

Claire O'Malley slammed her geography book shut the instant the final bell rang. From between the pages shot out a puff of musty air. It settled inside her nostrils as she tossed the worn-out text on top of two other schoolbooks. After lifting up her pocketbook from underneath the desk and slinging it over her shoulder, she picked up the stack of books and headed for the door. She ignored her teacher's instructions about that night's homework, as well as an unwelcome advance from one of her male classmates, and dashed out into the hallway. Students hurried for their lockers, gathered their belongings, and headed for the exit. Clutching her books to her chest, she searched for her sister Erin, a year older and a senior. Eventually she eyed Erin's lanky figure and bobbing auburn hair coming toward her. Erin spotted Claire at the same time. After Erin bid a hasty farewell to a couple of friends, the two sisters met near the main entrance.

They exchanged smiles, but Claire's faded quickly, prompting Erin to wonder if something was wrong. "You look like you just lost your best friend."

"It's that Bobby Johnson," replied Claire as Erin pulled open a glass and wooden door and held it for her sister. "He just won't leave me alone," she went on as they stepped out into warm, glaring sunshine.

"Still trying to get you to go out with him, huh?"

"He just doesn't get it." Marching down a long flight of stone steps, Claire added, "I'm not interested in going out with him."

Erin grinned, keeping pace. "It's not your fault you're gorgeous and sexy."

Midway down, something caught Erin's attention and she halted.

"What's the matter?" queried Claire, stopping as well.

"There's Jimmy Buxton," replied Erin, gazing down at the street. "In the convertible."

Claire looked down at a flashy, finny, mint-green convertible, with its top down, parked next to the curb. Two clean-cut teenage boys, sitting in the front seat, were staring up at Erin and her.

"I forgot to tell you this morning," said Erin apologetically. "Jimmy and his friend are picking us up. Carl's gorgeous and dying to meet you."

Claire frowned. "Erin, I don't want to meet any guy...."

"Don't worry, everything will be O.K. Besides, we get to ride home in a cool convertible."

Claire reluctantly followed her sister the rest of the way down the steps. When they reached the bottom, Claire got a close look at the passenger and stopped short. Erin continued to the car, then realizing her sister had halted, turned around to see what was keeping her.

"Claire, now what's the matter?" When Claire didn't respond Erin grew impatient. "Jimmy and Carl don't bite, Claire."

Claire wanted to tell her sister why she had reservations about getting into the car but was uncomfortable doing so. "Erin," she murmured, darting her eyes from her sister to the two teenage boys, back to her sister.

"Come on," piped up Jimmy, urging Claire to get in. "Like Erin said, we won't bite."

Erin walked back to her sister. "Claire, Carl is dying to meet you," she beseeched in a hushed tone. "All you have to do is talk to him." She paused, trying not to let her impatience show. "I really don't feel like walking home."

Claire started to whisper something but ceased when Erin spun around and scooted back to the car. She gave up and joined her sister. Meantime, Carl swung open the passenger door. He hopped out and pulled the front seat forward.

Claire stepped hesitantly around her sister and climbed into the backseat. She slid all the way over and with her books pressed against her chest huddled against the armrest. Carl hopped back in, spread a pair of gangly legs, and placed his left hand on top of the seat near the back of Claire's head. She felt his hand brush her hair and tried to squash herself against the side of the car, nauseated at just the thought of being in the backseat with Carl Baxter. She could get no farther away, and had no choice but to endure the ride until she and Erin arrived home.

Erin pushed back the seat and got in. She pulled the big door shut and wiggled into a comfortable position next to Jimmy.

Jimmy revved the engine, showing off, and then slipped the shifter into drive. "Hold on," he said, gazing into his outside rearview mirror. "We're going for a ride." He waited for a break in the traffic, then tore away from the curb. "How about some music?" he asked Erin as he reached for the radio dial. The open interior suddenly filled with loud twangs of instrumental music by the Ventures. "You can play with it if you want."

Erin was content with the Ventures. She swung around, checked her sister. When she saw Claire frozen against the armrest, she tried loosening her up. "Claire, isn't this great?" Claire refused to respond, so Erin shifted her attention back to Jimmy, whose head was bobbing to the blaring music. "Jimmy, this car is gorgeous."

"Thank my ol man," he shouted over the wind, pounding his palm against the big plastic steering wheel to the beat of the music. "I've gotta stay out of trouble to keep it though."

Erin grinned. "That should be a cinch for you."

Glimpsing right, Jimmy shined back. "Sure it will."

Erin turned around again. She noticed Carl attempting to strike up a conversation with Claire, but her sister still refused to come out of her shell. "Come on, Claire," she yelled over the wind and music. "Lighten up. He's only trying to be friendly." Claire remained mysteriously unresponsive, compelling Erin to face forward. "All right, be that way," she grumbled, disgusted.

She leaned forward, started pressing the buttons on the radio. A succession of unbearable and indistinguishable sounds crackled from the speakers until she finally stopped on a song by the Ronettes. She leaned back, and trying not to think about her sister's stubbornness, became engrossed in the catchy rock and roll tune.

"She pisses me off sometimes," she muttered out of nowhere.

