

## **CHAPTER ONE**

The grand old house towered more than two stories above the carefully transplanted and tenderly maintained native shrubs and wildflowers growing at its foundation. Three stone chimneys emerged from the sharply pitched roof, stretching majestically into the cloudless sky. On the front porch, a man sat rocking in a squeaky metal glider, watching activity on Main Street. Close beside the glider was a small table which held an almost empty tea glass conspicuously in need of a refill.

The man just rocked, glided actually, quite content to sit on his front porch. The somewhat heavy Sunday afternoon traffic was tapering off as local drivers and church-goers got off the streets, returning to their homes to prepare for the upcoming work week.

The man awaited the evening parade of vehicles filled with younger people. It was September, and the college kids were back in town. The locals kept riding around doing the drag all summer, but things really got hopping when college was back in session.

A solid black four-wheel drive pickup passed by, complete with a Blue Heeler dog riding along on the toolbox in the bed of the truck. The young man's window was down. While passing by the house, he stuck his arm out to wave casually at the man on the porch. The dog looked toward the house. His head seemed to nod in a friendly greeting. The gentleman on the porch smiled, raised his hand, and waved back in a nonchalant manner. It's what they did every time the young man drove by. Somewhere along the line, the man had named the young fellow in the pickup Rowdy and the ever present four-legged passenger Rocky. He had no idea what the driver's real name was. To him it was just Rowdy waving, with Rocky riding along in the back. It was awfully nice of them to acknowledge his presence in the world.

He turned his attention to gliding. He leaned forward a bit, to gain some momentum on the forward stroke for the cautious rise to his feet. His mobility was hampered by an old knee injury he had sustained in World War II while climbing up a rope net on the side of a battleship. In the rush to get aboard he slipped, then hung upside down with his leg in an unnatural twist for quite some time. His knee was never the same.

He picked up his empty glass, turned, and walked into the house to get a refill of sweetened iced tea. As he opened the screen door, he froze in place. A motorcycle was screaming in his direction. Close behind, a police siren shrieked. The clamor shattered the afternoon's serenity. The man looked back toward the street with concern; a familiar figure zoomed past, with a police car not far behind. His eyes crinkled a bit with amusement, as he sent a silent wish of good luck to the motorcycle rider. It was no surprise the motorcyclist was in that particular circumstance.

As he again attempted to enter his home, another sound grabbed his attention—a horn—barely loud enough to be noticed. Turning toward the street again, he saw a couple of college girls in a little gray car. They waved enthusiastically at him. He waved back, recognizing the car and the girls from the previous school year. The man watched the taillights retreat, until the red glow could no longer be seen. A second later, he couldn't see the car at all through the smoke pouring out of the tailpipe. He shook his head.

"I'm glad to see Mr. Rocker outside. It looks like he's doin' all right," said Tanya, the driver of the gray car. She was beginning her sophomore year at the university and had come back to school with a new short and sassy haircut.

"Yeah, he's always rockin' just like us. Hey, Mr. Rocker!" the passenger, Janie, shouted out the car window with a big wave.

Mr. Rocker's face crinkled up even more when he smiled, especially around the eyes, as he walked into the house, the screen door slamming behind him. *Slam-slam*. If a screen door with a spring attaching it to the frame is left to close on its own, it invariably bounces when hitting the wooden framework and makes a double-slamming noise. Nobody seemed to know why—it just does.

As the man disappeared, the girls continued happily "making a drag." They drove from one end of Main Street to the other (nobody knew exactly how far it was, and they certainly didn't care), turning around at each of the two Dairy Queens conveniently located at opposite ends of the "drag." A block or two past Mr. Rocker's beautiful home were several small, white frame houses which also faced Main Street, otherwise known as "the drag." Most were rental property. All were somewhat run down.

"Well, Glenda and Kevin are still there," said Tanya. She pointed to her right, almost clipping Janie's nose. An old, rusty AMC Matador sat in the driveway beside the house, a hideous hulk. A bright yellow Camaro was parked in front of it, almost out of sight. "I wonder how long he'll be in town. I'll be really mad if he doesn't come see me."

Janie glared at the two parked cars with a frown. "I was surprised when Kevin didn't come back to school this year. He was always so much fun to have around. I wonder why they're at that ratty old place. Glenda said on Friday she was goin' home for the weekend, but her car's been there since late Saturday mornin'."

"Ha! I suspect they've been pretty busy. Don't you remember she said she didn't hear from him just about all summer?" Tanya asked mischievously. "We'll see her after while."

Janie shrugged and shook her negative thoughts away with a few tosses of her head—her full curly brown hair flying in the air. She turned her attention to the road ahead.

Tanya drove past Central Texas State University's seemingly ancient stone front entrance and around the corner, where the boys' dorm stood three stories high next to Main Street. It was a stately red brick building with casement windows cranked open in every room. Janie leaned out the car window; her curls blew wildly in the wind. "Flesh—we want FLESH!!!" she yelled in the general direction of the dorm.

