the problem, but he doubted it. Scratching the timing mark on the pulley with some white chalk, he hooked up his timing light. "Right on," he said as he saw the white line sitting steadily on the arrow. Twisting the butterfly valve on the carburetor with his hand, he watched the line advance normally with acceleration. "Vacuum advance seems OK," he thought.

"Probably points and condenser," Brad speculated to himself. "A weak condenser could have caused that premature pitting on the points." Removing the exhaust hose, he hurried down to the parts store and purchased the new ignition parts.

"I'm going to have to hurry if Mom wants us to go out tonight," Brad told himself as he came back to the garage. He replaced the exhaust hose on the Monster's tail pipe and set right in to removing the points. The second time he dropped his screwdriver, it rolled clear back beneath the rear end of the car. Scurrying back to pick it up, he tripped over the makeshift hose. "I've got to slow down or I'll never get done," said Brad chuckling at his paradoxical statement. He replaced the jerked hose on the tailpipe, and returned to the opened hood. He had the new points and condenser in, in a jiffy and adjusted the gap carefully. He started the engine, and hooked up the timing light again. Loosening the locking bolts, he twisted the distributor to where the timing mark assumed the correct position. Satisfied, he locked in the new timing adjustment. Feeling unnaturally tired, he removed the timing light and decided to finish up with a quick carburetor adjustment. Putting his tools away wearily, he climbed into the driver's seat to rev the engine critically. That is where they found him unconscious ten minutes later.

* * *

GUILTY!! Brad struggled confusedly to free himself from the oppressive forces that gripped him. The harsh unfamiliar noises jangled painfully through his head. Each jarring sound seemed to echo, "Guilty". Would they never go away?

Even breathing was strangely difficult for Brad. It seemed impossible to expel his last breath before another gulp of air was being forced back into his lungs. No amount of jerking could rid him of the smothering mask pressed so firmly on his face.

What was happening? So many conflicting things were going on at the same time that Brad couldn't figure out what was happening. A vague influence seemed to lure him back towards blissful sleep again. A stronger impulse urged him to wake up and face reality. Something was dreadfully wrong. It had to be attended to immediately, despite the discordant pain. He had to face it. He must face it. He would face it!

Slowly Brad forced his eyes opened. Dazzling lights from above almost blinded his confused squint. Gradually he became able to focus a little. Intent faces of pale uniformed personnel glared down at him. Every movement, every word seemed calculated to hurt. Even the thin green oxygen tubing seemed to hiss, "Guilty" at him. Was everything in the world against him?

The pressure in his aching head rose to an intolerable crescendo as the paramedic squeezed the bag-mask again. Air squeaked by the opposing mask as Brad exhaled forcefully against it. "He's bucking," growled the paramedic as he forced the mask yet tighter against Brad's face. With a supreme effort, Brad jerked his right hand free of the nurse's and managed to grab the suffocating mask away from his face.

The paramedic determinedly tried to replace the mask on Brad's face. "Let me breathe," Brad gasped desperately as he fended it away with his free hand. The nurse grabbed his hand again.

"Hold still," yelled the frustrated medic as he jammed the mask back on Brad's face.

Suddenly an older man with a stethoscope appeared in the room. "You can stop breathing for him now," he said in a calm, yet authoritative voice. As Brad relaxed, he heard the doctor quietly reminding the paramedic student not to interfere with adequate spontaneous respirations of any patient. "Amen," thought the young man.

By this time Brad was fully conscious and at least partially adjusted to his surroundings. He was obviously in the emergency room of a hospital. The paramedic was just a student from Riley, probably one of Butch's friends. "Yes," Brad remembered. "He was at that party." Brad didn't recognize the nurse, but he'd seen her somewhere, he thought. He didn't know the doctor at all.

The doctor was hurriedly performing a physical exam on Brad. He shined his penlight in his eyes. He asked Brad to look at a penciled "X" on the ceiling while he peered into his eyes with an instrument. He moved quickly along Brad's body from head to foot, stopping occasionally to jot notes on the chart. His manner was brisk, but not unfriendly. "A busy, impersonal man," thought Brad.

"What happened?" Brad asked. "Why am I here?" His voice sounded muffled through his oxygen mask.

"You don't remember what happened?" asked the doctor.

"No," said the confused boy. "Did something happen to me? I don't feel any pain except for this awful headache. Did I get hurt?"

"Not exactly," said the doctor. "Are you really not going to tell me what happened? I can get you help, Brad, if you'll let me?"

Brad was just starting to ask what the doctor meant when Mom came rushing in. "Oh, Brad", she sobbed. "Why did you? Oh, Son, you've been through so much lately. We should have gotten you help."

"I'm sorry, Son," she added after a pause.

Mom's tears almost brought tears to Brad's eyes, too. He loved her so much. "Sorry for what, Mom? What happened, anyway?"

Mom's eyes looked away. "It'll be all right, Son. Everything will be all right. Don't worry, Brad. We'll get you some help, and everything will be all right."

By now Brad was aware that Dad had come in, too. He was questioning the doctor. "How is he now?"

"Looking much better," said the doctor. "He's coming around quite nicely now. He's out of danger. A couple more hours to breathe it out, and he should be O.K. except for a headache for a while."

"Does that mean we can take him home tonight?" asked Dad.

"Oh, no," said the doctor. "We'll keep him down here on oxygen for a few more minutes, but we'll have to admit him for psychiatric therapy after that." Brad saw his Dad wince momentarily at the mention of psychiatric therapy. Then he regained his composure.

"If that's what we need, that's what we'll get."

"It wouldn't be safe to send a serious suicide attempt like this home without it," said the doctor with a professional air of finality as he walked out of the room.

"Did he say suicide?" Brad asked looking up at Dad with big questioning eyes. "What did happen? Dad."

"I don't really know, Son. We came out to the garage to find out when you would be ready to go and found you unconscious in your truck with the engine running."

"Oh, yeah," said Brad struggling to remember. "I was working on the Monster."

"Yes, but there were no tools, and there was a hose connected to the exhaust," Dad stated pointedly.

"I was just finishing up," said Brad pointing to his greasy hands.

"But the hose?" said his confused father.

"That's what I always pipe the exhaust out of the garage with," Brad replied. "I tripped on it once, but I made sure it was back on the tail pipe."

"Did you check the other end?" asked Dad, almost relieved.

"Probably not," Brad replied sheepishly.

Shortly afterwards, a policeman came into the room to interview Brad. After hearing his explanation, he asked Mr. Davis to take him to the garage for a look around.

