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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 78-19623 ISBN 0-345-31564-2
Manufactured in the United States of America First Edition: April 1979
Paperback format
First Edition: August 1980
Second Printing: August 1984

To KERRY, without whom I would probably never have begun this book
and
To WALTER, without whom I would certainly never have finished it.

USUAL DISCLAIMER-WITH A DIFFERENCE

The Catch Trap is a work of fiction. No character in these pages represents or is intended to represent any actual human being, living or dead. Nor has any circus or carnival mentioned in these pages any existence outside the imagination of the author.

Every novelist says this. It is usually true. However, because I was writing of events which were real, even though my characters had no part in them, I must make a very special disclaimer.

It was no part of my intention to write a fictional history of the American circus. Although my characters are preoccupied with the history and traditions of the flying trapeze, and especially of its great trick, the "triple," I have not used the real history of the triple for this book.

Although nowadays it is not unusual to see the triple performed by any flyer with a claim to special competence, it was not always so. For a great many years, the triple was believed to be a physical impossibility; and even after it was known to be possible, it was actually known as the salto mortale, or fatal leap, because so many flyers had been killed or injured in attempting it. Like all aficionados of the flying trapeze, I know that it was Ernie Clarke, shortly before World War I, who first accomplished it; that it was the great Alfredo Codona who first managed to put it into his act on a regular basis; that Antoinette Concello was the first woman to do a triple and the only one to

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perform it in the ring with anything like regularity; and that the great tradition was carried on by such flyers as Fay Alexander and Tito Gaona.
This put me in a curious position. I could, as some novelists have chosen to do, mingle the names of my imaginary characters with real ones, the genuine historical aerialists of the period; but this was a liberty I did not feel free to take. Or I could, alternatively, invent an entire imaginary history for the circus and the art of the flying trapeze, thus of neces-

sity borrowing the accomplishments of real people and their known exploits, and attributing them to my imaginary performers. I have chosen to do this, as better suited to a novelist's freedom, but this places me under the necessity of making this very special disclaimer.
The private lives of the characters in this book, of the Flying Santellis, the Fortunatis, and the other performers in the imaginary circuses depicted here, do not represent and are not in any way intended to represent the private lives of the well-known circus artistes who actually performed these tricks in the circus rings of the real world. About the private lives of these real-world performers, I know nothing except what, in the words of the immortal Will Rogers, I read in the papers—or what they have chosen to make public in their memoirs. And while this may be as much fiction as my novel, it is a different fiction, and another story.
Where I have borrowed a well-known episode in circus history and attributed it to one of my fictional aerialists, I have done so merely for dramatic effect, and not with the intention of attempting to draw any parallel between the character in my novel and any actual circus performer who ever lived. If some of these episodes never had any existence outside newspaper publicity, or were invented by some imaginative public-relations writer, my only excuse for borrowing them is the novelist's time-honored excuse: "If it didn't happen that way, it should have." Or, to rephrase, Se non e vero, e ben trovato—which means in plain English, It may not be true, but it makes a good yarn.
This book is set in the forties and early fifties. Certain statements made by the characters portray social and sexual attitudes that would be distasteful if not unthinkable today. The reader is earnestly exhorted not to confuse the attitudes expressed by the various characters in the novel with any real-life attitude held by the author.
—Marion Zimmer Bradley

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
To all my friends who, knowing of my obsession with the art of the flying trapeze, have over the years sent me newspaper clippings, photographs, circus programs, circus magazines, and postcards alerting me to books, movies, or TV documentaries which I might otherwise have missed—
To the circus collection is San Antonio, Texas, for allowing me special access to the file on Alfredo Codona—

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To the friends who have gone above and beyond the call of duty by accompanying me to the dozenth, or two-dozenth, showing of a movie so that I might study, again and again, the fine details of body movements in flying—
To Bob Tucker; to Vernell Coriell; to Jacqueline Lichtenberg; to my patient children; and to the dozens of workhands, rigging men, and performers who—not knowing that I was doing research for a book—put up with my questions and indulged my impertinent curiosity—
My sincerest thanks.

