

Chapter 1

Mark was eleven and had been smoking off and on for two years, never trying to quit but being careful not to get hooked. He preferred Kools, his ex-father's brand, but his mother smoked Virginia Slims at the rate of two packs a day, and he could in an average week pilfer ten or twelve from her. She was a busy woman with many problems, perhaps a little naive when it came to her boys, and she never dreamed her eldest would be smoking at the age of eleven.

Occasionally Kevin, the delinquent two streets over, would sell Mark a pack of stolen Marlboros for a dollar. But for the most part he had to rely on his mother's skinny cigarettes.

He had four of them in his pocket this afternoon as he led his brother Ricky, age eight, down the path into the woods behind their trailer park. Ricky was nervous about this, his first smoke. He had caught Mark hiding the cigarettes in a shoe box under his bed yesterday, and threatened to tell all if his big brother didn't show him how to

do it. They sneaked along the wooded trail, headed for one of Mark's secret spots where he'd spent many solitary hours trying to inhale and blow smoke rings.

Most of the other kids in the neighborhood were into beer and pot, two vices Mark was determined to avoid. Their ex-father was an alcoholic who'd beaten both boys and their mother, and the beatings always followed nasty bouts with beer. Mark had seen and felt the effects of alcohol. He was also afraid of drugs.

'Are you lost?' Ricky asked, just like a little brother, as they left the trail and waded through chest-high weeds.

'Just shut up,' Mark said without slowing. The only time their father had spent at home was to drink and sleep and abuse them. He was gone now, thank heavens. For five years Mark had been in charge of Ricky. He felt like an eleven-year-old father. He'd taught him how to throw a football and ride a bike. He'd explained what he knew about sex. He'd warned him about drugs, and protected him from bullies. And he felt terrible about this introduction to vice. But it was just a cigarette. It could be much worse.

The weeds stopped and they were under a large tree with a rope hanging from a thick branch. A row of bushes yielded to a small clearing, and beyond it an overgrown dirt road disappeared over a hill. A highway could be heard in the distance.

Mark stopped and pointed to a log near the rope. 'Sit there,' he instructed, and Ricky obediently

backed onto the log and glanced around anxiously as if the police might be watching. Mark eyed him like a drill sergeant while picking a cigarette from his shirt pocket. He held it with his right thumb and index finger, and tried to be casual about it.

‘You know the rules,’ he said, looking down at Ricky. There were only two rules, and they had discussed them a dozen times during the day, and Ricky was frustrated at being treated like a child. He rolled his eyes away and said, ‘Yeah, if I tell anyone, you’ll beat me up.’

‘That’s right.’

Ricky folded his arms. ‘And I can smoke only one a day.’

‘That’s right. If I catch you smoking more than that, then you’re in trouble. And if I find out you’re drinking beer or messing with drugs, then –’

‘I know, I know. You’ll beat me up again.’

‘Right.’

‘How many do you smoke a day?’

‘Only one,’ Mark lied. Some days, only one. Some days, three or four, depending on supply. He stuck the filter between his lips like a gangster.

‘Will one a day kill me?’ Ricky asked.

Mark removed the cigarette from his lips. ‘Not anytime soon. One a day is pretty safe. More than that, and you could be in trouble.’

‘How many does Mom smoke a day?’

‘Two packs.’

‘How many is that?’

‘Forty.’

‘Wow. Then she’s in big trouble.’

‘Mom’s got all kinds of troubles. I don’t think she’s worried about cigarettes.’

‘How many does Dad smoke a day?’

‘Four or five packs. A hundred a day.’

Ricky grinned slightly. ‘Then he’s gonna die soon, right?’

‘I hope so. Between staying drunk and chain-smoking, he’ll be dead in a few years.’

‘What’s chain-smoking?’

‘It’s when you light the new one with the old one. I wish he’d smoke ten packs a day.’

‘Me too.’ Ricky glanced toward the small clearing and the dirt road. It was shady and cool under the tree, but beyond the limbs the sun was bright. Mark pinched the filter with his thumb and index finger and sort of waved it before his mouth. ‘Are you scared?’ he sneered as only big brothers can.

‘No.’