Jimmy shot a sideways glance her way. "You say something?"

Erin placed her lips next to Jimmy's ear. "I said Claire's pissing me off."

"She's a kid," he said, becoming annoyed with the slow-moving traffic in which they'd found themselves. "Leave her alone." He glanced into the interior rearview mirror and observed Claire's iciness firsthand. "She'll come around," he added, refocussing on the traffic.

"If she's gonna be a drag, maybe we oughta drop her off at my house," suggested Erin. She worried that the wind had carried her voice into the backseat.

"Then what'll we do with Carl? I don't want him being a third wheel."

Erin gnawed on her lower lip for a few seconds. "All right," she agreed, realizing her suggestion was impracticable. "But she better not ruin our good time."

This time, by chance, Claire caught the last few words of Erin's statement. She fired an angry look at her sister. "What's that suppose to mean?"

Erin glanced back. "I forgot to tell you we're stopping by Jimmy's for a while."

"Erin!"

"Relax, Claire. We'll be home in time for you to do your homework."

Looking forward, Erin knew she'd left Claire feeling trapped. Claire couldn't exactly jump out of the car. She was going along to Jimmy's whether she liked it or not. Out of the corner of her eye, Claire saw Carl slinking across the backseat. She clutched her schoolbooks even tighter, and wishing she could blink and disappear, wondered why Erin was being so inconsiderate.

She has to know, she thought as Carl grasped a lock of hair on the back her head and started toying with it.

She flinched and braced herself, endeavoring to tolerate his loathsome behavior, with absolutely no place to which to disappear.

Jimmy turned his shiny new convertible into the vacant driveway next to his parents' house on Everett Street, one of many residential streets lined with triple-deckers on Winter Hill. He brought the car to a rocky halt in front of the garage.

"Let's go inside," he said, switching off the radio and engine and removing the keys from the ignition.

He got out and swaggered around the front of the car, where he waited for the others. The big V-8 crackled as it started to cool. A feeling of wicked satisfaction from owning such a beautiful car overcame him, but he dismissed his hubris when he saw his auburn-haired companion struggling to push open her door. He scurried over to help her. Once she was out, she turned around to pull her seat forward so Claire and Carl could climb out. Erin's annoyance with Claire resurfaced when she saw her sister remaining nestled next to the armrest. Meantime, Carl hopped out and stood beside the others. Claire continued dillydallying, her face turned away.

"You coming?" asked Erin.

Claire broke her concentration on the clapboards, and looking up at her sister, responded with perturbed silence.

"Claire, come on. We don't have all day. Jimmy's parents'll be home soon."

Claire finally slid across the seat, still clutching her books against her chest. When she stood outside the car, she fired an even more unpleasant look at her sister. Erin decided she had to have a word with her sister.

Erin twirled toward Jimmy. "I wanna talk to my sister alone for a minute."

Jimmy frowned, shook his head. "Carl 'n I'll be inside, waiting," he muttered, and started for the backdoor. "But hurry up," he hollered with Carl following.

Erin waited until Jimmy and Carl disappeared around the corner, then faced her sister and began firing one verbal volley after another. "Claire, what's the matter with you? Stop being such a party pooper. Jimmy and Carl are fun. Let yourself go for a change. You might actually enjoy yourself."

"I'm glad you feel they're fun. Obviously, you haven't heard about Carl's reputation. The guy's a jerk."

Erin sighed, realizing she was being a bit of a jerk herself. She wanted to be with Jimmy, and regardless of Claire's feelings, selfishly expected her to occupy Carl's attention in the meantime. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "No, I didn't know about Carl. But I really wanna be with Jimmy. Please come in for a while. So Carl's a jerk. You don't have to become his girlfriend. Just keep him company so Jimmy and I can be together. Carl won't try anything stupid with all of us in the house."

Claire loosened her grip on her books, and as she'd done countless times, acquiesced to Erin's appeal. "All right. But I don't want to stay too long. Carl's a creep. The sooner we leave the better."

Erin flashed a big smile, said, "Thanks," and then slammed the passenger door, pirouetted, and led the way to the backdoor.

Jimmy lifted the top of his parents' wooden console stereo, switched it on, and placed a 33 1/3 album onto the turntable. On the edge of the spinning record, he carefully set the needle. It passed over some dust particles and a few miniscule scratches that caused some unpleasant crackling noises to emanate from the big cloth-covered speakers before instrumental rock and roll music began reverberating off the living room walls. He adjusted the volume somewhat, then headed back to the kitchen. The two O'Malley sisters walked through the backdoor at that moment. The excessive bass immediately hurt their ears, and they darted disapproving glances at the teenager.

"Jimmy, the walls are vibrating you've got the music so loud!" exclaimed Erin, joining the teenager under an oak archway.

"Duane Eddy," piped up Carl from the kitchen counter, his back to everybody. "'Rebel Rouser.' It's supposed to be loud."

Erin tossed her pocketbook on the kitchen table. "I like to hear myself think."

"Quit complaining," rejoined Jimmy affably. "This is a party." He shot a cynical glance at Claire, still standing sheepishly near the backdoor. "Not a funeral."