Tanya quickly stepped on the gas. The car accelerated slightly but left a getaway smoke screen before any guy in the dorm could look out his window. The girls laughed, because they really didn't want to see any actual bare flesh. It was just great fun to drive by and yell at the guys. The girls noticed several people sitting on the low, rock wall bordering the sidewalk that seemed flabbergasted at Janie's antics. They simply stared. Janie again leaned out the window, waving her cupped hand slowly as if in a parade—the "queen wave."

"Don't stare at me, or I'll wave at you!" Janie yelled. The people sitting on the wall laughed at her behavior. This type of antic was normal for Janie. She ducked her curls back into the car with a giggle.

Tanya drove up to the Dairy Queen and pulled in behind several other cars also making a drag. They steered their vehicles around the back of the building and up to the front of the parking lot next to Main Street. Like stock cars going around a racetrack curve three wide, Tanya and two other drivers jockeyed for position. All darted onto the street. Within a block, they fell into single file before the first traffic light. The quicker car was first, but Tanya was next. The third car lagged behind—the latest victim of the little gray car's getaway smoke screen.

"Let's go back to the dorm and see if anybody else is around," Tanya said. "The getaway smokescreen strikes again!"

Janie was tickled. "Yep, we left 'em in a fog. Head out to Horne Hall, Tanya. I need a potty break anywho."

Tanya whipped her little car between the stone pillars that marked the front entrance to the college campus. The road was one way going in and one way back out again. It was divided throughout by a wide center median with grass on the inside and parking places all along the edges. The drive followed a horseshoe path to the left of the median just past the girls' dorm, Horne Hall. At the second bend of the U, the road split. To the left was the one-way lane out to Main Street. To the right was a two-way street which ended in a T intersection at a neighborhood, serving as the back entrance. The U loop through the middle of the campus was officially part of the drag. Anybody and anything could drive through—and just about everybody in all kinds of vehicles did.

Tanya noticed a pickup coming up slowly behind them, so she quickly parked her little car close to the front of their two-storied, elderly dorm building—right next to her friend Glenda's yellow Camaro.

"Hey, look-it! Glenda's here already. She must a' come in the back way!" Janie exclaimed, as she crawled out of the car and hurried toward the steps. "Hi, Glenda...hi, Candace. Hey there, Barb-oh...and hey, hey, Months of the Year! Be back in a minute," she called to the girls standing next to the yellow Camaro.

Janie ran at full speed up the stairs and into the building. The "Months of the Year" were coeds and very close cousins: April, May, and June. They also lived in Horne Hall.

Tanya walked up to Glenda slyly. "Ah ha! So, there you are...how was Kevin? Well...Glenda?"

Glenda made a show of looking confused—gradually altering that look to innocence. She glanced at Candace and Barb-oh mischievously, but still didn't answer the question.

"Oh, come on. Your car was parked in front of his rusty old wreck in the driveway of that little house on the drag since early yesterday. Don't play dumb with me," Tanya said accusingly.

"OK. KO. I confess." Glenda's face brightened. "He called me at Mom and Dad's just as I got home Friday night and asked me to come down and spend the weekend with him. I was so excited I could barely wait till Saturday mornin', and then I nearly got a speedin' ticket gettin' down here from Dallas. It was SO good to finally see him. I missed him so much this summer I almost couldn't stand it. He got use of that house from a guy he knows. Man, you can't get away with anything in this small town!"

Tanya tried to elbow Glenda in the ribs. "Not hardly. Not when you're parked right out on the drag! Is he comin' by here? I haven't seen him in a long time either."

Glenda dodged the jab and furrowed her brow. "I don't think so. He said he was goin' back to Stonehill to get ready for work tomorrow."

Her attention was drawn to the street by some loud music. She turned toward the noise, finding two jocks in the white pickup that had been behind Tanya. Kent and Matt were testing out Kent's new stereo and playing air guitar to the Dire Straits hit, "Sultans of Swing." The jocks saw the girls on the sidewalk in front of the old dorm. They stopped to turn up the music even louder, showing off the new stereo's sound.

Matt noticed the brunette standing among the girls on the sidewalk. "Hey, isn't that Kevin's old girlfriend?"

"Yeah, it sure is," Kent said, turning down the music and slowing to a stop in front of the girls. "You know, when he didn't show up for football camp this summer, I knew somethin' was up. I guess now we know why."

"Hey!" Matt didn't know the name of the girl with thick, shoulder-length brown hair, but he knew she was Kevin's girlfriend. "Hey, I heard back in Stonehill that Kevin's gettin' married."

Glenda stepped up to the door of the pickup, soft blue eyes shining happily. "Yeah, that's right. We're gettin' married right after I graduate next year."

Matt suddenly slumped back into the seat, glancing over at Kent with a strange look on his face. He slowly looked back at Glenda. "Uhh, yeah. Well...we gotta go." Matt avoided eye contact with the girl who looked so happy. He motioned to Kent to get moving, reached over, and turned the volume back up, to cover the uncomfortable silence.

The pickup pulled away slowly, driving around the U, sharing the Dire Straits music with the entire area. The jocks drummed on the dash as they graced the campus with their presence and made their way back out to Main Street.

