

STEPHEN KING

THE STAND

The Complete and Uncut Edition



H
HODDER

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For Tabby:
This dark chest of wonders

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Stand is a work of fiction, as its subject matter makes perfectly clear. Many of the events occur in real places – such as Ogunquit, Maine; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Boulder, Colorado – and with these places I have taken the liberty of changing them to whatever degree best suited the course of my fiction. I hope that those readers who live in these and the other real places that are mentioned in this novel will not be too upset by my ‘monstrous impertinence,’ to quote Dorothy Sayers, who indulged freely in the same sort of thing.

Other places, such as Arnette, Texas, and Shoyo, Arkansas, are as fictional as the plot itself.

S.K.

A PREFACE IN TWO PARTS

Part 1 : To Be Read Before Purchase

There are a couple of things you need to know about this version of *The Stand* right away, even before you leave the bookstore. For that reason I hope I've caught you early – hopefully standing there by the *K* section of new fiction, with your other purchases tucked under your arm and the book open in front of you. In other words, I hope I've caught you while your wallet is still safely in your pocket. Ready? Okay; thanks. I promise to be brief.

First, this is not a new novel. If you hold misapprehensions on that score, let them be dispelled right here and now, while you are still a safe distance from the cash register which will take money out of your pocket and put it in mine. *The Stand* was originally published over ten years ago.

Second, this is not a brand-new, entirely different version of *The Stand*. You will not discover old characters behaving in new ways, nor will the course of the tale branch off at some point from the old narrative, taking you, Constant Reader, in an entirely different direction.

This version of *The Stand* is an *expansion* of the novel which has been in print since 1979 or so. As I've said, you won't find old characters behaving in strange new ways, but you will discover that almost all of the characters were, in the book's original form, doing *more* things, and if I didn't think some of those things were interesting – perhaps even enlightening – I would never have agreed to this project.

If this is not what you want, don't buy this book. If you have bought it already, I hope you saved your sales receipt. The bookshop where you made your purchase will want it before granting you credit or a cash refund.

If this expansion *is* something you want, I invite you to come along with me just a little farther. I have lots to tell you, and I think we can talk better around the corner.

In the dark.

Part 2: To Be Read After Purchase

This is not so much a Preface, actually, as it is an explanation of why this new version of *The Stand* exists at all. It was a long novel to begin with, and this expanded version will be regarded by some – perhaps many – as an act of indulgence by an author whose works have been successful enough to allow it. I hope not, but I'd have to be pretty stupid not to realize that such criticism is in the offing. After all, many critics of the novel regarded it bloated and overlong to begin with.

Whether the book *was* too long to begin with, or has become so in this edition, is a matter I leave to the individual reader. I only wanted to take this little space to say that I am republishing *The Stand* as it was originally written not to serve myself or any individual reader, but to serve a body of readers who have asked to have it. I would not offer it if I myself didn't think those portions which were dropped from the original manuscript made the story a richer one, and I'd be a liar if I didn't admit I am curious as to what its reception will be.

I'll spare you the story of how *The Stand* came to be written – the chain of thought which produces a novel rarely interests anyone but aspiring novelists. They tend to believe there is a 'secret formula' to writing a commercially successful novel, but there isn't. You get an idea; at some point another idea kicks in; you make a connection or a series of them between ideas; a few characters (usually little more than shadows at first) suggest themselves; a possible ending occurs to the writer's mind (although when the ending comes, it's rarely much like the one the writer envisioned); and at some point, the novelist sits down with a paper and pen, a typewriter, or a word cruncher. When asked, 'How do you write?' I invariably answer, 'One word at a time,' and the answer is invariably dismissed. But that is all it is. It sounds too simple to be true, but consider the Great Wall of China, if you will: one stone at a time, man. That's all. One

stone at a time. But I've read you can see that motherfucker from space without a telescope.

For readers who *are* interested, the story is told in the final chapter of *Danse Macabre*, a rambling but user-friendly overview of the horror genre I published in 1982. This is not a commercial for that book; I'm just saying the tale is there if you want it, although it's told not because it is interesting in itself but to illustrate an entirely different point.

For the purposes of this book, what's important is that approximately four hundred pages of manuscript were deleted from the final draft. The reason was not an editorial one; if that had been the case, I would be content to let the book live its life and die its eventual death as it was originally published.

The cuts were made at the behest of the accounting department. They toted up production costs, laid these next to the hardcover sales of my previous four books, and decided that a cover price of £6.95 was about what the market would bear (compare that price to this one, friends and neighbors!). I was asked if I would like to make the cuts, or if I would prefer someone in the editorial department to do it. I reluctantly agreed to do the surgery myself. I think I did a fairly good job, for a writer who has been accused over and over again of having diarrhea of the word processor. There is only one place – Trashcan Man's trip across the country from Indiana to Las Vegas – that seems noticeably scarred in the original version.

If all of the story is there, one might ask, then why bother? Isn't it indulgence after all? It better not be; if it is, then I have spent a large portion of my life wasting my time. As it happens, I think that in really good stories, the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. If that were not so, the following would be a perfectly acceptable version of 'Hansel and Gretel':

Hansel and Gretel were two children with a nice father and a nice mother. The nice mother died, and the father married a bitch. The bitch wanted the kids out of the way so she'd have more money to spend on herself. She bullied her spineless, soft-headed hubby into taking Hansel and Gretel into the woods and killing them. The kids' father relented at the last moment, allowing them to live so they could starve to death in the woods instead of dying quickly and mercifully at the

blade of his knife. While they were wandering around, they found a house made out of candy. It was owned by a witch who was into cannibalism. She locked them up and told them that when they were good and fat, she was going to eat them. But the kids got the best of her. Hansel shoved her into her own oven. They found the witch's treasure, and they must have found a map, too, because they eventually arrived home again. When they got there, Dad gave the bitch the boot and they lived happily ever after. The End.

I don't know what you think, but for me, that version's a loser. The story is there, but it's not elegant. It's like a Cadillac with the chrome stripped off and the paint sanded down to dull metal. It goes somewhere, but it ain't, you know, *boss*.

I haven't restored all four hundred of the missing pages; there is a difference between doing it up right and just being down-right vulgar. Some of what was left on the cutting room floor when I turned in the truncated version deserved to be left there, and there it remains. Other things, such as Frannie's confrontation with her mother early in the book, seem to add that richness and dimension which I, as a reader, enjoy deeply. Returning to 'Hansel and Gretel' for just a moment, you may remember that the wicked stepmother demands that her husband bring her the hearts of the children as proof that the hapless woodcutter has done as she has ordered. The woodcutter demonstrates one dim vestige of intelligence by bringing her the hearts of two rabbits. Or take the famous trail of breadcrumbs Hansel leaves behind, so he and his sister can find their way back. Thinking dude! But when he attempts to follow the backtrail, he finds that the birds have eaten it. Neither of these bits are strictly essential to the plot, but in another way they *make* the plot – they are great and magical bits of storytelling. They change what could have been a dull piece of work into a tale which has charmed and terrified readers for over a hundred years.

I suspect nothing added here is as good as Hansel's trail of breadcrumbs, but I have always regretted the fact that no one but me and a few in-house readers at Doubleday ever met that maniac who simply calls himself The Kid . . . or witnessed what happens to him outside a tunnel which counterpoints another

tunnel half a continent away – the Lincoln Tunnel in New York, which two of the characters negotiate earlier in the story.

So here is *The Stand*, Constant Reader, as its author originally intended for it to roll out of the showroom. All its chrome is now intact, for better or for worse. And the final reason for presenting this version is the simplest. Although it has never been my favorite novel, it is the one people who like my books seem to like the most. When I speak (which is as rarely as possible), people always speak to me about *The Stand*. They discuss the characters as though they were living people, and ask frequently, ‘What happened to so-and-so,’ . . . as if I got letters from them every now and again.