"Everything's just as the kid says," said the officer. "This was an accident, not a suicide attempt. They tell me another couple of minutes would have been fatal, though."

A brief conference between the policeman and the doctor won Brad his freedom. The family stopped for a light snack at the Dairy Queen on the way home. "We'll have that dinner out tomorrow after church," promised Dad.

Chapter Eighteen

The Fight

Brad slept in on Sunday morning. His parents felt that was the best therapy available for him. Mom stayed home from church to be with him when he awoke. She fixed pancakes and sausage when she heard him stirring, around nine-thirty in the morning.

"How are you this morning?" she asked cheerfully.

"OK except for a headache," Brad answered.

"The doctor predicted that you'd have one for several days from all that carbon monoxide," she volunteered. "I'm sure glad we're not making funeral arrangements today."

"Mom, when I recall Larry's mother trying to take care of his things, I can hardly bear it. I'd give anything to have that load of guilt off my back."

"I know it, Son. The doctor said you kept mumbling about being guilty while you were coming to, yesterday. I wish I could tell you more about how to handle it, but I can't. But don't let it get out of proportion, hear?"

"Yeah, Mom. What you said about that yesterday is true. They would have gotten that keg out there one way or another, whether I had helped or not. I guess what I'm finding out is that good old church-going Brad Davis isn't really any better than anyone else when the going gets rough. I never thought about sin and forgiveness much before. I guess I never thought I needed it. But now I'd give a lot to understand it."

"Wouldn't we all?" sighed Mrs. Davis. "Tell me about it if you find the answer."

The family had a nice, quiet dinner out in the middle of the afternoon. Brad left for school around four o'clock, feeling closer to his parents than ever before. "Buck up, boy," Dad encouraged him. "And let us know of any new developments. I'll be in touch with the lawyer and call you if necessary. Come home weekends if you think you can make it without hurting your grades."

Brad gently kissed his mother good-bye. It seemed so unjust for her to have to suffer this way. "I'd try praying," she said. "But I don't really know how to go about it. Isn't it gross that we've been to church regularly all our lives and don't even know how to pray?"

The Monster ran like a charm on the road to Riley that afternoon. Brad's thoughts started out on God and right and wrong and praying and forgiveness. As he approached Riley they imperceptibly drifted over to Beth Hardy and whatever she must think of him. That pleasant little sick feeling in his stomach appeared, and he could hardly wait to see her.

Lonnie was relieved to see his friend looking so much better. Brad told him about his brush with death. They had a good laugh over the suicide suspicions, although they made Lonnie a little more serious than usual. They finally went over to the dining hall just before closing time. "Now why ain't cha eatin'," he chided.

"I didn't finish dinner until three," Brad excused himself. But Lonnie noticed the blush that spread uncontrollably up from his neck.

"I understand," said Lonnie. And he did.

"Say, Brad," Lonnie offered later in the evening. "I've got some real sweet lettahs on a disc undah my desk. Ifin' they ain't so mushy they's tu'ned moldy we could program 'em up foa herh. All we'd have ta do is change the names on 'em."

"Thanks, Doc," Brad shot back. "If they didn't work for you, I don't need them."

"Shucks, Ah ain't nevah used 'em, Brad. Ah jist write one up evah now 'n then so's Ah kin take caah 'a that business without interruptin' mah Pac Man when the time comes. They's mostly got mah cute li'l English teachah's name on 'em now. 'Ts the only good grades Ah've gotten in theah."

For the next several days, Brad's thoughts zeroed in on Beth rather than his other problem. Lonnie maintained that he wasn't sure which was worse. Brad didn't admit to anything, but neither did he deny it. Beth always had a cheerful greeting and sometimes a wistful smile for Brad. But her wall of reserve seemed impenetrable.

* * *

On Thursday evening, Brad slipped over to the Student Union to play some Ping-Pong. He had developed a good backhand slam and had learned to catch slams easily with a backhand chop. He could hold on to a table for a reasonable time now, the winner staying up for another game and the loser turning over his end of the table to the next challenger.

After a few hard fast games, Brad had lost the table. He was sitting at the side drinking some cocoa when Butch came stumbling in. Brad rose to leave, but the bigger boy saw him.

"I hear you couldn't take the guilt anymore, so you tried to commit suicide," Butch called loudly. "I guess it would be hard to live with yourself after killing that kid with booze."

"You've got the story wrong, Butch," Brad said quietly. "But even if it were true, you and your buddies are not supposed to publish the privileged information you learn about others, are you? You're not being professional."

Butch moved closer. Although he was not dead drunk, he had a heavily alcoholic breath. Grabbing Brad by the front of his shirt, he pulled him up close to his livid face. "Apologize for that," he demanded, choking the smaller boy by twisting his collar. "Apologize before I wipe the floor with your dead body."

In a panic, Brad landed a solid blow on the unsuspecting bully's belly. Butch gasped, instantaneously letting go of Brad's collar. He recovered immediately. Swinging wildly, he moved murderously in towards Brad.

Brad blocked the wild blows in a natural boxer's stance. Slowly he realized that he was not all that much worse a boxer than his opponent. To the delight of the onlookers, Brad suddenly took a right jab at his adversary's midriff. Butch groaned, backing off as the awkward blow connected.

Thinking the skirmish was over, Brad dropped his guard, only to find another rain of relatively ineffective blows coming at him again. A fleeting vision of the drunken Larry coming home without an ounce of dignity crossed Brad's mind. Sudden anger welled up in him as Butch landed a fair one on his left ear.

"Butch is drunk," he reasoned. "Now's my chance to really humiliate him." With fearless resolve, he savagely tore into his surprised tormentor. Blood spurted from Butch's nose as Brad connected with a left. That whetted Brad's appetite. Moving smoothly and precisely, he began to cut his opponent down. Every blow that connected vented hateful passions built up over the last several months. It felt good! He wanted to mash that ugly face, and he was doing it bit by bit. Finally, Brad connected with the

old left jab to the chin followed by a right cross to the jaw combination that his high school P.E. teacher had taught him. Butch sank to the floor as Brad backed off. But as Brad turned to leave, the enraged football player grabbed his leg from behind. Pulling him down close, Butch began to meet out some retribution on the floor. Half-blinded by Butch's short, heavy punches to his face, Brad jerked himself free.

A pulse of irrational rage completely commandeered Brad's soul. He would kill the bully this time. Jamming his knee violently into Butch's stomach, he heard the breath escape like a released steam valve. Rising to slam in again, he felt strong supportive arms grasping him from behind.