"Hmm. I wonder what that was all about?" asked Tanya. She frowned and walked over to stand beside Glenda.

"I don't know." Glenda's brow also creased with sudden apprehension. "It's weird he should say somethin' like that. Kevin practically begged me to run off with him to San Antonio and get married this weekend. I told him I only had one more year of school—that we could wait that long." Glenda shook off the frown and smiled. "It was such a relief to see him. You know, I didn't hear from him all summer and had no idea where he was!"

Candace gazed at Glenda, surprised. She quickly took her car keys out of her pocket and jingled them. "I've gotta go. I've gotta go get somethin' from home. Come on, Barb-oh—ride with me. We'll be back after while."

Candace turned away so fast her long strawberry blonde curls swirled around her head. She took off running toward her truck with Barb-oh trailing.

The girls on the sidewalk watched their friend's pickup truck drive very quickly around the U and speed off toward Main Street.

Tanya turned to Glenda. "Humph. What's up with her?"

"No tellin'." A strange sensation came over Glenda and caused a shiver.

"We're outta here. See y'all later," April said. The three cousins disappeared around the corner of the building.

"Hmm, she must a' parked up front today," Glenda mused.

Janie appeared in the upstairs window and looked down at her friends. "Hey, what's goin' on?" she yelled through the screen.

Tanya tilted her head toward the window. "I don't know. But I'm hungry. Grab Queen *Jazz* and come on down!" She turned to Glenda. "Let's go in your car, OK? Mine probably needs a quart of oil by now. Mmmm, I feel like a corny dog."

"Sure." Glenda smacked her lips together several times. "Yepper, I believe I feel like a corny dog and a cherry limeade, too. Let's go!" She pressed her hand on her chest and took a deep breath to shake off the uncomfortable sensation. "But we gotta make a drag first. You know it's a rule."

"Of course!" Janie voiced her approval. She bounced down the concrete steps of the dorm and joined the others.

The three friends loaded up in the yellow 1975 Camaro. The car had no air conditioning, but that was all right. Since the windows stayed down, they could see and hear everything that was going on. The car did have an under-dash 8-track tape player with great speakers installed in the back deck, so the girls could play their very own choices of music very loud. It was wonderful to have mobile music at your fingertips. It was practically impossible to pick up rock and roll radio

stations from the big cities in a small town out in the boonies like Dairyville. The only station that would tune in clearly was local and played twangy old timey country music. That kind of sound was all right to dance to, but for ridin' around, these girls wanted rock and roll.

Tanya plugged in the Queen tape, as Glenda backed out of the Amen Corner parking place she had claimed earlier in front of the dorm steps. "Fat Bottom Girls" kicked off right in the middle of a word. That's the way 8-track tapes worked—the tape would start off where it had previously stopped. Sometimes a song paused and then continued, as the tape changed from one track to the next. But it was certainly better than the girls singing on their own. Besides, it helped a whole lot having Freddie Mercury sing lead.

As she left the campus, Glenda gazed at the house where she and Kevin had been together for the past twenty-four hours. She sighed, happily joining in the singing with her friends, as they made their way down the drag. They passed through downtown with the old stone courthouse positioned right in the middle of the square. There was a great dime store and a really old hardware store, but mostly the courthouse was surrounded by lawyer offices. All the stores and offices were closed up tight, as it was late Sunday afternoon.

They made the turnaround at the old Dairy Queen and noticed a guy in a faded brown Malibu parked over to the side, under the DQ sign. "Hey, that's Charles," said Tanya, offering up a "queen wave" out the passenger side window. Charles nodded in greeting but stayed in his car.

"He must not be feelin' good, or maybe he's just about outta gas," Glenda said. She was very glad her daddy had provided her a gasoline card and didn't fuss about the bills.

As the Camaro rumbled back up the drag toward Mr. Rocker's house, Glenda looked thoughtful. She stretched her left hand out the window and relished the feeling of the warm air rushing around her fingers. She wiggled them, letting the wind massage her hand, then quickly grabbed the steering wheel and pointed to the large Victorian house with her right index finger. "I love that old house. It's so grand," she said dreamily. "Oh look—they got a historical marker!"

"Hey, yeah. I didn't notice that earlier. Good for them! Now it should stay just like it is forever," Janie said.

"I'd love to see the inside sometime. I hear it has three fireplaces with fancy tile and twelve foot ceilings. And I bet the stained-glass windows are even more beautiful from the inside lookin' out!"

"Yepper. I noticed earlier they put in a circle drive this summer—at least I don't remember 'em havin' one before. You know, I bet it *is* a royal pain in the butt to have to back out of your driveway straight onto the drag!" Tanya noted. The other two girls nodded in silent agreement.

They rode back up Main Street to the Astro Drive-In—the local hangout strategically positioned in the middle of the drag. Glenda whipped the car through a gap in the traffic, and then made a fast left turn into the entrance.

"Way to shoot the gap! Hey, there's a spot on the *un-nerd* side," Tanya said, making exaggerated quotation mark signs with her fingers.

