

Chapter 9

IT WAS ALMOST six-thirty when I got home. The rumble was set for seven, so I was late for supper, as usual. I always come in late. I forget what time it is. Darry had cooked dinner: baked chicken and potatoes and corn--- two chickens because all three of us eat like horses. Especially Darry. But although I love baked chicken, I could hardly swallow any. I swallowed five aspirins, though, when Darry and Soda weren't looking. I do that all the time because I can't sleep very well at night. Darry thinks I take just one, but I usually take four. I figured five would keep me going through the rumble and maybe get rid of my headache.

Then I hurried to take a shower and change clothes. Me and Soda and Darry always got spruced up before a rumble. And besides, we wanted to show those Socs we weren't trash, that we were just as good as they were.

"Soda," I called from the bathroom, "when did you start shaving?"

"When I was fifteen," he yelled back.

"When did Darry?"

"When he was thirteen. Why? You figgerin' on growing a beard for the rumble?"

"You're funny. We ought to send you in to the Reader's Digest. I hear they pay a lot for funny things."

Soda laughed and went right on playing poker with Steve in the living room. Darry had on a tight black T-shirt that showed every muscle on his chest and even the flat hard muscles of his stomach. I'd hate to be the Soc who takes a crack at him, I thought as I pulled on a clean T-shirt and a fresh pair of jeans. I wished my T-shirt was tighter--- I have a pretty good build for my size, but I'd lost a lot of weight in Windrixville and it just didn't fit right. It was a chilly night and T-shirts aren't the warmest clothes in the world, but nobody ever gets cold in a rumble, and besides, jackets interfere with your swinging ability.

Soda and Steve and I had put on more hair oil than was necessary, but we wanted to show that we were greasers. Tonight we could be proud of it. Greasers may not have much, but they have a rep. That and long hair. (What kind of world is it where all I have to be proud of is a reputation for being a hood, and greasy hair? I don't want to be a hood, but even if I don't steal things and mug people and get boozed up, I'm marked lousy. Why should I be proud of it? Why should I even pretend to be proud of it?) Darry never went in for the long hair. His was short and clean all the time.

I sat in the armchair in the living room, waiting for the rest of the outfit to show up. But of course, tonight the only one coming would be Two-Bit; Johnny and Dallas wouldn't show. Soda and Steve were playing cards and arguing as usual. Soda was keeping up a steady stream of wisecracks and clowning, and Steve had turned up the radio so loud that it almost broke my eardrums. Of course everybody listens to it loud like that, but it wasn't just the best thing for a headache.

"You like fights, don't you, Soda?" I asked suddenly.

"Yeah, sure." He shrugged. "I like fights."

"How come?"

"I don't know." He looked at me, puzzled. "It's action. It's a contest. Like a drag race or a dance or something."

"Shoot," said Steve, "I want to beat those Socs' heads in. When I get in a fight I want to stomp the other guy good. I like it, too."

"How come you like fights, Darry?" I asked, looking up at him as he stood behind me, leaning in the kitchen doorway. He gave me one of those looks that hide what he's thinking, but Soda piped up: "He likes to show off his muscles."

"I'm gonna show 'em off on you, little buddy, if you get any mouthier."

I digested what Soda had said. It was the truth. Darry liked anything that took strength, like weight lifting or playing football or roofing houses, even if he was proud of being smart too. Darry never said anything about it, but I knew he liked fights. I felt out of things. I'll fight anyone anytime, but I don't like to.

"I don't know if you ought to be in this rumble, Pony," Darry said slowly.

Oh, no, I thought in mortal fear, I've got to be in it. Right then the most important thing in my life was helping us whip the Socs. Don't let him make me stay home now. I've got to be in it.

"How come? I've always come through before, ain't I?"

"Yeah," Darry said with a proud grin. "You fight real good for a kid your size. But you were in shape before. You've lost weight and you don't look so great, kid. You're tensed up too much."

"Shoot," said Soda, trying to get the ace out of his shoe without Steve's seeing him, "we all get tensed up before a rumble. Let him fight tonight. Skin never hurt anyone-- no weapons, no danger."

"I'll be okay," I pleaded. "I'll get hold of a little one, okay?"

