

July 4, 1961

Chapter 1

The telephone jerked him from a heavy, dreamless sleep without registering on his consciousness. He sat up and stared into the darkness, wondering why he was awake. The phone rang again and his body reacted instinctively to its strident summons, propelling him across the room and into the hall without conscious thought.

"'Lo." He slumped against the wall, shivering in thin cotton jockey shorts.

"Greg? Are you awake?"

A flare of irritation as he recognized John's voice helped dispel some of his stupor. "Yeah," he lied.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news, Greg. Your mother's dead. I'm sorry, but she's dead."

"But I... How did...?" His vision contracted into a pinpoint as shock sucked the air from his lungs. He doubled over, struggling for breath. John's voice continued as a buzz from the receiver, but he'd ceased to comprehend. Instead, he concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths until, gradually, the pounding in his head subsided.

"What happened?" he interrupted.

"Wha...?" Confused, John sputtered to a stop. "I just told you."

"Tell me again."

John's sigh carried clearly over the wire. "She wanted to go out to the cabin, but when we got there, I couldn't do anything with her. She kept hollering for me to leave her alone. So I came home and went to bed, but I got to worrying what she'd get up to out there by herself, so I went back out to see about her and she was dead."

"You left her out there like that, by herself?"

"We'll talk about it when I get there." As always, when cornered, John retreated into his customary tone of command. "Now listen, son. I'm gonna bring her home. Watch for me, but don't turn on the porch light, hear?"

He didn't answer.

"Greg?"

"I'm here."

"Wait for me. I'll be right there."

He hung up and turned toward his mother's room. It was a bad dream. Her light would be on and she'd be propped up on her elbow, demanding to know who was calling at such an hour.

Her room remained dark and silent.

He crammed his fist against his mouth and fled to his own room. His jeans and t-shirt lay across the end of his bed where he'd dropped them a few hours earlier. He pulled them on, dragged the chenille spread off his bed and wrapped it around his shoulders. The fabric brushed the stack of baseball cards on his desk as he passed, sending them cascading to the floor, but he didn't notice. The spread trailed behind him as he stumbled through the house, turning on lights in every room.

Until he came to his mother's room. He hesitated in his mother's doorway for a long time but in the end, could not force himself to enter. He went back out to the living room and sank down on the edge of the sofa, hugging the spread to his shoulders as he rocked back and forth and waited for John to bring his mother home.

It seemed years had passed when he finally heard the tires of John's Cadillac crunch over the gravel, but the mantel clock showed it had been less than an hour since the phone had awakened him.

He rose and went to peer out through the backdoor screen. He could just make out the gleam of John's white shirt in the darkness as he stepped out of the car.

John crossed the yard, yanked open the screen and squeezed past him into the kitchen. His white shirt was streaked with dirt. His face, too, was deathly white and sweat trickled down his sideburns. A sour smell of whiskey and fear hovered in the air around him.

"What the hell are you doing with all these lights on?" John demanded. "We might as well be on the damn stage." He strode through the house, snapping switches, and returned to loom over Greg. "C'mon, let's get her inside."

He trailed John out to the car. John wrenched open the door and Greg saw his mother in the weak yellow glow of the dome light. She lay sprawled in the floorboard, head and shoulders draped over the hump, her face mercifully shrouded in the shadows on the far side. She was barefoot.

John straightened up briefly to survey the neighboring houses. Their occupants slumbered peacefully, oblivious to the wordless shrieks of alarm from the crickets and cicadas. Satisfied, he wedged his shoulders into the narrow opening and grasped her under the arms. Grunting with the effort, he dragged her from the car and laid her down on the grass.

"You take her under her knees," he ordered. "I'll take her shoulders."

Greg was racked by a spasm of shame as he realized he was afraid to touch her.

"It's all right," John urged.

Slowly, Greg bent and slid his hands under her knees. Her skin was cool, but not cold or waxy the way he thought dead people were supposed to feel. He lifted and felt her body resist. Then her chest collapsed like a broken board, emitting a weird sound halfway between a gasp and a groan. He looked up at John, but tears blurred his vision. "Are you sure she's dead?"

"Of course, I'm sure," John snapped. "C'mon." He shoved his hands under the shoulders and heaved. Her head lolled back between his arms. "Let's go."

He began to back toward the house. But the oversized basket on Greg's bicycle leaning against the stoop, snagged his sleeve. "Goddamn it!" He shook free. He jerked his head left, then right, checking for signs of life from the surrounding houses.

They managed to wind through the darkened kitchen without bumping into the table or chairs, but as they negotiated the narrow hallway, one of her arms slipped free and banged against the doorjamb. Greg bit his lip hard to stop the scream that bubbled up from his chest.

They laid her down on the bed. John leaned against the wall, one hand splayed against his chest as he bent over, struggling to catch his breath.

