

Chapter 8

THE NURSES WOULDN'T let us see Johnny. He was in critical condition. No visitors. But Two-Bit wouldn't take no for an answer. That was his buddy in there and he aimed to see him. We both begged and pleaded, but we were getting nowhere until the doctor found out what was going on.

"Let them go in," he said to the nurse. "He's been asking for them. It can't hurt now."

Two-Bit didn't notice the expression in his voice. It's true, I thought numbly, he is dying. We went in, practically on tiptoe, because the quietness of the hospital scared us. Johnny was lying still, with his eyes closed, but when Two-Bit said, "Hey, Johnnykid," he opened them and looked at us, trying to grin. "Hey, y'all."

The nurse, who was pulling the shades open, smiled and said, "So he can talk after all."

Two-Bit looked around. "They treatin' you okay, kid?"

"Don't..." ---Johnny gasped--- "don't let me put enough grease on my hair."

"Don't talk," Two-Bit said, pulling up a chair, "just listen. We'll bring you some hair grease next time. We're havin' the big rumble tonight"

Johnny's huge black eyes widened a little, but he didn't say anything.

"It's too bad you and Dally can't be in it. It's the first big rumble we've had--- not countin' the time we whipped Shepard's outfit"

"He came by," Johnny said.

"Tim Shepard?"

Johnny nodded. "Came to see Dally."

Tim and Dallas had always been buddies.

"Did you know you got your name in the paper for being a hero?"

Johnny almost grinned as he nodded. "Tuff enough," he managed, and by the way his eyes were glowing, I figured Southern gentlemen had nothing on Johnny Cade.

I could see that even a few words were tiring him out; he was as pale as the pillow and looked awful. Two-Bit pretended not to notice.

"You want anything besides hair grease, kid?"

Johnny barely nodded. "The book"--- he looked at me--- "can you get another one?"

Two-Bit looked at me too. I hadn't told him about *Gone with the Wind*.

"He wants a copy of *Gone with the Wind* so I can read it to him," I explained. "You want to run down to the drugstore and get one?"

"Okay," Two-Bit said cheerfully. "Don't y'all run off."

I sat down in Two-Bit's chair and tried to think of something to say. "Dally's gonna be okay," I said finally. "And Darry and me, we're okay now."

I knew Johnny understood what I meant. We had always been close buddies, and those lonely days in the church strengthened our friendship. He tried to smile again, and then suddenly went white and closed his eyes tight.

"Johnny!" I said, alarmed. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, keeping his eyes closed. "Yeah, it just hurts sometimes. It usually don't... I can't feel anything below the middle of my back..."

He lay breathing heavily for a moment. "I'm pretty bad off, ain't I, Pony?"

"You'll be okay," I said with fake cheerfulness. "You gotta be. We couldn't get along without you."

The truth of that last statement hit me. We couldn't get along without him. We needed Johnny as much as he needed the gang. And for the same reason.

"I won't be able to walk again," Johnny started, then faltered. "Not even on crutches. Busted my back."

"You'll be okay," I repeated firmly. Don't start crying, I commanded myself, don't start crying, you'll scare Johnny.

"You want to know something, Ponyboy? I'm scared stiff. I used to talk about killing myself..." He drew a quivering breath. "I don't want to die now. It ain't long enough. Sixteen years ain't long enough. I wouldn't mind it so much if there wasn't so much stuff I ain't done yet--- and so many things I ain't seen. It's not fair. You know what? That time we were in Windrixville was the only time I've been away from our neighborhood."

"You ain't gonna die," I said, trying to hold my voice down. "And don't get juiced up, because the doc won't let us see you no more if you do."

Sixteen years on the streets and you can learn a lot. But all the wrong things, not the things you want to learn. Sixteen years on the streets and you see a lot. But all the wrong sights, not the sights you want to see.

Johnny closed his eyes and rested quietly for a minute. Years of living on the East Side teaches you how to shut off your emotions. If you didn't, you would explode. You learn to cool it.

A nurse appeared in the doorway. "Johnny," she said quietly, "your mother's here to see you."

Johnny opened his eyes. At first they were wide with surprise, then they darkened. "I don't want to see her," he said firmly.

"She's your mother."

"I said I don't want to see her." His voice was rising. "She's probably come to tell me about all the trouble I'm causing her and about how glad her and the old man'll be when I'm dead. Well, tell her to leave me alone. For once" ---his voice broke--- "for once just to leave me alone." He was struggling to sit up, but he suddenly gasped, went whiter than the pillowcase, and passed out cold.

The nurse hurried me out the door. "I was afraid of something like this if he saw anyone."

I ran into Two-Bit, who was coming in.

"You can't see him now," the nurse said, so Two-Bit handed her the book. "Make sure he can see it when he comes around." She took it and closed the door behind her. Two-Bit stood and looked at the door a long time. "I wish it was any one of us except Johnny," he said, and his voice was serious for once. "We could get along without anyone but Johnny."

