

FIRST CHAPTERS OF *ALTERED BOY*

Altered Boy

A Novel Based on Actual Events

Chapter One

The Yukon wind at her back, Kina ran to him, sliding merrily across ice patches, arms outstretched like wings. Under her anorak she wore a short pink dress with crinoline she'd sewn last month for her grade eight Halloween party. Her backpack held the little girl accessories: white ankle sockettes adorned with pink roses, low-heeled shiny black shoes, and the giant lollipop she would lick to complete the illusion. Many times he had suggested the little girl look would add spice to their bedroom activities. She giggled, thinking of how she would surprise him.

Using her back door key, she let herself in. She was not only his housekeeper, she was his one and only girl. Good, his coat was on the hook; he was home. So, she tiptoed to the bathroom to get ready. After putting on her cute socks and black shoes, she fixed her hair into twin pigtails, and sprayed her wrists with perfume. In the circular mirror over the liquor cabinet, she watched herself purse her full lips, lick the lollipop, and titter. She twirled, assessing her rear view. The dress was well above her knees. He'll like it, love it.

"Hello-o! Hi-ya! It's me!" A thud, a noise from the bedroom. Was he napping so early in the day? "Hi-ya," she said, turning the knob. She tried to open the door, but he shut it in her face. What? He had always been so good to her. Now his wolf growl scared her. "Grr. No, Kina, no. Go home. Go." Bewildered, feeling like a bad dog, she took a few obedient steps toward her coat until she heard urgent murmurs from behind the door. No. She was the only one allowed in his bedroom. She loved him, and he loved her.

She hurled herself against the door, and stumbled off balance into the bedroom she knew so well. Wearing only black boxer shorts, his bare back to her, he spun around in a fighter's stance, fists clenched for assault, and face twisted. At the sight of her in a little girl costume, his mouth dropped open. Then he gulped, shook his head, and hammered the air with his fist. "Out. Get out. I told you." Someone with long red hair ducked under the covers. Kina was dumbstruck. The man grasped her shoulders, and marched her out of the room. When she shattered the lollipop against his jaw, his grip loosened, and she bolted to the circular bed, and flung back the covers. Naked at least from the waist up, the boy hid his face with both hands, but the long red hair told her he was Kevin Wickstrom. "Kevin? What are you doing here?" The boy would not uncover his face, but began crying, tears dribbling from between his fingers. Then the man hauled her off her feet, carried her to the next room, and tossed her onto the couch. Her world had crumbled, and she was falling, falling through nothingness. "Don't move," he said, aiming a stern finger between her eyes. When he returned to the bedroom, she hurled her pretty black shoes, *bang-bang*, at the door.

Racing into the face-numbing winds of Whitehorse in late November, her tears froze to her cheeks. To escape this arctic torture, she staggered into the old historic church, and collapsed onto a pew. On her back, she wept loudly, mouth wide, cries echoing off the slick walls and ceiling, so it seemed twenty girls howled. She was his one and only. He said. The lying son-of-a-bitch betrayed her. With *Kevin*. She wanted to die. Then she sat up rigid as a statue, wide eyes unfocused. I will kill him. I will kill him with my father's axe.

The police were baffled by her accusations. Priests don't do such things. Father Damon had twelve-year-old Kevin Wickstrom in his bed? Red-headed Kevin? Still, Constable Bick the young RCMP officer, frowning with confusion, typed out her statement. In a shaky hand she signed her name and wrote the date, November 20, 1960. She felt she had just signed a death certificate. Her life with Father Damon was dead. She wanted him dead, too.

Constable Bick was obliged to visit Father Damon to show him Kina's statement.

"Oh, no. My-oh-my," Damon said. "Young Kina is mistaken, sadly mistaken. Kevin, one of my best and loyal altar boys, came down with the flu, I think. High fever. Throwing up, and so on. And I allowed him to recuperate at the manse. Ask him, he'll tell you the same thing."

"Ah," said Bick, relieved. "So that's what this is all about."

However, Kevin's parents were furious. They knew their boy was perfectly healthy. Also, for some time they had been suspicious of Father Damon's familiarity with altar boys. Mr. Wickstrom threatened to complain to the Mayor, the Bishop, Prime Minister Diefenbaker, even to Pope John XXIII in Rome. Obviously, it was time for Damon to move on. Again, he had to appeal to Uncle Frank, his mother's uncle, known professionally as Bishop Oldman. Damon knew he was lucky to be from a family with a tradition of service to the Catholic Church. Every generation on both sides, right back to his ancestors in Ireland and Scotland, had its share of priests, sisters, and brothers.

A year before, Bishop Oldman had reassigned him to the Yukon, rescuing him from a similar predicament with altar boys in St. John's, Newfoundland. Now, again, a quick call to Oldman in Toronto set the wheels in motion, and within days Damon was on a train to Windsor, Ontario, a gritty factory town across the river from Detroit, Michigan.

