

Chapter 10

I WALKED DOWN THE hall in a daze. Dally had taken the car and I started the long walk home in a stupor. Johnny was dead. But he wasn't. That still body back in the hospital wasn't Johnny. Johnny was somewhere else--- maybe asleep in the lot, or playing the pinball machine in the bowling alley, or sitting on the back steps of the church in Windrixville. I'd go home and walk by the lot, and Johnny would be sitting on the curb smoking a cigarette, and maybe we'd lie on our backs and watch the stars. He isn't dead, I said to myself. He isn't dead. And this time my dreaming worked. I convinced myself that he wasn't dead.

I must have wandered around for hours; sometimes even out into the street, getting honked at and cussed out. I might have stumbled around all night except for a man who asked me if I wanted a ride.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, I guess so," I said. I got in. The man, who was in his mid-twenties, looked at me.

"Are you all right, kid? You look like you've been in a fight."

"I have been. A rumble. I'm okay." Johnny is not dead, I told myself, and I believed it.

"Hate to tell you this, kiddo," the guy said dryly, "but you're bleedin' all over my car seats."

I blinked. "I am?"

"Your head."

I reached up to scratch the side of my head where it'd been itching for a while, and when I looked at my hand it was smeared with blood.

"Gosh, mister, I'm sorry," I said, dumfounded.

"Don't worry about it. This wreck's been through worse. What's your address? I'm not about to dump a hurt kid out on the streets this time of night."

I told him. He drove me to my house, and I got out. "Thanks a lot."

What was left of our gang was in the living room. Steve was stretched out on the sofa, his shirt unbuttoned and his side bandaged. His eyes were closed, but when the door shut behind me he opened them, and I suddenly wondered if my own eyes looked as feverish and bewildered as his. Soda had a wide cut on his lip and a bruise across his cheek. There was a Band-Aid over Darry's forehead and he had a black eye. One side of Two-Bits face was taped up--- I found out later he had four stitches in his cheek and seven in his hand where he had busted his knuckles open over a Soc's head. They were lounging around, reading the paper and smoking.

Where's the party? I thought dully. Weren't Soda and Steve planning a party after the rumble? They all looked up when I walked in. Dairy leaped to his feet.

"Where have you been?"

Oh, let's don't start that again, I thought. He stopped suddenly.

"Ponyboy, what's the matter?"

I looked at all of them, a little frightened. "Johnny... he's dead." My voice sounded strange, even to me. But he's not dead, a voice in my head said. "We told him about beatin' the Socs and... I don't know, he just died." He told me to stay gold, I remembered. What was he talking about?

There was a stricken silence. I don't think any of us had realized how bad off Johnny really had been. Soda made a funny noise and looked like he was going to start crying. Two-Bit's eyes were closed and his teeth were clenched, and I suddenly remembered Dally.... Dally pounding on the wall.

"Dallas is gone," I said. "He ran out like the devil was after him. He's gonna blow up. He couldn't take it."

How can I take it? I wondered. Dally is tougher than I am. Why can I take it when Dally can't? And then I knew. Johnny was the only thing Dally loved. And now Johnny was gone.

"So he finally broke." Two-Bit spoke everyone's feelings. "So even Dally has a breaking point."

I started shaking. Darry said something in a low voice to Soda.

"Ponyboy," Soda said softly, like he was talking to an injured animal, "you look sick. Sit down."

I backed up, just like a frightened animal, shaking my head. "I'm okay." I felt sick. I felt as if any minute I was going to fall flat on my face, but I shook my head. "I don't want to sit down."

Darry took a step toward me, but I backed away. "Don't touch me," I said. My heart was pounding in slow thumps, throbbing at the side of my head, and I wondered if everyone else could hear it. Maybe that's why they're all looking at me, I thought, they can hear my heart beating...

The phone rang, and after a moment's hesitation, Darry turned from me to it. He said "Hello" and then listened. He hung up quickly.

"It was Dally. He phoned from a booth. He's, just robbed a grocery store and the cops are after him. We gotta hide him. He'll be at the lot in a minute."

We all left the house at a dead run, even Steve, and I wondered vaguely why no one was doing somersaults off the steps this time. Things were sliding in and out of focus, and it seemed funny to me that I couldn't run in a straight line.