"Good deal." Glenda drove slowly around the back side of the little white brick building positioned between the rows of ordering stations. "Do you see her?"

Tanya peered around the area. "Her car isn't here. It should be all right." Their archenemy worked as a car hop at the Astro; they avoided any contact with her when possible.

Glenda pulled up to the ordering board on the "un-nerd" side. It was extremely uncool to park on the nerd side. Common knowledge. That's why spots on the un-nerd side were sometimes hard to grab. Even if the only place to park was on the nerd side, one would keep going. It was

best to make another drag and swing through the Astro on the next pass-by to try again. It was a rule—never, ever park on the nerd side.

"The usual?" Glenda asked of the other girls. "Let's get it to go, OK?"

"KO. Hit the button," Janie said brightly.

The voice in the box answered Glenda's call. Glenda spoke loudly to the speaker. "This is three separate orders. We need one with a corny dog, tater tots, and a cherry limeade—one with a corny dog, cheese tater tots and a cherry vanilla lime Sprite—and the third order is a just a corny dog and a Dr Pepper. To go please—and thank you!"

"OK. We'll have that right out," squeaked the tinny voice.

"Get your checks ready," Glenda instructed. They'd ordered like this enough times that they knew exactly how much each total would be, and they always wrote checks. They had to save their meager cash stash for places that wouldn't take personal checks.

After the food arrived in three separate sacks, Glenda gave up the coveted un-nerd spot and headed back to the dorm. "I'm sure my Amen Corner parkin' place will be gone," she said between sips of cherry limeade with the straw still in her mouth.

Sure enough, as Glenda drove in the college entrance, past the Student Center, the "quack shack", and the dorm—there were no available parking places in front of the building. As Glenda made the U turn, the girls looked toward the old World War I cannon on the lawn of the Administration Building and saw some friends sitting there. Glenda honked twice. The girls all waved at the two guys, Boots and Gene. Boots was a real cowboy, the best country dancer around—thus the nickname. His real name was Jim. Gene was an all-around nice guy. The girls didn't really consider either of them boyfriend material, but they were great guys to have as friends.

Glenda parked her car on the opposite side of the median from the dorm. The girls piled out with a clamor. They continued singing the song that had been playing on the stereo even after the music stopped. The car windows were left down, the doors unlocked. Dairyville was that kind of town—nobody would mess with your stuff. They spotted another friend and walked toward an old bench anchored to the center of the island. CTSU tradition buffs called this structure the Shoe Bench. Perhaps this name was given because the backs of the benches were quite high—perfect for leaning back. Plus, there was a concrete and pipe centerpiece just right for propping up shoes.

"Hey, Brent. What's happenin'?" asked Tanya.

Brent didn't answer. He just sat very still.

Janie plopped down beside him, putting her food sack in her lap. "What's up with you? You think you're a bunny, and if you sit very, very still we won't see you? How about an explanation—and hurry up about it. I'm hungry, and my cheese tater tots are gettin' cold!"

Brent turned in an excruciatingly slow manner toward Janie, his face devoid of expression. It was almost a surprise to hear him actually speak out loud. "How do you know it is me? Or even who 'me' is? Or that anybody is actually sittin' here? I may or may not be real, and this place may or may not exist. I might be a figment of your imagination."

"HA!" cried Janie. "Let's see!" She reached over and pinched the inside of his knee with vigor. Brent offered no reaction. His sometimes odd behavior was well-known around campus. "Ah yes, KO—I see. You *are* a figment of my imagination." Janie rose to her feet from the bench. "I'm goin' upstairs to eat my cheese tater tots, and you can sit here and act like you're not here if that's what makes ya happy. See ya, Figment!"

With eyes rolling and giggles galore, the girls walked to their dorm. As they hopped up on the sidewalk, each paused in mid-step in a personal imitation of an Egyptian pose. The funny maneuver always caused them to laugh out loud.

After the interlude, they noticed Candace and Barb-oh were back from their errand. The two girls were walking toward the dorm steps with purpose.

"Hey, did ya get whatcha went after?" Tanya asked.

"Yep," Candace said. Barb-oh stood by in silence. "Glenda, I hate to do this, but I thought you should see it."

She nervously handed a folded newspaper to Glenda. A confused Glenda put her bag of food and her drink down on the top step. She took the paper from Candace's shaking hand. Then she looked down at the *Stonehill Gazette*:

A picture of Kevin. *Her* Kevin, looking back at her with his bedroom eyes and crooked nose, wearing the shirt she had given him for Christmas. Her Kevin and a blonde girl sat side-by-side, shoulders touching, smiling happily.

The caption below the photograph provided more information:

Mr. and Mrs. Weldon Waring proudly announce the engagement of their oldest daughter, Kelly Ruth, to Kevin Ray Curtis. The casual double ring wedding ceremony will be held in the Waring home in Stonehill, Texas, at 3:00 p.m. on the fifteenth of September. Friends and family are invited to attend. Reception will follow.