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Chapter Two

Friday Afternoon, December 2, 1960

Waiting for Damon at Windsor's Walkerville Terminal were Holy Blood Church's ailing octogenarian Monsignor Brady who had lost a leg to cancer, and Audrey, his housekeeper and chauffeur, who drove the parish's light green 1955 Dodge Coronet Six two-door sedan. Bishop Oldman had sent Brady a special delivery letter on parchment paper praising Father Damon for his charisma, hard work, and devotion to the church. The letter contained no mention of Damon's notorious past in St. John's and Whitehorse.

Monsignor Brady and Audrey watched for the priest from Whitehorse until it seemed all passengers had left the train. Audrey, age forty, a French-Canadian from small town Québec, sometimes mixed the two languages together, but usually people knew what she meant. She asked a baggage handler, "*Bonjour*. Is a person remain on the train? A priest?"

"A priest? I don't think so. There's a man in the men's room, and he's kinda, um, sick." Now the baggage handler suspected the drunk puking in the toilet was the priest. "I'll see if I can find him." He gently knocked on the door.

The voice inside said, "I'll be right out."

He was not surprised when a priest stepped out, dressed in black, wearing the white clerical collar. "Are you all right now, sir?" Even though he was an atheist, he thought perhaps he should have called him Father.

Damon took the man's hand, and smiled broadly, his words floating on mouthwash. "I'm just fine. Thank you so much for the wonderful journey. I feel fortunate to live in such a beautiful country, from sea to shining sea. Thank you again for everything." Then he released the man's hand.

"Thank you, um, Father. It was a pleasure." He tilted his head toward the window. "You got two people out there waiting for you. Right there beside the green Coronet."

On the way to Holy Blood Church, as Damon chatted with Brady in the back seat, Audrey wondered about the mouthwash smell. Was it masking the odor of alcohol? At a red light, after removing her driving spectacles, in the rearview mirror she observed Damon's bloodshot eyes, and resolved to keep an eye on this young one.

"Whitehorse," said Monsignor Brady. "Yukon Territories. Must be cold up there."

"Yes, but you get used to it," said Damon. "It's a dry cold. You dress for it." Kina's little girl costume popped into his head.

"Were you assigned there, or...?" Brady assumed no one would go voluntarily to such a remote place.

Bishop Oldman had rescued Damon from his troubles in Newfoundland by sending him far away to the Yukon, the other side of the country. Damon considered the transfer a punishment. Purgatory. However, he gave Brady an upbeat reason. "Oh, no, I requested Whitehorse. As a kid I always wanted to travel, especially to the wild north, but never had the chance. So, Bishop Oldman was kind enough to fulfill my dream. The land is beautiful out there. Beautiful."

"Are you sad to leave Whitehorse?"

"Yes and no." The true answer was definitely no. He was not sad to escape crazy Kina. Until that final day she had been a perfect puppy: obedient, adoring, great in bed. He did, however, suffer a twinge of regret that he wasn't able to relish the little girl fantasy. "The people there were so kind, helpful, and devoted. I'll miss every one of them. And the mountains, and the trees, and the valleys? The Yukon River is magnificent. But..." Damon took a deep breath, and sighed. "Here I am back east – well, south, really – and it's exciting to be in a new place, a bustling, active, energetic city. And I feel blessed that God has allowed me to serve a parish in dire need of a priest, especially after the sudden departure of Father Henry."

At Father Henry's name, Audrey clenched her teeth, and gripped the steering wheel tighter. What disgrace is Father Henry, she thought; so weak, so foolish to allow himself to be seduced by that *plotte*, that young hussy, Cathy Whatsername. Then he knocks her up, and then decides to marry her. *Imbécile, tabarnac de câlisse!* I was the devoted one, doing everything and more for him. He could have asked me anything, and I would have done it *avec plaisir*. This Cathy will not last. She'll leave him. But me ... I would be a good wife to him, a stable wife.

"What a shame," said Brady. "You've heard the story about Father Henry?"

"I believe so, from Bishop Oldman."

"Here is your *nouvelle maison*," said Audrey, pulling the Coronet into the manse's driveway, covered with red paving stones. She dropped her driving spectacles into her pocket.

Fittingly, Damon's first task at Holy Blood, a mere hour after arrival, was a baptism. Dr. and Mrs. VanDaal had dressed five-day-old daughter Rita in a white lace gown twice the length of her squirming body. With them were the godparents and the baby's brother Guido, an altar boy at Holy Blood.

After the baptism, Brady clapped Damon on the back. "Good work. They like you." Then he presented Damon with a duty schedule for the week: Mass Saturday morning at seven, meeting with Holy Blood's P.T.A. at ten, confessions at two. He flipped the pages: masses, confessions, a funeral mass, graveside prayers, baptisms, a last rites, a wedding next Saturday, visits to the hospital, to an old folks' home, to Holy Blood School, and so on and so on.

"One more tiny thing," said Brady. "Please go around and empty all the donation boxes. Add the coins to the big pickle jar in the basement. When the jar is filled, we take it to the bank and deposit the money into our Holy Blood account. That jar gets so heavy, I can't carry it anymore. Here's the key."

"Of course, Monsignor Brady. My pleasure. I'll do that right now." When Damon saw the jar packed with silver coins, no pennies, he laughed. This free money, at least one hundred dollars, will come in handy. Oh, he'll deposit some lesser amount into the bank account, eventually.