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The full terror and the full reward of this fantastic game are given only to those who bring to it talent honed by obsessive practice into great skill, a fiercely competitive will, and high intelligence, with the flagellating sensitivity which so often accompanies it. In these men a terrible and profound change sometimes takes place; the game becomes life. They understand what Karl Wallenda meant when he said, going back to the high wire after the tragic fall that killed two of his troupe and left another a paraplegic, "To be on the wire is life; all the rest is waiting. "
STERLING MOSS/KEN PURDY

BOOK ONE
The Flyer
1944-1947

CHAPTER 1

in later life, when Tommy Zane was asked about his earliest memory, he never had any doubt. It was the time when they burned the Big Top at the Lambeth Circus.
Lambeth wasn't the Greatest Show on Earth, not by a long shot. For all he knew it might have been the smallest of the traveling circuses, playing mostly

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in villages and county seats through the Midwest. Tommy had only the haziest memory of seeing the show under the Big Top, when he was so small that he was never allowed into the ring at all, even at rehearsal, for fear someone would step on him.

He learned years later that it was halfway through the 1935 season when the main top had gotten so ancient and threadbare that it couldn't even be fireproofed again, and Jim Lambeth had decided it was too dangerous, and made a bonfire of it somewhere in Oklahoma. It was grand publicity for the show, in those Depression days when admission was a quarter and it was hard enough for the poor farmers in that area to scrape it up, but Tommy only remembered being hoisted on his father's shoulders while they watched it burn, flames shooting up forty feet into the air. He remembered that when it died down he had begun to cry, and when they asked him why he couldn't tell them. His father said, "Overexcited, that's all," and carried him to bed in their family trailer. That had been early in the evening; later that night when he woke up and heard the familiar band music and Big Jim Lambeth's voice booming out as usual over the band, the tight knot in his chest had dissolved. He had fallen asleep happy, knowing the circus would go on as usual. Seeing the Big Top burn, he had thought the show would be gone, too.

He had been five years old that summer. After that, they played under the open sky, on fairgrounds, stadiums, parks, and vacant lots outside the towns. The winters never seemed

quite real. All through childhood he had a recurring fantasy, that when the show packed up in the fall they turned off the real world and lived like the animals in the zoo, caged in one place till the time came to go out on the road and live their real life again. He sometimes wondered if they turned off the audience, too, for the winter.

He never knew quite when he stopped thinking that way. It was late in the war, and he was fourteen years old, when he began to understand that to the people outside, it was his world that was the illusion, the fake, not quite genuine.

Tommy stood in the dirt and sawdust of the ring, watching the glint of the sun on the high rigging, waiting for the Santellis to finish their morning practice. Forty feet above him, in the maze of guy wires and swinging trapezes, the three Santellis—Angelo, the catcher, and Mario and Papa Tony, the flyers—were busy at their morning workout. Tommy waited until Mario alighted on the platform at the near end.

"I went to town for the mail with Dad. Got a letter for you. "

"What's the postmark?" Mario yelled down.

Tommy pulled the letter out of his pocket and studied the smudges. "San Francisco."

"Okay, bring it up, then."

Tommy kicked off his dusty tennis shoes and swarmed up the ladder like a monkey. That summer he was a short, sturdy kid, lithe and compact, with shoulders surprisingly broad for his height. He maneuvered around the bulge where the narrow rope ladder curved around the tight-strung safety net, and

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came up to the firmly guyed piece of board, wide enough for two or three people to stand abreast—the takeoff platform for the flyers.
Mario Santelli (Tommy always thought of him as Mario Santelli, though he had known for months that it was not his real name), standing with one arm around a guy rope, mopped at his sweaty forehead with a resin-soaked handkerchief. He took the letter and said, "Sit down. Maybe you can take it right down with you when you go. "
At the far end of the rigging, Angelo, the catcher—a short, thickset man in his mid-thirties with curly dark hair— had pulled himself upright and was sitting in the trapeze

