

chapter 1

THERE WAS A MOMENT in the dark of the wing, a startling moment that was part optical illusion and part raw nerves—but for the space of an eyeblink, it appeared to Kelly Wheeler as if Peter Gardner was headless. His body stood erect beside her, caught in an oblong of stage light, and there was nothing above the neat line of his collar but air, black air. It was absurd. She knew it was only a trick of the light, but for that eerie, spun-out first second she was convinced that someone had lopped off his head.

Then he shifted a half-step toward her and that same oblong of light found his face, and he was grinning at her nervously, fingering the tight loop of his collar, looking like the groom at a shotgun wedding.

Chuckling at her bizarre misperception—one that had carried with it an alarming force—Kelly drew him back into the dark and hugged him. He was rigid with apprehension and she tried to reassure him.

“Don’t panic,” she told him. “You’re going to play just like you always do—flawlessly.” She kissed him lightly on the chin, her hand on the back of his neck feeling his tension.

Peter’s eyes, the color of sandstone, settled over the top of Kelly’s head on the gleaming baby grand that stood waiting for him at center stage.

“Yeah,” he said. “Flawlessly. If only I could find my fingers.” He poked his hands into the light with the fingers bent at the middle knuckles, creating the illusion that the distal segments had been neatly amputated.

Kelly, almost as nervous as Peter, jabbed him playfully in the ribs. Though eager to show him off, she felt guilty about putting him through all of this. He’d never played in public before—his music, he’d told her, was

for himself and the people he loved—and it had taken all of her wiles to persuade him to appear at this final assembly. But he was good, maybe even great, and she wanted people to know it. She was proud of him.

Taking Peter's hand, Kelly returned her attention to the stage, where the principal, Mr. Laughren, stood reciting his annual address. It was the last day of school, June 28.

“As your principal,” Laughren was saying, his round face the color of brick, “I consider it my personal duty to prepare each and every Laurentian High graduate for the fickle and often treacherous road ahead...”

Peter said, “Gimme a break. Same old bullshit only deeper.”

Kelly kissed him again, letting her hand slip to the sculpted small of his back. “Will you relax?”

“Relax,” Peter said. “Right.” He shifted the curtain a few inches, enough to allow Kelly a glimpse of all those impatient faces out there. “Just look at those animals. The minute Laughren steps down they're going to eat me alive. They'll wolf down the tender bits, then take turns gnawing on my skull.” He noticed his mother and kid brother seated near the front, eyes expectant and bright, then let the curtain fall closed.

Kelly giggled, only now beginning to appreciate how petrified he actually was. “This has really got you going, hasn't it?”

“Look,” Peter said in his most reasonable tone. “Why don't we just skip this whole deal? Hop on the bike and zip down to the DQ for a Dilly bar? I mean, no one's going to care—”

“*I'm* going to care,” Kelly said, cutting him off with her words and the wounded look in her eyes. “And your mother's going to care. And Sam.”

“But—”

Both fell mute as Laughren's amplified voice swung toward them. “It

gives me pleasure to introduce to you now a graduating student whom most of you know from his prowess on the football field.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Knock ’em dead,” Kelly said, squeezing his hand. Then she was gone, down the steps and out through the stage-left exit.

“What most of you don’t know about Peter Gardner,” Laughren said, “is that academically he ranks among the finest students to have passed through Laurentian’s hallowed halls.”

In the decidedly unhallowed womb of the wing, Peter felt his face flush with blood.

“On top of all that, a certain Kelly Wheeler informs me that his musical talent approaches the level of genius.”

Now Laughren glanced toward the wing and Peter shrank into the shadows again.

“Somehow, Mr. Gardner has managed to escape us until now—but now we’ve got him. So before we at this final assembly bid him luck and adieu, let us welcome him, and lend him our keenest attention as he performs one of my personal favorites, Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight Sonata.’”

A scattering of unenthusiastic applause tinkled through the hall’s big belly, and that made Peter even more nervous. It was hot, it was late, and it was the last day of school. Summer waited outside like an acres-big carnival where all the rides are free. And in the face of all that, he was supposed to capture and hold the *keenest* attention of some twelve hundred hyped-up teenagers?

No small feat.

Grinning like a used-car salesman, Laughren waved him onstage. Reluctantly, Peter stepped into view, almost overcome by the urge to look

down and see if his fly was done up...or if his pants were on at all.