Back in the manse Damon asked Audrey for the keys to the parish car, to "see the sights of my new city." When she offered to chauffeur, Damon flashed his smile. "Oh, I wouldn't want to bother you, making you drive all over the place."

"*Pas de problème*. To chauffeur is *mon plaisir*." She needed to learn more about this new priest. He was too polite.

"Really, Audrey, I'm sure you have more important things to do. Where are the keys?"

With her heart beating a war drum, she dropped the keys into his waiting palm.

"Thank you. I'm just going exploring." He waved his Windsor travel brochure. "See a few sights, maybe visit one of your famous pizza parlors, and, and we'll see you soon."

"Pizza? Oh, I can prepare best of pizza in small minutes. *Pas de raison* to enter a *restaurant*."

He patted her hand. "Of course you can." He winked. "Some other time, OK? I look forward to it, your best of pizza."

He took a moment to remove his hand from hers. She stole a look at his eyes, and, yes, he was smiling directly down into her face. A tremor flowed from her hand to her stomach. She was the chauffeur. Why wouldn't he let her drive him? She could show him the sights. Later she peeked between the window curtains at Damon, who needed both hands to heave a suitcase into the trunk. *Valise?* A suitcase? Why?

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Chapter Three

Friday, December 2, 1960, Late Afternoon

To prove to Audrey he was sightseeing, he would have to mention a few streets and buildings. At Walkerville Hardware he had two duplicate car keys made. Next stop: the downtown bus station, where he stashed the heavy suitcase in a rented locker. Then he drove along Riverside Drive and up the main street, Gillette Avenue, bustling with rumbling cars and scuttling shoppers, the first wave of the Christmas blitz. A team of city workers climbed up and down ladders, attaching decorations to poles, and stretching lights from one side of the street to the other every half block or so. It was late Friday afternoon, and a group of Catholic school girls

in their kilts loitered on a corner in front of Major's Department Store, chewing gum and cackling maniacally. Idling at the red light, he watched them, charmed by their energy and hilarity, until a long-legged stork called out, "Hey, Buddy. Take a *picture*, why doncha? It lasts longer." He snapped his look away, pretending to be absorbed by a worker high on his ladder.

Three tough-looking hoods in black leather jackets, Levis, and motorcycle boots passed in front of his car. Painted on the back of the tall one's jacket was a skull over crossed cutlasses, the flaking white paint producing cracks in the cranium, which added to the sinister effect. He and the boy beside him, scanning the streets through ice blue eyes, had greasy dark hair combed into the D.A. style, a duck's ass, although polite people on the radio and TV called it a ducktail hairstyle. Trailing behind, the third kid had a brush cut, and covered his cheeks with the collar of his jacket pulled up to his nose. This kid turned his head slowly, and stared narrow-eyed at Damon. Usually, a person would break eye contact immediately, thinking it's impolite to stare. But Damon did not look away, and the kid blew up. Eyes blazing, he stopped dead, flipped Damon the finger, and banged both fists on the metallic hood, *wha-wham*. Damon thought about pressing the gas, and flattening this idiot, when blue-eyes whirled around, saying, "Hey! Joey! What the hell?" He pulled Joey away by his sleeve.

"He was starin' at me."

"Be cool, man. We'll get coffees at Dante's. C'mon."

Damon parked, and sat, using his mirrors to watch the boys talking to the kilted girls. Stork called to the tall boy, "Hey, Shorty, keepin' outta trouble?" Laughing, she touched his hair, but he swatted her hand away. She laughed even louder. Two girls, whispering to each other, admired the profile of blue-eyes, who glanced at them, raised his eyebrows, and looked away, smirking. It seemed he was a lookout, eyes in constant motion.

Joey, collar still covering the bottom part of his face, offered a quick wave to the two girls, who leaned back, mouths twisted in distaste. After pulling his hand back into a trembling, tight fist, it looked like he was about to punch one of the girls. Abruptly, he stormed off, spitting curses in rhythm with his steps. Blue-eyes immediately followed, calling, "Hey, Joey. Wait up, man." But Joey picked up the pace until he was running at full speed.

Blue-eyes returned to the others. "He's gone again."

One girl swirled her finger next to her temple. "He's crazy. I mean *really* crazy."

Then Shorty said, "I gotta split," spanked the stork's ass, and escaped before she could slap his face.

The boys ducked into Dante's Pizzeria.

Well, Damon did tell Audrey he would sample Windsor's famous pizzas.

A Wurlitzer jukebox played popular songs by Brenda Lee, Nat King Cole, and Elvis. Damon sat at a table for two against the wall, within earshot of the waiter who stood over the boys, in a rear corner booth next to the kitchen door. The waiter, a dark, middle-aged man, white apron around his waist, wagged his finger at them, saying, "No trouble, no trouble."

Shorty, hands crossed over his heart, affected a wounded tone. "Ah, man, Mr. Dante. No way. Last time? Not my fault." Then he pointed toward the front cashier's counter. "You saw. The other boy was the bad boy. I'm the good boy. The other one. He was bad. You saw."