with one arm loosely braced around the rope, swinging gently to and fro.
"What's the holdup?"
"Letter from Liss," Mario called back, and tore the envelope open. While Mario read the letter, Tommy looked down at the whole panorama of the circus lot spread out below him, the backyard which was the same whether they set it up in Texas or Tennessee, Oklahoma or Ohio. In the dusty Texas sunlight, the clusters of house trailers where the performers lived looked like a small town, isolated from the wider roofs of the town beyond. In back of most of the trailers, wet wash was fluttering and flapping. Thick power cables coiled like snakes everywhere around the lot, running toward the generator truck.
The concession stands were going up, forming an alley to funnel the crowds inside. Behind roped-off barriers to keep away curious outsiders, the performing animals were staked in an enclosure formed by the parked rigging trucks and equipment trailers. Down by the cages where the cats were kept between shows, Tommy saw a foreshortened wedge of red shirt and broad-brimmed hat: his father, making sure that none of the females were in heat, none of the males had a sore pad or swollen tooth.
Directly below them in the ring a group of acrobats were practicing; Tommy could hear Margot Clane counting for them, "One-two, one-two, allez-hop!"
Other riggings were going up—for the wirewalker, Shuffles Small, and for the aerial ballet called the Pink Ladies. Beyond them the town roofs were spread out, hazy in the smoke from the cotton gin. An alien world, one Tommy knew nothing about.
Papa Tony—Antonio Santelli, small, wiry, gray-haired and gray-mustached—was resting with one leg thrown over the platform. "Any news?" he asked.
Mario finished reading his letter, folded it, and tucked it into the waistband of his tights. "None worth telling. I think she's lonely. But it won't be long—we'll be breaking up in another week. "
"And time enough for that, I say," Papa Tony declared. "It is too cold for the night shows; does the padrone want us to fly in our long red flannels?"
"And last night the wind was so bad I had all kinds of trouble controlling the ropes," Mario said. He was a thin, tautly built young man in his early twenties, though

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he looked younger. His thick black curls were combed back from a high forehead, and his dark eyes under slanting brows gave his face a faintly foreign, faintly devilish air. You had to know him a long time before you found out that his eyebrows told a whacking lie about his face. Some people never found it out at all. "Any other mail, Tom?"

"Not for you, no. But I got a card—I wanted to tell you about it. Remember I went to school in San Angelo last year while Dad was working in the zoo there? A couple of kids I know there, Jeff Marlin and his sister Nancy—Jeff and I shared a locker in school. He says he and Nancy will come to the show Thursday and they're coming early to say hello. "

"That will be nice for you, to see your friends," Papa Tony said, "but this is Thursday; will they be here?" At Tommy's nod, Papa Tony turned to Mario. "Matt, did you tell him?"

"No, I clean forgot. Tommy, we asked Big Jim to come down some morning this week before we break up for the winter. So keep your knees tucked in and don't get butter-fingered. "

Tommy gulped but tried to pretend the sun was in his eyes. "Hey, does that mean—"

"It doesn't mean a darn thing except he's getting curious to see if I've been wasting my time all summer," Mario cautioned. "Don't you get in a hurry. I told you that, often enough. When you get a little steadier, we might let you fill in once in a while. But you hold on, don't try to go too fast. I said—"

"Hey, Mario! I'm waiting, " Angelo shouted from the far end of the rigging.

Mario rose to his feet in one smooth, fluid motion. The platform swayed like the deck of a ship, but all three automatically shifted their weight to compensate for it, not noticing. "Stick around, Tom—climb up out of the way. After we finish the routine, I want to try something. Coming, Angelo!"

"About time, " Angelo called back, then lowered himself
to catching position, head down.

Tommy climbed up to the high bar fixed above the platform, to which the second trapeze was anchored when not in use. Here he could sit and watch without getting in the way of the flyers; it was his favorite vantage point, the spot he loved best. Only for a couple of months had he been

privileged to sit up here when the Santellis were rehearsing. It wasn't the view he cared about—though that was spectacular enough. What meant more to him was the proof that they trusted him up here: trusted him not to get in their way when they were rehearsing, not to distract one of them at a crucial moment, not to endanger them by doing something foolish. For a while this had been enough—but now he had something new to think about.

We might let you fill in once in a while...

But don't you get in a hurry. He wondered how many times this year Mario had said those words to him.

The Flying Santellis had joined the Lambeth Circus earlier that same year, halfway through June of 1944. As he watched Mario swing out toward Angelo, Tommy found himself remembering the first time he had watched them.