WE REACHED THE vacant lot just as Dally came in, running as hard as he could, from the opposite direction. The wail of a siren grew louder and then police car pulled up across the street from the lot. Doors slammed as the policemen leaped out. Dally had reached the circle of light under the street lamp, and skidding to a halt, he turned and jerked a black object from his waistband. I remembered his voice: I been carryin' a heater. It ain't loaded, but it sure does held a bluff.

It was only yesterday that Dally had told Johnny and me that. But yesterday was years ago. A lifetime ago.

Dally raised the gun, and I thought: You blasted fool. They don't know you're only bluffing. And even as the policemen's guns spit fire into the night I knew that was what Dally wanted. He was jerked half around by the impact of the bullets, then slowly crumpled with a look of grim triumph on his face. He was dead before he hit the ground. But I knew that was what he wanted, even as the lot echoed with the cracks of shots, even as I begged silently--- Please, not him... not him and Johnny both ---I knew he would be dead, because Dally Winston wanted to be dead and he always got what he wanted.

Nobody would write editorials praising Dally. Two friends of mine had died that night: one a hero, the other a hoodlum. But I remembered Dally pulling Johnny through the window of the burning church; Dally giving us his gun, although it could mean jail for him; Dally risking his life for us, trying to keep Johnny out of trouble. And now he was a dead juvenile delinquent and there wouldn't be any editorials in his favor. Dally didn't die a hero. He died violent and young and desperate, just like we all knew he'd die someday. Just like Tim Shepard and Curly Shepard and the Brumly boys and the other guys we knew would die someday. But Johnny was right. He died gallant.

Steve stumbled forward with a sob, but Soda caught him by the shoulders.

"Easy, buddy, easy," I heard him say softly, "there's nothing we can do now."

Nothing we can do... not for Dally or Johnny or Tim Shepard or any of us... My stomach gave a violent start and turned into a hunk of ice. The world was spinning around me, and blobs of faces and visions of things past were dancing in the red mist that covered the lot. It swirled into a mass of colors and I felt myself swaying on my feet. Someone cried, "Glory, look at the kid!"

And the ground rushed up to meet me very suddenly.

WHEN I WOKE UP it was light. It was awfully quiet. Too quiet. I mean, our house just isn't naturally quiet. The radio's usually going full blast and the TV is turned up loud and people are wrestling and knocking over lamps and tripping over the coffee table and yelling at each other. Something was wrong, but I couldn't quite figure it out. Something had happened... I couldn't remember what. I blinked at Soda bewilderedly. He was sitting on the edge of the bed watching me.

"Soda..."--- my voice sounded weak and hoarse--- "is somebody sick?"

"Yeah." His voice was oddly gentle "Go back to sleep now."

An idea was slowly dawning on me. "Am I sick?"

He stroked my hair. "Yeah, you're sick. Now be quiet."

I had one more question. I was still kind of mixed up. "Is Darry sorry I'm sick?" I had a funny feeling that Darry was sad because I was sick. Everything seemed vague and hazy.

Soda gave me a funny look. He was quiet for a moment. "Yeah, he's sorry you're sick. Now please shut up, will ya, honey? Go back to sleep."

I closed my eyes. I was awful tired.

WHEN I WOKE UP NEXT, it was daylight and I was hot under all the blankets on me. I was thirsty and hungry, but my stomach was so uneasy I knew I wouldn't be able to hold anything down. Darry had pulled the armchair into the bedroom and was asleep in it. He should be at work, I thought. Why is he asleep in the armchair?

"Hey, Darry," I said softly, shaking his knee. "Hey, Darry, wake up."

He opened his eyes. "Ponyboy, you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, "I think so."

Something had happened... but I still couldn't remember it, although I was thinking a lot clearer than I was the last time I'd waked up.

He sighed in relief and pushed my hair back. "Gosh, kid, you had us scared to death."

"What was the matter with me?"

He shook his head. "I told you you were in no condition for a rumble. Exhaustion, shock, minor concussion--- and Two-Bit came blubberin' over here with some tale about how you were running a fever before the rumble and how it was all his fault you were sick. He was pretty torn up that night," Darry said. He was quiet for a minute. "We all were."

And then I remembered. Dallas and Johnny were dead. Don't think of them, I thought. (Don't remember how Johnny was your buddy, don't remember that he didn't want to die. Don't think of Dally breaking up in the hospital, crumpling under the street light. Try to think that Johnny is better off now, try to remember that Dally would have ended up like that sooner or later. Best of all, don't think. Blank your mind. Don't remember. Don't remember.)

"Where'd I get a concussion?" I said. My head itched, but I couldn't scratch it for the bandage. "How long have I been asleep?"