Dante folded his strong, hairy forearms across his chest. "No trouble."

"Naw, man. No trouble. No way. Could we please have a coupla coffees? Please?"

Dante tapped his wristwatch. "You drink, and go out. Ten minutes."

Blue-eyes said something across the table to Shorty, who pretended to shiver, crossing his arms and rubbing his biceps, saying, "Dante, man, it's cold out. Ten minutes?"

"You drink, and go out."

"Sure. You're the boss. Fifteen minutes. Two coffees. OK?"

Dante brought them two cups, and demanded immediate payment. Blue-eyes paid with exact change: nickels, dimes, and pennies.

After wiping his moist palms on his apron, Dante turned and bowed to Damon. "Menu, sir?"

"Just a coffee." Pretending to read the newspaper, with his back turned, Damon furtively watched the boys in the mirror. Whenever the door opened, blue-eyes swiveled around to take a look.

The boys leaned in across the table, speaking in hushed tones, the one named Shorty fingering a silver medallion swaying at his chest. The inscription on it looked to be in a foreign language.

Damon liked the look of the one with the ice blue eyes. But he could not make the first move. You had to sit back and allow the kid to approach *you*, which eliminated the risk of stumbling upon straight arrows who might cause trouble. Sure, he's had trouble in the past. All the more reason to be doubly careful from now on.

Cruising was exciting, especially when he scored, but he must be constantly vigilant against robbery and violence. Back in Newfoundland those glue-sniffing kids were dead certain they had an easy mark. But a weapon can be a liability, if your victim seizes it from you. After he kicked that Newfy kid in the balls, and the knife was Damon's, the other two ran like the wind. With his belt he bound the kid's hands behind his back, and exacted a satisfying retribution.

A hulking man came in, and sat close to the boys, facing them, staring obviously at blue-eyes. Damon smirked, intrigued by the scenario about to unfurl.

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Chapter Four

"**H**ere we go-o," said Shorty. "A mark is looking at you. Don't turn around."

Mickey tried to catch the mark's reflection in the kitchen door's circular window. As Mickey craned his neck to get a better angle, Shorty rapped his knuckles twice on the table, saying, "Be cool. Lemme do the talkin'." Shorty took the switchblade from his boot, and, thumb on the button, held it out of sight between his knees.

Fourteen-year-old Shorty, who wasn't short, had been making money hustling what they called "the track" – Gillette Avenue from the Detroit River up to Wyandotte Street – since he was twelve, when older boys from his school, St. Jude's Reformatory, had shown him the ropes. Now his apprentice, thirteen-year-old Mickey, wanted to rake in easy bucks for Christmas, just a few weeks away.

The mark held his steaming cup of tea in both hands. A big, fat man who needed a shave, he had pink cheeks and red hair, thin on top. His tartan tie, mostly green, was pulled loose, the knot off to the side. Salesman, probably. "Excuse me, lads," he said in an English accent, standing in front of Dante's kitchen door, and looking straight at Mickey, "but I'm new in town, and I expect perhaps you could direct me to the Black Rose Motel."

Mickey stared into his cup, but Shorty scooted sideways in his seat to give the mark room, saying, "Yeah, I know that place. Sit down a minute."

The man ignored Shorty. Leaning forward, he touched Mickey's shoulder. "Do you know where the Black Rose is?"

Under the man's touch Mickey gritted his teeth, and swirled the coffee in his cup. Shorty had said he'd do the talking.

Snick. The sound came from between Shorty's knees as he pressed the switchblade's button, causing the blade to flick out of the handle, ready for action. The big man yanked his hand from

Mickey as if from flame, and stepped away, setting his cup down. Now he faced Shorty, looking him up and down as if inspecting a hyena at the zoo. His gaze lingered over the unusual medal around Shorty's neck. German? Silver? Artifact from the war?

Mickey gave the Englishman the once-over: a big baby about forty years old, a pink-skinned fatso with an immature downy moustache. He didn't want to imagine this person touching his skin. But money was money. As his dad Paddy Kelly said, almost nobody got paid to do something he enjoyed.

"We're a team," said Shorty. "How much for both of us? One hour."

After a momentary smile, here and gone like the spark from a cheap match, the Englishman said, "Well, you do get to the point, don't you? Allow me to be frank as well. I'm looking for *one* boy, and ..." He held his palms out toward Shorty. "Nothing personal, my friend, but I prefer *this* young man." He turned to Mickey. "I'll pay you fifteen dollars to accompany me in my car, and direct me to the Black Rose Motel."

"F'sure!" said Mickey, thinking, Man! Fifteen bucks!

"No," said Shorty, pointing at Mickey. "We're a team." Swiveling his pointed finger toward the mark, he said, "Twenty-five for both of us."

The man clasped his hands behind his back, and bowed slightly to each boy in turn. "I'm terribly sorry to have bothered you ... and you. Excuse me, please." He buttoned his coat to the neck, and wrapped a tartan scarf around his throat. To force open the door against the cruel frigid wind, he had to put his shoulder to it.

Damon noticed a red Ford, white wall tires, idling at the curb, a woman at the wheel. The glass in her spectacles flashed, reflecting the headlights from a prowling taxi.