"Easy, Brad, oah you'll kill him," came Lonnie's settling voice.

"I guess that's what I was trying to do," said Brad. Then, as he realized the implications of his admission, he ran for the security of his room.

"Is he OK?" asked Brad fearfully when Lonnie came in a few minutes later. "Is he going to be OK?"

"Butch?" asked Lonnie. "Shuah he's OK. He's givin' his doahm monitoahs fits, kind of like Larry did, but he's OK."

"He's built like a Shuahmin tank, Brad," Lonnie murmured later. "How'd y'all do it?"

"He was drunk, Lonnie, and didn't have all his abilities. He forced it on me, though, and wouldn't let it stop. But Lonnie, when he pulled me to the floor and started mauling me, I lost all my senses. I was really going to kill him. I'm a murderer at heart, Lonnie. What can I do?"

"Foa statahs, don't be gittin' angry with me," Lonnie joked.

But when he looked up, Brad was sobbing like a baby. "I need forgiveness, Lonnie. How can I get forgiveness?"

Lonnie was unable to help.

Chapter Nineteen

"X"

Brad's victory over Butch left nothing but a bitter taste in his mouth. He arose Friday morning to find his face swollen noticeably and his left eye slightly purple, but there was little real pain. He was not particularly shy about his altered appearance until he thought of Beth. "What will she think of me now?" he panicked. "If I ever had a chance with her, I've blown it now. First, I get arrested for carting beer around to parties, and now I'm involved in a drunken brawl."

As Brad mournfully contemplated his situation, philosophical tones began to vibrate. "I considered myself innocent in this fight because Butch started it. But I think Beth would not approve of it because she is so pure and innocent. Then I must not really consider my conduct pure and innocent, or I would expect Beth to approve of it. Ergo: I'm self-condemned.

"Boy!" Brad's mind continued. "If she knew how I actually wanted to kill Butch, there would be no question of purity or innocence. Thank God Lonnie came when he did."

Brad finished shaving and dug his sunglasses out of his drawer. He felt hypocritical trying to hide behind them. "You'ah not covahin' up youah badge of victory?" asked Lonnie impishly.

"Just hiding my shame," Brad admitted miserably. "I wish I'd left instead of fighting, despite what folks would have thought of me."

Though he yearned to be near her, Brad avoided Beth like the plague all day Friday and went home for the weekend.

"What happened to your face?" Brad's mother exclaimed as he walked in the door. "Ran into that same football player that sent you that emergency room bill last month," Brad answered evasively. "But it's only superficial. I'll be OK by Monday."

Dad questioned Brad more persistently while Mom was in the kitchen. He seemed to thoroughly enjoy Brad's unembellished account of the fight. "You gave him what he deserved, Son. I'm proud of you."

"Dad, if we got what we deserve all the time, we'd all be in trouble. I wish I had backed out of this somehow. It felt real good at the moment, but I'm not proud to be known as a brawler."

"You're wiser than I was being, Son. Stay with it!"

Brad spent the weekend trying to catch up on some of the studying he had let slide lately. He declined to go to church with his parents. Why should he go where they had failed to equip him with the answers he needed so desperately now? he thought.

All weekend long, Brad missed Beth. Though he hardly dared to think of her, he couldn't keep his mind off of her. He was more than ready to start the trip back to Riley, although he knew he wouldn't see her until Monday.

"Youah disease seems ta be gittin' worsen'," Lonnie teased as Brad played with his supper. "Ah been a'sufferin' ta know who she is. Ifin' ya'd let me, Ah could be addressing all them 'lectronic love lettahs to youah Ex."

""My Ex?" asked Brad in spite of himself.

"Ah learned it in algebra," Lonnie grinned proudly. "Mathematicians always label what they don't know nuthin' about an 'X'."

Tuesday afternoon in biology lab, Brad worked away at his drawings in silence. He longed to strike up a conversation with Beth, but he couldn't trust his voice not to quiver. So much was at stake, and he had bungled so many things lately. He contented himself with stealing an occasional glance across the lab desks at her pretty form. Class was almost over when he flashed her one last glance. Her lingering eyes averted an instant too late as a crimson blush painted her face. Thrilled, Brad continued his glance casually beyond her, as if he hadn't noticed. But he would never forget that moment. Never!

"Her blush betrayed her concentration on me," he mused as he walked to his room. "For some reason, she forces herself to resist it, but I think she really likes me."

""She kiss ya, oah somethin'?" probed Lonnie, noticing his lighter step as he entered the room.

Brad's silent grin yielded no news releases.

Wednesday evening Brad went directly to the library to work on a term paper for English. He was anxious to finish the task, and gave himself completely over to it. He was so absorbed in his research that he was caught by surprise when the blinking lights signaled fifteen minutes before closing time. Hastily scribbling some final notes, he pulled on his coat right at the nine o'clock deadline. As he stepped into the entrance foyer, he met Beth hesitating at the door.

"Why, hello," Brad greeted her as casually as he could.

"Hi, Brad," she rejoined cheerfully as they walked into the night together.

"Wow!" Brad said as a cold, sleety rain blasted them. "I didn't notice how the weather was changing."

"No," she said. "You were really engrossed in your work."

She noticed, anyway, Brad rejoiced inwardly.

"How far do you have to go in this?" he asked hopefully.

"Just a couple of miles to my aunt's house," she said wryly.

"My truck is just a block over," he suggested eagerly. "Can I take you home?"

"I'd appreciate it, Brad," she said genuinely. "I didn't come dressed for this weather."

They walked side by side to the parking lot in silence. Brad unlocked her door and let her in. Beth reached across and unlocked Brad's door as he walked around to his side. "Meet the Green Monster," he said as the engine spluttered to life. "My mother named it."

"It's neat," she said. "How old is it?"

"It's a forty-year-old Ford V-8," he said proudly.

"My Dad would have loved it," she said.

They lapsed into silence, watching the icy rain slide down the windshield into the path of the incessant wipers. The three-or-four-minute ride was going to be entirely too brief for Brad.

"It's the first house around the corner," Beth announced. Then, as they pulled into the drive, she asked, "Care for a cup of cocoa?...If my aunt's home."

"Sure," he said boyishly. "Is that her at the door?"

"She's home," announced Beth as he opened her door.

Brad thought, "This is the least inhibited I've ever seen her. Why does she act so reserved most of the time?"

"Meet my Aunt Fran," said Beth as they entered the house.

"Glad to meet you Mrs...."

"Hardy," said the woman. "I'm Beth's father's sister-in-law. I sure appreciate your bringing her home. I can't get her to dress warm enough these days."

