

CHAPTER 1

1

My father and uncle died in a fantastic alcohol-fire explosion while working in the pit at the Kalamazoo Speedway. The event was televised, of course, but I was only three months old when it happened. By the time I was four, Mom still had a recording of it buried at the bottom of her yarn basket in the living room. I found the tape one morning while she was out mowing the lawn.

I only saw a few seconds of footage: *There's Dad and Uncle Bobby poised at their places in the pit. The car rolls in. The driver is waving his arms back and forth, maybe signaling everyone to get the heck out of the way...*

BOOM! The two mechanics who lived through the blast are rolling in the grass, brushing frantically at their coveralls to put out the invisible alcohol flames roasting off their skin.

I remember giggling at the men rolling in the grass like horses rolling in dirt on Channel 8 animal shows. But deep down I didn't like what I had seen. For a few weeks after that I checked on the tape every day at the bottom of the yarn basket, driven by the same instinct that made me check under my bed for monsters before going to sleep. I never watched it again.

NASCAR had sponsored the event but their lawyers bunged up the liability contracts for all the pit workers. The organization ended up awarding one million dollars to the families of all six mechanics who were killed.

Mom and Aunt Marguerite never had to work again. They moved in together when my cousin Eleanor and I were about six months old—we'd been born on the same day the previous July, baffling the obstetrician in Fort Wayne who had projected a full three weeks between our respective due dates. Mom and Marguerite bought a house together and changed their last names back to Carlson, either unwilling or unable to continue the lives they had begun with their husbands. We all lived together for less than a year, but during that time Marguerite held me and took care of me just as often as Mom did. The same relationship held true between Mom and Eleanor. We were a family.

2

At first there was no way to tell that Eleanor would not be a beautiful little girl. Her mother had gorgeous red hair falling in soft curls down past her shoulders and skin that made cream look rough. Eleanor took after her mother in every way, at least from the beginning.

But so did I. And then some.

I was outward perfection. Despite my mother's inconspicuous straight brown hair, I had dark red curls from the beginning. Clear green eyes like Marguerite's, but without the gold flecks, and skin out of a renaissance painting. I was so darn pretty that nobody suspected I was a boy, and when they found out they were even more impressed.

Marguerite's hidden jealousy worked on Eleanor as surely as the years worked on Dorian Gray's portrait. Eleanor grew gaunt and bizarre, breaking out in so-called "baby acne" at five months and never losing it. Exaggerated neck, nose, and ears; bulbous eyes with fleshy, camel-like lids; huge feet and hands along with bony wrists and ankles; adult teeth the same size as her baby teeth; glacial gums—need I go on?

Marguerite didn't even wait to take her revenge until Mom was out of the house. That's how Mom knew it wasn't an accident. Marguerite was feeding me. I was in her lap, eight months old, hunched the way only a baby can be hunched, gumming puréed squash off a plastic spoon. Mom was washing dishes. Eleanor lay in her portable bassinet in a chair scooted up to the Formica table. I know she was there because years later, when I was old enough to understand when people spoke, Marguerite whispered to me that Eleanor laughed and cooed when I hit the floor.

"I'm not so sure he likes this food, Alice," Marguerite commented as she fed me, setting the stage. "He's squirming all over the place."

"Here, I'm done with the dishes," Mom said, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "I'll see if I can get him to—"

At this point, Mom later told me, she heard a soft

thump from behind her. The sound, she said, was horrible in its smallness.

Mom said Marguerite's eyes were so wide she could see white all around her beautiful gold-green irises. "He slipped..." Marguerite stammered. "I-I couldn't...he was just so wiggly."

Mom stood frozen with her back to the sink, hands holding her upright against the counter. I know I can't remember this, but I see her so clearly, right down to the wisps of straight brown hair illuminated by the sunlight pouring through the window behind her. She is beautiful in my mind. Beautiful in her horror.

The first fall dislocated my left shoulder, which gave me a mild, but supposedly permanent hump in my back like Quasimodo. The real offense came next.

Marguerite reached down, still in her chair—that she didn't even stand to pick me up bothers Mom nearly as much as the whole incident itself. I was squalling to high heaven, blood rushing through my little body up to my damaged shoulder to prepare a bruise that would last over a month. She picked me up in the beautiful hands her own daughter would never have, raised my body about three feet off the floor, and dropped me again, upside down. I stopped crying instantly according to my mother, and I didn't say a word for nearly five years.

3

The morning kindergarten teacher at Auburn Elementary, Miss Felicia Aloe—"AL-A-WAY?" she shouted at us the first day of class, grinning and terrified at teaching

a class for the first time—decided my first day that I would have no responsibilities.