"Well, Johnny won't be there this time..." ---Johnny and I sometimes ganged up on one big guy--- "but then, Curly Shepard won't be there either, or Dally, and we'll need every man we can get."

"What happened to Shepard?" I asked, remembering Tim Shepard's kid brother. Curly, who was a tough, cool, hard-as-nails Tim in miniature, and I had once played chicken by holding our cigarette ends against each other's fingers. We had stood there, clenching our teeth and grimacing, with sweat pouring down our faces and the smell of burning flesh making us sick, each refusing to holler, until Tim happened to stroll by. When he saw that we were really burning holes in each other he cracked our heads together, swearing to kill us both if we ever pulled a stunt like that again. I still have the

scar on my forefinger. Curly was an average downtown hood, tough and not real bright, but I liked him. He could take anything.

"He's in the cooler," Steve said, kicking the ace out of Soda's shoe. "In the reformatory."

Again? I thought, and said, "Let me fight, Darry. If it was blades or chains or something it'd be different. Nobody ever gets really hurt in a skin rumble."

"Well"--- Darry gave in--- "I guess you can. But be careful, and if you get in a jam, holler and I'll get you out."

"I'll be okay," I said wearily. "How come you never worry about Sodapop as much? I don't see you lecturin' him."

"Man"--- Darry grinned and put his arm across Soda's shoulders--- "this is one kid brother I don't have to worry about"

Soda punched him in the ribs affectionately.

"This kiddo can use his head."

Sodapop looked down at me with mock superiority, but Darry went on: "You can see he uses it for one thing--- to grow hair on." He ducked Soda's swing and took off for the door.

Two-Bit stuck his head in the door just as Darry went flying out of it. Leaping as he went off the steps, Darry turned a somersault in mid-air, hit the ground, and bounced up before Soda could catch him.

"Welup," Two-Bit said cheerfully, cocking an eyebrow, "I see we are in prime condition for a rumble. Is everybody happy?"

"Yeah!" screamed Soda as he too did a flying somersault off the steps. He flipped up to walk on his hands and then did a no-hands cartwheel across the yard to beat Darry's

performance. The excitement was catching. Screeching like an Indian, Steve went running across the lawn in flying leaps, stopped suddenly, and flipped backward. We could all do acrobatics because Darry had taken a course at the Y and then spent a whole summer teaching us everything he'd learned on the grounds that it might come in handy in a fight. It did, but it also got Two-Bit and Soda jailed once. They were doing mid-air flips down a downtown sidewalk, walking on their hands and otherwise disturbing the public and the police. Leave it to those two to pull something like that.

With a happy whoop I did a no-hands cartwheel off the porch steps, hit the ground, and rolled to my feet. Two-Bit followed me in a similar manner.

"I am a greaser," Sodapop chanted. "I am a JD and a hood. I blacken the name of our fair city. I beat up people. I rob gas stations. I am a menace to society. Man, do I have fun!"

"Greaser... greaser... greaser..." Steve singsonged. "O victim of environment, underprivileged, rotten, no-count hood!"

"Juvenile delinquent, you're no good!" Darry shouted.

"Get thee hence, white trash," Two-Bit said in a snobbish voice. "I am a Soc. I am the privileged and the well-dressed. I throw beer blasts, drive fancy cars, break windows at fancy parties."

"And what do you do for fun?" I inquired in a serious, awed voice.

"I jump greasers!" Two-Bit screamed, and did a cartwheel.

We settled down as we walked to the lot. Two-Bit was the only one wearing a jacket; he had a couple of cans of beer stuffed in it. He always gets high before a rumble. Before anything else, too, come to think of it. I shook my head. I'd hate to see the day when I had to get my nerve from a can. I'd tried drinking once before. The stuff tasted awful, I got sick, had a headache, and when Darry found out, he grounded me for two

weeks. But that was the last time I'd ever drink. I'd seen too much of what drinking did for you at Johnny's house.

"Hey, Two-Bit," I said, deciding to complete my survey, "how come you like to fight?"

He looked at me as if I was off my nut. "Shoot, everybody fights."