Glenda stared at the picture for a few seconds, and then slowly sank down as her knees gave way, wilting onto the bottom step. Tanya caught the paper as it slid from Glenda's limp fingers and looked at the page. "That butt-face!" She glanced at Glenda and whispered, "Oh, Glenda. Oh, my God."

"I'm *so* sorry," Candace said. "Folks in Stonehill say she's pregnant." Barb-oh looked on with concern.

Slowly raising her face toward her friends with a look of shock and disbelief, Glenda closed her eyes. A cry of grief, loss and pain rose from deep within her heart. The sound was like that of an injured animal. It was a moan, a muted scream that rose above the group of girls and out into the darkening sky. It was the kind of sound that could raise the hair on the backs of necks. And it did.



"What in the world was that?" asked Boots. Gene jumped down from where he had been sitting on the cannon. Boots didn't expect an answer. He hurriedly joined Gene, who was already running toward the disturbing sound.

The Figment also heard the disconcerting cry. He dropped his figment façade, hurrying across the parking lot toward the dorm. The three guys arrived on the sidewalk where the girls were gathered but stopped short. Their eyes met with the common masculine purpose to protect, then moved ahead as one toward the group of girls. But as they reviewed the situation, each observed no one was bleeding or otherwise in mortal danger. Wary eyes relaxed and gave way to willing ears, as the guys stayed in the background and listened.

"I don't believe it," said Glenda. "Just this mornin', he wanted me to go with him to San

Antonio and get married tomorrow. He begged me!" She looked up at her friends with pain and tears in her blue eyes.

"Yeah. Oh, Glenda, he wanted to marry you so he wouldn't have to marry HER!" Tanya said bitterly, pointing at the picture in the paper.

The guys looked at each other quizzically. They moved in closer to stand among the group of girls huddled around Glenda, who was trembling on the bottom step. "What's going on?" asked Gene.

Janie took the newspaper from Tanya and thrust it at him. "Take a look at that." She moved past him to sit beside her shocked friend on the step. Glenda had begun to sob. Janie put her arm around her.

"Glenda...I'm sorry, but I have to say I'm not surprised," Gene said quietly, handing the paper to Boots. Janie looked sharply up at him, but he was looking at Glenda compassionately.

"Oh, man," the Figment spoke after he took the paper from Boots. "Damn him. I always thought he was a son of a bitch." Boots remained silent but looked off into the distance.

"You're not helpin'," Tanya said with a slap to the Figment's arm.

Glenda was quiet, but they all could see she was about to fall completely apart. She seemed to be on the edge of hysteria.

"Come on. Let's go upstairs," Janie said gently. She motioned to the others to pick up the food and drinks and follow. Barb-oh grabbed the paper from the Figment before the girls disappeared into the dark hallway of the dorm. The guys stood abandoned on the sidewalk in the fading sunlight.

"Hmm," grunted Gene. "Back to the cannon and do some thinking, Boots."

"Right." Boots looked at the Figment. "Comin'?"

"Yeah, sure—might as well watch the cars go by." He was such a notorious loner, Boots and Gene looked at each other surprised he agreed to join them. But they shrugged and started walking.

They moved slowly back across the parking lot, noticing the sunset through the trees over the dining hall. They avoided the concrete steps that led to the Administration Building, taking the shortcut by hopping up one-by-one onto the stone retaining wall in front of the cannon. They walked across the freshly mowed grass. While Boots and Gene regained their perches on either side of the barrel, the Figment leaned casually on one of the cannon's wheels.

"Hey, there's that crazy guy in the big Thunderbird," said Boots.

Gene nodded. "Yeah, that guy can really drive. I've seen him turn that land yacht around on a dime. I wish I had a car like that. It looks new—must be a '78 or '79 model."

"Sorry about that," the Figment said. "Your role is the starvin' college student, and for wheels like that you gotta have a real job."

Gene considered the remark. "True. You speak the truth, oh wise one."

The silver Thunderbird made the U turn in front of the cannon to head back out of the college drive. The driver, with his right hand resting lightly on top of the steering wheel, casually lifted his index finger in greeting to the shadowy figures on the cannon. The three guys returned the acknowledgment with almost imperceptible nods in unison—the most noticeable being when Boots' beige felt cowboy hat turned slightly orange with reflected light from the flaming sunset.

"He's by himself. Seems like that's kind of unusual," Gene said.

"The night is young," said the Figment.

"Again, my unusual friend, you speak the truth. You know, there's really no telling what goes on in that car."

Boots tipped his hat in agreement.

Directly behind the Thunderbird, the four-wheel drive pickup rolled up, They too were about to make the U turn in front of the cannon and its attendants. The dog sat in the back.

"GRRRRR!" The Figment growled loudly, quickly gaining the dog's attention. The large Blue Heeler moved menacingly over to the right side of the pickup toolbox and stared straight at the source of the noise.

"GRRRRR!"

The dog stood tall and alert, ears up, locking his eyes on the Figment. As the truck made the turn to move away from the object of his attention, the dog moved his legs to keep his balance on top of the toolbox. He moved back-and-forth as needed to keep his sharp eyes focused on the irritating human. The pickup moved further away—completely out of sight in the relative darkness that took place between dusk and the delayed activation of the streetlights on campus.