The lights went down. A dramatically muted spot picked him up and followed him toward the piano. A fresh flourish of applause, punctuated by high hoots and happy hollers, swept against him from the orchestra seats, where the entire football team slouched in grinning disarray. Risking a sideward glance, Peter spotted his three best buddies, Rhett Kiley, Mike Gore and Jerry Jeter, frenziedly clapping their hands. Kiley's dark eyes were bloodshot, and Jerry's long, horsey face gleamed with a telltale beery flush.

““Stairway to Heaven,”” Rhett bellowed, shrinking in his seat as Laughren's predatory gaze settled directly upon him.

Peter's knees turned to Silly Putty. Maddeningly, the piano seemed to glide away as he approached it. His tie—he almost *never* wore a tie—felt like a gradually tightening noose around his neck.

Somehow he reached the stool. He sat. His fingers brushed the keys and he felt better, more confident. He waited for silence, his soft brown eyes fixed on the alternating pattern of keys.

From her seat near the front Kelly looked on, her excitement contaminated now by a new emotion. Tiptoeing down from the wing a half-minute earlier, she'd met eyes with Peter's mother and had been struck by an open glare of resentment; brief but shockingly potent, it had rocked her like a savage backhand. And it occurred to her then that she'd seen that look before—glancing idly around while Peter played for her and finding those slate-colored eyes fixed on her back from the adjacent kitchen, lingering an instant too long before shifting away; turning on the moonlit front porch in time to see the living room curtain snap shut behind them while she and Peter sat chatting on the steps. And yet, when she spoke to

Kelly, Mrs. Gardner was always pleasant, gracious and kind. Before today, Kelly had always managed to explain that look away, putting it down to her imagination or to some innocent quirk in a decidedly quirky lady. But on this occasion there had been no mistaking its authenticity—Kelly had felt something go slack inside her in its force. She'd dropped her gaze immediately, feeling sweaty, guilty and afraid, but angry, too. She knew what that look meant, and its very senselessness infuriated her. Jealousy was for other girls, not for mothers. The woman just wouldn't give her a chance.

Kelly cast these thoughts aside, deciding to deal with them later. She refused to let a single nasty glance spoil her enjoyment of Peter's first public recital. Besides, by this time tomorrow they'd be free of their accustomed restraints, parental and academic alike. By this time tomorrow they'd be rolling west on Highway 17, embarking on the adventure of their lives.

Kelly settled back in her seat. Onstage, Peter sat hunched over the keys, eyes closed, a small muscle in his jaw working rhythmically. Waiting for silence.

Come on, everyone, Kelly thought, her excitement returning. *Shut up and let him play.*

As if privy to her thoughts, Laughren strafed the assembly with his most menacing glare. A reluctant, blemished hush wound its way through the aisles.

And Peter began to play.

And suddenly, as if compelled by some unseen force, the hush grew solemn and profound, becoming so total that within minutes the unlit hall seemed empty of any living soul. No seat creaked, no page was riffled, no

whispered phrase uttered.

For a while there was only the music, untarnished and sweet, as at the best of times seeming to flow *through* him, as if apart from his own volition. It evoked within him a state akin to magic, and he allowed it to fetch him away.

In the audience Kelly felt her heart swell with pride. She'd chosen her seat carefully, so she could see Peter's face, and when his mouth widened into that funny, lopsided grin he got when he played, she knew she'd done the right thing. In the years to come this day would be a cherished memory for them both.

When it was done, when the last audible vibration perished on the air, Peter wondered for a moment if everyone hadn't just up and left, so perfect was the silence. Then a single pair of hands rang out—*My mother*, Peter thought ruefully, *I bet that was my mother*—and were immediately joined by another, and another, until soon the crisp, clean roar of applause filled the hall.

The lights came up then, giving Peter that naked feeling again, and he stood, bowing modestly. For as far back as he could see, the eyes of his audience looked misty and dazed. Even the jocks he called his friends wore expressions of mingled wonder, admiration and surprise.

He scanned the crowd for his girl. Where was she, anyway?

Now they were giving him a standing ovation. With the house lights up, Peter could see his mother out there, dabbing her eyes with a hankie. And his kid brother, Sam, hoisting the family reel-to-reel aloft like a trophy, an admiring grin splitting his zit-ravaged face. Spilling into the aisles, his teammates waved their arms like overgrown two-year-olds.