"You were sure right this evening," laughed Beth musically. "Meet Brad Davis."

"Oh, so you're the one we've been praying for! Glad to meet you, Brad. Beth told me how you were framed by those awful people. We've been praying together for you every night at our evening devotions... Why don't you kids fix a snack before you go?" She took their coats and left Brad and Beth alone in the living room of the little bungalow.

"Come on out to the kitchen," invited Beth shyly. "I'll get some cookies and cocoa."

"This is a cute little place," said Brad looking around.

"Suits Aunt Fran to a tee," said Beth. "She got it five years ago when her husband died. She invited me to come here to go to school. I couldn't afford it otherwise, but God provided this."

"Beth, I wish I knew more about God," said Brad earnestly.

"It's not so much knowing about Him as it is knowing Him personally. That's what we pray about for you." She looked away as a little tear started down her face. Brad would have liked to kiss it away from that precious little cheek.

"I've found out so much about myself this year," Brad found himself telling her. "I found that I didn't have the courage to make Daphne tell me what was in that box. I didn't have the guts to use the word 'theory' on the biology test. I lost my temper and beat Butch up.... I don't know that God would be interested in me."

"I heard all about the fight," Beth volunteered. "I guess you were pushed pretty hard into that, too."

"Yeah," Brad answered. "He'd done so much to me that I thought I'd enjoy my revenge. But I've been more miserable than ever since then. I wish I'd ignored what everyone else would think and left without fighting."

"I'd rather have you disgraced that way than see you losing your real dignity by sinking to the level of a street fighter," she said wistfully. She was totally unaware of any implication she might be leaving room for.

Suddenly breaking out into a bright smile, she said enthusiastically, "Say, Brad, if you really want to know God, why don't you go and talk to Dr. Baxter. He's close to God, and he invited the whole class to come to him if they had any problems."

"I think I'll do that just as soon as I can," Brad answered, rising to leave. He certainly didn't want to wear out his welcome here.

Chapter Twenty

Forgiveness

Brad drove out into the sleety night floating on air. Despite the weather, he turned the Monster away from Riley. He had to be alone to enjoy his thoughts--to check out their reality. "She blushed when I noticed her looking at me," he mused happily. "And she would rather **have** me with genuine dignity."

"She doesn't seem to hold the fight against me," he thought as he drove slowly out the country highway. "She hates it, and yet she understands how I could have gotten into it." There was no one like Beth. He had to have her, forever.

"Appears that youah algebra's goin' smoothah," Lonnie observed as Brad came in that evening. "Ah'd be a'bettin' that theah 'X' is a'goin' ta be a mighty cute lil' numbah."

Brad silently brushed the sleet off his coat and hung it over the back of his chair to dry. He went straight to bed, but his grin told Lonnie that he was not bad at the mathematics of probability himself.

Visions of Beth came and went all night long. He reviewed his first noticing of her pretty face. He lingered on that revealing picture of her framed so perfectly in the autumn foliage. He placed her in all sorts of beautiful backgrounds--by a water falls, sitting on a rock by a mountain stream, in a wooded bower surrounded by wildflowers. He dared to imagine that they were tripping hand in hand through a lonely field of daisies in the spring. Once he placed her side by side with Daphne, comparing her modest comeliness with Daphne's audacious beauty. "No contest," he thought.

On Thursday, Brad stopped awkwardly by the Chemistry office to make an appointment to see Dr. Baxter. "Scholastic or personal?" asked his secretary pleasantly.

"Personal," Brad replied, wondering how many people answered that way. "Enough that she asks the question," he answered himself.

"He could see you briefly right now," she said. "He'll arrange something with you himself, if it needs more time."

She ushered him right into Dr. Baxter's office with a smile of encouragement.

"Hello, Brad." Dr. Baxter half rose as he reached out to shake Brad's hand warmly. "I'm proud of your progress in chemistry." He pushed his papers to the side of his desk, as if to devote his time to Brad. "What can I do for you?"

"I appreciate your calling me in at the beginning of the semester to get me off to a better start," Brad began. "But I need some help in my personal life now," he said more awkwardly. "I guess I'm in trouble," he said, screwing up his courage.

"Tell me about it," the middle-aged man invited sympathetically.

Brad started off hesitantly recounting the beer keg story. The older man encouraged him to continue, more by his expressions than his occasional comments or questions. Brad soon found himself letting go completely--telling how Daphne had literally wiggled her way right into his judgment. "So I find myself framed in one way and yet guilty in another," Brad finished up.

"Mrs. Smith," called the doctor as Brad finished. "Will you call the bank and ask if I can come in later this afternoon? Tell them something has come up so I can't come now."

"Oh! You don't need to....." Brad started. But Dr. Baxter insisted on Brad's staying right there.

"It looks pretty bad, doesn't it?" said the professor thoughtfully. "I think we're going to need all the help we can get. Are you a praying man, Brad?"

"I guess I don't know how," Brad admitted. "I don't know why God would listen to me anyway." And suddenly Brad was telling Dr. Baxter about the fight. He told the story just as he would have to his best friend, withholding nothing. "It scared me," said Brad when he told of his realization that he had actually wanted to kill his opponent. "I might have been a murderer if Lonnie hadn't come along," he admitted ruefully.

"Dr. Baxter, I heard a graphic sermon about the crucifixion a few weeks ago. For the first time, I realized how very much the Christ suffered for men. His words still ring through my soul. You know, 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they're doing.' I relived it all that night in my dreams. I tried to get up to the cross and ask him to forgive me too. He would, wouldn't he?" Brad paused hopefully. "Beth told me if I wanted to know God, you could help me," he added, hopefully, searching the doctor's moist eyes with his own.

"Brad," Dr. Baxter began slowly. "What did they write on the cross when they crucified Christ?"

When Brad hesitated, his mentor pulled a well-worn Bible off the shelf behind him. "Read it," he invited, turning to Matthew chapter twenty-seven. "Verse thirty-seven," he prompted with his finger.

Brad read aloud, "And they put up above His head the charge against Him which read, 'THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.'"

"It seems that when the Romans executed their criminals by crucifixion," continued the doctor, "they posted the charge against them at the tops of their crosses. That would mean that they labeled the crosses on either side of Jesus with the respective names of the two thieves and their accusations. But when it came to Jesus, there was nothing they could accuse him of. He was the sinless Son of God. He had never done anything unkind or bad. The only accusation they could come up with was a simple statement of who He was."