Ignoring Jimmy's derogatory remarks, Claire walked over to the table and toppled her belongings next to her sister's. "I'm not stopping you from having your big-deal party."

"Claire, you promised," whispered Erin.

"Relax," assured Claire. She glimpsed Jimmy, then her sister again. "I don't like Jimmy's attitude. That's all."

Carl turned around, stepped over to Claire and Erin, and displayed two dark-colored drinks. "Kids, kids, no fighting," he said, and held out the drinks for the sisters. "I've made something that'll get us all in the right frame of mind."

Erin took hers right away. Claire regarded hers suspiciously, but after some cajoling from her sister, finally accepted it. Carl hastened back to the counter to pick up two more drinks. He returned and handed one to his best friend.

"Let's make a toast," said Jimmy, raising his glass.

Erin and Carl lifted their glasses. Erin started to ask what they were toasting but hesitated when she noticed Claire eyeing her drink quizzically.

"What is this?" asked Claire.

"CC 'n coke," answered Carl. "Taste it. You'll like it."

Claire shot an incredulous look at Carl. "CC and coke?"

"Canadian Club," elucidated Jimmy. "Whisky."

Setting the drink down, Claire shook her head. "No, no, I don't drink that stuff. You go ahead and toast."

"Suit yourself," said Jimmy, "but you'll miss out on a great buzz."

Erin regarded Jimmy curiously. "Won't your parents miss this?"

"Na," replied Jimmy, shaking his head. Gazing at the three glasses still raised, he explained, "My ol man's got bottles of it in the cabinet."

"What're we toasting?" queried Erin as the rims clinked.

"The four of us," said Carl, glancing around the circle, making a point to finally land on Claire, who'd attempted to withdraw by folding her arms and looking away.

"To Winter Hill!" cried Jimmy. "The best damned neighborhood in the world!" He then added, "And the toughest!"

Erin, Jimmy and Carl eagerly gulped their drinks, while Claire gazed disinterestedly around the kitchen.

Claire's lack of interest carried over into the living room. Sitting at opposite ends of the couch, she and Carl watched a black and white Sylvania console television. Erin and Jimmy were upstairs doing God-knew-what. On the small screen was a grainy image of President Kennedy, smiling toothily and repeatedly brushing aside a lock of short, wavy hair misbehaving in a brisk, early autumn breeze. He was conducting a press conference from behind a microphone and a podium set up on the White House lawn. Claire remained aloof by concentrating on the president's responses to questions presented to him by the White House press corps. Carl occasionally looked away from the screen to check on Claire. As his best friend's booze began loosening his inhibitions, he kept hoping to find Claire's face and posture softening, but no such luck. They hadn't spoken more than a few words, most by him in an effort to break her iciness. Eventually he tried again to spark up a conversation with the reticent redhead.

"Think we'll go to war?"

Without interrupting her concentration, Claire grimaced. "Don't be silly. The Russians wouldn't dare start a war with us."

"They're assholes. They're gonna park those missiles off of Cuba, and if Kennedy doesn't back down, they're gonna launch 'em right at us."

"President Kennedy will never back down from the Russians."

Smirking, Carl felt elated he'd finally engaged Claire in a conversation, even if the subject matter wasn't to his liking. His grin dissolved, and he felt confident he'd have his arm around her shoulders in no time flat. "Who put that in your head? Your ol man? This ain't World War Two, you know." He nodded at the TV as Kennedy responded to a new question about Russian missile-loaded ships heading for Florida's coastline. "Those're nuclear missiles they're talking about."

Claire finally felt compelled to look at Carl. "You're an idiot. Everybody knows we would all end up dead if a nuclear war broke out."

Carl didn't have a comeback, and along with Claire, faced the set again. He decided to use the cessation to sneak a little closer to the redhead. At the same time, he nonchalantly slid his hand behind her head. Claire knew from the onset what Carl was up to, and retreated as far as she could against the corner of the couch. She silently cursed her sister and wished she and Jimmy would finish up and come back downstairs.

"Frankly, I don't see why women find him so attractive," rambled on Carl, inching his fingers onto Claire's shoulder. She flinched, but instead of pulling away, he tightened his grip on her bony shoulder. "He's got big teeth and a skinny neck. And that Havid accent is sooo phony. People from Boston don't sound like that."

Claire broke away from Carl's grip and glowered at the insolent teenager. "The president has class, something you know nothing about."

"I have class," he shot back, adding hastily, "and I know how to treat a woman."

Claire snickered. "You know how to treat a woman, all right," she said under her breath.

Carl grabbed Claire's upper right arm and yanked her toward him. She protested, but his sturdy hold prohibited her from escaping. "Here," he declared, and thrust his face toward hers. "Lemme show you."

Despite stouthearted resistance, Carl managed to plant his mouth over Claire's. He reeked of brown liquor. She continued struggling to wriggle free, all the while emitting muffled shrieks beneath the weighty force of his kiss. Out of desperation, she probed around with her right hand until it landed on his left knee and squeezed for dear life, but to no avail. She then formed a fist with her left hand and started beating his chest.