I am inevitably asked if it is ever going to be a movie. The answer, by the way, is probably yes. Will it be a good one? I don’t know. Bad or good, movies nearly always have a strange diminishing effect on works of fantasy (of course there are exceptions; *The Wizard of Oz* is an example which springs immediately to mind). In discussions, people are willing to cast various parts endlessly. I’ve always thought Robert Duvall would make a splendid Randall Flagg, but I’ve heard people suggest such people as Clint Eastwood, Bruce Dern, and Christopher Walken. They all *sound* good, just as Bruce Springsteen would seem to make an interesting Larry Underwood, if he ever chose to try acting (and, based on his videos, I think he would do very well . . . although my personal choice would be Marshall Crenshaw). But in the end, I think it’s perhaps best for Stu, Larry, Glen, Frannie, Ralph, Tom Cullen, Lloyd, and that dark fellow to belong to the reader, who will visualize them through the lens of imagination in a vivid and constantly changing way no camera can duplicate. Movies, after all, are only an illusion of motion comprised of thousands of still photographs. The imagination, however, moves with its own tidal flow. Films, even the best of them, freeze fiction – anyone who has ever seen *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and then reads Ken Kesey’s novel will find it hard or impossible not to see Jack Nicholson’s face on Randle Patrick McMurphy. That is not necessarily bad . . . but it *is* limiting. The glory of a good tale is that it is limitless and fluid; a good tale belongs to each reader in its own particular way.

Finally, I write for only two reasons: to please myself and to please others. In returning to this long tale of dark Christianity, I hope I have done both.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen King". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent 'S' at the beginning and a decorative flourish at the end.

October 24, 1989

THE STAND

*Outside the street's on fire
In a real death waltz
Between what's flesh and fantasy
And the poets down here
Don't write nothin at all
They just stand back and let it all be
And in the quick of the night
They reach for their moment
And try to make an honest stand
But they wind up wounded
Not even dead
Tonight in Jungle Land.*

Bruce Springsteen

*And it was clear she couldn't go on!
The door was opened and the wind appeared,
The candles blew and then disappeared,
The curtains flew and then he appeared,
Said, 'Don't be afraid,
Come on, Mary,'
And she had no fear
And she ran to him
And they started to fly . . .
She had taken his hand . . .
'Come on, Mary;
Don't fear the Reaper!'*

Blue Öyster Cult

*WHAT'S THAT SPELL?
WHAT'S THAT SPELL?
WHAT'S THAT SPELL?*

Country Joe and the Fish

THE CIRCLE OPENS

We need help, the Poet reckoned.

Edward Dorn

‘Sally.’

A mutter.

‘Wake up now, Sally.’

A louder mutter: *leeme lone*.

He shook her harder.

‘Wake up. You got to wake up!’

Charlie.

Charlie’s voice. Calling her. For how long?

Sally swam up out of sleep.

First she glanced at the clock on the night table and saw it was quarter past two in the morning. Charlie shouldn’t even be here; he should be on shift. Then she got her first good look at him and something leaped up inside her, some deadly intuition.

Her husband was deathly pale. His eyes started and bulged from their sockets. The car keys were in one hand. He was still using the other to shake her, although her eyes were open. It was as if he hadn’t been able to register the fact that she was awake.

‘Charlie, what is it? What’s wrong?’

He didn’t seem to know what to say. His adam’s apple bobbed futilely but there was no sound in the small service bungalow but the ticking of the clock.

‘Is it a fire?’ she asked stupidly. It was the only thing she could think of which might have put him in such a state. She knew his parents had perished in a housefire.

‘In a way,’ he said. ‘In a way it’s worse. You got to get dressed, honey. Get Baby LaVon. We got to get out of here.’

‘Why?’ she asked, getting out of bed. Dark fear had seized her. Nothing seemed right. This was like a dream. ‘Where? You mean the back yard?’ But she knew it wasn’t the back yard. She

had never seen Charlie look afraid like this. She drew a deep breath and could smell no smoke or burning.

‘Sally, honey, don’t ask questions. We have to get away. Far away. You just go get Baby LaVon and get her dressed.’

‘But should I . . . is there time to pack?’

This seemed to stop him. To derail him somehow. She thought she was as afraid as she could be, but apparently she wasn’t. She recognized that what she had taken for fright on his part was closer to raw panic. He ran a distracted hand through his hair and replied, ‘I don’t know. I’ll have to test the wind.’

And he left her with this bizarre statement which meant nothing to her, left her standing cold and afraid and disoriented in her bare feet and babydoll nightie. It was as if he had gone mad. What did testing the wind have to do with whether or not she had time to pack? And where was far away? Reno? Vegas? Salt Lake City? And . . .

She put her hand against her throat as a new idea struck her.

AWOL. Leaving in the middle of the night meant Charlie was planning to go AWOL.

She went into the small room which served as Baby LaVon’s nursery and stood for a moment, indecisive, looking at the sleeping infant in her pink blanket suit. She held to the faint hope that this might be no more than an extraordinarily vivid dream. It would pass, she would wake up at seven in the morning just like usual, feed Baby LaVon and herself while she watched the first hour of the ‘Today’ show, and be cooking Charlie’s eggs when he came off-shift at 8 AM, his nightly tour in the Reservation’s north tower over for another night. And in two weeks he would be back on days and not so cranky and if he was sleeping with her at night she wouldn’t have crazy dreams like this one and –

‘Hurry it *up!*’ he hissed at her, breaking her faint hope. ‘We got just time to throw a few things together . . . but for Christ’s sake, woman, if you love her’ – he pointed at the crib – ‘you get her dressed!’ He coughed nervously into his hand and began to yank things out of their bureau drawers and pile them helter-skelter into a couple of old suitcases.

She woke up Baby LaVon, soothing the little one as best she

could; the three-year-old was cranky and bewildered at being awakened in the middle of the night, and she began to cry as Sally got her into underpants, a blouse, and a romper. The sound of the child's crying made her more afraid than ever. She associated it with the other times LaVon, usually the most angelic of babies, had cried in the night: diaper rash, teething, croup, colic. Fear slowly changed to anger as she saw Charlie almost run past the door with a double handful of her own underwear. Bra straps trailed out behind him like the streamers from New Year's Eve noisemakers. He flung them into one of the suitcases and slammed it shut. The hem of her best slip hung out, and she just bet it was torn.

'What *is* it?' she cried, and the distraught tone of her voice caused Baby LaVon to burst into fresh tears just as she was winding down to snuffles. 'Have you gone crazy? They'll send soldiers after us, Charlie! *Soldiers!*'

'Not tonight they won't,' he said, and there was something so sure in his voice that it was horrible. 'Point is, sugar-babe, if we don't get our asses in gear, we ain't never gonna make it off'n the base. I don't even know how in hell I got out of the tower. Malfunction somewhere, I guess. Why not? Everything else sure-God malfunctioned.' And he uttered a high, loonlike laugh that frightened her more than anything else had done. 'The baby dressed? Good. Put some of her clothes in that other suitcase. Use the blue tote-bag in the closet for the rest. Then we're going to get the hell out. I think we're all right. Wind's blowing east to west. Thank God for that.'

He coughed into his hand again.

'Daddy!' Baby LaVon demanded, holding her arms up. 'Want Daddy! Sure! Horsey-ride, Daddy! Horsey-ride! Sure!'

'Not now,' Charlie said, and disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, Sally heard the rattle of crockery. He was getting her pin-money out of the blue soup dish on the top shelf. Some thirty or forty dollars she had put away – a dollar, sometimes fifty cents, at a time. Her *house* money. It was real, then. Whatever it was, it was really real.

Baby LaVon, denied her horsey-ride by her daddy, who rarely if ever denied her anything, began to weep again. Sally struggled to get her into her light jacket and then threw most of her clothes

into the tote, cramming them in helter-skelter. The idea of putting anything else into the other suitcase was ridiculous. It would burst. She had to kneel on it to snap the catches. She found herself thanking God Baby LaVon was trained, and there was no need to bother with diapers.

Charlie came back into the bedroom, and now he *was* running. He was still stuffing the crumpled ones and fives from the soup dish into the front pocket of his suntans. Sally scooped Baby LaVon up. She was fully awake now and could walk perfectly well, but Sally wanted her in her arms. She bent and snagged the tote-bag.

‘Where we going, Daddy?’ Baby LaVon asked. ‘I was aseepin.’

‘Baby can be aseepin in the car,’ Charlie said, grabbing the two suitcases. The hem of Sally’s slip flapped. His eyes still had that white, starey look. An idea, a growing certainty, began to dawn in Sally’s mind.

‘Was there an accident?’ she whispered. ‘Oh Jesus Mary and Joseph, there was, wasn’t there? An accident. Out *there*.’

‘I was playing solitaire,’ he said. ‘I looked up and saw the clock had gone from green to red. I turned on the monitor. Sally, they’re all –’

He paused, looked at Baby LaVon’s eyes, wide and, although still rimmed with tears, curious.