‘I think you are. Look, hold it like this, okay?’ He waved it closer, then with great drama withdrew it and stuck it between his lips. Ricky watched intently.

Mark lit the cigarette, puffed a tiny cloud of smoke, then held it and admired it. ‘Don’t try to swallow the smoke. You’re not ready for that yet. Just suck a little then blow the smoke out. Are you ready?’

‘Will it make me sick?’

‘It will if you swallow the smoke.’ He took two quick drags and puffed for effect. ‘See. It’s really easy. I’ll teach you how to inhale later.’

‘Okay.’ Ricky nervously reached out with his thumb and index finger, and Mark placed the cigarette carefully between them. ‘Go ahead.’

Ricky eased the wet filter to his lips. His hand shook and he took a short drag and blew smoke. Another short drag. The smoke never got past his front teeth. Another drag. Mark watched carefully, hoping he would choke and cough and turn blue, then get sick and never smoke again.

‘It’s easy,’ Ricky said proudly as he held the cigarette and admired it. His hand was shaking.

‘It’s no big deal.’

‘Tastes kind of funny.’

‘Yeah, yeah.’ Mark sat next to him on the log and picked another one from his pocket. Ricky puffed rapidly. Mark lit his, and they sat in silence under the tree enjoying a quiet smoke.

‘This is fun,’ Ricky said, nibbling at the filter.

‘Great. Then why are your hands shaking?’

‘They’re not.’

‘Sure.’

Ricky ignored this. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, took a longer drag, then spat in the dirt like he’d seen Kevin and the big boys do behind the trailer park. This was easy.

Mark opened his mouth into a perfect circle and attempted a smoke ring. He thought this would really impress his little brother, but the ring failed to form and the gray smoke dissipated.

‘I think you’re too young to smoke,’ he said.

Ricky was busy puffing and spitting, and thoroughly enjoying this giant step toward manhood.

‘How old were you when you started?’ he asked.

‘Nine. But I was more mature than you.’

‘You always say that.’

‘That’s because it’s always true.’

They sat next to each other on the log under the tree, smoking quietly and staring at the grassy clearing beyond the shade. Mark *was* in fact more mature than Ricky at the age of eight. He was more mature than any kid his age. He’d always been mature. He had hit his father with a baseball bat when he was seven. The aftermath had not been pretty, but the drunken idiot had stopped beating their mother. There had been many fights and many beatings, and Dianne Sway had sought refuge and advice from her eldest son. They had consoled each other and conspired to survive. They had cried together after the beatings. They had plotted ways to protect Ricky. When he was nine, Mark convinced her to file for divorce. He had called the cops when his father showed up drunk after being served with divorce papers. He had testified in court about the abuse and neglect and beatings. He was very mature.

Ricky heard the car first. There was a low, rushing sound coming from the dirt road. Then Mark heard it, and they stopped smoking. ‘Just sit still,’ Mark said softly. They did not move.

A long, black, shiny Lincoln appeared over the slight hill and eased toward them. The weeds in

the road were as high as the front bumper. Mark dropped his cigarette to the ground and covered it with his shoe. Ricky did the same.

The car slowed almost to a stop as it neared the clearing, then circled around, touching the tree limbs as it moved slowly. It stopped and faced the road. The boys were directly behind it, and hidden from view. Mark slid off the log, and crawled through the weeds to a row of brush at the edge of the clearing. Ricky followed. The rear of the Lincoln was thirty feet away. They watched it carefully. It had Louisiana license plates.

‘What’s he doing?’ Ricky whispered.

Mark peeked through the weeds. ‘Shhhhh!’ He had heard stories around the trailer park of teenagers using these woods to meet girls and smoke pot, but this car did not belong to a teenager. The engine quit, and the car just sat there in the weeds for a minute. Then the door opened, and the driver stepped into the weeds and looked around. He was a chubby man in a black suit. His head was fat and round and without hair except for neat rows above the ears and a black-and-gray beard. He stumbled to the rear of the car, fumbled with the keys, and finally opened the trunk. He removed a water hose, stuck one end into the exhaust pipe, and ran the other end through a crack in the left rear window. He closed the trunk, looked around again as if he were expecting to be watched, then disappeared into the car.

The engine started.

‘Wow,’ Mark said softly, staring blankly at the car.