Turning abruptly, he said, "Let's go see Dallas."

As we walked out into the hall, we saw Johnny's mother. I knew her. She was a little woman, with straight black hair and big black eyes like Johnny's. But that was as far as the resemblance went. Johnny's eyes were fearful and sensitive; hers were cheap and hard. As we passed her she was saying, "But I have a right to see him. He's my son. After all the trouble his father and I've gone to to raise him, this is our reward: He'd rather see those no-count hoodlums than his own folks..." She saw us and gave us such a look of hatred that I almost backed up. "It was your fault. Always running around in the middle of the night getting jailed and heaven knows what else..." I thought she was going to cuss us out. I really did.

Two-Bit's eyes got narrow and I was afraid he was going to start something. I don't like to hear women get sworn at, even if they deserve it. "No wonder he hates your guts," Two-Bit snapped. He was going to tell her off real good, but I shoved him along. I felt sick. No wonder Johnny didn't want to see her. No wonder he stayed overnight at Two-Bit's or at our house, and slept in the vacant lot in good weather. I remembered my mother... beautiful and golden, like Soda, and wise and firm, like Darry.

"Oh, lordy!" There was a catch in Two-Bit's voice and he was closer to tears than I'd ever seen him. "He has to live with that."

We hurried to the elevator to get to the next floor. I hoped the nurse would have enough sense not to let Johnny's mother see him. It would kill him.

DALLY WAS ARGUING with one of the nurses when we came in. He grinned at us. "Man, am I glad to see you! These--- hospital people won't let me smoke, and I want out!"

We sat down, grinning at each other. Dally was his usual mean, ornery self. He was okay.

"Shepard came by to see me a while ago."

"That's what Johnny said. What'd he want?"

"Said he saw my picture in the paper and couldn't believe it didn't have 'Wanted Dead or Alive' under it. He mostly came to rub it in about the rumble. Man, I hate not bein' in that."

Only last week Tim Shepard had cracked three of Dally's ribs. But Dally and Tim Shepard had always been buddies; no matter how they fought, they were two of a kind, and they knew it.

Dally was grinning at me. "Kid, you scared the devil outa me the other day. I thought I'd killed you."

"Me?" I said, puzzled. "Why?"

"When you jumped out of the church. I meant to hit you just hard enough to knock you down and put out the fire, but when you dropped like a ton of lead I thought I'd aimed too high and broke your neck." He thought for a minute. "I'm glad I didn't, though."

"I'll bet," I said with a grin. I'd never liked Dally--- but then, for the first time, I felt like he was my buddy. And all because he was glad he hadn't killed me.

Dally looked out the window. "Uh..." ---he sounded very casual--- "how's the kid?"

"We just left him," Two-Bit said, and I could tell that he was debating whether to tell Dally the truth or not. "I don't know about stuff like this... but... well, he seemed pretty bad to me. He passed out cold before we left him."

Dally's jaw line went white as he swore between clenched teeth.

"Two-Bit, you still got that fancy black-handled switch?"

"Yeah."

"Give it here."

Two-Bit reached into his back pocket for his prize possession. It was a jet handled switchblade, ten inches long, that would flash open at a mere breath. It was the reward of two hours of walking aimlessly around a hardware store to divert suspicion. He kept it razor sharp. As far as I knew, he had never pulled it on anyone; he used his plain pocketknife when he needed a blade. But it was his showpiece, his pride and joy--- every time he ran into a new hood he pulled it out and showed off with it. Dally knew how

much that knife meant to Two-Bit, and if he needed a blade bad enough to ask for it, well, he needed a blade. That was all there was to it. Two-Bit handed it over to Dally without a moment's hesitation.

"We gotta win that fight tonight," Dally said. His voice was hard. "We gotta get even with the Socs. For Johnny."

He put the switch under his pillow and lay back, staring at the ceiling. We left. We knew better than to talk to Dally when his eyes were blazing and he was in a mood like that.

We decided to catch a bus home. I just didn't feel much like walking or trying to hitch a ride. Two-Bit left me sitting on the bench at the bus stop while he went to a gas station to buy some cigarettes. I was kind of sick to my stomach and sort of groggy. I was nearly asleep when I felt someone's hand on my forehead. I almost jumped out of my skin. Two-Bit was looking down at me worriedly. "You feel okay? You're awful hot."

"I'm all right," I said, and when he looked at me as if he didn't believe me, I got a little panicky. "Don't tell Darry, okay? Come on, Two-Bit, be a buddy. I'll be well by tonight. I'll take a bunch of aspirins."

"All right," Two-Bit said reluctantly. "But Darry'll kill me if you're really sick and go ahead and fight anyway."

"I'm okay," I said, getting a little angry. "And if you keep your mouth shut, Darry won't know a thing."

"You know somethin'?" Two-Bit said as we were riding home on the bus. "You'd think you could get away with murder, living with your big brother and all, but Darry's stricter with you than your folks were, ain't he?"