But where was Kelly?

“Pssst.”

Peter heard the sound but was unable to trace it. Now Laughren was back at the lectern, clapping along with the rest of them.

“Pssst. Peter.”

Then he saw her, standing in the shadows of the wing. He gave another quick bow and stepped offstage to join her. She hugged him mightily. Even in the scant light of the wing he could see the silvery tracks of her tears.

“Oh, Peter, that was wonderful.”

Smiling like a sultan, Peter agreed with her.

Kelly composed herself. “Wanna get lucky?” she said, bumping her hips against his.

“Here?” Peter said, hamming it. *“Now?”*

“Cute. My place, dummy. My folks won’t be back ’til ten.”

Peter ran a hand through his thick sandy hair, which the sun had already begun to lighten. “What about Nell Tait’s cottage party? Aren’t you the gal who said she’d *die* before she’d miss Nell Tait’s cottage party?”

“It’ll keep.” She cupped his crotch in her hand. *“What do ya say?”*

“Five minutes,” Peter said. *“Just gonna say ’bye to my mom.”*

* * *

Sometimes Peter had a tendency to rush things a bit.

But today, in the curtained cool of Kelly’s bedroom, he began almost painfully slowly, building her by degrees to a pitch before he entered her that scared her a little. Even once he was inside her and she was moving rhythmically beneath him, he remained in complete control. And soon, there was a heat building deep in Kelly’s works, a tiny, dime-size glow that was the warm orange color of a new spring sun and spreading concentrically outward. Something happened to her mind as the sensation

rippled out from her belly and found her legs, a sort of unintentional yet irresistible disconnection, nothing like it had ever happened to her before, not ever, and before she realized it was finally, actually happening, she was caught in the tightening, gushing, heightening glory of it, murmuring rapturously to Peter and clutching him closer, trying to absorb him into herself.

The feeling lingered for a time, ebbing and flowing, and they lay awash in it, more in love than either could even begin to comprehend.

Then, dreamily, they drowsed.

* * *

A half hour later Peter jerked awake with a scream boiling up from his guts. He managed to contain it, dissipating its force in a hot rush of air, but the terror remained lodged like a fish hook in his throat.

He'd been dreaming about flying; nothing unusual for Peter. Hardly a day had gone by since his eighth birthday—when his father, in one of the few loving gestures he'd shown the boy, brought home an Aurora model of a Lockheed F-104 and the two of them stayed up until midnight assembling it—that he hadn't dreamed about piloting his own aircraft, carving the edge of the atmosphere, man and machine joined in perfect harmony.

But in this dark dream, things had gone abruptly, irreversibly awry. He'd been alone, high up, where the stars wink even in daylight and to the earthbound observer an aircraft seems little more than a pinpoint of light trailing vapor. His oxygen supply had failed, and in the delirium that quickly followed he lost control. Then man and machine were plummeting, dragged toward the globe like a thumbtack caught in the resistless pull of an electromagnet. Alarms flashed, dials spun helter-

skelter, the whole instrument panel seemed to sneer like a savage face, the face of a machine come to malign and murderous life, shedding its charade of smooth obedience and replacing it with a furious, suicidal mutiny. *Die with me*, it seemed to whisper in the vacuum of the cockpit. *Taste the flames of hell*. And when he opened his eyes he thought he was still in the cockpit, and the scream was hammering at the backs of his teeth.

Breathless, Peter pushed up onto his elbows. That spiraling sensation of free-fall was still on him, and it took several swooning seconds to still the spin of the room. Gradually his breathing settled, the images dispersing like wind-torn smoke.

Kelly lay with her back to him, her respirations shallow with sleep. As gently as he was able, Peter tucked an arm around her waist. Nuzzling closer, he kissed the back of her neck, high up on the nape. Kelly moaned, stirring slightly, then awoke.

“Hi, doll,” she said. Her hand found Peter’s beneath the covers and pressed it to her tummy.

Peter felt the beginnings of another erection and drew back his hips. Though they’d been going out together for nine months—and sleeping together for three of those—Peter hadn’t fully overcome his shyness with her yet. But Kelly pressed her backside against him, closing the gap. Not sharing Peter’s shyness, his penis grew almost painfully stiff.