At the front counter Dante, smoking cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, without moving his head looked up from his magazine at the fat man. Then his eyes panned over to the boys in the far corner.

"I coulda made fifteen bucks," said Mickey.

"Are you nuts? You don't *know*," said Shorty. He fingered the medal on the sturdy chain at his throat, a silver disk engraved with German words in a semi-circle surrounding a longhaired violinist. "You're just a kid. Man, you don't *know*. Some-a these guys are freaks, I'm *tellin'* ya."

"I think I'd be OK," said Mickey. "I got my friend, here." He reached down and freed the switchblade from the heavy rubber band around his ankle. Glowering at an imaginary mark, he said, "OK, buddy. Don't mess with *me*." *Snick*. Pressed the button, and the blade appeared like magic. "Just gimme the money," he said, waving the knife. "All of it. Hurry up, or—"

"Put that away," said Shorty. "Dante's lookin' over here. Hurry up, ditch it. Here he comes." Mickey shoved the blade back into its handle, and replaced it at his ankle between his sock and the elastic band, *snap*.

In the mirror Damon saw everything. Kids with knives. Danger. Usually to themselves.

Dante stood in front of them, arms folded, holding a forced smile. "We close now. Good-bye."

Mickey pulled a sad face. "But I gotta wait for my father."

Dante picked up their cups. "Be good boys. You go now. No trouble."

At the front door, Mickey pointed at the calendar. "Hey, f'sure ya gotta change that over. November's over. It's December, man. Want me t'change it for ya?"

Dante tossed the cups in steaming hot water, and washed them.

Shorty held the door open. "Let's check out the river."

The icy wind took Mickey's breath away. Protecting his ears with his hands, he said, "Naw, it's freezing, man. I gotta go home."

"Gonna leave me here alone?"

"Sorry, man. Gotta."

"Yeah, kid," said Shorty. "We'll try again tomorrow night. You'll see: there's lotsa guys who'll pay good scratch to just look at you, just *look*."

"Hard to believe. Weird."

"Well, you best believe it. I'm gonna hang loose, make some scratch."

When the boys were gone, Damon went to his car. As he fished for his keys, he looked up and down the street. About a block behind him, the headlights of a red 1949 Ford Tudor snapped on. Cop? Or the same car from before, a woman driving? He pulled away from the curb, and the red Ford pulled away from its curb. At first he drove below the speed limit, and the trailing car matched his speed. He turned left, and it turned left. He turned right, and it followed. All right, what the hell's going on?

Damon drove up Gillette Avenue, increasing speed block by block, and then hit the brakes, and swerved around so he was traveling in the opposite direction toward the red Ford. His headlights flashed in the driver's glasses. The Ford made a squealing right turn, and sped off, engine roaring. Fast car. Its glowing tail-lights grew smaller and smaller until they were swallowed by blackness.

Just to be sure, he took a roundabout route to Holy Blood's manse. When he parked, and turned off the motor, he realized his hands were trembling, and a headache was bubbling up like lava. Who was following him? A woman? After only his first day in town? Audrey? Did she suspect something? Was she attracted to him? It wouldn't be the first time.

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Chapter Five

Friday Evening, December 2

On Gillette Avenue, the track, they had strung up their usual red and blue lights across the road from one lamppost to another. On every second post they attached their Merry Christmas signs made of silver and gold tinsel that swayed and flashed in the wind, kinda cool looking. At Major's Department Store, Shorty pressed his forehead against the window, gloved hands shielding his ears, and followed the toy train's figure eight route across plastic bridges and through cardboard mountains. A shadow approached silently, and stood next to him.

The voice said, "Lovely, isn't it?"

Startled, Shorty leaped sideways into a boxer's crouch, dukes up, ready for anything.

"My mistake," said a man, hands high as if under arrest. "Didn't mean to alarm you."

Shorty recognized the Englishman's accent, the same guy from Dante's. "I'm not scared. You *snuck up* on me."

"My apologies," said the Englishman, lowering his hands, but keeping them visible. "All my fault."

Shorty turned back to the window, followed the train's circuitous voyage, but kept one eye on the man, his tartan scarf up to his chin. So, he'd been cruising the track, and didn't find anybody, eh? Well, now it would cost him twenty-five bucks for *one* boy.

"Cold," said the man.

"It's OK."

"Fancy a cup of coffee? Warm up?"

Shorty pitched a lob ball: "Well, I'm on my way to my uncle's. He got work for me. Pays twenty bucks." He paused, pretending to think it over. "But if I could make twenty-five bucks tonight at something else, I could prob'ly do my uncle's work tomorrow."

The mark caught the pitch. "I have some work. Twenty-five dollars is fine."

"Sounds OK."

"I believe it's the appropriate time for me to introduce myself," said the man, offering his kid leather-gloved hand. "I'm Nigel. How do you do?"

"I do fine," said Shorty, briefly tapping the man's palm with his gloved fingertips, and thinking, Nigel, Nigel Bruce the English actor, that stupid fat guy, Sherlock Holmes' buddy, Doctor Watson.