"Now read this," the doctor invited turning the pages over to Colossians, chapter two, verses thirteen and fourteen. Brad stumbled aloud through the unfamiliar phraseology.

"Having forgiven us all our transgressions," Dr. Baxter reiterated the highlights. "Having cancelled out the certificate of debt...against us...; He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to His cross."

"They could nail no accusation to His cross, Brad. But it's just as if Christ himself takes all the 'certificate of debt against us' and nails it there above His own head as the real crimes He was dying for that day. You see, Brad, God's son was paying the penalty for all the crimes those who will receive Him ever committed. If 'the wages of sin is death,' then 'Christ died for our sins.'"

"That means," Brad said in holy wonder, "that Christ died as my substitute rather than my example."

"You've got it, Brad," said the doctor as he rose to leave. "Think about it, make it yours, and get back to me. I've got a class."

"So do I," Brad said, noticing the time. They walked out of the room together.

Not even the presence of Beth across the lab desk distracted Brad's thoughts as he pattered away at his drawings that afternoon. He was full of his great discovery that Christ had died in place of men. He was struggling to find himself in this perspective. He was absentmindedly putting away his things to leave before he even noticed Beth.

"Hi, Beth," he said artlessly. "I had a neat talk with Dr. Baxter a while ago. I just can't quite comprehend the magnitude of what he showed me."

"I could see that you were quite preoccupied. Did you find out how to know God?" she said quizzically.

"Not exactly," he replied thoughtfully. "But I found out why Christ died."

"You know, Beth, I was always taught that He died to show us some vague principle or something. Now I see that he was dying in our place--to give us forgiveness, somehow."

"Yes," she replied, putting her books back down on the lab desk. "God doesn't hold our sins against us if Christ has paid for them."

"You see, Brad, when God sent His Son down to earth, the angel said, 'You shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.' The name 'Jesus' means 'Savior.' It's no accident that when they crucified Him, they wrote on His cross, 'THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.' God wanted us to know that Christ was dying as our savior."

"But," said Brad coming around to face her. "Somehow that doesn't apply to everyone. Some people don't even care."

"That's just it, Brad. Those who repent of their sins and appropriate Christ's death on the cross as for them are completely forgiven. But those who don't accept God's arrangement to forgive their sins will have to suffer for their own sins."

Seeing his still puzzled expression, she continued. "It's like a check, Brad. I could write you a check for a fortune. You could talk about it or frame it or whatever. It would be for you, but you wouldn't get a penny until you bothered to cash it."

"How?" asked Brad.

The girl unconsciously grasped both his shoulders in her earnestness. "Just tell God you accept Christ's death in the place of your own. Do it in your heart right now. Do it on your knees at home. But Brad, do it!"

"I do," said Brad earnestly. "He took all my guilt away. and I'm free of it all." They stared into each other's eyes at the wonder of it for a moment. Brad wasn't aware of her hands on his shoulders until he saw the blush on her face as she herself realized they were there. He would cherish this moment later.

"Can I take you home?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes. Thank you, Brad." She flashed him a shy, rosy smile that he would not forget.

"I've got to get home and tell this to Lonnie," Brad said as he left her at the door of Aunt Fran's house.

When Brad came into the room a few minutes later, Lonnie was waiting to go to the dining hall with him. "Ah thought y'all might be a'workin' on youah algebra," he explained. "So Ah jist been a'waitin' patiently foa you ta come. Say," he said noticing Brad's expression, "it's a'lookin' like youah about ta git that problem solved."

"I don't know about the algebra, Lonnie. But I got the biggest problem in my life solved today."

Tears welled up in Lonnie's eyes as Brad explained about how Christ had died as their substitute, to take away their sins. "It's jist what we've been a'lookin' foa, Brad," he said seriously. "Ah'm tellin' Him Ah wants His salvation now."

So both boys knelt side by side and poured out their awkward thanks to God for His salvation. "And yesterday we didn't even know how to pray," Brad grinned as they arose happily.

After dinner, Brad put a phone call in to Dr. Baxter. "I was sure that you would want to know that Lonnie and I are both forgiven," he told the doctor. Brad could almost hear the good man's smile over the telephone. He warmly invited the new Christians to a Bible study at his home on Thursday evenings. "We'll be there this Thursday," said Brad enthusiastically.

Brad had hardly put down the phone when it started ringing. It was his Dad. "The lawyer just called, Brad. Your trial is scheduled for the last Friday of this month. He wants to come to Riley tomorrow morning at eleven to plan a strategy."

"I'll be here, Dad," Brad replied. "I have lots to tell you about. And tell Mom that I found out about forgiveness." Brad slept better than he had for a long time that night.

Chapter Twenty-one

Lonnie's Help

Saturday morning was cold and blustery. Brad felt that yearning to be with Beth stronger than ever before. If he could think of some excuse, he'd try to see her this evening for sure.

Promptly at eleven o'clock, a knock at the door announced that the visitors from Hillside had arrived. After introductions, Lonnie helped Brad arrange three chairs in a triangle at the foot of the beds. He started out the door, but Brad asked him to stay. The lawyer started to object, but Brad explained that Lonnie was "Just like a brother" and could help with the details.

"Now, tell me everything from the very beginning," the lawyer instructed Brad. So Brad and Lonnie told everything of their relationship with Butch from the first of the school year.

The older men interrupted occasionally, but mostly just let the boys tell their story. They could not repress a chuckle now and then and laughed heartily at Lonnie's football escapades. But Mr. Davis found it hard to control his anger on hearing Lonnie's account of Brad's injury when Butch sent him to the emergency room.

"I see that we're dealing with a treacherous man," said the lawyer. "And he's probably got someone on the police force or something who helped him set this up so cunningly."

"We can't deny that you hauled that keg out there," he mused after a pause. "And it will be difficult to convince the jury that you were duped into it, unless we can produce positive evidence that you were framed."

"That's going to be especially hard when they have the original receipt like this one with my name on it," said Brad, producing the yellow copy from the bottle store. "Butch shoved it into my pocket when he repaid me the twenty dollars I loaned Daphne."

Taking the receipt in his hand, the lawyer groaned aloud as he began to comprehend what it was. "They'll hang their whole case on hard evidence like this."

"I wonder where they got it?" he said, looking suspiciously at Brad.

"Obviously a false ID was used," Brad pointed out. "Their implication that I had the age changed would not be any more feasible than our contention that they had a false card made up."

"Good point," conceded the lawyer. "We can use it to our advantage, but it's not going to smash their case. If they only had a time on the receipt, we might be able to prove that you were somewhere else when the booze was purchased."