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Several months ago. They had arrived in the night; early in the morning they had set up their rigging and gone up to test it.

They were good. After a lifetime with the circus Tommy knew the difference between good, average, and incompetent performers, and the Santellis were good—good enough that he wondered, a little, what they were doing with a show the size of Lambeth.

Tommy had known immediately how good they were by the precise deftness with which the catcher waited to get the feel of the wind and the proper pacing before lowering himself to swing by his knees, testing the swing of the bar and speeding it up slightly by arching his shoulders, then twisting his legs around the side ropes of his trapeze, making himself an extension of the swing. Then the first of the flyers, a neat thin little old man with gray hair, reached up for the flying bar, gripped it in his hands, and swung out in a long, smooth arc. At the top of the swing he jackknifed his body upward, rolled over into a double back somersault that looked effortless, and straightened out smoothly, outstretched hands interlocking with the catcher's grip.

Meanwhile the second flyer, a long-legged youngster in tights, had caught the returning trapeze on the backswing and swung out, throwing his body forward over the bar. Just as the first flyer let go of the catcher's wrists, the boy let go of the trapeze and the two flyers somersaulted past one another, the boy landing safely in the catcher's hands and the old man gripping the trapeze the boy had just re-

leased. Tommy caught his breath at the perfection of the maneuver—he had never seen a flying pass this close—but the old man, landing springily on the platform, had shouted, "Ragged, ragged! You break too fast, Mario! Try it again!"

They had done it three times more before the old man was satisfied. The old man caught up a towel, flung it about his shoulders, and sat down on the end of the platform to rest. Tommy, the spell broken, had turned to move away, when the younger flyer called out, "Hold it, Angelo. Give me a good high swing. I want to try again, okay?"

"On a brand-new rig? Okay, kid, it's your neck, " the catcher called.

The moment Mario left the platform, Tommy knew what the younger flyer was trying to do: the difficult, the legendary, the near-impossible triple midair somersault. He made the second turn and flipped over for the third, but he had started a fraction too late; he turned in midair, rolled over, plunged down into the net, bounced twice, and laughed in chagrin. He vaulted over the edge of the net. From a distance of forty feet Tommy had thought him grown-up; now he saw that Mario was only a few years older than he was himself.

"What you staring at, kid?"

"No law against watching, is there?" Tommy retorted. "I thought you were good, that's all. The last flyers we had weren't worth watching. "

"Yeah. I looked great just now, didn't I?"

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Tommy said, suddenly shy, "That was tough luck. Looked like you almost had it. You'll do it sometime, though. "
"Oh, sure. Someday. I've done it twice in a thousand tries. Maybe in the second thousand I'll do it four or five. Who are you, anyhow? You're no town kid. You belong here?"
"I'm Tommy Zane, junior. "
"Tom Zane's kid? I met your dad last night. " The flyer put out his hand and shook Tommy's. "You going to be a cat man too someday?"
"No, Mister Santelli. "
The older boy laughed. "Hey, you make me feel old. Mister Santelli is my grandfather, up there. "
"I heard him call you Mario. "
"That's the way they bill me on the road. There's always been a Mario in the family. That's Papa Tony, my grand-

father. And the catcher is Angelo, my uncle—my mother's brother. He's a Santelli, too. But my name is Matt Gardner —Matthew, junior, really. He was my mother's catcher when she was in the act, but he died when I was a little kid. My sister, Elissa, left the show a year ago and got married. Are you in the show?"
"I ride on the parade floats, and I help Ma Leighty with costumes for the spec, " Tommy said, "and sometimes I fill in with the aerial ballet if one of the girls wants a day off. In a wig, that is. " Then he found the nerve to say what he wanted to say: "But what I really want is to be a flyer. "
He had expected Mario to laugh, or to say something patronizing, like most grown-ups. It had suddenly seemed so important to get it said that he felt he could even take that— from a real flyer. But Mario only quirked up one of the devilish eyebrows. "Is that so? How long you been in the aerial ballet?"
"I started learning web work when I was about nine. All the kids do it. "
"I know. My sister did. Are you any good?" "Nothing to be good at, in a web act, " Tommy said, exasperated. "Ma Leighty could do it, if the ropes would hold her up!"
Mario started to laugh and then didn't. He gave Tommy a sharp look, drawing down his eyebrows so that they were almost level. Then he looked up at the empty rigging; Papa Tony and Angelo had come down.
"Tell you what. Come on up, if you want to. "
"Up there? On the rigging?"
"Scared?"
"No, " Tommy said quickly, "only the one time I went up they chased me off. And I got a licking. "
"Well, I'll guarantee nobody will lick you for it, " Mario said. "Come on up, then. "
For the first time, then, he climbed the narrow, jiggling rope ladder to the high platform. Even this first time he climbed it as he had seen other flyers do; not like an ordinary ladder, grasping the side ropes and placing the feet on the rungs, but holding only one of the side ropes, keeping his body on the outside and using the rungs only as toeholds for leverage upward. He had