Nigel bent into the wind. "My vehicle is around the corner. Bloody hell, it's cold! This way."

That fat mark had a sharp ride, a '56 green and white Ford Crown Victoria, Ohio plates. So, a yank, probably from Toledo, about an hour and a half drive down highway I-75 from Detroit.

After turning the key to start the motor, he flipped open a silver cigarette case. "Fag?"

Shorty sniggered. He knew fag was the English word for cigarette, but it was funny.

"Oh, my dear," said Nigel, placing his chubby fingertips daintily on his chest. "I *know*. I keep *saying* that word. What a *scream*."

"Yeah," said Shorty, checking out the interior of this beautiful machine. "A scream."

"So, do you care for one? A *ci-ga-rette*?"

"Nah. Got any booze?"

"As a matter of fact," he said, pointing. "Open the, erm, the little door, there."

"Glove box?"

"Of course, ha, the glove box."

In it was a pint of imported scotch, Glen Something. Shorty took a snort. Nigel waved it off. Then Shorty shuddered and tensed, teeth clenched, as the whiskey passed through the cavity on the right side of his front right tooth, tormenting the exposed nerve.

"Strong drink," said Nigel.

"Nah, it's this cavity."

"You must get it sorted out."

"Hurts like hell sometimes."

"Yes, and it's unattractive."

"So," said Shorty, "we going to that Black Rose Motel place?"

"Later. Excuse me, but right now I must ..." He stepped out of the car, took off his heavy overcoat, and tossed it in the back. "Ah, that's better. The heater is quite extraordinary. You'll be hot as blazes in two shakes. Please, remove your jacket. Make yourself at home."

"That's OK," said Shorty, leaving his jacket on.

"Suit yourself." Nigel settled his bulk into his seat, pressed toe to accelerator, and *vroom*, they were off, along Riverside Drive to Walker Road.

Shorty switched on the radio, and Motown rhythms had him tapping his nails on the dashboard.

"What is that around your neck?"

"This?" said Shorty. "Just a medal."

"I noticed it at the restaurant. It's German."

"Uh, yeah, it's a German medal thing."

"Where did you acquire it? It looks old. 1936?"

Shorty didn't want to talk about the medal. "Ah, man," he said, sighing, "it's just a piece-a metal. My uncle gave it to me." Actually, Shorty stole it last summer, snatched it from the neck of a cripple on Gillette Avenue. That's why he attached it to a heavy-duty chain, the kind

construction companies use to lock the gates. Nobody, but nobody, would snatch it from *his* neck.

"Hm," said Nigel, dropping the topic. He accelerated into the long curve that carried them to Highway 401.

Shorty liked this car. He knew how to drive, learned by joy-riding stolen cars. Maybe he'd just take this fat mark's Crown Victoria for a little spin, whether he liked it or not. Pull up to the Hi-Ho Drive-In, and buy a burger and shake with the scratch he'd get from fatso, here. Which reminded him, by the way ...

"I get paid in advance."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do." Shorty didn't like the way the mark said *Do* you? "And I gotta get paid right now." A guy's gotta get tough with these queers. Show 'em who's boss. It turns their crank, too.

"Well, I did agree to twenty-five. But ... how would you like fifty?"

Here we go, thought Shorty. A pervert. "Fifty? For what?"

"You do *me*. For fifty American dollars."

Shorty had never been on the giving end. The older boys at St. Jude's told him it would come to this one day. Should he bite the bullet, and take the cash?

"Sixty bucks," said Shorty, almost hoping flabbo would turn him down.

"Accepted," he answered, winking, and nodding once. He offered his right hand, saying, "Shake."

There was only one thing to do: shake the hand. He had a surprisingly strong grip for a tub-o-lard who looked like a mama's boy, and he held on for longer than Shorty wanted. A moment later Shorty furtively wiped his damp palm on the side of his jeans. Then, slowly, slowly, he reached down to his boot, and took out the switchblade, which he slowly, slowly transferred to the waistband of his jeans, hidden by the jacket he had refused to remove.

"I'm so *excited*," said Nigel, slowing down and pulling off the highway to a dimly-lit country road. "I can't *wait*." He turned again at a crooked wooden sign that read Allard Sideroad, drove into a clearing and stopped, but left the car running for the heat and music.

Shorty thought, Holy shit, this'll be sick. As the mark began to unzip, Shorty said, "Um, sixty bucks?"

"Absolutely, as per negotiations." Shorty imagined the big rich English schools this dope grew up in, where the teachers wore long black gowns and flat hats. "My wallet's in my coat in the back," he said, squeezing his bulk into the rear area. "Ah, here it is. Be right with you." As he extracted the bills, one by one, from his wallet he repeated, "hm, hm, hm ..." Then, "Here you go. This should be it." Over the seat, he handed Shorty a wad of ones, fives, and tens. "I suggest you count it. I've been known to be rather weak at sums."

Shorty opened the glove box to get some light, and counted the money, thinking, What's a guy gonna do? It's a job.