‘They’re all D-E-A-D down there,’ he said. ‘All but one or two, and they’re probably gone now.’

‘What’s D-E-D, Daddy?’ Baby LaVon asked.

‘Never mind, honey,’ Sally said. Her voice seemed to come to her from down a very long canyon.

Charlie swallowed. Something clicked in his throat. ‘Everything’s supposed to mag-lock if the clock goes red. They got a Chubb computer that runs the whole place and it’s supposed to be fail-safe. I saw what was on the monitor, and I jumped out the door. I thought the goddamn thing would cut me in half. It should have shut the second the clock went red, and I don’t know how long it *was* red before I looked up and noticed it. But I was almost to the parking lot before I heard it thump shut behind me. Still, if I’d looked up even thirty seconds later, I’d be shut up in that tower control room right now, like a bug in a bottle.’

‘What is it? What –’

'I dunno. I don't *want* to know. All I know is that it ki – that it K-I-L-L-E-D them quick. If they want me, they'll have to catch me. I was gettin hazard pay, but they ain't payin me enough to hang around here. Wind's blowing west. We're driving east. Come on, now.'

Still feeling half-asleep, caught in some awful grinding dream, she followed him out to the driveway where their fifteen-year-old Chevy stood, quietly rusting in the fragrant desert darkness of the California night.

Charlie dumped the suitcases in the trunk and the tote-bag in the back seat. Sally stood for a moment by the passenger door with the baby in her arms, looking at the bungalow where they had spent the last four years. When they had moved in, she reflected, Baby LaVon was still growing inside her body, all her horsey-rides ahead of her.

'Come on!' he said. 'Get in, woman!'

She did. He backed out, the Chevy's headlights momentarily splashing across the house. Their reflection in the windows looked like the eyes of some hunted beast.

He was hunched tensely over the steering wheel, his face drawn in the dim glow of the dashboard instruments. 'If the base gates are closed, I'm gonna try to crash through.' And he meant it. She could tell. Suddenly her knees felt watery.

But there was no need for such desperate measures. The base gates were standing open. One guard was nodding over a magazine. She couldn't see the other; perhaps he was in the head. This was the outer part of the base, a conventional army vehicle depot. What went on at the hub of the base was of no concern to these fellows.

I looked up and saw the clock had gone red.

She shivered and put her hand on his leg. Baby LaVon was sleeping again. Charlie patted her hand briefly and said: 'It's going to be all right, hon.'

By dawn they were running east across Nevada and Charlie was coughing steadily.

BOOK I
CAPTAIN TRIPS

JUNE 16, 1990 – JULY 4, 1990

*I called the doctor on the telephone,
Said doctor, doctor, please,
I got this feeling, rocking and reeling,
Tell me, what can it be?
Is it some new disease?*

The Sylvers

*Baby, can you dig your man?
He's a righteous man,
Baby, can you dig your man?*

Larry Underwood

CHAPTER 1

Hapscomb's Texaco sat on Number 93 just north of Arnette, a pissant four-street burg about 110 miles from Houston. Tonight the regulars were there, sitting by the cash register, drinking beer, talking idly, watching the bugs fly into the big lighted sign.

It was Bill Hapscomb's station, so the others deferred to him even though he was a pure fool. They would have expected the same deferral if they had been gathered together in one of their business establishments. Except they had none. In Arnette, it was hard times. In 1980 the town had had two industries, a factory that made paper products (for picnics and barbecues, mostly) and a plant that made electronic calculators. Now the paper factory was shut down and the calculator plant was ailing – they could make them a lot cheaper in Taiwan, it turned out, just like those portable TVs and transistor radios.

Norman Bruett and Tommy Wannamaker, who had both worked in the paper factory, were on relief, having run out of unemployment some time ago. Henry Carmichael and Stu Redman both worked at the calculator plant but rarely got more than thirty hours a week. Victor Palfrey was retired and smoked stinking home-rolled cigarettes, which were all he could afford.

'Now what I say is this,' Hap told them, putting his hands on his knees and leaning forward. 'They just gotta say screw this inflation shit. Screw this national debt shit. We got the presses and we got the paper. We're gonna run off fifty million thousand-dollar bills and hump them right the Christ into circulation.'

Palfrey, who had been a machinist until 1984, was the only one present with sufficient self-respect to point out Hap's most obvious damfool statements. Now, rolling another of his

shitty-smelling cigarettes, he said, 'That wouldn't get us nowhere. If they do that, it'll be just like Richmond in the last two years of the States War. In those days, when you wanted a piece of gingerbread, you gave the baker a Confederate dollar, he'd put it on the gingerbread, and cut out a piece just that size. Money's just paper, you know.'

'I know some people don't agree with you,' Hap said sourly. He picked up a greasy red plastic paper-holder from his desk. 'I owe these people. And they're starting to get pretty itchy about it.'

Stuart Redman, who was perhaps the quietest man in Arnette, was sitting in one of the cracked plastic Woolco chairs, a can of Pabst in his hand, looking out the big service station window at Number 93. Stu knew about poor. He had grown up that way right here in town, the son of a dentist who had died when Stu was seven, leaving his wife and two other children besides Stu.

His mother had gotten work at the Red Ball Truck Stop just outside of Arnette – Stu could have seen it from where he sat right now if it hadn't burned down in 1979. It had been enough to keep the four of them eating, but that was all. At the age of nine, Stu had gone to work, first for Rog Tucker, who owned the Red Ball, helping to unload trucks after school for thirty-five cents an hour, and then at the stockyards in the neighboring town of Braintree, lying about his age to get twenty backbreaking hours of labor a week at the minimum wage.

Now, listening to Hap and Vic Palfrey argue on about money and the mysterious way it had of drying up, he thought about the way his hands had bled at first from pulling the endless handtrucks of hides and guts. He had tried to keep that from his mother, but she had seen, less than a week after he started. She wept over them a little, and she hadn't been a woman who wept easily. But she hadn't asked him to quit the job. She knew what the situation was. She was a realist.

Some of the silence in him came from the fact that he had never had friends, or the time for them. There was school, and there was work. His youngest brother, Dev, had died of pneumonia the year he began at the yards, and Stu had never quite gotten over that. Guilt, he supposed. He had loved Dev the best . . . but his passing had also meant there was one less mouth to feed.

In high school he had found football, and that was something his mother had encouraged even though it cut into his work hours. 'You play,' she said. 'If you got a ticket out of here, it's football, Stuart. You play. Remember Eddie Warfield.' Eddie Warfield was a local hero. He had come from a family even poorer than Stu's own, had covered himself with glory as quarterback of the regional high school team, had gone on to Texas A&M with an athletic scholarship, and had played for ten years with the Green Bay Packers, mostly as a second-string quarterback but on several memorable occasions as the starter. Eddie now owned a string of fast-food restaurants across the West and Southwest, and in Arnette he was an enduring figure of myth. In Arnette, when you said 'success,' you meant Eddie Warfield.

Stu was no quarterback, and he was no Eddie Warfield. But it did seem to him as he began his junior year in high school that there was at least a fighting chance for him to get a small athletic scholarship . . . and then there were work-study programs, and the school's guidance counselor had told him about the NDEA loan program.

Then his mother had gotten sick, had become unable to work. It was cancer. Two months before he graduated from high school, she had died, leaving Stu with his brother Bryce to support. Stu had turned down the athletic scholarship and had gone to work in the calculator factory. And finally it was Bryce, three years' Stu's junior, who had made it out. He was now in Minnesota, a systems analyst for IBM. He didn't write often, and the last time he had seen Bryce was at the funeral, after Stu's wife had died – died of exactly the same sort of cancer that had killed his mother. He thought that Bryce might have his own guilt to carry . . . and that Bryce might be a little ashamed of the fact that his brother had turned into just another good old boy in a dying Texas town, spending his days doing time in the calculator plant, and his nights either down at Hap's or over at the Indian Head drinking Lone Star beer.

The marriage had been the best time, and it had only lasted eighteen months. The womb of his young wife had borne a single dark and malignant child. That had been four years ago. Since, he had thought of leaving Arnette, searching for something better, but small-town inertia held him – the low siren

song of familiar places and familiar faces. He was well liked in Arnette, and Vic Palfrey had once paid him the ultimate compliment of calling him 'Old Time Tough.'