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never done it before, but it seemed as natural as breathing. The platform joggled and swayed as Mario stepped off beside him.

"Heights don't bother you, I see. How tall is your father?"
"About five feet seven, I guess. Maybe not quite. "
"And your mother?"
"About my size. Why?"
"Because if you're going to grow up to be six feet tall, forget it. I'm supposed to be too tall for a flyer, and I'm only about five feet eight. Chances are you won't be that tall, though. How old are you? About ten?"
"I was fourteen in May, " Tommy said coldly.
"Small for your age, then. No, I'm not insulting you, because that's good; it means you're old enough to start. The only thing is, you have to be tall enough to reach the bar from the platform. Here. " He reached up and pulled down the trapeze from the hook where it was anchored. "Can you reach it?"
He could, and it was with a sort of held-breath wonder that he first closed his fingers around the rough taped surface of the bar. Mario said, "You know how to fall in the net, don't you?"
"Sure, " Tommy said, his voice only a thread. "You have to land on your back, is all. "
"Well, how about it? Want to try a swing?"
Tommy had not been sure the flyer was serious. "Honest? Can I?"
"You'll never learn any younger. Go ahead. "
It suddenly seemed a very long way down, and the net looked much too small and flimsy way down there.
"Go ahead, " Mario said. "The worst you can do is fall in the net. Now. "
Tommy got a firm grip on the bar and jumped off the platform. Remembering what he had seen them do when they started a swing, he kicked out with both feet, arching his body. He managed to get the trapeze into a long forward swing, but at the end of the arc the ropes buckled and his hands began to slip—later he learned how performers coated them with resin—and he twisted frantically, kicked out hard, and managed to get up enough momentum to swing back. He missed the platform, and the returning trapeze swung him out again.
"Don't panic, " Mario shouted. "Can you change hands and face around this way? If you can't, wait till the swing dies and drop into the net. "
He had done this kind of midair turn a dozen times on a

single trapeze ten feet high. The forward swing carried him to the end of the arc, and he somehow managed to shift his slippery hands around so he faced the platform. As the momentum of the bar carried him back, he jumped for the platform and scrambled off beside Mario, knocking the trapeze wildly sidewise and grabbing with clumsy haste at the side ropes.
"Easy! Easy!" Mario caught and steadied him. "You'll wind up in the net yet! But anyway, you got back. I thought you'd have to drop off—most everybody does, the first time. I know I did. Lost my grip, too, and hung by one arm—nearly pulled my arm out at the shoulder. " He grinned at the memory. "Tell

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you what. You come around—oh, four, five times a week after we get the rigs set is the morning— and I'll get you started. But don't get in a hurry. "
That had been several months ago, and it hadn't been quite as simple as that. His mother had gone dead white when Tommy burst into the Zane trailer and exploded with the news. He'd met the new flyers, and one of them said he would teach him to fly, had even let him up on the rigging.
"I'll have something to say to that young man, " she snapped, hustling the lunch dishes into the kitchen sink. Tom Zane, lighting his after-dinner pipe, had taken it more calmly.
"Calm down, Beth. You've known since he was a kid that he was nuts about flying, and he's learned as much as Margot can teach him. I was going to ask Tonio Santelli to take him on—"
"Now look, Tom. I let him learn tumbling, work swinging ladders, aerial ballet, but the flying rig? Tom, that's sixty feet in the air! One slip—"
"Mother... " Tommy said, feeling the knot closing tight inside him again. "They use a forty-foot rigging. The people up at the top of the bleachers are almost that high. And there's a net. "
"Look, Beth, I know the Santellis. Tonio was flying before you and I were born. None of them would let Tommy within a mile of the rig unless they were willing to look after him. I'm surprised they want to bother with the kid—they usually work with the family, and don't let any outsiders in. Who was it, Tommy? The old man—Antonio?"
"No, the kid. The one they call Mario. "