As quickly as he'd forced himself upon her, he pulled away. The ordeal left her lightheaded, nauseous. She froze with her pale eyes glued angrily to his face. Her breasts heaved as she strove to capture her breath and regain her composure. Licking her lips, she tried to wash away the oily film and disgusting taste of hard booze left behind by his tongue and lips.

"You're a pig," she spewed, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. He moved toward her again, but she instantly recoiled. "Leave me alone!"

"Don't play hard to get with me," he protested cockily. "You're no different than any other chick I've met. You want it, but you like to put up a fight before you give in. I bet Erin's not upstairs making Jimmy fight for it."

Carl continued moving closer. Claire leaped up, tried running, but he reached out, grasped her right calf, and stopped her in her tracks.

"I said leave me alone!" she cried, trying to break free of his grip, which became two-handed.

Carl's strength won out again, and Claire capitulated. He let go of her leg as she fell back toward the couch. He wrapped his arms around her waist to hasten her fall. She reached out for the back of the couch with her right hand, managing to grab onto the slipcover. She pushed with every ounce of strength she could muster, delaying her descent. Her left arm whirled aimlessly as she tried to regain her footing. She quickly lost her precarious balance and toppled the rest of the way. As she landed on his lap, her feet swung in the air. Her left foot caught the edge of a lampshade, and the brass lamp next to the couch tumbled over. When the lamp struck the floor, the shade came loose and rolled clumsily across the rug. At the same instant, the bulb exploded.

Claire let out an earsplitting scream.

On the television, President Kennedy cracked a one-liner, to which the White House press corps responded with a chorus of laughter.

Erin popped her head up from the pillow and looked down at Jimmy, stretched out and relishing the luxuriousness of the moment. "Hear that?" she queried.

"Hear what?" he replied hazily.

"That noise." Ears perked up, she centered on the bedroom door. "Sounded like glass breaking."

A sense of urgency overcame her. She swung her feet around to the floor, and remaining on the edge of the bed, hastily started dressing.

Jimmy propped himself up on his elbows and regarded Erin peculiarly. "What're you doing? I thought we were gonna go for seconds?"

Erin ignored Jimmy's queries, and continuing to dress, murmured, "I knew I shouldn't've left her alone with that jerk."

"You're overreacting," he insisted, sitting up all the way. "They're probably having a good time 'n one of 'em accidentally knocked something over." He reached out to pull her back down.

Erin eluded his grasp, jumped up, and twirled around to slip on her slacks. "Bullshit, having a good time," she retorted, pulling up her zipper. She sucked in her stomach,

fastened the top button. "I'm going downstairs to check on her. I don't trust that son of a bitch."

Groaning, Jimmy climbed out of bed and retrieved his pants and shirt, slung over the back of a nearby chair. "All right," he said cheerlessly, and reluctantly started dressing. "I'll go with you."

Erin pulled her sweater over her head and shook her long auburn ringlets as she adjusted the bottom of the garment. "Hurry up," she carped, slipping into her shoes, then darting for the door.

"Wait!" he cried, shoving his right arm through his shirtsleeve while trying to get his right foot into a penny loafer.

Erin swung the door open and exited, leaving Jimmy to catch up. She descended a flight of creaky, carpeted stairs and charged into the living room, whereupon she froze to assess the situation. Her instincts had been correct: Claire was struggling to escape from beneath the weight of Carl's torso. Running over to the two, Erin screamed for Carl to get off her sister. She grabbed onto the teenager's beefy shoulders and began tugging.

"Get off her!" she repeated at the top of her lungs.

As soon as she realized her sister had come to her rescue, Claire became overwhelmed with emotion and erupted in tears.

"Get off her I said!"

Jimmy emerged from the hallway, stunned by the absurdity of the situation transpiring before him. He dashed over to Erin's side. "Carl, what're you doing?" he inquired, stopping short of helping Erin.

Carl heard his best friend's voice and ceased his drunken savageness. He slowly sat back up, freeing the young woman beneath him. "Cool it, guys," he muttered. Erin let go of his shoulders and stepped back a pace. "We're just having a little fun."

"Having a little fun, in a pig's ass!" shouted Erin, darting a glance at her sister, who was sobbing uncontrollably as she slowly sat up and started pulling herself back together. "Claire isn't having a little fun, you moron! Look at her! She's crying!"

Carl glimpsed Claire's pitiful appearance and then locked eyes with Erin. "Come on, lighten up," he said, trying to mitigate what he'd done. "She's fine."

"I'll lighten up, you sonuvabitch!" exploded Erin, and she lunged at her sister's aggressor again.

Carl tried to avoid Erin, but before he could duck out of the way, she grasped onto his shoulders, from the front this time, and shoved him against the back of the couch. Claire clambered as far as she could into the other corner. Amused, Jimmy played a game of wait and see. His best friend merited whatever trouncing he was about to get. Carl managed to get up partway, but another driving force from Erin caused him to fall backward again. He tried recovering a second time but lost his balance altogether and teetered to the left. Erin rammed opened palms against his chest, making sure he continued falling. He landed on the part of the floor covered with shattered glass and let out a painful wail.

Jimmy decided he'd seen enough and grasped onto Erin's upper left arm to stop her in her tracks. "Erin!" he shouted, spinning her partway around. "Stop it! Now you're acting crazy!"