As Vic and Hap chewed it out, there was still a little dusk left in the sky, but the land was in shadow. Cars didn't go by on 93 much now, which was one reason that Hap had so many unpaid bills. But there was a car coming now, Stu saw.

It was still a quarter of a mile distant, the day's last light putting a dusty shine on what little chrome was left to it. Stu's eyes were sharp, and he made it as a very old Chevrolet, maybe a '75. A Chevy, no lights on, doing no more than fifteen miles an hour, weaving all over the road. No one had seen it yet but him.

'Now let's say you got a mortgage payment on this station,' Vic was saying, 'and let's say it's fifty dollars a month.'

'It's a hell of a lot more than that.'

'Well, for the sake of the argument, let's say fifty. And let's say the Federals went ahead and printed you a whole carload of money. Well then, those bank people would turn round and want a *hundred* and fifty. You'd be just as poorly off.'

'That's right,' Henry Carmichael added. Hap looked at him, irritated. He happened to know that Hank had gotten in the habit of taking Cokes out of the machine without paying the deposit, and furthermore, Hank *knew* he knew, and if Hank wanted to come in on any side it ought to be his.

'That ain't necessarily how it would be,' Hap said weightily from the depths of his ninth-grade education. He went on to explain why.

Stu, who only understood that they were in a hell of a pinch, tuned Hap's voice down to a meaningless drone and watched the Chevy pitch and yaw its way on up the road. The way it was going Stu didn't think it was going to make it much farther. It crossed the white line and its lefthand tires spumed up dust from the left shoulder. Now it lurched back, held its own lane briefly, then nearly pitched off into the ditch. Then, as if the driver had picked out the big lighted Texaco station sign as a beacon, it arrowed toward the tarmac like a projectile whose velocity is very nearly spent. Stu could hear the worn-out thump of its engine now, the steady gurgle-and-wheeze of a dying carb

and a loose set of valves. It missed the lower entrance and bumped up over the curb. The fluorescent bars over the pumps were reflecting off the Chevy's dirt-streaked windshield so it was hard to see what was inside, but Stu saw the vague shape of the driver roll loosely with the bump. The car showed no sign of slowing from its relentless fifteen.

'So I say with more money in circulation you'd be -'

'Better turn off your pumps, Hap,' Stu said mildly.

'The pumps? What?'

Norm Bruett had turned to look out the window. 'Christ on a pony,' he said.

Stu got out of his chair, leaned over Tommy Wannamaker and Hank Carmichael, and flicked off all eight switches at once, four with each hand. So he was the only one who didn't see the Chevy as it hit the gas pumps on the upper island and sheared them off.

It plowed into them with a slowness that seemed implacable and somehow grand. Tommy Wannamaker swore in the Indian Head the next day that the taillights never flashed once. The Chevy just kept coming at a steady fifteen or so, like the pace car in the Tournament of Roses parade. The undercarriage screeched over the concrete island, and when the wheels hit it everyone but Stu saw the driver's head swing limply and strike the windshield, starring the glass.

The Chevy jumped like an old dog that had been kicked and plowed away the hi-test pump. It snapped off and rolled away, spilling a few dribbles of gas. The nozzle came unhooked and lay glittering under the fluorescents.

They all saw the sparks produced by the Chevy's exhaust pipe grating across the cement, and Hap, who had seen a gas station explosion in Mexico, instinctively shielded his eyes against the fireball he expected. Instead, the Chevy's rear end flirted around and fell off the pump island on the station side. The front end smashed into the low-lead pump, knocking it off with a hollow *bang*.

Almost deliberately, the Chevrolet finished its 360-degree turn, hitting the island again, broadside this time. The rear end popped up on the island and knocked the regular gas pump asprawl. And there the Chevy came to rest, trailing its rusty

exhaust pipe behind it. It had destroyed all three of the gas pumps on that island nearest the highway. The motor continued to run choppily for a few seconds and then quit. The silence was so loud it was alarming.

'Holy moly,' Tommy Wannamaker said breathlessly. 'Will she blow, Hap?'

'If it was gonna, it already woulda,' Hap said, getting up. His shoulder bumped the map case, scattering Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona every whichway. Hap felt a cautious sort of jubilation. His pumps were insured, and the insurance was paid up. Mary had harped on the insurance ahead of everything.

'Guy must have been pretty drunk,' Norm said.

'I seen his taillights,' Tommy said, his voice high with excitement. 'They never flashed once. Holy moly! If he'd a been doing sixty we'd all be dead now.'

They hurried out of the office, Hap first and Stu bringing up the rear. Hap, Tommy, and Norm reached the car together. They could smell gas and hear the slow, clocklike tick of the Chevy's cooling engine. Hap opened the driver's side door and the man behind the wheel spilled out like an old laundry sack.

'God-damn,' Norm Bruett shouted, almost screamed. He turned away, clutched his ample belly, and was sick. It wasn't the man who had fallen out (Hap had caught him neatly before he could thump to the pavement) but the smell that was issuing from the car, a sick stench compounded of blood, fecal matter, vomit, and human decay. It was a ghastly rich sick-dead smell.

A moment later Hap turned away, dragging the driver by the armpits. Tommy hastily grabbed the dragging feet and he and Hap carried him into the office. In the glow of the overhead fluorescents their faces were cheesy-looking and revolted. Hap had forgotten about his insurance money.

The others looked into the car and then Hank turned away, one hand over his mouth, little finger sticking off like a man who has just raised his wineglass to make a toast. He trotted to the north end of the station's lot and let his supper come up.

Vic and Stu looked into the car for some time, looked at each other, and then looked back in. On the passenger side was a young woman, her shift dress hiked up high on her thighs.

Leaning against her was a boy or girl, about three years old. They were both dead. Their necks had swelled up like inner tubes and the flesh there was a purple-black color, like a bruise. The flesh was puffed up under their eyes, too. They looked, Vic later said, like those baseball players who put lampblack under their eyes to cut the glare. Their eyes bulged sightlessly. The woman was holding the child's hand. Thick mucus had run from their noses and was now clotted there. Flies buzzed around them, lighting in the mucus, crawling in and out of their open mouths. Stu had been in the war, but he had never seen anything so terribly pitiful as this. His eyes were constantly drawn back to those linked hands.

He and Vic backed away together and looked blankly at each other. Then they turned to the station. They could see Hap, jawing frantically into the pay phone. Norm was walking toward the station behind them, throwing glances at the wreck over his shoulder. The Chevy's driver's side door stood sadly open. There was a pair of baby shoes dangling from the rear-view mirror.

Hank was standing by the door, rubbing his mouth with a dirty handkerchief. 'Jesus, Stu,' he said unhappily, and Stu nodded.

Hap hung up the phone. The Chevy's driver was lying on the floor. 'Ambulance will be here in ten minutes. Do you figure they're -?' He jerked his thumb at the Chevy.

'They're dead, okay.' Vic nodded. His lined face was yellow-pale, and he was sprinkling tobacco all over the floor as he tried to make one of his shitty-smelling cigarettes. 'They're the two deadiest people I've ever seen.' He looked at Stu and Stu nodded, putting his hands in his pockets. He had the butterflies.

The man on the floor moaned thickly in his throat and they all looked down at him. After a moment, when it became obvious that the man was speaking or trying very hard to speak, Hap knelt beside him. It was, after all, his station.

Whatever had been wrong with the woman and child in the car was also wrong with this man. His nose was running freely, and his respiration had a peculiar undersea sound, a churning from somewhere in his chest. The flesh beneath his eyes was puffing, not black yet, but a bruised purple. His neck looked too thick, and the flesh had pushed up in a column to give

him two extra chins. He was running a high fever; being close to him was like squatting on the edge of an open barbecue pit where good coals have been laid.

'The dog,' he muttered. 'Did you put him out?'

'Mister,' Hap said, shaking him gently. 'I called the ambulance. You're going to be all right.'

'Clock went red,' the man on the floor grunted, and then began to cough, racking chainlike explosions that sent heavy mucus spraying from his mouth in long and ropy splatters. Hap leaned backward, grimacing desperately.

'Better roll him over,' Vic said. 'He's goan choke on it.'

But before they could, the coughing tapered off into bellowsed, uneven breathing again. His eyes blinked slowly and he looked at the men gathered above him.

'Where's . . . this?'

'Arnette,' Hap said. 'Bill Hapscomb's Texaco. You crashed out some of my pumps.' And then, hastily, he added: 'That's okay. They was insured.'

The man on the floor tried to sit up and was unable. He had to settle for putting a hand on Hap's arm.