The Figment let out a yell. "HA! I WIN!"

"Win what?" Boots asked impatiently.

"The starin' contest—I win."

"Just because he couldn't see you anymore. That's the only reason, Brent. He'd still be here staring at you if the pickup under him hadn't driven away." Gene laughed at his own words.

"I still win," the Figment said indignantly. "Tell me again where you're from. One of those 'I' states?"

"Indiana, Brent. I was born in Houston, but my folks moved to Indiana when I was little." They'd been over this before.

"Right. Illinois—Indiana—one of those 'I' states." The Figment's drawl was a bit snide. "I wondered why yew tawk funny."

Gene ignored the comment, though it was true. He tended to put the "g" on the ends of words, whereas his friends usually dropped it. He couldn't help the way he talked, and neither could they.

A few other cars drove by, but the people in them didn't pay any attention to the guys at the cannon. Next a big white station wagon with three girls in the front seat rounded the first turn of the U. The passenger waved enthusiastically from the open window.

"Hey, there! How's about takin' us for a drag?" yelled Boots.

"In your dreams, cowboy!" Laughter erupted from the car. The large vehicle that was obviously somebody's mama's car pulled away.

"Good grief, man. They're in high school!" cried Gene.

"Jail Bait," the Figment stated with a snort.

"I can dream, can't I?" asked Boots.

"Just make sure there's no cop in that dream, buddy, or you'll be lookin' at a statutory rape charge!" the Figment said.

Gene nodded. "Yeah, Boots. You know, he's right. You'd best stick with consenting adults—real women."

"Now if you could just get one to notice you, Boots, you'd be in business!" The Figment's voice carried its usual sarcasm.

"Shut up, Brent!" Boots said with equal venom. "I don't see you hangin' out with any real women, bubba."

"Now Boots. Don't get your panties in a wad. I believe it's time for this smart young man to go find a beer or somethin'. See y'all later."

With that, the Figment made his exit into the darkness.

Gene and Boots settled back to silently watch the world go by. The guys made no noise, but the campus wasn't at all quiet. They heard country music coming from pickup trucks, ZZ Top from a Roadrunner, loud exhaust pipes, and a lot of noise caused by a pair of motorcycles that seemed to be chasing each other around the island. Finally, they rocketed out of sight. The parade of passing vehicles seemed continuous.

"You know, there's really a lot of cool cars in this town," Gene said.

"Yepper. Here comes that Thunderbird again. Ah ha, the driver is no longer alone. Surprise, surprise, surprise. He has picked up a friend."

The silver Thunderbird rounded the start of the U, with the driver saluting in the same manner as before. A young man with a slightly fuzzy blonde afro coolly flashed the two-fingered peace sign at the guys from the passenger seat. He also tipped his chin upward in acknowledgment and then dropped his hand, drumming his fingers on the outside of the door to a Ted Nugent tune. Suddenly, the driver goosed the car around the other corner of the U. The exhaust pipes rumbled, and the car fishtailed slightly before it straightened, proceeding calmly down the road on the way out of the campus.

"Not impressed!" shouted Janie as she returned from Glenda's car. She'd been sent to retrieve the Queen tape for Tanya.

The driver revved the engine again, and the tires chirped briefly. Giggling, Janie heard the occupants of the car laughing over the sound of the tailpipes. After she ran past the Shoe Bench, the Thunderbird came to a slow stop behind a parked car.

"Hey, Fuz. There's the yellow Camaro. Seems like that girl back there rides in it, and I think she lives up there in that end room with the bright light," the driver commented coolly.

"Yeah," agreed the passenger, the guy called Fuzzy. "I've seen her ridin' around before, and that car is always parked around here if it's not out on the drag." He looked over toward the girls' dorm and nodded.

The driver, nicknamed "Evel Knievel" by those who knew him best, looked intently at one of the end rooms on the second floor of the dorm. He saw figures moving around behind filmy curtains but couldn't really see much from that far away. The room on the other side had some kind of poster hanging on the back wall. He'd have to look closer next time around. Evel wondered if the girl was up there, the one who drove the yellow Camaro. Shaking the thoughts away so hard that his longish hair stood out a little on either side wildly above his ears, he stepped on the gas, rapidly exiting the college.

The Thunderbird motored on past the boys' dorm and up to the north end of the drag at the new Dairy Queen. "There's some girls pullin' out, Evel," said Fuzzy. "Do the Dairy Queen Turnaround in front of 'em."

A roguish expression crossed Evel's face. He grabbed the emergency brake and turned the steering wheel in an expert move that flipped the big car around "one-eighty", the perfect spin ending when the car headed calmly back the way it had just come.

"Perfect! Maybe they'll chase us," Fuzzy said hopefully.

"Question is—do you really wanna get caught?"

Fuzzy leaned out the window to eye the carload of girls. His frizzy hair blew into his face, as he noticed the car make a quick right turn off Main Street. He ducked back inside. "Hell, they turned off," he said dejectedly. He made a partially successful attempt to put his hair back in the right places.