Greg's eyes were riveted on his mother's face. "What happened?"

Enough light from the streetlight penetrated the blinds for him to see that her hair was stringy and disheveled. Her eyes were closed. Even in the darkness, the bruises stood out lividly against the pale flesh of her arms and legs.

"I don't know," John panted, shaking his head. "Heart attack, maybe, or she poisoned herself with that stuff she was drinking." He raised his eyes to look directly at Greg for the first time. "We both know it could have happened any time, anywhere, the way she was going. As far as anybody else has to know, she died right here in her bed, in her sleep, of a heart attack. That's all anybody has to know and there won't be any ugly talk."

When he didn't answer, John straightened up and crossed the room to drop a heavy hand on his shoulder. "We don't want a scandal, do we?"

He gazed down at his mother but still he didn't speak. John grasped him by his other shoulder and turned him slightly so he could look into his face. "You stand by me

on this, son, hear? I'll look out for you, see you're taken care of. You don't have to worry about that."

He raised his eyes to John's. John flinched, but didn't loosen his grip. Slowly, Greg nodded.

"Good." John's relief was as palpable as a third presence in the room. He turned toward the bureau, his movements brisk and sure again. He yanked open the drawers and pawed through the slips and panties. "Where are her pajamas?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Why?" But he knew the answer even as he asked, and his heart gave a painful lurch.

"She wouldn't sleep in her clothes." John straightened up and looked hard at him. "We have to put her pajamas on her." He held up a pair of pink cotton pajamas. "These'll do."

Greg stood in the shadows and watched as John rolled his mother over to struggle with the zipper on her dress. His big hands were clumsy. As he fumbled with it, the fabric ripped and the dress fell free from her shoulders. She was naked under the red and white-striped sundress. Greg turned his head.

"Hand me those," John held out his hands for the pajamas.

He picked them up from the foot of the bed. Her scent, comprised of her perfume, the hair spray and soap she used, rose from the fabric.

"Pick up her legs," John ordered.

He did as he was told. John forced her feet through the legs and wrestled the bottoms up over her hips. Sweat rolled down his face. "You'll have to help me with the top," he panted.

He held the sleeve while John forced her arm through. He looked away while John propped her up to thread her other arm through the opposite sleeve. When he looked again, John had laid her down and was struggling with the buttons. Then he drew the sheet and spread up over her chest and laid one arm across the sheet, the other against her pillow.

"That's all we can do for her now," John gazed down at her. It was impossible to see his expression in the darkness. He wheeled abruptly and left the room.

Greg stood by the bed feeling helpless. He should do something, but he couldn't think. He lifted her hand and pressed it to his cheek. Tears squeezed from under his tightly shut lids onto the cold flesh.

After a minute, he scrubbed his face on his sleeve and went out to the living room. John sat by the picture

window, the tip of his cigarette glowing in the darkness.
"Sit down, son."

He perched on the edge of the sofa and concentrated on the tip of the cigarette as it jerked up and down with John's words. It flared briefly as he took a deep drag.

"I'm sorry about your mother, son." John ground out his cigarette in the ashtray on his knee and leaned forward, a silhouette in the darkness. "But there's nothing we can do for her now, except protect her."

Greg stared at him, giving nothing away.

"We don't want a scandal, Greg. That's something we can do for her. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Good. Now listen to me very carefully. I want you to call the police and tell them you got up in the night and found her like this, hear? Tell them... I don't know, tell them something didn't look right to you so you went in to check on her and she wasn't breathing, so you called for help. Can you do that?"

He nodded again, not trusting himself to speak.

"I'll help you make the call, then I have to go. I can't be here when the police arrive. But it'll only be a little while and you'll be all right. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"All right." John rose. He hesitated in the doorway, as if to speak. Greg felt himself shrink. If John touched him now, he might scream. But John thought better of whatever he'd thought to say, and passed on into the hall. Greg stared into the darkness and listened as he dialed.

"Greg? It's ringing."

He took the receiver and listened to the rings until someone answered. "This is..." his breath caught in his throat. "This is Greg Green," he managed. "I need help. My mother is...I can't wake her up."

He gave the officer his address and even remembered to thank him. He replaced the receiver.

"You did fine." John patted his shoulder. Greg couldn't suppress a shudder. John dropped his hand. "It won't be long now and remember, I'll take care of everything. You just stick to our story, all right?"

"I've got it."

He watched through the screen as John pulled away. Long after the taillights had disappeared around the corner, he continued to gaze into the darkness after him. Finally he turned and went to the linen closet in the hall. He groped behind the folded sheets and towels until his

fingers found the bulky package where she had hidden it, wrapped in white tissue. He carried it out to the living room and sat down in the chair John had vacated, the package cradled in his lap. Tears slid down his face and were quickly soaked up by the flimsy paper. It was the last birthday gift his mother would ever give him.

Tomorrow--today--he turned 13.