'My wife . . . my little girl . . .'

'They're fine,' Hap said, grinning a foolish dog grin.

'Seems like I'm awful sick,' the man said. Breath came in and out of him in a thick, soft roar. 'They were sick, too. Since we got up two days ago. Salt Lake City . . .' His eyes flickered slowly closed. 'Sick . . . guess we didn't move quick enough after all . . .'

Far off but getting closer, they could hear the whoop of the Arnette Volunteer Ambulance.

'Man,' Tommy Wannamaker said. 'Oh man.'

The sick man's eyes fluttered open again, and now they were filled with an intense, sharp concern. He struggled again to sit up. Sweat ran down his face. He grabbed Hap.

'Are Sally and Baby LaVon all right?' he demanded. Spittle flew from his lips and Hap could feel the man's burning heat radiating outward. The man was sick, half crazy, he stank. Hap was reminded of the smell an old dog blanket gets sometimes.

'They're all right,' he insisted, a little frantically. 'You just . . . lay down and take it easy, okay?'

The man lay back down. His breathing was rougher now. Hap and Hank helped roll him over on his side, and his respiration seemed to ease a trifle. 'I felt pretty good until last night,' he said. 'Coughing, but all right. Woke up with it in the night. Didn't get away quick enough. Is Baby LaVon okay?'

The last trailed off into something none of them could make out. The ambulance siren warbled closer and closer. Stu went over to the window to watch for it. The others remained in a circle around the man on the floor.

'What's he got, Vic, any idea?' Hap asked.

Vic shook his head. 'Dunno.'

'Might have been something they ate,' Norm Bruett said. 'That car's got a California plate. They was probably eatin at a lot of roadside stands, you know. Maybe they got a poison hamburger. It happens.'

The ambulance pulled in and skirted the wrecked Chevy to stop between it and the station door. The red light on top made crazy sweeping circles. It was full dark now.

'Gimme your hand and I'll pull you up outta there!' the man on the floor cried suddenly, and then was silent.

'Food poisoning,' Vic said. 'Yeah, that could be. I hope so, because —'

'Because what?' Hank asked.

'Because otherwise it might be something catching,' Vic looked at them with troubled eyes. 'I seen cholera back in 1958, down near Nogales, and it looked something like this.'

Three men came in, wheeling a stretcher. 'Hap,' one of them said. 'You're lucky you didn't get your scraggy ass blown to kingdom come. This guy, huh?'

They broke apart to let them through — Billy Verecker, Monty Sullivan, Carlos Ortega, men they all knew.

'There's two folks in that car,' Hap said, drawing Monty aside. 'Woman and a little girl. Both dead.'

'Holy crow! You sure?'

'Yeah. This guy, he don't know. You going to take him to Braintree?'

'I guess.' Monty looked at him, bewildered. 'What do I do with the two in the car? I don't know how to handle this, Hap.'

‘Stu can call the State Patrol. You mind if I ride in with you?’

‘Hell no.’

They got the man onto the stretcher, and while they ran him out, Hap went over to Stu. ‘I’m gonna ride into Braintree with that guy. Would you call the State Patrol?’

‘Sure.’

‘And Mary, too. Call and tell her what happened.’

‘Okay.’

Hap trotted out to the ambulance and climbed in. Billy Verecker shut the doors behind him and then called the other two. They had been staring into the wrecked Chevy with dread fascination.

A few moments later the ambulance pulled out, siren warbling, red domelight pulsing blood-shadows across the gas station’s tarmac. Stu went to the phone and put a quarter in.

The man from the Chevy died twenty miles from the hospital. He drew one final bubbling gasp, let it out, hitched in a smaller one, and just quit.

Hap got the man’s wallet out of his hip pocket and looked at it. There were seventeen dollars in cash. A California driver’s license identified him as Charles D. Champion. There was an army card, and pictures of his wife and daughter encased in plastic. Hap didn’t want to look at the pictures.

He stuffed the wallet back into the dead man’s pocket and told Carlos to turn off the siren. It was ten after nine.

CHAPTER 2

There was a long rock pier running out into the Atlantic Ocean from the Ogunquit, Maine, town beach. Today it reminded her of an accusatory gray finger, and when Frannie Goldsmith parked her car in the public lot, she could see Jess sitting out at the end of it, just a silhouette in the afternoon sunlight. Gulls wheeled and cried above him, a New England portrait drawn in real life, and she doubted if any gull would dare spoil it by dropping a splat of white doodoo on Jess Rider's immaculate blue chambray workshirt. After all, he was a practicing poet.

She knew it was Jess because his ten-speed was bolted to the iron railing that ran behind the parking attendant's building! Gus, a balding, paunchy town fixture, was coming out to meet her. The fee for visitors was a dollar a car, but he knew Frannie lived in town without bothering to look at the RESIDENT sticker on the corner of her Volvo's windshield. Fran came here a lot.

Sure I do, Fran thought. In fact, I got pregnant right down there on the beach, just about twelve feet above the high tide line. Dear Lump: You were conceived on the scenic coast of Maine, twelve feet above the high tide line and twenty yards east of the seawall. X marks the spot.

Gus raised his hand toward her, making a peace sign.

'Your fella's out on the end of the pier, Miss Goldsmith.'

'Thanks, Gus. How's business?'

He waved smilingly at the parking lot. There were maybe two dozen cars in all, and she could see blue and white RESIDENT stickers on most of them.

'Not much trade this early,' he said. It was June 17. 'Wait two weeks and we'll make the town some money.'

'I'll bet. If you don't embezzle it all.'

Gus laughed and went back inside.

Frannie leaned one hand against the warm metal of her car, took off her sneakers, and put on a pair of rubber thongs. She was a tall girl with chestnut hair that fell halfway down the back of the buff-colored shift she was wearing. Good figure. Long legs that got appreciative glances. *Prime stuff* was the correct frathouse term, she believed. Looky-looky-looky-here-comes-nooky. Miss College Girl, 1990.

Then she had to laugh at herself, and the laugh was a trifle bitter. You are carrying on, she told herself, as if this was the news of the world. Chapter Six: Hester Prynne Brings the News of Pearl's Impending Arrival to Rev. Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale he wasn't. He was Jess Rider, age twenty, one year younger than Our Heroine, Little Fran. He was a practicing college-student-undergraduate-poet. You could tell by his immaculate blue chambray workshirt.

She paused at the edge of the sand, feeling the good heat baking the soles of her feet even through the rubber thongs. The silhouette at the far end of the pier was still tossing small rocks into the water. Her thought was partly amusing but mostly dismaying. He knows what he looks like out there, she thought. Lord Byron, lonely but unafraid. Sitting in lonely solitude and surveying the sea which leads back, back to where England lies. But I, an exile, may never –

Oh balls!

It wasn't so much the thought that disturbed her as what it indicated about her own state of mind. The young man she assumed she loved was sitting out there, and she was standing here caricaturing him behind his back.

She began to walk out along the pier, picking her way with careful grace over the rocks and crevices. It was an old pier, once part of a breakwater. Now most of the boats tied up on the southern end of town, where there were three marinas and seven honky-tonk motels that boomed all summer long.

She walked slowly, trying her best to cope with the thought that she might have fallen out of love with him in the space of the eleven days that she had known she was 'a little bit preggers,' in the words of Amy Lauder. Well, he had gotten her into that condition, hadn't he?

But not alone, that was for sure. And she had been on the pill. That had been the simplest thing in the world. She'd gone to the campus infirmary, told the doctor she was having painful menstruation and all sorts of embarrassing eruptions on her skin, and the doctor had written her a prescription. In fact, he had given her a month of freebies.

She stopped again, out over the water now, the waves beginning to break toward the beach on her right and left. It occurred to her that the infirmary doctors probably heard about painful menstruation and too many pimples about as often as druggists heard about how I gotta buy these condoms for my brother – even more often in this day and age. She could just as easily have gone to him and said: 'Gimme the pill. I'm gonna fuck.' She was of age. Why be coy? She looked at Jesse's back and sighed. Because coyness gets to be a way of life. She began to walk again.

Anyway, the pill hadn't worked. Somebody in the quality control department at the jolly old Ovril factory had been asleep at the switch. Either that or she had forgotten a pill and then had forgotten she'd forgotten.

She walked softly up behind him and laid both hands on his shoulders.