Erin broke free and charged back at Carl, who'd sat up. He was concentrating on his left palm, which had sustained a nasty cut. As he went about picking glass out of his wound, from which a tiny rivulet of blood trickled onto the rug, he never noticed Erin coming toward him. She stopped short, wound up her left fist and uncorked a powerful punch to his right cheek. There was a resounding thwack and Carl's head reeled to the left. He brought his

head back around, not believing a teenage girl had hit him so hard, and centered a dazed expression on Erin's face.

"What was that for?" he wondered, daubing his reddened cheek with bloodied fingers. "For cripe sake...."

Jimmy rushed over, wedged himself between Erin and Carl, looked down at the floor, and surveyed the broken glass and bloodstained rug. "Look at this mess," he griped.

Erin shoved Jimmy out of the way and went after Carl a third time. "You bastard!" she growled between gritted teeth, winding up again. "I'll teach you not to screw with my sister!"

"Erin, you're flipping out!" came back Carl, raising bloodied hands to deflect Erin's next punch. "Knock it off!"

Her fist penetrated his defense and caught the right side of his mouth. His head jerked backward. He wondered how this situation had got so far out of control, while still refusing to believe a teenage girl was beating him up.

"Erin, back off!" he demanded, continuing to shield his face with his hands. "I don't wanna hit you! Back off!"

"I will like hell!" she retorted, and took another swing. This time she struck his palms.

Jimmy stepped between them again. "Erin, knock it off!"

Erin finally retreated a few feet, halted, and looked at Claire, who had moved to the center of the couch and was delicately wiping away her tears. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I should've listened to you, then none of this would've happened. I was being selfish."

Claire cast her eyes downward. "I told you...."

Erin stepped over to her sister, gently took her by the arm. "Come on," she said, glaring at Jimmy and then Carl, "we're getting out of here."

Claire stood up, and the two sisters ambled into the kitchen to retrieve their belongings. Like a Labrador retriever pup, Jimmy followed, while Carl, still dumbfounded, remained a battered heap on the floor.

"Erin," called out Jimmy, entering the kitchen behind the sisters. "Wait a minute," and he stopped to watch them pick up their things. "I'll drive you home."

Claire pressed her schoolbooks against her chest, while Erin confronted Jimmy near the oak archway. "No," replied Erin. "I think it's best we walk home. She needs a little time before she goes in the house."

As she headed out the backdoor with her sister, Erin heard Jimmy call out her name again. "I'm sorry," he tacked on glumly. Erin paused and glanced back. "Carl's an idiot."

"Not your fault," she said, and turned and exited.

Erin joined Claire in the driveway, and they began a silent, heads-bowed trek home.

Henry Sommers loved expensive suits. No matter what time of day it was, if he had to go out of his house on Manor Street, he always wore an expensive suit. On this afternoon, he stepped out onto his farmer's porch on his way to meet his right hand man, Sammy Cunningham, wearing a dark-gray silk suit he'd recently purchased at Brooks Brothers on Boylston Street in the Back Bay. Henry – he liked Henry, not Mr. Sommers, because Henry made him sound younger and friendlier – paused to carefully mat down the waves on the sides of his full head of lustrous salt and pepper hair. He tweaked his necktie, brushed the front of his jacket, then took in a healthy lungful of warm early fall air. Cleansing his lungs on clear days was a ritual, for he also liked to smoke expensive cigars. Cuban, if he could get his hands on them. Otherwise, Dominican. He believed the ritual would allow him to continue this minor vice. He always laughed at that notion, as his minor vices were nothing compared to his major ones.

He patted the left side of his chest to make sure the two Monte Cristos under his jacket weren't bulging unattractively, and then proceeded down a long flight of concrete steps to the sidewalk at the top of the hill upon which his house sat. When he reached the last step, he glanced down and happened to notice someone had carelessly discarded a crumpled Camel cigarette package. Almost nothing infuriated him more than littering. He hated litterbugs almost as much as he hated people who didn't pay their bills on time. Even though littering wasn't as big an offense as being late with a weekly payment, he felt both litterbugs and deadbeats deserved similar punishment: a warning, then a beating, then a broken bone or two. If someone didn't learn his lesson by then, he called Jasper Calapari, Mario Pina or Jay O'Malley into action. Their job was to carry out the next level of punishment.

God help the deadbeat then. Or any punk caught littering in front of his house, for that matter.

He stooped over, picked up the crumpled cigarette package, and walked over to a trash bin annexed to a telephone pole nearby. Discarding the package, he murmured an expletive intended for the litterbug who'd disposed of his trash improperly. He strolled back to the bottom step and began waiting for Sammy to pull up. Shortly, he spotted his right hand man's big black Chrysler New Yorker cruising over the hill. Right on time. He demanded punctuality as well. Easing his car to a stop next to the curb, Sammy positioned the passenger door directly in front of his boss. Henry climbed in and after shutting the door said good morning.

Sammy returned the greeting while admiring Henry's spiffy new suit. "Nice," he acknowledged, nodding approvingly. "Very nice."

"I always say, Sammy, the way you feel about yourself inside starts with the way you look outside."