The bills flew from his grasp as something tightened around his throat, and yanked his head back with such force he was lifted from his seat. The big man had seized Shorty's heavy-duty chain with both hands. Grunting like a dog, he pulled and twisted it around Shorty's neck, pushing his knees against the back of the seat as leverage. The German medallion pressed against his windpipe, shutting off air. *I'm too young to die. This chain will not break. Why did I buy the strongest chain in the world?* He tried to pry his fingers between the chain and his throat, but couldn't. He punched and clawed back over his head, but ... nothing.

"Big shot, are you?" said Nigel as he twisted the chain tighter. "Kept the pretty boy a-away from me, eh? I ... I *wanted* him. I wan—" A wild punch connected with Nigel's jaw, and the pressure on Shorty's throat lessened enough for him to get two fingers in there. Nigel laughed.

"Bastard!" He threw more strength into tightening the chain. "You were about to *do* me, weren't you, you sad little pansy?"

Shorty fumbled at his waistband, but dropped the knife. Felt around the seat. Where is it? Where? There, *got* it. If only he could— *snick*. Nigel heard that sound again, saw the glittering blade, and hissed through his teeth, "Daft bastard!" Leaning back, eyes shut tight, he strained mightily.

He's gonna tear my head off, unless... Shorty ceased struggling. Instead, he allowed himself to be pulled over, into the back seat, on top of the heavy Englishman, driving Nigel's head into the window, which cracked in a jagged spider web pattern. The impact stunned the man, who lost his grip, and the chain slipped over Shorty's head, and fell to the floor. Shorty sucked in a gulp of air, and another, and another, and the sudden rush of blood to his head made him woozy.

Seeing the kid in trouble, gasping for breath, Nigel grabbed for the knife, but Shorty reared back, the weapon cocked behind his ear, and, teeth bared, drove it toward the man's eye. To deflect it, Nigel threw up his hand, and the blade plunged through the center of his palm, and came out the other side. The force of the strike carried his hand back, and pinned it to the upholstery.

At first, silence. Dumbstruck, Nigel gawked wide-eyed at this mad boy, and then, inches from his eyes, at the black handle protruding from his throbbing hand. It hurt like fucking hell, but he was furious that some lowlife street urchin had maimed him. "My hand! My fucking hand! Wait'll I..." When he tried to pull it out, the pain blinded him. "Oh-oh-oh." He pulled again. "Oh-oh-fuck, Jesus Christ!" Blood trickled from the gash, over the heel of his hand, down his wrist, and soaked into the white cuff, now turning crimson.

As Shorty, gasping for breath, fell back and grabbed the door handle, Nigel, lips pulled back and teeth bared, with a mighty heave, freed his hand from the upholstery, but the knife remained fixed through his palm, the bloody blade still sticking out the back of it. Like a tennis player, he repeatedly struck at Shorty backhanded, trying to stab him in the face. Bobbing and weaving, Shorty leaned way back, and the door gave way. He grabbed wildly at the man's sleeve, and ripped it off as he tumbled out, and kept rolling until he reached the trees, where he picked up a rock the size of a baseball. He had to get away. He needed that Crown Victoria, and he'd get it, god-dammit, from that fat, fucking, tub-o-lard sonofabitch!

While sucking in great gulps of crisp air, he watched through slitted eyes as Nigel rolled and crawled over the seat in pursuit. Nigel threw a forearm at the door to pound it open. But it was ajar, and his momentum carried him through it, and as he toppled head first toward rock-solid earth, he instinctively held out both hands to cushion the impact. Shorty turned from the sight of Nigel's hand striking the ground, which shoved the sharp steel even further in. Yelping like a chimp, Nigel clamped his fist around the handle, and, with an almighty heave, extracted the knife, blood and flesh spewing out. He stared in revulsion at the hole in his hand. He could see right through it! Shorty heard the *plop-plop, plop-plop* of drops of blood bouncing off the frozen earth.

Red eyes spinning, Nigel now wanted one thing: to *kill this kid dead*. Shorty could see it. Nigel rushed him, knife held high. Like firing a blur to first base, Shorty hurled the rock at Nigel's face. He didn't see it coming. It struck his forehead, and he stopped dead, and dropped the knife. As he crumpled to his knees, Shorty ran up and kicked him in the mouth. A piece of tooth sailed through the air, and skidded across a patch of ice. Nigel drew himself into the fetal position, pressing his maimed hand against his chest, and spat out a bloody chip from a second broken tooth.

Using the ripped sleeve, Shorty wiped the mess from his knife. Using his elbows, the man crawled toward the back wheels, mumbling, "Please, don't kill me ... I have a wife ... three girls ... don't kill me ..."

"Don't you fucken *move*," said Shorty.

Shaking his head rapidly side to side, Nigel said, "No, no, I won't, I won't move." He hugged the back tire.

Inside the idling car the money was strewn about – some on the dash, some on the seat, on the floor, in the glove box. He collected the bills, counting them as he searched. Finally, sixty dollars. And eighty more dollars in twenties in the guy's wallet. Cool. One hundred and forty bucks. American bucks.

He flung the coat at Nigel, sprawled face down, and it landed on his head and shoulders, covering them. From under the coat, Nigel said, "See, I didn't move."