If everybody jumped in the Arkansas River, ol' Two-Bit would be right on their heels. I had it then. Soda fought for fun, Steve for hatred, Darry for pride, and Two-Bit for conformity. Why do I fight? I thought, and couldn't think of any real good reason. There isn't any real good reason for fighting except self-defense.

"Listen, Soda, you and Ponyboy," Darry said as we strode down the street, "if the fuzz show, you two beat it out of there. The rest of us can only get jailed. You two can get sent to a boys' home."

"Nobody in this neighborhood's going to call the fuzz," Steve said grimly. "They know what'd happen if they did."

"All the same, you two blow at the first sign of trouble. You hear me?"

"You sure don't need an amplifier," Soda said, and stuck out his tongue at the back of Darry's head. I stifled a giggle. If you want to see something funny, it's a tough hood sticking his tongue out at his big brother.

TIM SHEPARD AND company were already waiting when we arrived at the vacant lot, along with a gang from Brumly, one of the suburbs. Tim was a lean, catlike eighteen-year-old who looked like the model JD you see in movies and magazines. He had the right curly black hair, smoldering dark eyes, and a long scar from temple to chin where a tramp had belted him with a broken pop bottle. He had a tough, hard look to him, and his nose had been broken twice. Like Dally's, his smile was grim and bitter. He was one of those who enjoy being a hood. The rest of his bunch were the same way. The boys from Brumly, too. Young hoods--- who would grow up to be old hoods. I'd never thought

about it before, but they'd just get worse as they got older, not better. I looked at Darry. He wasn't going to be any hood when he got old. He was going to get somewhere. Living the way we do would only make him more determined to get somewhere. That's why he's better than the rest of us, I thought. He's going somewhere. And I was going to be like him. I wasn't going to live in a lousy neighborhood all my life.

Tim had the tense, hungry look of an alley cat--- that's what he's always reminded me of, an alley cat--- and he was constantly restless. His boys ranged from fifteen to nineteen, hard-looking characters who were used to the strict discipline Tim gave out. That was the difference between his gang and ours--- they had a leader and were organized; we were just buddies who stuck together--- each man was his own leader. Maybe that was why we could whip them.

Tim and the leader of the Brumly outfit moved forward to shake hands with each of us--- proving that our gangs were on the same side in this fight, although most of the guys in those two outfits weren't exactly what I'd like to call my friends. When Tim got to me he studied me, maybe remembering how his kid brother and I had played chicken. "You and the quiet black-headed kid were the ones who killed that Soc?"

"Yeah," I said, pretending to be proud of it; then I thought of Cherry and Randy and got a sick feeling in my stomach.

"Good goin', kid. Curly always said you were a good kid. Curly's in the reformatory for the next six months." Tim grinned ruefully, probably thinking of his roughneck, hard-headed brother. "He got caught breakin' into a liquor store, the little..." He went on to call Curly every unprintable name under the sun--- in Tim's way of thinking, terms of affection.

I surveyed the scene with pride. I was the youngest one there. Even Curly, if he had been there, had turned fifteen, so he was older than me. I could tell Darry realized this too, and although he was proud, I also knew he was worried. Shoot, I thought, I'll fight so good this time he won't ever worry about me again. I'll show him that someone besides Sodapop can use his head.

One of the Brumly guys waved me over. We mostly stuck with our own outfits, so I was a little leery of going over to him, but I shrugged. He asked to borrow a weed, then lit up. "That big guy with y'all, you know him pretty well?"

"I ought to, he's my brother," I said. I couldn't honestly say "Yes." I knew Darry as well as he knew me, and that isn't saying a whole lot.

"No kiddin'? I got a feelin' he's gonna be asked to start the fireworks around here. He a pretty good bopper?"

He meant rumbler. Those Brumly boys have weird vocabularies. I doubt if half of them can read a newspaper or spell much more than their names, and it comes out in their speech. I mean, you take a guy that calls a rumble "bop-action," and you can tell he isn't real educated.

"Yep," I said. "But why him?"

He shrugged. "Why anybody else?"