Sammy checked his exterior rearview mirror and then sped away. Once underway, he wasted no time getting down to business. "Markham was mouthing off again last night. At the Blarney Stone. Kept telling the bartender you'll get your money whenever the fug he's ready to give it to you." He glimpsed the interior rearview mirror to make sure no one was following him, a habit he'd developed in high school when he drove to the suburbs to stick up gas stations and liquor stores. "Swear to God, Henry," he went on, right hand raised. "That's exactly what the bartender told me he said."

Although he remained silent, the muscles in the back of Henry's neck tightened, and he clenched his right hand into a fist on his knee. He was the most respected man in the city, as well as the most feared. How dare that punk, to whom he'd been kind enough to loan three thousand dollars, publicly disrespect him that way?

"You don't like hearing this, Henry, but I thought you should know."

Henry shook his head. "No, no, Sammy, you have to tell me these things. No matter how much it pisses me off to hear them. It's your job. I trust you to tell me everything."

"I know Markham's ol man was a war buddy of yours...."

Henry began staring out the passenger window. Meantime, Sammy turned onto Broadway. "It's a shame," mumbled Henry, reflecting on his wartime connection to Eddie Markham's father. "We landed on Normandy together. Fought the krauts, side by side, across Europe, then back to Paris." He glanced back at his right hand man. "But the time has come for you to pay another visit to young Mr. Markham." He paused. "This the second time, or the third?"

"Second."

Henry glanced out his window again, and happened to spot an elderly woman he knew stepping up onto the sidewalk in front of Purity Supreme. "Pull over, Sammy," he piped up. "I wanna say hello to Mrs. Bannister."

Sammy slowed down and aimed his car toward the fire lane in front of the supermarket. Henry pressed a button on his armrest, and held it down until the big power window beside him opened all the way. Fresh air instantly blew through the interior. Sammy brought the car to a halt next to the old woman shuffling toward the entrance to the supermarket. Over her head was tied a bright-red kerchief blocking her peripheral view, and she never noticed that the car had come to a stop beside her. Henry called out her name.

"Mrs. Bannister!" he repeated, louder.

The elderly woman finally heard her name and stopped. Twisting creakily, she eventually espied Henry in the big black car. She acknowledged her old acquaintance by curling up the corners of her ancient mouth, then padded gingerly over to the window.

"Henry!" she responded with joy, peering down at the gang leader.

"Mrs. Bannister," replied Henry with fondness, looking up at the old woman. "How are you and George doing these days? Good I hope."

"Better than nothin," she said in an upbeat manner.

"Doing a little food shopping are you?"

"George is in the mood for chicken tonight, so I thought I'd surprise him. I needed to get the hell out of the house, anyway. He was driving me crazy. Him 'n his damn morning game shows."

Henry laughed. "Tell George I said hello, and you take care."

The elderly woman waved her right hand, while clutching her pocketbook with the other. "Don't worry about us. We're O.K." She added as an afterthought, "By the way, I never got the chance to thank you for what you did for us last Easter, sending us that beautiful ham. It was very kind. Unnecessary, but kind."

Henry waved back. "Ah, don't mention it, Mrs. Bannister. Is there anything I can do for you now? The neighborhood kids aren't bothering you, are they? The paperboy delivering the Record on time every day?"

"Everything is fine," she insisted, adding, "And Billy Farrell delivers the paper every day at five on the button."

"He's my Godson you know," he remarked, nonchalantly reaching into the breast pocket of his suit jacket. He pulled out a wad of folded bills held together with a thick rubber band. "If he messes up you call me," he added as he removed the rubber band. He hunted through the wad until he came to a twenty. He pulled it out and held it out for Mrs. Bannister, who inspected it briefly before looking back up bewilderedly.

"Oh, no, Henry. I don't need that. I told you, George and I are doing fine. Besides, you've done enough already."

Henry waved the bill. "Go ahead," he insisted. "Consider it an early Christmas present. Buy George some chicken on me."

The old woman reluctantly accepted the money. She folded it in her right palm instead of putting it inside her pocketbook right away. "Thank you, Henry," she said graciously. "You're always so kind to us. To everybody on the Hill."

"Well, not everybody," he clarified, grinning. "You take care, Mrs. Bannister."

"I will," she promised, and tossed a halfhearted wave with her empty hand.

As Mrs. Bannister turned and slowly resumed her way toward the entrance to Purity Supreme, Henry raised his window. Sammy checked for oncoming cars and pedestrians, then eased the New Yorker out of the fire lane, back onto Broadway.

"Where were we?"

"Eddie Markham," reminded Sammy, automatically checking the inside rearview mirror for the umpteenth time.

"Oh, ya, young Mr. Markham. You were telling me this is gonna be your..."

"Second time," finished Sammy.

"Second time," repeated Henry airily. "The ungrateful cocksucker." His voice all of a sudden had turned vitriolic. "I loan him money to help that fat pig of a wife of his get an operation, and he thanks me by disrespecting me in front of strangers like that."

Henry's sudden change in demeanor concerned Sammy. "Easy, Henry. I'll take care of it."