“What’s that in your pocket?” Kelly said.

“Banana,” Peter said, his shyness forgotten. He kissed her again on the nape of the neck, high up, in the downy hair that grew there. “Wanna play bury the banana?”

Kelly Wheeler, whose mouth was wide and whose large brown eyes

seemed always to betray a flicker of sadness, turned to face him. “That’s what I like about you, Gardner. Always the romantic.”

“We’re keeping Nell Tait waiting.”

The plan was to motor out to his uncle Jim’s charter field on Highway 144, pick up the Twin Otter Peter had trained in, and fly to Nell’s cottage on Halfway Lake. Peter had earned his solo license the summer before, and both he and Kelly were looking forward to the grand entrance they’d make at the party. His uncle, who’d trained him, trusted Peter implicitly. To accommodate his favorite nephew, he’d kept the Twin Otter free for this one special day.

“What time is it?” Kelly said.

Peter glanced at the bedside digital. “Almost four.”

Kelly’s fingers found the taut muscles of his shoulders and idly began to knead them. “You’re still pretty tense,” she said, and Peter detected a trace of injury in her voice.

“It’s never been so good,” he said.

“No. It’s been good, but never that good.”

“Did it happen?”

She smiled. “Uh-huh.”

Suddenly pensive, Peter lay back on the pillow, resting his head in the hammock of his hands. Kelly lay with her head on his chest, one hand stroking his abdomen. His erection had subsided.

“What’s on your mind?” she said. But she knew. Many of the same things reeled in her mind, too.

“I was just thinking that it’s over. High school. Being a kid.” This was only partially true. In the front of his mind was the dream, bright and jagged as a saw blade. He’d dreamed about flying before, many times. It

was only natural. Aviation was his future; he lived for it. But this was the first time things had taken such a catastrophic turn, and there was no way he was going to tell Kelly about it. Her own nightmare was that he would someday perish in a crash. Thinking back on it now, he supposed his dream tied in with some of the other feelings he was having. The fears, the uncertainty about what Laughren had so aptly termed ‘the fickle and often treacherous road ahead.’ It was no longer a metaphor. “It’s really over.”

“Aren’t you glad?”

“Until this morning I was overjoyed, ready to do back flips. But now that it’s here...” He sighed. “I mean, after today, we’re probably never going to see half of those people again.”

Kelly chuckled. “I can think of more than a few I’m not gonna miss.”

“Me, too...but you know what I mean.” She did. “And it’s not only that. Tomorrow we’re off on our trip, and when we get back there’ll only be a few days left before we move down to Kingston. I mean, here we are planning to live together, and we haven’t even told our parents about it yet. Then there’s military college. What if I spend three years down there and they tell me I’m not cut out for the air force?”

Peter’s admission of uncertainty surprised and unsettled Kelly. Before today he’d never expressed even the slightest doubt regarding their future, particularly where flying was concerned—he was going to become a fighter pilot come hell or high water. But his sudden confidings pleased her, too. It meant he trusted her, and she felt that much closer to him for it.

She tried to hearten him. “You’ve already been through candidate screening and they’ve practically guaranteed you a spot.”

It was true. He’d been to the Aircrew Selection Center in Toronto the

month before for a series of rigorous tests, and had done well. And he already had a private pilot's license.

"I know, I know." He seemed close to tears. "It's just..."

Then it dawned. "Is it your mom?"

Peter paused a moment before answering, surprised at how brittle his emotions had become on this of all days...and astonished at how, after just under a year together, Kelly seemed so unfailingly able to place her finger directly on the sore spot. He said, "When she kissed me in the auditorium there was booze on her breath."

Kelly made a small, disappointed sound in her throat.

"You know, I honestly thought she'd be okay. After my dad died—" Peter missed a beat, realizing with a jolt that it had been five years since his father's death from a heart attack "—it looked as if she was going to lose it completely. Jack Daniel's was her only friend in those days." He blew air through his teeth in a humorless chuckle. "I still don't know why she took it so hard. The old man was a total prick to her." He paused, remembering. "But then she seemed to come around. I can't say for sure, but I think I had a lot to do with it. The piano, the marks, football...all of that."