I looked our outfits over. Most greasers don't have real tuff builds or anything. They're mostly lean and kind of panther-looking in a slouchy way. This is partly because they don't eat much and partly because they're slouchy. Darry looked like he could whip anyone there. I think most of the guys were nervous because of the 'no weapons' rule. I didn't know about the Brumly boys, but I knew Shepard's gang were used to fighting with anything they could get their hands on--- bicycle chains, blades, pop bottles, pieces of pipe, pool sticks, or sometimes even heaters. I mean guns. I have a kind of lousy vocabulary, too, even if I am educated. Our gang never went in for weapons. We're just not that rough. The only weapons we ever used were knives, and shoot, we carried them mostly just for looks. Like Two-Bit with his black-handled switch. None of us had ever really hurt anybody, or wanted to. Just Johnny. And he hadn't wanted to.

"Hey, Curtis!" Tim yelled. I jumped.

"Which one?" I heard Soda yell back.

"The big one. Come on over here."

The guy from Brumly looked at me. "What did I tell ya?"

I watched Darry going toward Tim and the leader of the Brumly boys. He shouldn't be here, I thought suddenly. I shouldn't be here and Steve shouldn't be here and Soda shouldn't be here and Two-Bit shouldn't be here. We're greasers, but not hoods, and we don't belong with this bunch of future convicts. We could end up like them, I thought. We could. And the thought didn't help my headache.

I went back to stand with Soda and Steve and Two-Bit then, because the Socs were arriving. Right on time. They came in four carloads, and filed out silently. I counted twenty-two of them. There were twenty of us, so I figured the odds were as even as we could get them. Darry always liked to take on two at a time anyway. They looked like they were all cut from the same piece of cloth: clean shaven with semi-Beatle haircuts, wearing striped or checkered shirts with light red or tan-colored jackets or madras ski jackets. They could just as easily have been going to the movies as to a rumble. That's why people don't ever think to blame the Socs and are always ready to jump on us. We look hoody and they look decent. It could be just the other way around--- half of the hoods I know are pretty decent guys underneath all that grease, and from what I've heard, a lot of Socs are just cold-blooded mean--- but people usually go by looks.

They lined up silently, facing us, and we lined up facing them. I looked for Randy but didn't see him. I hoped he wasn't there. A guy with a madras shirt stepped up. "Let's get the rules straight--- nothing but our fists, and the first to run lose. Right?"

Tim flipped away his beer can. "You savvy real good."

There was an uneasy silence: Who was going to start it? Darry solved the problem. He stepped forward under the circle of light made by the street lamp. For a minute, everything looked unreal, like a scene out of a JD movie or something. Then Darry said, "I'll take on anyone."

He stood there, tall, broad-shouldered, his muscles taut under his T-shirt and his eyes glittering like ice. For a second it looked like there wasn't anyone brave enough to take him on. Then there was a slight stir in the faceless mob of Socs, and a husky blond guy stepped forward. He looked at Darry and said quietly, "Hello, Darrel."

Something flickered behind Darry's eyes and then they were ice again. "Hello, Paul."

I heard Soda give a kind of squeak and I realized that the blond was Paul Holden. He had been the best halfback on Darry's football team at high school and he and Darry used to buddy it around all the time. He must be a junior in college by now, I thought. He was looking at Darry with an expression I couldn't quite place, but disliked. Contempt? Pity? Hate? All three? Why? Because Darry was standing there representing all of us, and maybe Paul felt only contempt and pity and hate for greasers? Darry hadn't moved a muscle or changed expression, but you could see he hated Paul now. It wasn't only jealousy--- Darry had a right to be jealous; he was ashamed to be on our side, ashamed to be seen with the Brumly boys, Shepard's gang, maybe even us. Nobody realized it but me and Soda. It didn't matter to anyone but me and Soda.

That's stupid, I thought swiftly, they've both come here to fight and they're both supposed to be smarter than that. What difference does the side make?

Then Paul said, "I'll take you," and something like a smile crossed Darry's face. I knew Darry had thought he could take Paul any time. But that was two or three years ago. What if Paul was better now? I swallowed. Neither one of my brothers had ever been beaten in a fight, but I wasn't exactly itching for someone to break the record.

They moved in a circle under the light, counterclockwise, eyeing each other, sizing each other up, maybe remembering old faults and wondering if they were still there. The rest of us waited with mounting tension. I was reminded of Jack London's books--- you know, where the wolf pack waits in silence for one of two members to go down in a fight. But it was different here. The moment either one swung a punch, the rumble would be on.