"Look, " Beth Zane said, "maybe the old man is okay, but a kid? Is he old enough to know what he's doing?"
"He's not all that much of a kid, " Tom said. "Draft age, I think—twenty, twenty-one. I know he's been flying with them for years. And he's very good. The act used to be with Starr's. "
"Then what in the world are they doing with a two-bit outfit the size of Lambeth?"
"There was an accident in the thirties, and the family split up for a while, " Tom Zane said. "I don't know all the details. " His face held a look Tommy had known from childhood, a look that said his father knew perfectly well but was not going to discuss it in front of Tommy. "Anyhow, they're here, and it's Tommy's good luck; he couldn't possibly learn from anyone better. And they're decent people, Beth, family people. Old-country circus people. Tommy will be perfectly all right with them. Relax, Beth. Let the kid enjoy himself. "
And so it began, haphazardly at first, a few minutes at a time. Only Mario paid the slightest attention to Tommy. Papa Tony didn't seem to know Tommy was alive—or so Tommy thought then—and Tommy was just as well pleased. Antonio Santelli had a powerful yell and a quick-flaring temper which he turned indiscriminately on his family and outsiders. Angelo was polite and friendly enough, but to him Tommy was just another of the kids with the show. Outside the few minutes of his lessons, it meant hours of hard, painstaking calisthenics; working on the parallel bars his father put up for him; hours of repeating simple back-and-forward swings over and over, of

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learning to manage his body at any angle, to turn around and change hands at any point in his swing, to fall into the safety net without hurting himself. Eventually the haphazard few minutes three or four times a week turned into a daily routine. As soon as the Santellis' regular morning workout was over, when Papa Tony and Angelo had pulled on their sweaters and gone, Mario would signal to Tommy and he would climb up and work on the routine of tricks Mario allowed him to do.

He had begun, quite soon, to get impatient to do some real flying. Swinging back and forth on a single trapeze, varied with drops into the net and maneuvering his body over and around the bar, wasn't really much different from fooling around on an aerial ladder ten feet off the ground. But when he let Mario see his impatience, he had been cut off with a

curt, "Not till I think you're good and ready. I told you not to get in a hurry. "

But it had only been a week or so later—somewhere in Arkansas; Tommy never remembered the name of the town —that when he joined them in the morning, Angelo was still on the rigging. Tommy hesitated, but Mario signaled him to come up anyway. Then he said, "Tom, watch this carefully. "

He swung out on the bar, flipped up till he was sitting in it like a swing, then slipped backward, holding on by his hands and bracing himself with his ankles—all these things he had taught Tommy to do. Then, as Angelo reached the high point of his swing, Mario let go of the bar and fell toward him, catching his wrists with effortless ease. They swung together, wrists locked, for a moment. When Mario returned to the platform, he said, "Think you can do that today?"

A yeasting excitement boiled up inside Tommy. "Can I really?"

"That's what we're going to find out, I guess. Sooner or later you'll freeze on that bar, unless we get you off it. "

Angelo dived down into the net. Tommy made a small sound, protest and disappointment, and Mario said, "It's okay, I'm going to catch for you. You think I'd waste Angelo's time on you?"

"You're a catcher, too?"

"Sometimes. Papa Tony's a great one for insisting that everybody has to learn to do everything. I started out as the catcher and my kid brother Johnny was the flyer, because I was taller than he was; only he liked to catch and I wanted to fly, so we swapped. "

"I didn't know you had a brother. "

"I've got two of them. Twins. "

"What are their names?"

"John and Mark. And I've got a sister, Liss. "

"How come they're not with the act?"