Apparently bored with the details, Lonnie unobtrusively moved his chair over to the computer desk as the rest continued to hash over the possibilities. Brad was a little amused at the lawyer's irritated glance at his buddy as he booted up the Gamin' Disc. The man would have had to have know Lonnie to have understood this.

Little was being accomplished as the three consulting heads grew quieter and quieter at the hopelessness of the case. There didn't seem to be any plan of action any better than the rest. Things were bleak.

"Hey, Brad!" Lonnie interrupted the struggling conference. "What weah y'all doin' at nine-thirty thet Friday mawnin'?"

"We need to be left alone," the lawyer looked up at Lonnie sourly.

"I was taking a chemistry test from nine 'till almost ten," Brad said thoughtfully. "I've got a ninety-nine to prove it."

"Thet theah receipt was wrote at exactly nine twenty-three on Friday mawnin'."

"How do you know?" queried the lawyer skeptically. "There's not even a spot for time on the receipt."

"Yes," agreed Lonnie. "But theah computah automatically recoads a time field internally on ev'ry transaction reoad. Ifin' you all's receipt is numbah 00021956, that reoad was made at nine twenty-three."

They all crowded around the computer to view the record Lonnie had on the screen. "That's what it says, all right," said the lawyer. "If you can prove that you were taking that chemistry test at that time, we've got a reasonable chance."

"Dr. Baxter will vouch for that," Brad said positively. Everyone sighed with relief.

"Wait a minute!" said Brad pensively. "How did you get the bottle store's record on this computer?"

"Well, said Lonnie reluctantly. "Mah gamin' disc helps me ta check on things like thet. See, Ah've got the campus mapped out with these heah squahs. Ifin' Ah wants ta check on sompthin' in the dean's files, Ah jist moves mah little man ovah ta theah 'n push F-12, 'n his files comes up foa review. The administration building is ovah heah, 'n so on. When youah troubles started, Brad, Ah started on accessin' the bottle stoah's recoads. 'T's a good thing they'ah hooked up ta a central computah by the phone lines, oah it couldn't be done. 'T took me up ta this Monday ta crack theah codes. Don't y'all tell no one, oah I'll be writin' ya from prison foa cookies."

"Why are you doing this?" said the lawyer. "Don't you know what a serious offense it is?"

"Shucks!" Lonnie replied in an innocent voice. "Ah ain't offended no one yet. But Ah got ta wondering wheah all them govahment grants was a'goin', so Ah set about ta find out. Ah ain't nevah changed nothin' any wheah. But aftah seein' all the waste 'n hanky pank, Ah been teahible tempted to appropriate a students' coffee 'n donut fund foa all ouah eight o'clock classes."

"How can you get those records to the courts without causing Lonnie any trouble?" Mr. Davis asked the lawyer gravely.

"If the bottle store can print out that stuff on the screen, I can subpoena that very record," replied the lawyer thoughtfully. "The prosecution doesn't have to know how we found out what to ask for."

"Jist ask 'em for a printout of theah monthly liquor sales file," said Lonnie authoritatively.

"You be careful what you get involved in, young man.", remonstrated the lawyer to Lonnie as he put his coat on. "I'd have a hard time defending such activities in court."

"Theah harmless in mah hands," Lonnie assured him.

"And don't breathe a word of this to anyone," the lawyer warned as he walked out the door. "The less they know of our strategy, the less chance they'll have to alter the records, or set up phony witnesses."

"Coming home tonight?" Brad's dad asked his son as he followed the lawyer out the door.

Seeing the consternation on Brad's face, Lonnie interceded. "Ah think he's got an awful lot of algebra to do this weekend, Mr. Davis."

"Don't let anything interfere with your studies, Son," Dad replied. He was halfway home before he realized that Brad wasn't taking algebra.

Chapter Twenty-two

Success

As the door closed on the lawyer and Brad's father, Brad turned to Lonnie with new respect. "Where'd you learn that hacking stuff?" he asked admiringly.

"Oh, Brad, Ah guess Ah jist kind'a growed up with it," he mused. "Mah Daddy investigates fraud foa an accountin' firm. Ah had some purty smaht friends in high school that got in ta hackin' foa the fun of it, 'n Ah saw the possibilities foa helpin' mah Daddy. So Ah got 'em ta teach me the basics, 'n Ah jist developed mah own system with the Gamin' Disc from theah."

"But why mix it all up with the Gamin' Disc?" Brad queried.

"It works! Ifin' ennyone comes around, Ah kin jist slip inta an innocent 'lil game 'a Pac Man, 'n they'ah none the wiseah." Lonnie paused. "Ah been able ta find out what happened to Granddaddy's sister's money, 'n ev'rything else Ah wanted ta know 'round heah, 'ceptin' the value of 'X'," he added a mite reproachfully.

"I guess I don't even know whether 'X' is a real or an imaginary number yet myself," Brad lamented. "I thought I'd try to find out this afternoon, Lonnie, but I'm scared to death."

"Sounds like any othah equation ta me," Lonnie observed. "Ya jist got'a put every thing else ta one side 'n find out."

Brad moped around for an hour or so trying to think of a casual way to contact Beth, but there just didn't seem to be an indirect approach available. He dreaded doing anything that might contribute to that dreadful wall of reservations that kept cropping up on her

part. Finally he had to admit that it was either the direct approach or nothing at all for the weekend. He was too miserable to tolerate a delay.

Lonnie moved towards the door as Brad picked up the telephone. "Good luck, pal," he whispered almost to himself as he exited the room. Brad's wan smile of thanks told him he was heard.

With resolve, Brad dialed the number. He hoped his shaky fingers got it right. "Hello,... is this aunt Fran...a, Mrs. Hardy?" he stammered. He hadn't anticipated this complication.

"Sure," came the warm voice. "You can call me Aunt Fran if you'd like, Brad.... This is Brad Davis isn't, it?"

"Yes,... Aunt Fran. May I speak to Beth?"

"Of course. She's in her room studying. I'll call her....."

"She'll be here in a moment Brad. She told me you had been to see Dr. Baxter."

"Yes," Brad followed her lead more easily. "Lonnie and I both found forgiveness last night through what he and Beth told us. It's a real load off my mind."

"I'm glad, Brad. Drop by and tell me about it, will you?.... Here's Beth."

"Hello?"

"Hi, Beth." Brad's mouth was dry. "I was wondering if you would go out to dinner with me tonight." He waited with baited breath for the verdict.

"I...I guess so," she replied. "What did you have in mind? a...I mean.... What should I dress for?"