The silence grew heavier, and I could hear the harsh heavy breathing of the boys around me. Still Darry and the Soc walked slowly in a circle. Even I could feel their hatred. They used to be buddies, I thought, they used to be friends, and now they hate each other because one has to work for a living and the other comes from the West Side. They shouldn't hate each other... I don't hate the Socs any more... they shouldn't hate...

"Hold up!" a familiar voice yelled. "Hold it!" Darry turned to see who it was, and Paul swung--- a hard right to the jaw that would have felled anyone but Darry. The rumble was on. Dallas Winston ran to join us.

I couldn't find a Soc my size, so I took the next-best size and jumped on him. Dallas was right beside me, already on top of someone.

"I thought you were in the hospital," I yelled as the Soc knocked me to the ground and I rolled to avoid getting kicked.

"I was." Dally was having a hard time because his left arm was still in bad shape. "I ain't now."

"How?" I managed to ask as the Soc I was fighting leaped on me and we rolled near Dally.

"Talked the nurse into it with Two-Bit's switch. Don't you know a rumble ain't a rumble unless I'm in it?"

I couldn't answer because the Soc, who was heavier than I took him for, had me pinned and was slugging the sense out of me. I thought dizzily that he was going to knock some of my teeth loose or break my nose or something, and I knew I didn't have a chance. But Darry was keeping an eye out for me; he caught that guy by the shoulder and half lifted him up before knocking him three feet with a sledge-hammer blow. I decided it would be fair for me to help Dally since he could use only one arm.

They were slugging it out, but Dallas was getting the worst of it, so I jumped on his Soc's back, pulling his hair and pounding him. He reached back and caught me by the

neck and threw me over his head to the ground. Tim Shepard, who was fighting two at once, accidentally stepped on me, knocking my breath out. I was up again as soon as I got my wind, and jumped right back on the Soc, trying my best to strangle him. While he was prying my fingers loose, Dally knocked him backward, so that all three of us rolled on the ground, gasping, cussing, and punching.

Somebody kicked me hard in the ribs and I yelped in spite of myself. Some Soc had knocked out one of our bunch and was kicking me as hard as he could. But I had both arms wrapped around the other Soc's neck and refused to let go. Dally was slugging him, and I hung on desperately, although that other Soc was kicking me and you'd better believe it hurt. Finally he kicked me in the head so hard it stunned me, and I lay limp, trying to clear my mind and keep from blacking out. I could hear the racket, but only dimly through the buzzing in my ears. Numerous bruises along my back and on my face were throbbing, but I felt detached from the pain, as if it wasn't really me feeling it.

"They're running!" I heard a voice yell joyfully. "Look at the dirty--- run!"

It seemed to me that the voice belonged to Two-Bit, but I couldn't be sure. I tried to sit up, and saw that the Socs were getting into their cars and leaving. Tim Shepard was swearing blue and green because his nose was broken again, and the leader of the Brumly boys was working over one of his own men because he had broken the rules and used a piece of pipe in the fighting. Steve lay doubled up and groaning about ten feet from me. We found out later he had three broken ribs. Sodapop was beside him, talking in a low steady voice. I did a double take when I saw Two-Bit--- blood was streaming down one side of his face and one hand was busted wide open; but he was grinning happily because the Socs were running.

"We won," Darry announced in a tired voice. He was going to have a black eye and there was a cut across his forehead. "We beat the Socs."

Dally stood beside me quietly for a minute, trying to grasp the fact that we had really beaten the Socs. Then, grabbing my shirt, he hauled me to my feet. "Come on!" He half dragged me down the street. "We're goin' to see Johnny."

I tried to run but stumbled, and Dally impatiently shoved me along. "Hurry! He was gettin' worse when I left. He wants to see you."

I don't know how Dallas could travel so fast and hard after being knocked around and having his sore arm hurt some more, but I tried to keep up with him. Track wasn't ever like the running I did that night. I was still dizzy and had only a dim realization of where I was going and why.