"Mark never did learn to fly. Johnny quit the act and went off with an act of his own, two, three years ago. And Liss got married. You want to fly or stand around gabbing?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to waste time. "

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"Forget it. It's okay. " Mario went down into the net, climbed the rope at the far end, and by the time he had pulled himself into the catcher's trapeze, he was smiling again.
"Okay, go ahead. Now remember, when I call, you just let

go and dive at me. Don't grab, just put your hands out and I'll be there. You'll probably miss, you know—everybody does the first time. " He let go with his hands, leaned back, twisting his legs around the padded lower supports of the catch trap, and began the long, steady, back-and-forth swing.
Tommy stood poised on the pedestal, his mouth dry, but feeling something inside him counting off that steady pendulum swing. He took the bar between his hands.
"Now!" Mario said, but Tommy was already off the pedestal, swinging out firmly, feeling his body flex upward. In the full stretch of the swing, he got himself up, arms and knees— They used to call it "skinning the cat, " he thought in a split second—heard Mario say, "Now!" again, let go, and felt the momentum of the swing carry him toward Mario's outstretched hands.
He missed, of course, and felt the sickening drop as his flight turned into a plunge. "Roll over!" Mario shouted, but Tommy had already twisted over and balled up, instinct operating, a reflex that was no longer conscious at all. He struck the net where it began to curve up against the guy lines and slid instead of bouncing, feeling the ropes burn skin from his bare elbow. His breath jolted out. An unintentional fall into the net was not—not in the least—like the deliberate drops he had been taught to make! He lay there, shaken, and surprised, and above him Mario swung head down, laughing.
"See? Big difference between falling in and diving in! Come up and try again?"
"Soon as I get my breath. "
"And hang on to the bar a little longer. You broke too fast. Wait for my call next time. "
Tommy went up, swung again, missed again. And a third time. By this time he had bruises already darkening on both shoulders, and the stiff ropes of the net had rubbed his left knee and right elbow bare. They stung like burns. He was painfully discouraged, his eyes smarting.
"One more time, " Mario called down.
"I don't think I'm going to get it. "
"What are you, a quitter? Get up there! And you're still letting go too fast. Get right out there to the end of the swing!"
This time Tommy's wrists actually brushed Mario's hands. Then, just as he felt the sudden thrill of success, he lost his grip before their wrists locked; he grabbed in a panic and his

elbow struck Mario in the face. He fell, twisting over quickly on his back, and something struck hard beside him. As he untangled himself, wincing—he had rope burns now on both elbows—he saw Mario sitting up groggily in the net beside him. Blood was trickling down his face.
"Mario, your nose! It's bleeding—"

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"God damn it, I know that!" It was the first time Mario had forgotten himself enough to swear; like all performers who work in a field where the main audience is children, Mario was careful of what he said before the public—and somehow this forgetfulness gave Tommy an odd little lift, as if he were no longer an outsider, a child to be guarded.
"I'm sorry, Mario. It was my fault. I lost my balance—"
"You grabbed. I told you about that. " Mario pulled the resin-stiffened handkerchief out of his waistband—they all carried them, to wipe sweat from palms on the slippery riggings—and mopped at his face.
"That lady who wrestled tigers for a living ought to take you on someday!" He added, roughly, "No, you didn't knock me off; I felt my nose start bleeding and let go. That's finished me for this morning. I've got to go get some ice on this or I'll be bleeding all through the matinee. Scram. "
"Can't I do anything? Get you some ice from the drink stand?" He stood by, feeling helpless, as Mario got down from the net.
"No, no, just put your sweater on before you catch a chill. Don't make such a big thing of it—this is all in the day's work. Or doesn't it seem like so much fun anymore?"
Tommy braced himself against the sarcasm, wrapping himself in his sweater.
"I guess if you can take a few thousand falls I can take a few dozen. Anyhow, I almost had your hands that time. "
Mario drew the bloody handkerchief away from his face, laughing. "I guess you'll do. Don't forget to put something on those rope burns, ragazzo. Your mother probably has some stuff for burns. Here—" He fumbled at the neck of his shirt. "Come here a minute. "
He was removing a tag from the shoulder seam of his shirt, a little metal oval, fastened there with a safety pin. He bent over and pinned it into the neckband of Tommy's shirt.
"What's that?"
"My Saint Michael's medal. Patron saint of flyers. Wear
it for luck, okay?"