The gang leader gazed at his right hand man's rugged profile. "Go easy on him," he said, sounding calm again. "Not that I give a shit about him. But I still have this thing about his father and me."

"His ol man is dead. What's it matter now?"

"I know, I know," patronized the other, waving his hand. "Just don't mess 'im up too much. I want him healthy enough to work. He owes us a lot of money, and I want it back."

Sammy glimpsed his boss, somewhat befuddled by the unusual display of compassion. "Don't worry. Like you said, you trust me to do my job."

During the walk home, Claire wavered between bouts of sobbing and bouts of anger. Now she was working her way through one of the latter, and thus far, her sister was unable to quell it.

"I told you I was sorry," said Erin, a combination of frustration and guilt sweeping over her. "I didn't know Carl was such an asshole."

"I told you he had a reputation for just taking what he wants," replied Claire, removing a hand from her schoolbooks to wipe away a tear lingering under her left eye. She angrily flicked it away and said, "He almost raped me."

"But he didn't, and that's all that matters."

Claire suddenly started giggling.

"Now what?"

"It was pretty funny seeing you beat the shit out of him." Claire smiled at her sister. "Did you see the look on his face when you hauled off and punched him? He didn't know what to make of it."

Glad to see Claire lightening up, Erin started giggling, too. "He deserved that and a lot more. He'll think twice before trying to maul some other poor girl."

As the two sisters approached their house on Maple Street, it struck Erin that Claire, in spite of her spirits bouncing back, still wore a disheveled look on her face. "Claire, you've got to keep your wits about you. I don't want mom and dad asking too many questions. Tell them your period is making you sick. Anything but what really happened. They'd be furious if they knew. They'd ground us for a month, and I wouldn't see Jimmy."

"Don't worry, I won't ruin your precious time with Jimmy," promised Claire sardonically. As they headed up the walkway to the front door, she added, "Frankly, I don't know what you see in him. Except maybe his car."

"Jimmy's nice. Not like Carl. That's for sure."

"If you ask me, they're all like Carl."

They started up paint-chipped wooden steps. "You feel that way because you haven't met anybody you like," returned Erin, reaching for the brass doorknob.

Erin pushed open the sturdy oak door and stepped into a spacious hallway. Claire walked in behind her and closed the door. Erin set her pocketbook down on a small cherry wood table next to the staircase, then pranced into the living room on the left.

"Maybe it's their age," speculated Claire, following her sister. She plopped her books onto the coffee table. "Guys my age are too immature," she went on as Erin disappeared into the kitchen. "I need to find an older man. A guy in his twenties."

Someone clearing his throat behind her startled her. She whipped around, beheld her brother strutting toward her. "What's this about finding an older man?" he queried, stopping when he got to his sister. "For your information, I'm in my twenties, and I wouldn't exactly call me an older man."

Claire sighed with relief, responding to being startled, not to her brother confronting her. "I didn't mean it that way, Jay. Of course, you're not an older man. As my brother. But if you were my boyfriend, you'd be an older man. I'm seventeen. Remember?"

"My seventeen-year-old sister shouldn't be thinking about men, period," he opined, pressing his big Irish mug close to his youngest sister's heavenly face. "You'll concentrate on your homework, if you know what's good for you."

Claire glanced down at the floor, hoping Jay wouldn't detect any redness that might still be showing on her face. However, detect it he did. Jay pulled back his face, which had formed a quizzical expression. Touching Claire's chin, he lifted her face until their eyes locked. He examined her countenance, eventually centering on her forehead, where he noticed a square-inch patch of discoloration marring her milky-white skin. He discovered under her chin another bruise, slightly larger and darker. The sight of the two bruises enraged him. Letting go, he accidentally brushed the larger one, causing her to flinch.

"Ouch!" she blurted out, instantly reaching for the sensitive area while looking away.

"This better be from a fight with a chick."

Continuing to look away, Claire tenderly daubed under her chin with the fingers of her right hand. She knew better than to tell her older brother how she really got the bruises, and was about to make up a story when he started shouting.

"Claire, tell me this happened during a fight with a girl at school. Tell me, damn it!"

"It didn't," interjected Erin, who'd overheard the commotion and returned to the living room. She hesitated under the archway, a can of coke in her right hand.

Claire fired a disgruntled look at Erin as Jay spun around and centered angry eyes on his other sister.

"It happened at Jimmy Buxton's a little while ago."

"Erin! I thought you didn't want anybody to know?"

"I don't want mom and dad finding out." Erin nonchalantly lifted the can to her lips and sipped.

"This Buxton kid do this?" queried Jay, jabbing the air over his left shoulder with his thumb.

"No," answered Erin, lowering the can, "his friend did."

Wheeling around, Jay darted his angry eyes back at Claire. "What's his name?"

Claire looked away again, refusing to divulge Carl Baxter's name. She was well aware of her brother's propensity for violence, and no matter what Carl had done to her, the last thing she wanted to be responsible for was seeing him seriously hurt.

"Claire." Jay's voice sounded calm, but inside he was seething, determined to get the information out of his youngest sister, even if he had to squeeze it out of her. He grasped her upper arm and pressed his thumb into her bicep. "Tell me his name."