‘What’s he doing?’ Ricky asked.

‘He’s trying to kill himself.’

Ricky raised his head a few inches for a better view. ‘I don’t understand, Mark.’

‘Keep down. You see the hose, right? The fumes from the tail pipe go into the car, and it kills him.’

‘You mean suicide?’

‘Right. I saw a guy do it like this in a movie once.’

They leaned closer to the weeds and stared at the hose running from the pipe to the window. The engine idled smoothly.

‘Why does he want to kill himself?’ Ricky asked.

‘How am I supposed to know? But we gotta do something.’

‘Yeah, let’s get the hell outta here.’

‘No. Just be still a minute.’

‘I’m leaving, Mark. You can watch him die if you want to, but I’m gone.’

Mark grabbed his brother’s shoulder and forced him lower. Ricky’s breathing was heavy and they were both sweating. The sun hid behind a cloud.

‘How long does it take?’ Ricky asked, his voice quivering.

‘Not very long.’ Mark released his brother and eased on to all fours. ‘You stay here, okay. If you move, I’ll kick your tail.’

‘What’re you doing, Mark?’

‘Just stay here. I mean it.’ Mark lowered his thin body almost to the ground and crawled on

elbows and knees through the weeds toward the car. The grass was dry and at least two feet tall. He knew the man couldn't hear him, but he worried about the movement of the weeds. He stayed directly behind the car and slid snake-like on his belly until he was in the shadow of the trunk. He reached and carefully eased the hose from the tail pipe, and dropped it to the ground. He retraced his trail with a bit more speed, and seconds later was crouched next to Ricky, watching and waiting in the heavier grass and brush under the outermost limbs of the tree. He knew that if they were spotted, they could dart past the tree and down their trail and be gone before the chubby man could catch them.

They waited. Five minutes passed, though it seemed like an hour.

'You think he's dead?' Ricky whispered, his voice dry and weak.

'I don't know.'

Suddenly, the door opened, and the man stepped out. He was crying and mumbling, and he staggered to the rear of the car where he saw the hose in the grass, and cursed it as he shoved it back into the tail pipe. He held a bottle of whiskey and looked around wildly at the trees, then stumbled back into the car. He mumbled to himself as he slammed the door.

The boys watched in horror.

'He's crazy as hell,' Mark said faintly.

'Let's get out of here,' Ricky said.

‘We can’t! If he kills himself, and we saw it or knew about it, then we could get in all kinds of trouble.’

Ricky raised his head as if to retreat. ‘Then we won’t tell anybody. Come on, Mark!’

Mark grabbed his shoulder again and forced him to the ground. ‘Just stay down! We’re not leaving until I say we’re leaving!’

Ricky closed his eyes tightly and started crying. Mark shook his head in disgust but didn’t take his eyes off the car. Little brothers were more trouble than they were worth. ‘Stop it,’ he growled through clenched teeth.

‘I’m scared.’

‘Fine. Just don’t move, okay. Do you hear me? Don’t move. And stop the crying.’ Mark was back on his elbows, deep in the weeds and preparing to ease through the tall grass once more.

‘Just let him die, Mark,’ Ricky whispered between sobs.

Mark glared at him over his shoulder and eased toward the car, which was still running. He crawled along his same trail of lightly trampled grass so slowly and carefully that even Ricky, with dry eyes now, could barely see him. Ricky watched the driver’s door, waiting for it to fly open and the crazy man to lunge out and kill Mark. He perched on his toes in a sprinter’s stance for a quick getaway through the woods. He saw Mark emerge under the rear bumper, place a hand for balance on the tail light, and slowly ease the hose from the tailpipe. The grass crackled softly and

the weeds shook a little and Mark was next to him again, panting and sweating and, oddly, smiling to himself.

They sat on their legs like two insects under the brush, and watched the car.

‘What if he comes out again?’ Ricky asked. ‘What if he sees us?’

‘He can’t see us. But if he starts this way, just follow me. We’ll be gone before he can take a step.’

‘Why don’t we go now?’

Mark stared at him fiercely. ‘I’m trying to save his life, okay? Maybe, just maybe, he’ll see that this is not working, and maybe he’ll decide he should wait or something. Why is that so hard to understand?’