"Fu-uck," said Shorty. He put the Crown Vic in gear, pressed the gas, and popped the clutch. Shit, it lurched backwards, wrong gear, and ... *bump-bump*. The guy screamed. In panic, he dropped it into first, and floored it – another *bump-bump* – spraying stones over the writhing body behind him.

To avoid the heat he took side roads. Hurling through blackness, he repeated, "He deserved it. Tried to kill me. Self-defence. Deserved it." As he passed a little white hut named Happy Market, he wondered where he was. After a few minutes he saw a sign: Essex. Pulled over, opened the glove box, and under a heavy flashlight he found receipts from Maumee Bay Auto Repairs, Toledo. Name: Nigel George Montgomery, Edgewater Drive, Toledo, Ohio. A map of Ontario was under the receipts. Ow. Sonofabitch, his neck was on fire! He touched it gingerly with his fingers, feeling welts. But ... his chain? His medal? Gone! He searched everywhere: under the seats, under the mats, everywhere. Nothing. He *had* to have his lucky medal. He vowed he would never, ever lose his lucky medal. And, if that fat slob was dead, the medal would be a dead-cinch clue for the heat. Lots and lotsa people knew about his medal. It would bring the heat right to his door. Dammit!

He wheeled the Crown Vic around, and raced back to the clearing off Allard Sideroad. Nigel was gone. He turned on the highbeams, and used the flashlight to search the area. A puddle of blood was still wet, and he followed droplets that glittered under the flashlight, and led to the forest. Where was that man? He musta been playing possum. Shorty walked a few steps into the black forest, calling, "Hey, you! I'll drive you home! I won't hurt you! Promise!" Holding his breath for a long time, he listened hard for some sound, rustle of a leaf, a twig, *anything*.

Nothing. No man. No medal. And that bloody shirtsleeve had disappeared. Maybe Nigel used it as a bandage.

On his way back to the car, he swung the flashlight beam left and right, back and forth. A gleam. Over there. He ran to it. The medal! His medal! The long-haired violinist and the German inscription: *Erster Platz Mit Unterscheidung, Berlin Musik-Festival 1936*. But no chain. So what? Relief surged through him, making him feel as light as a perfect snowflake. He slipped the medal into his jean's coin pocket.

At the horizon, the crescent moon hovered behind a black silhouette edging of pointed pines. He had to get back. The Brothers would kill him.

He parked the Crown Vic in the police station parking lot about a ten-minute walk from his home, St. Jude's Training School for Boys. Before climbing the fire escape, he hid his switchblade and the hundred and forty dollars behind the loose brick in the wall next to the garbage cans.

Chapter Six

Friday, December 2, Approaching Midnight

When Shorty stepped off the fire escape into his tall third floor dormitory window, the other boys were asleep. All was quiet and dark. After removing his boots, he slide-stepped across the buffed floor to his bed at the other end of the long room, ten beds a side, above each a glow-in-the-dark cross.

Shorty – born Clyde Allen Shortt, Jr. – had been a ward of St. Jude's Training School for Boys for three years. Everyone knew Jude's was actually teen jail, reform school. Every kid had been sent there by court order.

At eleven years old, after a drunk driver killed his mother and infant brother, his father dove to the bottom of a whiskey bottle, and never resurfaced. The authorities sent young Clyde to Castle Hill Orphanage run by the Brothers of St. John. During his first summer there, half the brothers were arrested, and the orphanage closed. Before they could assign Clyde to another location, the kid took off. He picked up the knack of living on the streets – panhandling, theft, B&E's, shoplifting, and robberies, sometimes armed with his trusty switchblade. During a botched purse-snatching attempt, the woman left fingernail gouges across his cheek. Then she and two patrol cops chased Shorty for blocks. He zigzagged, jinked, and doubled back, but couldn't shake them. That babe must have been a track star. Eventually the heat cornered him, and their judge sent him to St. Jude's Training School for Boys, teen jail, run by the Christian Brothers who during the days enforced the rules harshly, and at nights slipped into bedrooms to make it better.

Under the covers, he pulled the pillow over his face to shut out the world, trying to think. That maniac Nigel tried to kill him. He imagined his own dead body in the clearing as rats gnawed his eyeballs, and maggots played hide and seek in his nostrils. The pain from his cavity resumed its nasty work. Caressing the welt around his neck, he thought of all the wackos he had met over the years. Where would it end? Last night he was lucky he wasn't murdered. But then he probably killed, murdered, the other guy. Maybe Nigel crawled into the forest and died, and some animal dragged him off. The heat would be out looking for the killer, and Gillette Avenue would be the first place they'd look. He'd better drop hustling for a while. He should use the money from last night to go on a trip, get outta town, get the hell away.

"Where you been, Clyde?" Brother Tom's Irish voice spoke to him through the pillow and blankets. Shorty hated that silly name, and Brother Tom knew it. He called him Clyde to mock him. The brother enjoyed watching kids squirm, and, better yet, whimper, scream, lose control. Shorty pretended to be asleep, but the brother was having none of it. He pulled the pillow roughly from Shorty's face, saying, "Where you been, boyo?"