Jess, who had been holding his rocks in his left hand and plunking them into Mother Atlantic with his right, let out a scream and lurched to his feet. Pebbles scattered everywhere, and he almost knocked Frannie off the side and into the water. He almost went in himself, head first.

She started to giggle helplessly and backed away with her hands over her mouth as he turned furiously around, a well-built young man with black hair, gold-rimmed glasses, and regular features which, to Jess's eternal discomfort, would never quite reflect the sensitivity inside him.

'You scared the *hell* out of me!' he roared.

'Oh Jess,' she giggled, 'oh Jess, I'm sorry, but that was funny, it really was.'

'We almost fell in the water,' he said, taking a resentful step toward her.

She took a step backward to compensate, tripped over a rock, and sat down hard. Her jaws clicked together hard with her tongue between them – exquisite pain! – and she stopped

giggling as if the sound had been cut off with a knife. The very fact of her sudden silence – you turn me off, I'm a radio – seemed funniest of all and she began to giggle again, in spite of the fact that her tongue was bleeding and tears of pain were streaming from her eyes.

'Are you okay, Frannie?' He knelt beside her, concerned.

I *do* love him, she thought with some relief. Good thing for me.

'Did you hurt yourself, Fran?'

'Only my pride,' she said, letting him help her up. 'And I bit my tongue. See?' She ran it out for him, expecting to get a smile as a reward, but he frowned.

'Jesus, Fran, you're really bleeding.' He pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket and looked at it doubtfully. Then he put it back.

The image of the two of them walking hand in hand back to the parking lot came to her, young lovers under a summer sun, her with his handkerchief stuffed in her mouth. She raises her hand to the smiling, benevolent attendant and says: Hung-huh-Guth.

She began to giggle again, even though her tongue did hurt and there was a bloody taste in her mouth that was a little nauseating.

'Look the other way,' she said primly. 'I'm going to be unladylike.'

Smiling a little, he theatrically covered his eyes. Propped on one arm, she stuck her head off the side of the pier and spat – bright red. Uck. Again. And again. At last her mouth seemed to clear and she looked around to see him peeking through his fingers.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm such an asshole.'

'No,' Jesse said, obviously meaning yes.

'Could we go get ice cream?' she asked. 'You drive. I'll buy.'

'That's a deal.' He got to his feet and helped her up. She spat over the side again. Bright red.

Apprehensively, Fran asked him: 'I didn't bite any of it off, did I?'

'I don't know,' Jess answered pleasantly. 'Did you swallow a lump?'

She put a revolted hand to her mouth. 'That's not funny.'

'No. I'm sorry. You just bit it, Frannie.'

'Are there any arteries in a person's tongue?'

They were walking back along the pier now, hand in hand. She paused every now and then to spit over the side. Bright red. She wasn't going to swallow any of that stuff, uh-uh, no way.

'Nope.'

'Good.' She squeezed his hand and smiled at him reassuringly. 'I'm pregnant.'

'Really? That's good. Do you know who I saw in Port —'

He stopped and looked at her, his face suddenly inflexible and very, very careful. It broke her heart a little to see the wariness there.

'What did you say?'

'I'm pregnant.' She smiled at him brightly and then spat over the side of the pier. Bright red.

'Big joke, Frannie,' he said uncertainly.

'No joke.'

He kept looking at her. After a while they started walking again. As they crossed the parking lot, Gus came out and waved to them. Frannie waved back. So did Jess.

They stopped at the Dairy Queen on US 1. Jess got a Coke and sat sipping it thoughtfully behind the Volvo's wheel. Fran made him get her a Banana Boat Supreme and she sat against her door, two feet of seat between them, spooning up nuts and pineapple sauce and ersatz Dairy Queen ice cream.

'You know,' she said, 'D. Q. ice cream is mostly bubbles. Did you know that? Lots of people don't.'

Jess looked at her and said nothing.

'Truth,' she said. 'Those ice cream machines are really nothing but giant bubble machines. That's how Dairy Queen can sell their ice cream so cheap. We had an offprint about it in Business Theory. There are many ways to defur a feline.'

Jess looked at her and said nothing.

'Now if you want real ice cream, you have to go to some place like a Deering Ice Cream Shop, and that's —'

She burst into tears.

He slid across the seat to her and put his arms around her neck. 'Frannie, don't do that. Please.'

'My Banana Boat is dripping on me,' she said, still weeping.

His handkerchief came out again and he mopped her off. By then her tears had trailed off to sniffles.

'Banana Boat Supreme with Blood Sauce,' she said, looking at him with red eyes. 'I guess I can't eat any more. I'm sorry, Jess. Would you throw it away?'

'Sure,' he said stiffly.

He took it from her, got out, and tossed it in the waste can. He was walking funny, Fran thought, as if he had been hit hard down low where it hurts boys. In a way she supposed that was just where he had been hit. But if you wanted to look at it another way, well, that was just about the way she had walked after he had taken her virginity on the beach. She had felt like she had a bad case of diaper rash. Only diaper rash didn't make you preppers.

He came back and got in.

'Are you really, Fran?' he asked abruptly.

'I am really.'

'How did it happen? I thought you were on the pill.'

'Well, what I figure is one, somebody in the quality control department of the jolly old Ovril factory was asleep at the switch when my batch of pills went by on the conveyor belt, or two, they are feeding you boys something in the UNH messhall that builds up sperm, or three, I forgot to take a pill and have since forgotten that I forgot.'

She offered him a hard, thin, sunny smile that he recoiled from just a bit.

'What are you mad about, Fran? I just asked.'

'Well, to answer your question in a different way, on a warm night in April, it must have been the twelfth, thirteenth, or fourteenth, you put your penis into my vagina and had an orgasm, thus ejaculating sperm by the millions -'

'Stop it,' he said sharply. 'You don't have to -'

'To what?' Outwardly stony, she was dismayed inside. In all her imaginings of how the scene might play, she had never seen it quite like this.

'To be so mad,' he said lamely. 'I'm not going to run out on you.'

'No,' she said more softly. At this point she could have plucked one of his hands off the wheel, held it, and healed the breach entirely. But she couldn't make herself do it. He had no business wanting to be comforted, no matter how tacit or unconscious his wanting was. She suddenly realized that one way or another, the laughs and the good times were over for a while. That made her want to cry again and she staved the tears off grimly. She was Frannie Goldsmith, Peter Goldsmith's daughter, and she wasn't going to sit in the parking lot of the Ogunquit Dairy Queen crying her damn stupid eyes out.

'What do you want to do?' Jess asked, getting out his cigarettes.

'What do *you* want to do?'

He struck a light and for just a moment as cigarette smoke raftered up she clearly saw a man and a boy fighting for control of the same face.

'Oh hell,' he said.

'The choices as I see them,' she said. 'We can get married and keep the baby. We can get married and give the baby up. Or we don't get married and I keep the baby. Or —'

'*Frannie —*

'Or we don't get married and I don't keep the baby. Or I could get an abortion. Does that cover everything? Have I left anything out?'

'Frannie, can't we just talk —'

'We *are* talking!' she flashed at him. 'You had your chance and you said "Oh hell." Your exact words. I have just outlined all of the possible choices. Of course I've had a little more time to work up an agenda.'

'You want a cigarette?'

'No. They're bad for the baby.'

'Frannie, goddammit!'

'Why are you shouting?' she asked softly.

'Because you seem determined to aggravate me as much as you can,' Jess said hotly. He controlled himself. 'I'm sorry. I just can't think of this as my fault.'

'You can't?' She looked at him with a cocked eyebrow. 'And behold, a virgin shall conceive.'

'Do you have to be so goddam flip? You had the pill, you said. I took you at your word. Was I so wrong?'

'No. You weren't so wrong. But that doesn't change the fact.'

'I guess not,' he said gloomily, and pitched his cigarette out half-smoked. 'So what do we do?'

'You keep asking me, Jesse. I just outlined the choices as I see them. I thought you might have some ideas. There's suicide, but I'm not considering it at this point. So pick the other choice you like and we'll talk about it.'

'Let's get married,' he said in a sudden strong voice. He had the air of a man who has decided that the best way to solve the Gordian knot problem would be to hack right down through the middle of it. Full speed ahead and get the whiners belowdecks.

'No,' she said. 'I don't want to marry you.'

It was as if his face was held together by a number of unseen bolts and each of them had suddenly been loosened a turn and a half. Everything sagged at once. The image was so cruelly comical that she had to rub her wounded tongue against the rough top of her mouth to keep from getting the giggles again. She didn't want to laugh at Jess.