She's not any more used to this than I am, Brad's fleeting thoughts advised him. "There's a nice little restaurant in Hillside," said Brad. "It's only an hour's drive, and we won't have to be too formal."

"When should I be ready?"

"Would six be OK?" Brad asked, breathing easier.

"I'll be ready," Beth promised, sweetly, he thought.

Beth sat well to her own side of the truck as they started out towards Hillside. Brad wasn't sure whether he detected that wall of reservations or not. Silence threatened, at first.

After some small talk about the weather, Brad remembered to tell her about Lonnie's thrill at hearing the real reason that Christ had died. Soon he was telling her about their awkward attempts at prayer and how they were sure God had heard. He looked over at her face and saw tears of joy glittering in her lashes. That was beautiful.

"And, Beth," he continued. "That settles the issue on the origin of everything for me, too. I believe everything God tells us in the Bible--just as He tells it. I never considered these things much before, and I have a lot to learn. But I see that the theory of evolution is not a proven entity, and my faith is in God's Word."

"I've prayed for your salvation for a long time, Brad. You don't know how happy I am." Her voice cracked, but Brad noticed her relaxing more from that time on.

Soon they were talking more freely about each other. They found that Brad was six months older than Beth. They found more about each other's personal likes and dislikes. In general, they began to get acquainted, really acquainted. By the time they reached Hillside, Beth was carrying her part of a witty and animated conversation well. She seemed genuinely satisfied and completely at ease.

An ecstatic Brad steered his girl into the familiar restaurant that evening. He helped her with her coat and gazed proudly at her modest, simply dressed form as they waited to be seated. "She's absolutely luscious," he told himself deliriously.

Beth tried to be easy on Brad's budget, but he coaxed her into ordering a really nice meal. "I'll try lobster if you'll show me how to eat it," she finally agreed. "We didn't have funds for things like that after Dad got sick." Brad had a steak. He found that Beth ate with easy, graceful manners.

Brad encouraged Beth to tell him more about her family. Her father had left a good position with an engineering firm when it got into some illegal practices. While unemployed--without insurance, he had developed a chronic disease. The family's resources had been drained by his prolonged illness that ended fatally two years ago. He was a kind man, so good that he could not understand the need of God's plan of salvation until shortly before his death. Beth's mother had been a Christian when she had married him, but was not able to raise the children in a truly Christian environment because of her marriage. Beth herself had only accepted Christ as her Savior about a year ago.

Dinner was almost over when Brad nearly dropped his fork. His parents were walking into the restaurant. "Oh!" he groaned inwardly. "Why didn't I anticipate this?" There was nothing to do but make introductions when they came by the table.

Mom solved Brad's predicament smoothly. "Why don't you show Beth around Hillside while Dad and I eat a quick meal. Then you can drop by the house for some dessert and

pick up a box of cookies that I was going to send you, Brad," she suggested. "Would that be all right?" she asked the two of them.

"Sure," Beth replied pleasantly. "It will be nice to get to know you, Mr. and Mrs. Davis."

An hour later they stopped by the house long enough to eat some of Mom's pie and ice cream in the living room. "We don't want to keep you," Mom said shortly. "We know it's a long way back to Riley.... If you'll come out to the kitchen, Brad, I'll get you those cookies."

"She's priceless, Brad," Mom whispered enthusiastically as she handed over the goodies. "Keep her that way."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm glad you like her," he answered softly as he hurried back to Beth with the cookies.

"Hope we didn't interfere too much with your algebra." Dad eyes twinkled as he and Brad got the coats from the closet. "We wouldn't have done this to you on purpose, but we sure enjoyed seeing the figure you came up with."

"Your mother is really nice, Brad. So's your Dad. I'm glad we bumped into them," Beth said as they pulled out of the driveway.

"They really liked you, too" Brad assured her, relieved that she was not upset about the unexpected meeting. The trip home was completely relaxed. Each of the young people seemed to really be enjoying the other's company.

"Thanks, Brad," Beth said as he left her at the door. "I really enjoyed the evening with you."

"Must be a real numbah," Lonnie suggested from his bed as Brad tiptoed into the dark room.

"Or else this is an imaginary world," Brad laughed tantalizingly. "I'm not sure which, but I like it."

Chapter Twenty-three

The Trial

Brad's hopeful inklings that Beth's reservations about him had vanished proved to be real. She always remained modest, and frequently shy, but she evidently began to appreciate his attentions. He managed to sit by her in all the classes they had together, and she seemed to expect him to walk with her from class to class. He took her home in the Green Monster whenever possible.

On discovering that Beth attended Dr. Baxter's Bible studies regularly, Brad arranged that he and Lonnie would pick her up on Thursday evenings. With Lonnie at the door of the Monster, she had to sit in the center, closer to Brad. His grin of approval bequeathed that position to her forever, and it was her regular place in the Monster thereafter.

From the very beginning, Brad found great spiritual encouragement and genuine inspiration in the Bible studies. With Beth at his side, he had no trouble relating to the first lesson, taken from Ephesians chapter five.

Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water by the word, that He might present the church to Himself in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.

He reveled in the discovery that Christ desired a relationship as close as marriage with the ones he had died for. He felt that he understood Christ's desire that his church should reserve herself pure and wholesome for that day when she would be presented

as his bride. In response to this glorious relationship, he resolved to keep himself "without spot or wrinkle or any such thing," for Christ.

That evening after the lesson, Brad and Beth dropped Lonnie off at the dorm and drove slowly out a lonely country lane before parting. "Let's dedicate ourselves to being 'holy and blameless' for Him," he urged Beth earnestly. He wasn't sure just when he had taken her hand in his, but she didn't seem overly anxious to terminate his spontaneous little intimacy. He thought she even returned the pressure of his grip a little.

"Brad, she's exponential!" Lonnie exclaimed as Brad returned to their room later that night. "N Ah think she feels the same 'bout you."

The two boys prayed earnestly every night about the trial that was coming up at the end of the month. Their prayers were halting and awkward at first, but the growing new Christians rapidly gained confidence and peace at the "throne of grace."

* * *

Brad's case came before the court promptly at nine o'clock on the scheduled Friday morning. After the usual preliminaries, the charges of fraudulently obtaining alcohol as a minor and providing alcohol to minors were leveled at Brad. From his seat beside Dad and their lawyer, Brad could see Mom's troubled face in the viewers' section. Larry's determined-looking parents were sitting as close as possible to the prosecutor.