Dally had Buck Merrill's T-bird parked in front of our house, and we hopped into it. I sat tight as Dally roared the car down the street. We were on Tenth when a siren came on behind us and I saw the reflection of the red light flashing in the windshield.

"Look sick," Dally commanded. "I'll say I'm taking you to the hospital, which'll be truth enough."

I leaned against the cold glass of the window and tried to look sick, which wasn't too hard, feeling the way I did right then.

The policeman looked disgusted. "All right, buddy, where's the fire?"

"The kid"--- Dally jerked a thumb toward me--- "he fell over on his motorcycle and I'm takin' him to the hospital."

I groaned, and it wasn't all fake-out. I guess I looked pretty bad, too, being cut and bruised like I was.

The fuzz changed his tone. "Is he real bad? Do you need an escort?"

"How would I know if he's bad or not? I ain't no doc. Yeah, we could use an escort." And as the policeman got back into his car I heard Dally hiss, "Sucker!"

With the siren ahead of us, we made record time getting to the hospital. All the way there Dally kept talking and talking about something, but I was too dizzy to make most of it out.

"I was crazy, you know that, kid? Crazy for wantin' Johnny to stay outa trouble, for not wantin' him to get hard. If he'd been like me he'd never have been in this mess. If he'd got smart like me he'd never have run into that church. That's what you get for helpin' people. Editorials in the paper and a lot of trouble.... You'd better wise up, Pony... you get tough like me and you don't get hurt. You look out for yourself and nothin' can touch you..."

He said a lot more stuff, but I didn't get it all. I had a stupid feeling that Dally was out of his mind, the way he kept raving on and on, because Dallas never talked like that, but I think now I would have understood if I hadn't been sick at the time.

The cop left us at the hospital as Dally pretended to help me out of the car. The minute the cop was gone; Dally let go of me so quick I almost fell. "Hurry!"

We ran through the lobby and crowded past people into the elevator. Several people yelled at us, I think because we were pretty racked-up looking, but Dally had nothing on his mind except Johnny, and I was too mixed up to know anything but that I had to follow Dally. When we finally got to Johnny's room, the doctor stopped us. "I'm sorry, boys, but he's dying."

"We gotta see him," Dally said, and flicked out Two-Bit's switchblade. His voice was shaking. "We're gonna see him and if you give me any static you'll end up on your own operatin' table."

The doctor didn't bat an eye. "You can see him, but it's because you're his friends, not because of that knife."

Dally looked at him for a second, then put the knife back in his pocket. We both went into Johnny's room, standing there for a second, getting our breath back in heavy gulps. It was awful quiet. It was scary quiet. I looked at Johnny. He was very still, and for a moment I thought in agony: He's dead already. We're too late.

Dally swallowed, wiping the sweat off his upper lip. "Johnnycake?" he said in a hoarse voice. "Johnny?"

Johnny stirred weakly, then opened his eyes. "Hey," he managed softly.

"We won," Dally panted. "We beat the Socs. We stomped them--- chased them outa our territory."

Johnny didn't even try to grin at him. "Useless... fighting's no good...." He was awful white.

Dally licked his lips nervously. "They're still writing editorials about you in the paper. For being a hero and all." He was talking too fast and too calmly. "Yeah, they're calling you a hero now and heroizin' all the greasers. We're all proud of you, buddy."

Johnny's eyes glowed. Dally was proud of him. That was all Johnny had ever wanted.

"Ponyboy."

I barely heard him. I came closer and leaned over to hear what he was going to say.

"Stay gold, Ponyboy. Stay gold..." The pillow seemed to sink a little, and Johnny died.

You read about people looking peacefully asleep when they're dead, but they don't. Johnny just looked dead. Like a candle with the flame gone. I tried to say something, but I couldn't make a sound.

Dally swallowed and reached over to push Johnny's hair back. "Never could keep that hair back... that's what you get for tryin' to help people, you little punk, that's what you get..."

Whirling suddenly, he slammed back against the wall. His face contracted in agony, and sweat streamed down his face.

"Damnit, Johnny..." he begged, slamming one fist against the wall, hammering it to make it obey his will. "Oh, damnit, Johnny, don't die, please don't die..."

He suddenly bolted through the door and down the hall.