‘Because he’s crazy. If he’ll kill himself, then he’ll kill us. Why is that so hard to understand?’

Mark shook his head in frustration, and suddenly the door opened again. The man rolled out of the car growling and talking to himself, and stomped through the grass to the rear. He grabbed the end of the hose, stared at it as if it just wouldn’t behave, and looked slowly around the small clearing. He was breathing heavily and perspiring. He looked at the trees, and the boys eased to the ground. He looked down, and froze as if he suddenly understood. The grass was slightly trampled around the rear of the car and he knelt as if to inspect it, but then crammed the hose back into the tailpipe instead and hurried back to his door. If someone was watching from

the trees, he seemed not to care. He just wanted to hurry up and die.

The two heads rose together above the brush, but just a few inches. They peeked through the weeds for a long minute. Ricky was ready to run, but Mark was thinking.

‘Mark, please, let’s go,’ Ricky pleaded. ‘He almost saw us. What if he’s got a gun or something?’

‘If he had a gun he’d use it on himself.’

Ricky bit his lip and his eyes watered again. He had never won an argument with his brother, and he would not win this one.

Another minute passed, and Mark began to fidget. ‘I’ll try one more time, okay. And if he doesn’t give up, then we’ll get outta here. I promise, okay?’

Ricky nodded reluctantly. His brother stretched on his stomach and inched his way through the weeds into the tall grass. Ricky wiped the tears from his cheek with his dirty fingers.

The lawyer’s nostrils flared as he inhaled mightily. He exhaled slowly and stared through the windshield while trying to determine if any of the precious, deadly gas had entered his blood and begun its work. A loaded pistol was on the seat next to him. A half-empty fifth of Jack Daniels was in his hand. He took a sip, screwed the cap on it, and placed it on the seat. He inhaled slowly and closed his eyes to savor the gas. Would he simply drift away? Would it hurt or burn or make

him sick before it finished him off? The note was on the dash above the steering wheel, next to a bottle of pills.

He cried and talked to himself as he waited for the gas to hurry, dammit! before he'd give up and use the gun. He was a coward, but a very determined one, and he much preferred this sniffing and floating away to sticking a gun in his mouth.

He sipped the whiskey, and hissed as it burned on its descent. Yes, it was finally working. Soon, it would all be over, and he smiled at himself in the mirror because it was working and he was dying and he was not a coward after all. It took guts to do this.

He cried and muttered as he removed the cap of the whiskey bottle for one last swallow. He gulped, and it ran from his lips and trickled into his beard.

He would not be missed. And although this thought should have been painful, the lawyer was calmed by the knowledge that no one would grieve. His mother was the only person in the world who loved him, and she'd been dead four years so this would not hurt her. There was a child from the first disastrous marriage, a daughter he'd not seen in eleven years, but he'd been told she had joined a cult and was as crazy as her mother.

It would be a small funeral. A few lawyer buddies and perhaps a judge or two would be there all dressed up in dark suits and whispering importantly as the piped-in organ music drifted

around the near-empty chapel. No tears. The lawyers would sit and glance at their watches while the minister, a stranger, sped through the standard comments used for dear departed ones who never went to church.

It would be a ten-minute job with no frills. The note on the dash required the body to be cremated.

‘Wow,’ he said softly as he took another sip. He turned the bottle up, and while gulping glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the weeds move behind the car.

Ricky saw the door open before Mark heard it. It flew open, as if kicked, and suddenly the large, heavy man with the red face was running through the weeds, holding on to the car and growling. Ricky stood, in shock and fear, and wet his pants.

Mark had just touched the bumper when he heard the door. He froze for a second, gave a quick thought to crawling under the car, and the hesitation nailed him. His foot slipped as he tried to stand and run, and the man grabbed him. ‘You! You little bastard!’ he screamed as he grabbed Mark’s hair and flung him on to the trunk of the car. ‘You little bastard!’ Mark kicked and squirmed, and a fat hand slapped him in the face. He kicked once more, not as violently, and he got slapped again.

Mark stared at the wild, glowing face just inches away. The eyes were red and wet. Fluids dripped from the nose and chin. ‘You little bastard,’ he growled through clenched, dirty teeth.