He turned to face Kelly. Tears had formed glimmering pools in his eyes. "Just lately, she's gone back to the boozing again. Nothing serious, just the occasional weekend fling...but I'm afraid once I'm gone, she'll slip back over the edge."

"She's still got Sammy," Kelly said, biting her tongue against an urge to verbalize her true feelings for Peter's mother; it could only worsen an already delicate situation. "He's only fourteen, but..."

"I've never said this to anyone, Kel. It kills me to even think it. But my

mother doesn't love Sam. Not the way she does me. Sam was an accident. After me, she never meant to have another." He sighed. "I don't think Sam can help her."

"Try not to think about it," Kelly said, chilled—but not entirely surprised—by this admission. "You'll do what you can. But you've got a life of your own now." She kissed him. "And you've got me."

Seized by a sudden, fierce arousal, Peter shifted his body over Kelly's. Sharing his need, Kelly turned and lifted the raven locks from her neck, baring the nape.

Peter kissed her there, knowing how it brought her alive.

* * *

It was five o'clock and the end-of-June sun still hung high. For the past six days temperatures had skyrocketed into the high eighties and early nineties, and the forecasts offered no hints of a break. Uncle Jim's airfield—a six-bay hangar and a frost-heaved landing strip—was a forty-minute drive from the city, northwest of Sudbury on Highway 144. Peter and Kelly had been on the road for about twenty minutes now, and had just passed the turnoff to Dowling. The last of the city's mining-ravaged outskirts lay far behind them, and now rich pine forest stretched out for miles on either side.

Peter swerved out to pass a lumbering transport loaded with Blue Label, if you could believe the logo on the trailer.

Cuffing sweat from her brow, Kelly shouted over the roar of the bike. "Hey, let's hijack that truck."

Peter nodded, his silver Bell helmet setting off sun flares with the movement. "That'd make us a hit at the party," he said. "Beer, anyone?"

Onaping came next, then Cartier, twelve miles later. Beyond that, 144

was little more than a weather-bleached strip of concrete, running like a zipper between two thighs of bush.

Bush, bush, and more bush.

Lulled by the heat and the stuttering monotony of the center line, Peter slipped into a logy semi-trance. He was aware of the vibration of the bike, the pressure of Kelly's hands on his hips, but these perceptions only added to the soporific effect. Gradually, his mind switched to autopilot.

His thoughts wound back absently to the events and sentiments of the now dwindling day, turning them over like Rubic's cubes, arranging them into different patterns. The porcupine toiling its way out of the ditch didn't even catch his eye. He might have picked it up with his peripheral vision, but the image didn't crystallize until it was already too late.

Then he did see its waddling bulk, and with a cold lump of terror in his throat he tried to swerve around it—

But in the last possible instant the doomed beast chose the direction of Peter's swerve as its own. With a swiftness anomalous to its species, it leaped into the whirring spokes of the Honda's front wheel.

The creature exploded, knots of raw tissue and fire-tipped quills spraying into Peter's face.

The front wheel locked at sixty miles an hour.

For the space of a heartbeat, unreality triumphed. Nothing happened. They simply hung there, neither in control nor completely out of it. Then reality resumed its treacherous reign and the bike flipped saddle-over-headlight, catapulting Kelly into space. Still clutching the hand grips, Peter watched her go, and for another tilted spasm unreality over swept him. That was *Kelly* out there and she was totally airborne, her flailing limbs giving the impression of someone swimming through the thick

summer air.

Impossible.

There followed an infinite moment of downy free-fall...

Then the bike went over hard. Peter's first, terrified intake of breath stunk of gasoline, sunbaked pavement and scalding oil. His helmet struck the asphalt with a pistol crack and split like an egg, stunning him. Colored pinpoints of light pulsed on his retinas, blooming like oil drops on water, and a dreadful flat horn bleat a single concussive note in his skull.

Peter thought: *I'm about to die.*

Then came the pain.

Four hundred pounds of pitiless machine pinned him to the pavement, grinding his body like a bug beneath a boot heel. Obeying the laws of friction and force, the bike swept him along before its load of momentum. He tried to roll away but couldn't, the weight of the bike clutching his leg like shark teeth. He could feel the blacktop rasping through his jeans, flaying off skin, planing down to bone. In a reflex, he thrust his hands out in front of him, but the asphalt chewed into them, too. He twisted at the waist, trying to distribute the scalding pain. Beneath his face, inches away, the flat gray back of the highway blurred incessantly past, and for a hideous moment Peter wondered if the still roaring Honda would mill and grind him until there was nothing left but a long bloody streak and a coagulated cluster of bone.