"Yeah," I said, "but they'd raised two boys before me. Darry hasn't."

"You know, the only thing that keeps Darry from bein' a Soc is us."

"I know" I said. I had known it for a long time. In spite of not having much money, the only reason Darry couldn't be a Soc was us. The gang. Me and Soda. Darry was too smart to be a greaser. I don't know how I knew, I just did. And I was kind of sorry.

I was silent most of the way home. I was thinking about the rumble. I had a sick feeling in my stomach and it wasn't from being ill. It was the same kind of helplessness I'd felt that night Darry yelled at me for going to sleep in the lot. I had the same deathly fear that something was going to happen that none of us could stop. As we got off the bus I finally said it. "Tonight--- I don't like it one bit."

Two-Bit pretended not to understand. "I never knew you to play chicken in a rumble before. Not even when you was a little kid."

I knew he was trying to make me mad, but I took the bait anyway. "I ain't chicken, Two-Bit Mathews, and you know it," I said angrily. "Ain't I a Curtis, same as Soda and Darry?"

Two-Bit couldn't deny this, so I went on: "I mean, I got an awful feeling something's gonna happen."

"Somethin' is gonna happen. We're gonna stomp the Socs' guts, that's what."

Two-Bit knew what I meant, but doggedly pretended not to. He seemed to feel that if you said something was all right, it immediately was, no matter what. He's been that way all his life, and I don't expect he'll change. Sodapop would have understood, and we would have tried to figure it out together, but Two-Bit just ain't Soda. Not by a long shot.

Cherry Valance was sitting in her Corvette by the vacant lot when we came by. Her long hair was pinned up, and in daylight she was even better looking. That Sting Ray was one tuff car. A bright red one. It was cool.

"Hi, Ponyboy," she said. "Hi, Two-Bit."

Two-Bit stopped. Apparently Cherry had shown up there before during the week Johnny and I had spent in Windrixville.

"What's up with the big times?"

She tightened the strings on her ski jacket. "They play your way. No weapons, fair deal. Your rules."

"You sure?"

She nodded. "Randy told me. He knows for sure."

Two-Bit turned and started home. "Thanks, Cherry."

"Ponyboy, stay a minute," Cherry said. I stopped and went back to her car. "Randy's not going to show up at the rumble."

"Yeah," I said, "I know."

"He's not scared. He's just sick of fighting. Bob..." She swallowed, then went on quietly. "Bob was his best buddy. Since grade school."

I thought of Soda and Steve. What if one of them saw the other killed? Would that make them stop fighting? No, I thought, maybe it would make Soda stop, but not Steve. He'd go on hating and fighting. Maybe that was what Bob would have done if it had been Randy instead of him.

"How's Johnny?"

"Not so good," I said. "Will you go up to see him?"

She shook her head. "No. I couldn't."

"Why not?" I demanded. It was the least she could do. It was her boyfriend who had caused it all... and then I stopped. Her boyfriend...

"I couldn't," she said in a quiet, desperate voice. "He killed Bob. Oh, maybe Bob asked for it. I know he did. But I couldn't ever look at the person who killed him. You only knew his bad side. He could be sweet sometimes, and friendly. But when he got drunk... it was that part of him that beat up Johnny. I knew it was Bob when you told me the story. He was so proud of his rings. Why do people sell liquor to boys? Why? I know there's a law against it, but kids get it anyway. I can't go see Johnny. I know I'm too young to be in love and all that, but Bob was something special. He wasn't just any boy. He had something that made people follow him, something that marked him different, maybe a little better, than the crowd. Do you know what I mean?"

I did. Cherry saw the same things in Dallas. That was why she was afraid to see him, afraid of loving him. I knew what she meant all right. But she also meant she wouldn't go see Johnny because he had killed Bob. "That's okay," I said sharply. It wasn't Johnny's fault Bob was a booze-hound and Cherry went for boys who were bound for trouble. "I wouldn't want you to see him. You're a traitor to your own kind and not loyal to us. Do you think your spying for us makes up for the fact that you're sitting there in a Corvette while my brother drops out of school to get a job? Don't you ever feel sorry for us. Don't you ever try to give us handouts and then feel high and mighty about it."

I started to turn and walk off, but something in Cherry's face made me stop. I was ashamed--- I can't stand to see girls cry. She wasn't crying, but she was close to it.

"I wasn't trying to give you charity, Ponyboy. I only wanted to help. I liked you from the start... the way you talked. You're a nice kid, Ponyboy. Do you realize how scarce nice kids are nowadays? Wouldn't you try to help me if you could?"

I would. I'd help her and Randy both, if I could. "Hey," I said suddenly, "can you see the sunset real good from the West Side?"

She blinked, startled, then smiled. "Real good."

"You can see it good from the East Side, too," I said quietly.

"Thanks, Ponyboy." She smiled through her tears. "You dig okay."

She had green eyes. I went on, walking home slowly.