"That's your luck, Fuz—always bad," Evel said with a snicker.

Fuzzy gave his friend a brief dirty look, but then relaxed to enjoy the ride. "Hmm, that's

weird—it's kinda quiet through here."

"It's fixin' to not be quiet. Look up ahead. It's Ben in the Trans Am, and he's flashin' his headlights."

"Oh, no. Not that." Fuzzy gripped the armrest firmly with his right hand while bracing against the dash with his left. Casting an uneasy glance at Evel, Fuzzy read the expression: something exciting was about to happen. He ducked his head and focused his eyes on the floorboard.

Evel flashed his headlights back at the approaching car and sat up straighter in the seat, squinting his eyes into slits. His lips opened a bit, and he pressed his tongue against the right corner of his mouth. The cars approached each other at equal speeds. At what seemed to be a predetermined cue, each driver switched lanes across the yellow line onto the wrong sides of the road.

Fuzzy closed his eyes and held on even more tightly.

As the two vehicles passed, each driver could hear the other yelling with excitement. As soon as they were clear, the cars steered back onto their proper sides of the road.

Evel threw his head back and shouted with joy. Fuzzy released his death grip on the armrest. Consequently, he waved his arms excitedly back-and-forth above and beside his head inside the Thunderbird. "I HATE it when y'all do that!"

Evel quieted his laughter to a chuckle. "Would you rather me stay on the right side of the road when Ben's on the wrong side?"

"No! I guess not, but it's still crazy."

"Yep. It is. Oh, it's not so bad here in town, but it really gets interestin' when he wants to swap lanes out on the highway goin' eighty or ninety miles an hour."

As the car bounced over the railroad tracks, Fuzzy did a double take out the passenger window.

"What is it?" asked Evel.

Fuzzy frowned. "I don't know—somethin' with the Marlboro Man. Let's take a closer look when we come back by."

"No problem. He's been there for years, and I bet he'll still be there when we roll past here again."

"Yeah, it's not like he's gonna walk down to the Quick Stop!"

"Nope. He's pretty well stuck right there. In concrete."

Evel continued driving down the drag. Fuzzy looked out the window. "Hey, Moo Lah," he called to the fiberglass Holstein cow that stood on a platform in all her black and white spotted glory, some fifteen feet above ground. The platform was planted atop a pedestal on the corner of the courthouse square, bearing a sign that proclaimed the total gallons of milk produced yearly from the local dairies rounded up to the nearest ten thousandth. "Someday, Moo Lah," Fuzzy called out the window to the cow. He turned to Evel with a meaningful look.

Evel ignored his passenger and drove past the businesses in the downtown area. One had a reflective coating on the glass facing Main Street, which served as kind of a sun shield for the interior of the building and created a mirror for those on the outside. If the traffic light at that intersection caught him, Evel always took the opportunity—day or night—to look in the mirror to check out how the car looked—and was never disappointed.

He drove to the old Dairy Queen and noticed Charles' Chevy Malibu backed in under the DQ sign. Evel nosed in the Thunderbird beside the faded brown car so the drivers' windows would be facing each other, then shut off the engine.

"Hi there," said Charles brightly.

"Outta gas again, buddy?" Evel asked. Fuzzy made a funny face at Charles.

"Yeah, almost. Stop lookin' at me like that, Fuz. Well, I got just enough to get to and from work till payday Friday." Charles was most times broke and had terrible luck in general. But he was a good friend—good for a lot of fun.

"You wanna ride around with us?" Why ask? Evel already knew the answer.

"You bet, thanks!" Charles climbed out of the Malibu.

Fuzzy and Evel had also exited the Thunderbird and were leaning on the trunk. "First—let's git a Dip Cone," Fuzzy suggested. "I'm buyin'."

"You're on," agreed Charles.

The three crossed the pothole-filled parking lot and entered the building through the glass door. A short time later, they walked out carrying flat-bottomed cones with soft-serve vanilla ice cream coated with a hard shell of chocolate. The workers at the Dairy Queen hand-dipped the ice cream in melted chocolate. It was almost magical to watch the way the chocolate hardened as the cone was handed to the patron wrapped inside a white piece of tissue paper.

The guys returned to their cars, nibbling and slurping on the ice cream cones, as they relaxed in the dim yellow glow of the streetlight. They watched the parade of cars, their silence interrupted only by slurping noises.

"Hey, Evel. There's your little brother," said Fuzzy. Evel caught part of his dipped cone's chocolate shell with his teeth before it slipped off the ice cream and plunged to the ground. Ice cream melts fast in September in Texas. "Don't that Nova run purdy good?"

"Yep. Watch this." Evel balanced the flat cone on the trunk of his car and raised his hand in greeting. Larry's face took on an impish expression, as Evel pointed at him—twirling his finger in circles. Larry's grin grew to a wicked smile. He pulled out of the parking lot and came to a stop on Main Street. After a moment, the engine roared, and the back wheels started spinning. Smoke rolled out from under the Nova in clouds that drifted over the Dairy Queen parking lot. Larry let off the brake, allowing the car to move forward out of the tire smoke.