Now the concussive bleat in his head changed in quality. It deepened, seemed to exteriorize, becoming a deep-throated bellow overspread by a high keening shriek that whirled around inside his helmet.

But he was going to be all right. He knew that now. The bike was slowing, and although the world swam and the stars were out and the pain

was titanic, he was still conscious. He would walk away from this one, scraped and bloodied, maybe a busted kneecap on the left—

Kelly.

The thought galvanized him.

What about Kelly?

He was lying on his belly, still facing north, when the bike came to an abrupt, begrudging halt. He craned his neck around and spotted her, several yards back on the roadside. She was hobbling toward him, one arm flailing over her head, the other dangling at her side, a fractured butt of bone jutting obscenely through the skin. There was blood and she was yelling something, but she was up and she was moving and she was going to be okay, too.

Relief surged through him. He waved, doing his best through the pain to grin...but Kelly was still yelling, really howling, he realized. What was she saying? He couldn't hear her over that infernal noise inside his helmet.

Pushing up on raw palms, Peter angled his gaze another twenty degrees and saw what Kelly was yelling about, beheld the source of that solid, bellowing roar.

The beer truck, rumbling like doom out of the heat shimmer, veering hard to the left in an ill-spent effort to avoid the over-turned bike. It bore down on him like the closing halves of a gargantuan jackknife, locked wheels spewing white smoke...

And there was nothing he could do but watch.

The truck was thunder, the truck was the serpent-hiss of air brakes, the truck was the earsplitting howl of the air horn.

The truck was everything.

Punted like a pop can, the bike entered the air in a lazy spiral.

And Peter went under, past sunlight on polished chrome, past hot breath and foul smells into dark guts and a lifetime of hideous nightmares. The right rear wheels of the cab rolled over his legs at the knees—he could actually *see* them going over his knees—then he was tumbling, over and over, faster and faster, a bit of cloth in a wicked wind.

The world became a bloodied pastiche of layered sensation: alternating glimpses of road and underbelly, road and underbelly; hot whiffs of mechanical body fluids; the terrible, beastly moan of metal straining against metal; raw pain screaming from every nerve fiber in hellish concert with the air horn.

A snap!

(That came)

A deep, sickening, greenstick *snap*.

(from inside me)

Bright Light.

Dead? Am I dead?

no

It had passed over him. The truck had passed over him and now he lay flat on his back on the highway. The Bright Light was not God's celestial corridor but the sun, hot as slag on his face. He had journeyed through a dark eternity that had lasted only seconds—and he was still alive.

Incredibly, he was still alive.

Legs busted bad...can't move...

The sun was so terribly hot on his face, he could feel the skin burning, he could feel that and he could hear the truck. The horn had fallen silent, but now came the earsplitting artillery blasts of steel snapping trees, and

the jangling, shattering clangor of hundreds upon hundreds of exploding beer bottles.

He could feel the sun on his face—

But that was all.

Where is the pain? Why is there no pain?

In his tottering mind Peter screamed out a prayer, begging for pain, pleading for brutal, mind-eating, nerve-blasting pain—

Something hovering over him now, blocking the sun, pooling cool shadow on his face.

“Kelly?” A feeble whisper.

“Oh, Peter, yes, it’s me. You’re alive, thank God you’re *alive*.”

Kelly. Above him, leaning over him, her voice hectic and high. Blood dripped from her shattered arm and freckled his forehead...wet, warm, tacky. He could feel that and he wanted to tell her he could feel that and nothing else...

But the truth of what that meant, the unspeakable horror of what that crisp interior *snap*. had been, turned the words to ash in his throat.

The world was swimming...

Swimming away.

There was a voice out there now, beyond Kelly’s, and Peter prayed it was God’s voice, if there was a God. He prayed it was God’s voice calling him Home.

But it was only the trucker, stumbling toward them from his toppled rig. “Hey. Hey. You kids all right?”

Swimming...

Floating? Am I floating?

Kelly’s voice. Kelly’s touch. Kelly’s hair tenting his face.

Then nothing. Nothing at all.