'Why not?' he asked. 'Fran —'

'I have to think of my reasons why not. I'm not going to let you draw me into a discussion of my reasons why not, because right now I don't know.'

'You don't love me,' he said sulkily.

'In most cases, love and marriage are mutually exclusive states. Pick another choice.'

He was silent for a long time. He fiddled with a fresh cigarette but didn't light it. At last he said: 'I can't pick another choice, Frannie, because you don't want to discuss this. You want to score points off me.'

That touched her a little bit. She nodded. 'Maybe you're right. I've had a few scored off me in the last couple of weeks. Now you, Jess, you're Joe College all the way. If a mugger came at you with a knife, you'd want to convene a seminar on the spot.'

'Oh for God's sake.'

'Pick another choice.'

'No. You've got your reasons all figured out. Maybe I need a little time to think, too.'

'Okay. Would you take us back to the parking lot? I'll drop you off and do some errands.'

He gazed at her, startled. 'Frannie, I rode my bike all the way down from Portland. I've got a room at a motel outside of town. I thought we were going to spend the weekend together.'

'In your motel room. No, Jess. The situation has changed. You just get back on your ten-speed and bike back to Portland and you get in touch when you've thought about it a little more. No great hurry.'

'Stop riding me, Frannie.'

'No, Jess, you were the one who rode me,' she jeered in sudden, furious anger, and that was when he slapped her lightly backhand on the cheek.

He stared at her, stunned.

'I'm sorry, Fran.'

'Accepted,' she said colorlessly. 'Drive on.'

They didn't talk on the ride back to the public beach parking lot. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, watching the slices of ocean layered between the cottages just west of the seawall. They looked like slum apartments, she thought. Who owned these houses, most of them still shuttered blindly against the summer that would begin officially in less than a week? Professors from MIT. Boston doctors. New York lawyers. These houses weren't the real biggies, the coast estates owned by men who counted their fortunes in seven and eight figures. But when the families who owned them moved in here, the lowest IQ on Shore Road would be Gus the parking attendant. The kids would have ten-speeds like Jess's. They would have bored expressions and they would go with their parents to have lobster dinners and to attend the Ogunquit Playhouse. They would idle up and down the main street, masquerading after soft summer twilight as street people. She kept looking out at the lovely flashes of cobalt between the crammed-together houses, aware that the vision was blurring with a new film of tears. The little white cloud that cried.

They reached the parking lot, and Gus waved. They waved back.

'I'm sorry I hit you, Frannie,' Jess said in a subdued voice. 'I never meant to do that.'

'I know. Are you going back to Portland?'

'I'll stay here tonight and call you in the morning. But it's your decision, Fran. If you decide, you know, that an abortion is the thing, I'll scrape up the cash.'

'Pun intended?'

'No,' he said. 'Not at all.' He slid across the seat and kissed her chastely. 'I love you, Fran.'

I don't believe you do, she thought. Suddenly I don't believe it at all . . . but I'll accept in good grace. I can do that much.

'All right,' she said quietly.

'It's the Lighthouse Motel. Call if you want.'

'Okay.' She slid behind the wheel, suddenly feeling very tired. Her tongue ached miserably where she had bitten it.

He walked to where his bike was locked to the iron railing and coasted it back to her. 'Wish you'd call, Fran.'

She smiled artificially. 'We'll see. So long, Jess.'

She put the Volvo in gear, turned around, and drove across the lot to the Shore Road. She could see Jess standing by his bike yet, the ocean at his back, and for the second time that day she mentally accused him of knowing exactly what kind of picture he was making. This time, instead of being irritated, she felt a little bit sad. She drove on, wondering if the ocean would ever look the way it had looked to her before all of this had happened. Her tongue hurt miserably. She opened her window wider and spat. All white and all right this time. She could smell the salt of the ocean strongly, like bitter tears.

CHAPTER 3

Norm Bruett woke up at quarter past ten in the morning to the sound of kids fighting outside the bedroom window and country music from the radio in the kitchen.

He went to the back door in his saggy shorts and undershirt, threw it open, and yelled: 'You kids shutcha heads!'

A moment's pause. Luke and Bobby looked around from the old and rusty dump truck they had been arguing over. As always when he saw his kids, Norm felt dragged two ways at once. His heart ached to see them wearing hand-me-downs and Salvation Army giveouts like the ones you saw the nigger children in east Arnette wearing; and at the same time a horrible, shaking anger would sweep through him, making him want to stride out there and beat the living shit out of them.

'Yes, Daddy,' Luke said in a subdued way. He was nine.

'Yes, Daddy,' Bobby echoed. He was seven going on eight.

Norm stood for a moment, glaring at them, and slammed the door shut. He stood for a moment, looking indecisively at the pile of clothes he had worn yesterday. They were lying at the foot of the sagging double bed where he had dropped them.

That slutty bitch, he thought. She didn't even hang up my duds.

'Lila!' he bawled.

There was no answer. He considered ripping the door open again and asking Luke where the hell she had gone. It wasn't donated commodities day until next week and if she was down at the employment office in Braintree again she was an even bigger fool than he thought.

He didn't bother to ask the kids. He felt tired and he had

a queasy, thumping headache. Felt like a hangover, but he'd only had three beers down at Hap's the night before. That accident had been a hell of a thing. The woman and the baby dead in the car, the man, Campion, dying on the way to the hospital. By the time Hap had gotten back, the State Patrol had come and gone, and the wrecker, and the Braintree undertaker's hack. Vic Palfrey had given the Laws a statement for all five of them. The undertaker, who was also the county coroner, refused to speculate on what might have hit them.

'But it ain't cholera. And don't you go scarin people sayin it is. There'll be an autopsy and you can read about it in the paper.'

Miserable little pissant, Norm thought, slowly dressing himself in yesterday's clothes. His headache was turning into a real blinder. Those kids had better be quiet or they were going to have a pair of broken arms to mouth off about. Why the hell couldn't they have school the whole year round?

He considered tucking his shirt into his pants, decided the President probably wouldn't be stopping by that day, and shuffled out into the kitchen in his sock feet. The bright sunlight coming in the east windows made him squint.

The cracked Philco radio over the stove sang:

But bay-yay-yaby you can tell me if anyone can,
Baby, can you dig your man?
He's a righteous man,
Tell me baby, can you dig your man?

Things had come to a pretty pass when they had to play nigger rock and roll music like that on the local country music station. Norm turned it off before it could split his head. There was a note by the radio and he picked it up, narrowing his eyes to read it.

Dear Norm,

Sally Hodges says she needs somebody to sit her kids this morning and says shell give me a dolar. Ill be back for luntch. Theres sassage if you want it. I love you honey.

Lila.

Norm put the note back and just stood there for a moment, thinking it over and trying to get the sense of it in his mind. It was goddam hard to think past the headache. Babysitting . . . a dollar. For Ralph Hodges's wife.

The three elements slowly came together in his mind. Lila had gone off to sit Sally Hodges's three kids to earn a lousy dollar and had stuck him with Luke and Bobby. By God it was hard times when a man had to sit home and wipe his kids' noses so his wife could go and scratch out a lousy buck that wouldn't even buy them a gallon of gas. That was hard fucking times.

Dull anger came to him, making his head ache even worse. He shuffled slowly to the Frigidaire, bought when he had been making good overtime, and opened it. Most of the shelves were empty, except for leftovers Lila had put up in refrigerator dishes. He hated those little plastic Tupperware dishes. Old beans, old corn, a left-over dab of chili . . . nothing a man liked to eat. Nothing in there but little Tupperware dishes and three little old sausages done up in Handi-Wrap. He bent, looking at them, the familiar helpless anger now compounded by the dull throb in his head. Those sausages looked like somebody had cut the cocks off'n three of those pygmies they had down in Africa or South America or wherever the fuck it was they had them. He didn't feel like eating anyway. He felt damn sick, when you got right down to it.

He went over to the stove, scratched a match on the piece of sandpaper nailed to the wall beside it, lit the front gas ring, and put on the coffee. Then he sat down and waited dully for it to boil. Just before it did, he had to scramble his snotrag out of his back pocket to catch a big wet sneeze. Coming down with a cold, he thought. Isn't that something nice on top of everything else? But it never occurred to him to think of the phlegm that had been running out of that fellow Champion's pump the night before.