"Weee Haw!" called Charles, as Evel and Fuzzy cheered.

"Not a bad smoky burnout for a kid!" Fuzzy said.

"Yeah, I helped him rebuild the engine, and it's pretty stout. You know, I love the smell of tire smoke in the evenin'." Evel retrieved his ice cream cone before it melted into a puddle of sticky goo on his freshly polished trunk lid.

Nervous, Charles asked, "What if the cops hear?"

"Or smell," Fuzzy added.

"He knows what to do. He *is* my little brother," Evel calmly replied.

Larry screamed the Nova up the drag for a bit—and then quickly turned off on a side street to disappear into a residential neighborhood. The locals knew their way around town much better than the college kids, who rarely veered from the drag or the main roads. Occasionally, they would venture off into the neighborhoods if there were a party somewhere. But afterward, they likely couldn't remember how they got there or how to get back again.

"See what I mean?" Evel asked proudly.

They heard a noise from the museum grounds next to the old Dairy Queen. Sometimes a cop sat back in the darkness by the little historical chapel to sleep or try to catch people pulling in to park. Sure enough, a police car appeared. It seemed to be in a big hurry, but no lights or sirens. The car had begun to gain speed but abruptly slowed in front of the Dairy Queen. The officer noticed the fresh black tire marks on the road. He looked over at the guys leaning on the car. All three had innocent, though somewhat amused, looks on their faces. Each gave the officer a friendly salute with what was left of their ice cream cones. *Hey, we didn't do it. We're sittin' here*

*eatin' Dip Cones.*

The cop glared at them and took off toward town. "I guess Larry better stay off the drag tonight," said Charles.

"Yeah, he's gotta get up and go to school tomorrow anyway," Evel said. "He'll take the back-roads home. Let's make a couple a' drags to see what's happenin'. There's somethin' I wanna look at."

"Yeah, the Marlboro Man," said Fuzzy.

"And somethin' else," Evel added.

Charles cast a questioning look at Fuzzy and received a shrug in response. The Thunderbird pulled out onto the drag behind a few cars that were completing their turnarounds in the parking lot. After passing Moo Lah and the courthouse, the car travelled toward the railroad tracks.

"Can we stop here? Let's take a look," Fuzzy asked of Evel.

Evel checked the rearview mirror and confirmed no headlights were approaching. He brought the big car to a stop in the road where they could get a good look at the Marlboro Man. This icon was a billboard unlike any other around—a thirty-foot cutout of a rugged cowboy smoking a cigarette. He was very big and very cool—a unique landmark on the drag. Or, for that matter, a unique icon on the national landscape.

Fuzzy noticed something wrong. "Somebody shot him! There's an arrow in his... pants!"

The three were outraged that someone would shoot arrows into the Marlboro Man. But it was doubly shocking for him to be skewered in that tender area. "Ouch," said Charles with a cringe. "They got him right in the... zipper."

"Good shot," noted Evel, "or maybe just lucky. Oh great—now everybody will be shootin' arrows at him. I sure hope they don't miss and hit somebody over at the Rastro."

The guys had nicknamed the Astro Drive-In after George Jetson's dog. Evel often lapsed into Astro talk. Sometimes other guys mimicked the old space cartoon, too.

"Rat's ror sure, Ralph!" Fuzzy added.

They nodded their heads—first in agreement—then slowly side-to-side in sympathy. Evel bounced the big car over the railroad tracks. At the college entrance he turned right, slowly cruising up to the girls' dorm. He stopped to point up at a well-lighted room on the second floor. The back of the wall could be seen perfectly through the open window. "See that poster up there in that end room with the light? What is it?"

Fuzzy squinted and peered into the room. He let out a hoot. "Wow, it's a picture of a bunch of naked girls on bicycles!"

"Queen *Jazz*," said Charles knowingly from the back seat.

Fuzzy turned around to look at his buddy. "Huh?"

"You know the song 'Fat Bottomed Girls'? The poster was in the Queen album with that song on it. *Jazz*. Tanya, the girl that lives up there, listened to it all the time on 8-track last year. I know her."

Evel turned sharply around. "You know the girl up there—the one with the yellow Camaro?"

"No. Well, yeah sorta'. Tanya drives a gray Vega that smokes." Fuzzy and Evel both looked at Charles like he was nuts. "I mean exhaust smoke. You know—it burns oil—I mean *really* bad. But she rides around a lot with the girl who has that Camaro. I think she lives in the other end room. It's dark over there right now. Her name's Glenda."

Charles pointed across the median to where the yellow car was parked, then back up to the darkened room.

"Hmm, OK," Evel said coolly. The dark stillness gave him a strange feeling. He shook his head

to banish the odd sensation, and his hair again stood out a bit. "Let's go."

Fuzzy leaned forward to turn the volume knob to max. "Queen's OK, but let's crank up Ted."

Within moments, all three were drumming to the screaming sounds of Ted Nugent's guitar—Evel on the steering wheel, Fuzzy on the dash and Charles on the back of the seat. They loved ridin' around. There was no better way to spend a Sunday evening.