I appeared at the door with my hand attached to my mother's in a first-day-of-school death grip. So far so good.

Miss Aloe baby-stepped toward us like a tennis player loading up for a forehand, her hand thrust downward as far in front of her as possible, presumably to shake my hand.

Her eyes flicked upward. One horrified glance at the slightly misshapen crown of my head and the maniacal red curls covering it set off her silent alarm that I was SPECIAL ED. Mom's note from Dr. Hyrnewyc claiming I had a speaking disorder called "Selective Aphasia" didn't help; suddenly poor Miss Aloe's main job concerning me was to keep me from mauling the other students.

She bared her teeth in what I soon learned was her attempt at cheerful comfort, as if a voice in her head constantly reminded her, *Keep grinning, Felicia, whatever you do.*

It was sadder for her than for me, actually. Her hopes for a stellar rookie year of teaching were dashed and all it had taken was me walking into her room. All she'd ever wanted was to help children learn to read and she had to get hired at a school that supported the classroom inclusion of—

"GOOD MORNING, YOUNG MAN. WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

I obviously wouldn't answer. Mom shook Miss Aloe's hand and saved the day: "Clifford Carlson." Then Mom made things worse again by proving I was smart. "That's an alliterative name, right honey?" She patted my head. I nodded.

This time Miss Aloe's inner voice was nearly audible: *Dear*

God. “WELCOME TO KINDERGARTEN, CLIFFORD CARLSON,” she wailed.

Mom snapped a picture.

Miss Aloe began immediately to make me different. She beamed at me a lot and spoke slowly through her white, always-smiling teeth. The cords in her neck stood out like pencils under her skin. “DO YOU WANT SOME CRACKERS WHILE THE OTHER STUDENTS DO LEVEL TESTS?” she asked me the first day after my mom left. Throughout that semester, sometimes she offered cookies, sometimes apple slices. The other kids learned quickly that talking to me was a NO-NO.

Christmas break was wonderful. My mother read to me in the mornings and helped me write simple responses about whether I liked the books in the afternoon. Mom had been reading to me daily since Marguerite and Eleanor had moved out shortly after my first birthday, and. If I performed satisfactorily I could watch TV for one hour in the evening.

I remember watching *Christmas Vacation* because it was one of the few times Mom let me stay up late. We sat on the couch together, me resting my lopsided head in the crevice between Mom’s arm and her right breast, my already odd hair standing up with static from snuggling against Mom’s sweater. Mom had loved Chevy Chase ever since she had watched him fall off the Oval Office desk while decorating a Christmas tree on the first season *Saturday Night Live*. But *Christmas Vacation* wasn’t her favorite movie until after I spoke my first words.

My first day back in kindergarten after the break was

also my last. The other kids were used to me by now. They weren't mean, but they ignored me. I don't blame them; like I said, Miss Aloe made sure I was always doing something different just in case I would go crazy and attack another kid with my safety pencil, I guess.

The other students were drawing messy pictures of their favorite Christmas presents. I had started drawing with a colored pencil, which Miss Aloe yanked from my hand and replaced with a hunk of yellow cheese. "NO, CLIFFORD, THESE ARE TOO DANGEROUS," she said, waving the colored pencil in front of my eyes. "OWIE. COME SIT HERE AND EAT YOUR SNACK."

She dropped said pencil when a new little girl with a blonde ponytail pointed at the top of my head and said, "Why is your hair standing up funny? Are you a troglodyte?"

Lord knows where she picked up this word but she wasn't the only one handing out surprises; before Miss Aloe could so much as gasp in horror, I opened my mouth and echoed Randy Quaid from *Christmas Vacation*: "My hair just ain't gonna look right."

I'm not sure who was more surprised—Miss Aloe, the other kids, or me. Alford Milner, who sometimes gave me Chips Ahoy from his lunch when Miss Aloe wasn't looking, clapped. Agnes Young, on whom I had a desperate crush, said, "Cliff, you talked!" I just stood there with my mouth open, unable to move.

Miss Aloe seemed to take my speech as a threat; she marched me down to the office, beaming gruesomely into open classrooms as we passed by. Her heels clicked loudly in the hallway, a very businesslike sound.

In the main office she sat me down in a padded chair

and disappeared into the principal's office. Wordless shrieks came from behind the principal's closed door—apparently Miss Aloe's fear of me had reached its breaking point. I imagined her holding her face in her hands, shoulders quaking while the principal offered awkward comfort in the form of a few pats on the back.

She came out after several minutes. Her puffy eyes were smeared all around with black eye shadow and mascara. She announced, inches from my face, "YOU CAN LEARN FROM YOUR MOMMY AT HOME NOW." I could have hugged her right then but the shock probably would've killed her.