Hap was in the garage bay putting a new tailpipe on Tony Leominster's Scout and Vic Palfrey was rocking back on a folding camp chair, watching him and drinking a Dr Pepper when the bell dinged out front.

Vic squinted. 'It's the State Patrol,' he said. 'Looks like your cousin, there. Joe Bob.'

'Okay.'

Hap came out from beneath the Scout, wiping his hands on a ball of waste. On his way through the office he sneezed heavily. He hated summer colds. They were the worst.

Joe Bob Brentwood, who was almost six and a half feet tall, was standing by the back of his cruiser, filling up. Beyond him, the three pumps Champion had driven over the night before were neatly lined up like dead soldiers.

'Hey Joe Bob!' Hap said, coming out.

'Hap, you sumbitch,' Joe Bob said, putting the pump handle on automatic and stepping over the hose. 'You lucky this place still standin this morning.'

'Shit, Stu Redman saw the guy coming and switched off the pumps. There was a load of sparks, though.'

'Still damn lucky. Listen, Hap, I come over for somethin besides a fill-up.'

'Yeah?'

Joe Bob's eyes went to Vic, who was standing in the station door. 'Was that old geezer here last night?'

'Who? Vic? Yeah, he comes over most every night.'

'Can he keep his mouth shut?'

'Sure, I reckon. He's a good enough old boy.'

The automatic feed kicked off. Hap squeezed off another twenty cents' worth, then put the nozzle back on the pump and switched it off. He walked back to Joe Bob.

'So? What's the story?'

'Well, let's go inside. I guess the old fella ought to hear, too. And if you get a chance, you can phone the rest of them that was here.'

They walked across the tarmac and into the office.

'A good mornin to you, Officer,' Vic said.

Joe Bob nodded.

'Coffee, Joe Bob?' Hap asked.

'I guess not.' He looked at them heavily. 'Thing is, I don't know how my superiors would like me bein here at all. I don't think they would. So when those guys come here, you don't let them know I tipped you, right?'

'What guys, Officer?' Vic asked.

'Health Department guys,' Joe Bob said.

Vic said, 'Oh Jesus, it *was* cholera. I *knowed* it was.'

Hap looked from one to the other. 'Joe Bob?'

'I don't know nothing,' Joe Bob said, sitting down in one of the plastic Woolco chairs. His bony knees came nearly up to his neck. He took a pack of Chesterfields from his blouse pocket and lit up. 'Finnegan, there, the coroner —'

'That was a smartass,' Hap said fiercely. 'You should have seen him struttin around in here, Joe Bob. Just like a pea turkey that got its first hardon. Shushin people and all that.'

'He's a big turd in a little bowl, all right,' Joe Bob agreed. 'Well, he got Dr James to look at this Campion, and the two of them called in another doctor that I don't know. Then they got on the phone to Houston. And around three this mornin they come into that little airport outside of Braintree.'

'Who did?'

'Pathologists. Three of them. They were in there with the bodies until about eight o'clock. Cuttin on em is my guess, although I dunno for sure. Then they got on the phone to the Plague Center in Atlanta, and those guys are going to be here this afternoon. But they said in the meantime that the State Health Department was to send some fellas out here and see all the guys that were in the station last night, and the guys that drove the rescue unit to Braintree. I dunno, but it sounds to me like they want you quarantined.'

'Moses in the bulrushes,' Hap said, frightened.

'The Atlanta Plague Center's federal,' Vic said. 'Would they send out a planeload of federal men just for cholera?'

'Search me,' Joe Bob said. 'But I thought you guys had a right to know. From all I heard, you just tried to lend a hand.'

'It's appreciated, Joe Bob,' Hap said slowly. 'What did James and this other doctor say?'

'Not much. But they looked scared. I never seen doctors look scared like that. I didn't much care for it.'

A heavy silence fell. Joe Bob went to the drink machine and got a bottle of Fresca. The faint hissing sound of carbonation was audible as he popped the cap. As Joe Bob sat down again, Hap took a Kleenex from the box next to the cash register,

wiped his runny nose, and folded it into the pocket of his greasy overall.

‘What have you found out about Campion?’ Vic asked. ‘Anything?’

‘We’re still checking,’ Joe Bob said with a trace of importance. ‘His ID says he was from San Diego, but a lot of the stuff in his wallet was two and three years out of date. His driver’s license was expired. He had a BankAmericard that was issued in 1986 and that was expired, too. He had an army card so we’re checking with them. The captain has a hunch that Campion hadn’t lived in San Diego for maybe four years.’

‘AWOL?’ Vic asked. He produced a big red bandanna, hawked, and spat into it.

‘Dunno yet. But his army card said he was in until 1997, and he was in civvies, and he was with his family, and he was a fuck of a long way from California, and listen to my mouth run.’

‘Well, I’ll get in touch with the others and tell em what you said, anyway,’ Hap said. ‘Much obliged.’

Joe Bob stood up. ‘Sure. Just keep my name out of it. I sure wouldn’t want to lose my job. Your buddies don’t need to know who tipped you, do they?’

‘No,’ Hap said, and Vic echoed it.

As Joe Bob went to the door, Hap said a little apologetically: ‘That’s five even for gas, Joe Bob. I hate to charge you, but with things the way they are –’

‘That’s okay.’ Joe Bob handed him a credit card. ‘State’s payin. And I got my credit slip to show why I was here.’

While Hap was filling out the slip he sneezed twice.

‘You want to watch that,’ Joe Bob said. ‘Nothin any worse than a summer cold.’

‘Don’t I know it.’

Suddenly, from behind them, Vic said: ‘Maybe it ain’t a cold.’

They turned to him. Vic looked frightened.

‘I woke up this morning sneezin and hackin away like sixty,’ Vic said. ‘Had a mean headache, too. I took some aspirins and it’s gone back some, but I’m still full of snot. Maybe we’re coming down with it. What that Campion had. What he died of.’

Hap looked at him for a long time, and as he was about to put forward all his reasons why it couldn’t be, he sneezed again.

Joe Bob looked at them both gravely for a moment and then said, 'You know, it might not be such a bad idea to close the station, Hap. Just for today.'

Hap looked at him, scared, and tried to remember what all his reasons had been. He couldn't think of a one. All he could remember was that he had also awakened with a headache and a runny nose. Well, everyone caught a cold once in a while. But before that guy Campion had shown up, he had been fine. Just fine.

The three Hodges kids were six, four, and eighteen months. The two youngest were taking naps, and the oldest was out back digging a hole. Lila Bruett was in the living room, watching 'The Young and the Restless.' She hoped Sally wouldn't return until it was over. Ralph Hodges had bought a big color TV when times had been better in Arnette, and Lila loved to watch the afternoon stories in color. Everything was so much prettier.

She drew on her cigarette and then let the smoke out in spasms as a racking cough seized her. She went into the kitchen and spat the mouthful of crap she had brought up down the drain. She had gotten up with the cough, and all day it had felt like someone was tickling the back of her throat with a feather.

She went back to the living room after taking a peek out the pantry window to make sure Bert Hodges was okay. A commercial was on now, two dancing bottles of toilet bowl cleaner. Lila let her eyes drift around the room and wished her own house looked this nice. Sally's hobby was doing paint-by-the-numbers pictures of Christ, and they were all over the living room in nice frames. She especially liked the big one of the Last Supper mounted in back of the TV; it had come with sixty different oil colors, Sally had told her, and it took almost three months to finish. It was a real work of art.

Just as her story came back on, Baby Cheryl started to cry, a whooping, ugly yell broken by bursts of coughing.

Lila put out her cigarette and hurried into the bedroom. Eva, the four-year-old, was still fast asleep, but Cheryl was lying on her back in her crib, and her face was going an alarming purple color. Her cries began to sound strangled.

Lila, who was not afraid of the croup after seeing both of

her own through bouts with it, picked her up by the heels and swatted her firmly on the back. She had no idea if Dr Spock recommended this sort of treatment or not, because she had never read him. It worked nicely on Baby Cheryl. She emitted a froggy croak and suddenly spat an amazing wad of yellow phlegm out onto the floor.

‘Better?’ Lila asked.

‘Yeth,’ said Baby Cheryl. She was almost asleep again.

Lila wiped up the mess with a Kleenex. She couldn’t remember ever having seen a baby cough up so much snot all at once.

She sat down in front of ‘The Young and the Restless’ again, frowning. She lit another cigarette, sneezed over the first puff, and then began to cough herself.