"You got a concussion from getting kicked in the head--- Soda saw it. He landed all over that Soc. I've never seen him so mad. I think he could have whipped anyone, in the state he was in. Today's Tuesday, and you've been asleep and delirious since Saturday night. Don't you remember?"

"No," I said slowly. "Darry, I'm not ever going to be able to make up the school I've missed. And I've still got to go to court and talk to the police about Bob's getting killed. And now... with Dally..." ---I took a deep breath--- "Darry, do you think they'll split us up? Put me in a home or something?"

He was silent. "I don't know, baby. I just don't know."

I stared at the ceiling. What would it be like, I wondered, staring at a different ceiling? What would it be like in a different bed, in a different room? There was a hard painful lump in my throat that I couldn't swallow.

"Don't you even remember being in the hospital?" Darry asked. He was trying to change the subject.

I shook my head. "I don't remember."

"You kept asking for me and Soda. Sometimes for Mom and Dad, too. But mostly for Soda."

Something in his tone of voice made me look at him. Mostly for Soda. Did I ask for Darry at all, or was he just saying that?

"Darry..." I didn't know quite what I wanted to say. But I had a sick feeling that maybe I hadn't called for him while I was delirious, maybe I had only wanted Sodapop to be with me. What all had I said while I was sick? I couldn't remember. I didn't want to remember.

"Johnny left you his copy of *Gone with the Wind*. Told the nurse he wanted you to have it"

I looked at the paperback lying on the table. I didn't want to finish it. I'd never get past the part where the Southern gentlemen go riding into sure death because they are gallant. Southern gentlemen with big black eyes in blue jeans and T-shirts, Southern gentlemen crumpling under street lights. Don't remember. Don't try to decide which one died gallant. Don't remember.

"Where's Soda?" I asked, and then I could have kicked myself. Why can't you talk to Darry, you idiot? I said to myself. Why do you feel uncomfortable talking to Darry?

"Asleep, I hope. I thought he was going to go to sleep shaving this morning and cut his throat. I had to push him to bed, but he was out like a light in a second."

Darry's hopes that Soda was asleep were immediately ruined, because he came running in, clad only in a pair of blue jeans.

"Hey, Ponyboy!" he yelled, and leaped for me, but Darry caught him.

"No rough stuff, little buddy."

So Soda had to content himself with bouncing up and down on the bed and pounding on my shoulder.

"Gosh, but you were sick. You feel okay now?"

"I'm okay. Just a little hungry."

"I should think you would be," Darry said. "You wouldn't eat anything most of the time you were sick. How'd you like some mushroom soup?"

I suddenly realized just how empty I was. "Man, I'd like that just fine."

"I'll go make some. Sodapop, take it easy with him, okay?"

Soda looked back at him indignantly. "You'd think I was going to challenge him to a track meet or something right off the bat."

"Oh, no," I groaned. "Track meet. I guess this just about puts me out of every race. I won't be back in condition for the meets. And the coach was counting on me."

"Golly, there's always next year," Soda said. Soda never has grasped the importance Darry and I put on athletics. Like he never has understood why we went all-out for studying. "Don't sweat it about some track meet."

"Soda," I said suddenly. "What all did I say while I was delirious?"

"Oh, you thought you were in Windrixville most of the time. Then you kept saying that Johnny didn't mean to kill that Soc. Hey, I didn't know you didn't like baloney."

I went cold. "I don't like it. I never liked it"

Soda just looked at me. "You used to eat it. That's why you wouldn't eat anything while you were sick. You kept saying you didn't like baloney, no matter what it was we were trying to get you to eat."

"I don't like it," I repeated. "Soda, did I ask for Darry while I was sick?"

"Yeah, sure," he said, looking at me strangely. "You asked for him and me both. Sometimes Mom and Dad. And for Johnny."

"Oh. I thought maybe I didn't ask for Darry. It was bugging me."

Soda grinned. "Well, you did, so don't worry. We stayed with you so much that the doctor told us we were going to end up in the hospital ourselves if we didn't get some sleep. But we didn't get any anyway."

I took a good look at him. He looked completely worn out; there were circles under his eyes and he had a tense, tired look to him. Yet his dark eyes were still laughing and carefree and reckless.

"You look beat," I said frankly. "I bet you ain't had three hours sleep since Saturday night."

He grinned but didn't deny it. "Scoot over." He crawled over me and flopped down and before Darry came back in with the soup we were both asleep.