"Carl Baxter," revealed Erin. She gazed apologetically at her sister. "Sorry, Claire, but Jay wants to know his name. Carl's an asshole, remember?"

Jay released Claire's arm but remained focussed on her. "Is he still at the house now?"

Claire nodded hesitantly. "Don't hurt him," she pleaded, reestablishing eye contact with him. "Ya, he's an asshole, like Erin said, but I don't need you causing me any more trouble."

"I'll handle this," he replied stonily. "I told you, if anybody ever laid a hand on either of you, I'd put a"

The telephone on the table next to the couch suddenly rang, truncating Jay's tirade. Erin sidled over to the table, picked up the receiver, and said hello. A brief pause followed, and then she told the person on the other end to hold on. She held out the receiver for Jay. "For you."

Jay took the receiver, put it up to his left ear, and curtly said hello.

"Is that any way to answer the phone?" came back the person on the other end.

Jay recognized the husky voice.

"Henry has something for us to do. I'll be over in twenty minutes."

"I'll meet you out front." Jay returned the receiver to its cradle, then confronted Claire again. "You'd better get upstairs, and get those bruises covered before mom and dad come home. If dad sees them, there'll be real hell to pay."

Claire hastily departed and headed upstairs, with Erin following close on her heels.

Jay tracked his sisters' movement with his eyes until Erin's feet vanished on the second floor, then headed for the basement.

Jay opened the large, tattered wooden chest he stored in a cluttered corner. He removed his sawed-off M31 Remington shotgun, known as the Hillbilly Dueling Pistol. He held it up, and while admiring the shortened shoulder stock, pumped it. Feeling the dark-metal barrels in his left hand and the trigger with his right index finger gave him an adrenaline rush. He'd used the weapon only two times, both for business. The first was when Henry ordered him to eliminate a punk from Medford who'd refused to stop selling drugs on the Hill. Jay knew the guy from the bar scene, and after deliberately bumping into him at an after-hours joint in Somerville, cornered him in a backroom on the pretext of buying some cocaine. He shoved the end of the shotgun into the guy's belly and blew him away. He'd made sure there wouldn't be any traces left behind by covering the walls and floor with tarpaulin beforehand. He'd gotten the punk so high earlier he never noticed all the plastic. That night he buried the body at a highway construction site in Dorchester. The next morning the state DPW covered the makeshift grave with asphalt. To this day, he felt a tinge of nostalgia every time he drove over that stretch of Southeast Expressway.

The second time wasn't so violent but a kick nonetheless. Henry ordered Sammy and him to retrieve money owed to the gang by some third-tier hoods from the North End. He placed the mouth of Hillbilly Dueling Pistol against the knob on the door leading to the backroom of a North End restaurant where these hoods hung out and pulled the trigger. Most of the door exploded into smithereens. He kicked in what remained, then Sammy and he, wearing black balaclavas, charged in. They found the group who owed the money playing cards. None was interested in getting his head turned into pureed spaghetti and meatballs, so they willingly turned over all the money they owed, plus a few extra bucks. Henry got back what was his, and Sammy and he split the leftover two grand. That was what he loved the most about Henry Sommers: he was so damned generous. He would do anything for Henry, and automatically jumped whenever he called.

He'd rigged the shotgun with a leather strap, which allowed him to dangle the weapon under his right arm while concealing it under the black London Fog raincoat he wore on assignments. He slipped the strap over his shoulders, and with the shotgun dangling by his side, removed the size forty-four raincoat from inside the chest. He put the raincoat on, then paused to see how everything felt. With the sawed-off shotgun hidden under the raincoat, even extra-large felt snug.

"Gotta cut back on the 'roids 'n the heavy lifting," he murmured, twitching his shoulders. "I'm bulking up way too much."

Despite his powerful physique, he didn't look like an enforcer for organized crime. But this didn't bother him. He liked not looking like he worked for Henry Sommers. With his sandy crew cut and chiseled jaw line, he looked more like an all-American fullback from Boston College. However, taking too many steroids and pumping too much iron were beginning to take away the soft shape of his face. He was beginning to develop a hard look, the kind Sammy Cunningham had had as long as he'd known him. Sammy was only a few years older than he was, but his ruddy complexion and lifeless coal-black eyes gave him the appearance of a much older man. This is what happens when you work in the rackets too long, he realized. It wasn't as if you could do it for a few years, make some dough, and then just walk away. Once you start breaking legs and eliminating for somebody like Henry Sommers, you're in it for the long haul. Unless you're busted, the only way out is in a basket, a euphemism for a coffin.

He lingered a little while longer before heading back upstairs. He delighted in how good the Hillbilly Dueling Pistol felt. He closed his eyes and waited for adrenaline to start rushing through his body again. He put himself through this routine before each time he went out on an assignment for Henry. Eventually he put himself in a trance. A transcendental state, he called it. It put him in the right frame of mind. He had no idea what Henry was going to ask him to do. Henry was probably going to ask him to whack around somebody. But he liked to be prepared, in case Henry called upon him to perform his best work. Once he was in the right frame of mind, adrenaline pumping through his veins and his brain focussed one hundred percent, he was capable of doing anything.

Absolutely anything.