The prosecution started off by positively stating that they would prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Brad had purchased a keg of beer with a false ID card and that he had willfully and knowingly transported it to a party involving many minor college students. They went on to detail the seriousness of the crime that had resulted in the traffic fatality of a minor student who had become inebriated at the party.

Three witnesses verified that they had seen Brad deliver the keg at the party. A nurse from the emergency department at the hospital left the courtroom literally ringing with Larry's last words, "Three cheers for Brad Davis. Brad Davis brought the booze."

Brad's lawyer had Brad tell his side of the story in his own defense. He contended that Brad had been framed to take the blame if anything went awry, in a cunning scheme by the truly guilty party. He finished up by stating that the defendant was truly sorry for his accidental involvement in the party that he did not even attend, but that he had been deliberately misled when he asked what was in the box that contained the beer keg.

Brad saw Dr. Baxter and Beth come in late. Beth's face radiated confidence in victory as she squeezed a smile out of Mom, gripping her shoulder. But even Beth's expression dimmed as the prosecution produced the original of the bottle store's receipt with Brad's name and falsified age on it. It was said to have been found at the gravel pit by the investigating officer on the day following the party. It was offered as positive proof

that Brad's story was false, since he obviously had purchased the beer himself. The prosecutor sat back smugly.

In response to the touted receipt, Brad's lawyer presented the subpoenaed printout of the liquor sales record Lonnie had discovered. The bottle store manager testified that this positively established the time of the sale to have been at exactly nine-twenty three on the morning of the beer blast. Dr. Baxter then testified that he had observed Brad continually as he took the chemistry test during that time. Brad's paper was presented to verify that he was taking the test at the time of the purchase. "It could not have been the defendant that purchased that keg of beer," Brad's lawyer argued aggressively.

But the prosecution had another ploy. Right after a lunch break, the bottle store clerk was brought to the stand. He was obviously anxious to show that he had not purposely sold the beer to a minor. He admitted that he had sold the keg of beer in question at the time indicated on the record. "Did the purchaser display an ID card to prove his age?" questioned the prosecutor.

"Yes, sir."

"What significant information was included on the card?" continued the prosecutor.

"The name was Brad Davis, and the age was twenty-one years," he replied nervously.

"Did you check the picture on the ID card?"

"Yes, sir, the picture matched the face of the purchaser."

"Then you will confirm that Brad Davis purchased a keg of beer at nine twenty-three on the morning in question?" asked the prosecutor triumphantly.

"Yes, sir, that's the case," replied the clerk with certainty.

"Your Honor, I have a very important question for the witness," Brad's lawyer interrupted.

"Proceed," directed the judge.

"Did you personally know Brad Davis before this sale?" the lawyer began.

"No, sir."

"Have you had any dealings with him after the sale?"

"No, sir."

"Would you recognize him if you saw him today?" continued the lawyer sharply.

"Yes, sir, I remember him well," replied the clerk confidently.

"Is he present in this room right now?"

"Yes, sir, he is."

"Please point him out." Brad's lawyer directed.

"He's the big man sitting by the police officer over there," the clerk indicated with his finger. A murmur of comprehension arose as the whole court suddenly realized that he was pointing to Butch.

"Your honor," Brad's lawyer explained. "We have already proven that the defendant was elsewhere when the keg in question was purchased. We have just demonstrated that the purchase was made by the gentleman on the other side of the room, probably using a fraudulent ID card bearing Brad Davis's name and the purchaser's picture. The clerk saw that the picture matched the purchaser's face and naturally assumed that he would be Brad Davis, as the card indicated. It is no more reasonable to assume that the defendant could obtain a fraudulent ID card than to realize that those who are trying to frame him could produce one. The defendant's account appears to be vindicated." He paused to let his words sink in. "I move that this case be dismissed."

"The motion is in order," replied the judge. "The case against Brad Davis is dismissed."

Brad stood and gripped his father's hand. His father turned to congratulate the lawyer for a successful defense. Mrs. Davis pushed her way up to her son's side, giving him a hearty hug. Beth's expressive face said even more than the little squeeze she gave his arm. Brad was free.

Larry's parents were waiting at the doors of the courthouse as Brad's party came out. After introducing themselves, they said that they just wanted to assure Brad that they certainly held nothing against him now that they understood what had really happened. "We hope to pin the guilt on the proper party," they said as they turned to leave.

"Thank you," Brad replied. "That's a real load off my mind."

Chapter Twenty-four

The Aftermath

Lonnie was included in the victory celebration that evening. "He kept me sane when everything seemed so desperate," Brad told his folks.

"And he provided the backbone evidence for our defense," added his Dad.

Brad also requested that Aunt Fran, "Who prayed me through my difficulties," be included.

The jovial party of six went to the restaurant of Mom's choice this evening. Dad escorted Mom regally. Brad escorted Beth proudly. And Lonnie escorted Aunt Fran bravely. Everyone was silent as Lonnie asked a hesitant blessing on the food. They enjoyed an excellent meal in relaxed company. Mom and Dad were obviously even more impressed with Beth than before. Brad knew he had their blessings.

The party was over. Mom and Dad said their good-byes and dropped Lonnie and a beaming Aunt Fran at their respective dwellings. Brad and Beth were finally alone.

The Monster purred contentedly under a full moon as Brad drove slowly out to the park at the west end of town. He helped Beth gently out the door, and they strolled hand in hand down to the river's edge. Standing silently, they stared into the water a while.

"Beth," he finally said. "I love you, Darling."

She drew closer. "I love you too, Sweetheart. I've loved you ever since that first talk we had in the biology lab."

"Then why did you always seem to erect that isolating wall of reservation between us that drove me out of my mind?" he asked, puzzled.

"My mother made the mistake of marrying a man who was not a true Christian, Brad. She knew he was kind and good. She probably thought he'd eventually accept Christ as his Savior. But she could never live entirely for Christ with her unequal yoke. When I became a Christian, I made up my mind that I would never let myself fall for a man who was not a Christian, Brad. So I held myself back, against all my longings, until I was positive you really belonged to Christ. From that time, I wanted to be yours."

"Do you mean that, Honey?" he asked, his short breaths coming more and more quickly.

She nodded her silent assent, her wide eyes gazing trustingly into his as he placed his arm around her waist.

He pulled her around close to the front of him and bent to kiss her forehead. She melted in his arms as she raised her lips to meet his. They shared a deep draught from the cup of love.

"Beth," he murmured dreamily as they turned to go. "We've got to keep ourselves pure for the Lord and for each other."

"Amen," she whispered as they squeezed each other's hands. "With His help we will."