Embarrassed, Tommy touched the little metal thing with a curious finger.
"I'm not a Catholic. "
"Well, I am, and I'm going to be catching you, so maybe Saint Michael will look after you to keep me from breakin' my neck!" Suddenly, under the slanted eyebrows, Mario smiled. Not the usual devilish grin, but a shy, boyish smile. He touched his bleeding face again. "I better get some ice on this, and you ought to have something on those burns. Run along, Tom. "
Tommy went, touching the little medal curiously. He did not know then that he was to wear it for the rest of his life, never devoutly as Mario did then, but simply because he associated it, then and after, with his first taste of real flying. And for the indistinct knowledge—never wholly articulate —that for this sudden comradeship, this unexpected warmth through the roughness Mario usually showed him, he would have taken a thousand falls.

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Tommy made his first successful crossover three days later. Then after three more weeks of performances left Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kansas behind them, one morning Mario beckoned Tommy up while Angelo was still in the catch trap. Angelo called to him: "Come on over, young Tom. Let's see if Matt's managed to teach you anything!"
Tommy almost froze to the platform, in sudden stages
fright, but Mario gave him a light tap on the shoulder.
"Go ahead. Try a jackknife—nothing fancy. "
Tommy swung out, making the "jackknife bend" so that he swung by his knees from the bar. Then he let go and tumbled, wrists extended, toward Angelo. He missed; his body twisted ungracefully as he plunged into the net, and he heard Angelo's harsh laughter.
"Ha, ha! You look worse than Matt the first time he went for a triple!"
Tommy clenched his fists, his eyes smarting with humiliation. He had hurt one knee badly in his fall; he had landed all wrong. Mario was laughing, too, standing on the pedestal above him. Tommy started to shout that Angelo's swing was shorter than Mario's—then he realized that the one thing he could never do was to make excuses. He rolled out of the net, trying not to favor the knee he had twisted.
"Sorry. Can I come up and try again, Angelo?"
And after a heart-stopping silence, Angelo shouted roughly, "Sicuro! Come on, then. "

He knew, then, that he was accepted. They worked him mercilessly, pounding hard at his mistakes, but a few weeks later, when he made his first successful return to the platform after going to the catcher—the true flying return—Papa Tony said, looking him over with a frightening scowl, "Well, Malio, you may as well begin teaching him "Elissa's routines. "
From that day, except when they were actually performing, he was one of them. He joined them at the top of the rigging for the regular morning practice instead of working with Mario alone. He stood on the platform with them at rehearsal and learned to handle the bars—catching the returning trapeze and dropping it again for the flyer, moving it out of the way of a returning flyer. But Mario had said, Don't be in a hurry....
Now Mario had said, We asked Big Jim to come down some morning this week. That meant he was seriously considering allowing Tommy to appear with them, before long, in performance. Daydreaming on the high platform above the flyers, he had lost track of the present until Mario reached up and tapped him lightly on the arm.
"You still with us, up there? Come on down and try the duo routine. "
This was something they had begun practicing only a few days before. Papa Tony had already descended and crossed to the far end of the rigging, where he was unfastening a second catcher's trapeze. Tommy scrambled down beside Mario, helping him fasten up the ordinary trapeze out of the way and pull down the slightly wider bar they used for the duo routine. He stepped carefully into position at Mario's left shoulder. His hands were sweating

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slightly; he reached out for the resin bag tied to one of the uprights and rubbed his hands around it.
Papa Tony and Angelo were swinging head down, side by side, timing their swings identically like mass-produced clock pendulums. Mario and Tommy, side by side, their hands resting lightly on one another's shoulders for balance, waited; then Mario muttered, "Now!" They caught the bar, four hands slapping like one on the rough tape. Simple as this was, Tommy remembered the hours of practice it had taken—a split-second difference of timing, and the bar slipped sidewise and their swing went out crooked.
This was a good day; they went out together, hard, smooth, and straight, then flipped off the bar together. His

hands slapped on Papa Tony's wrists and he felt the jolt in his shoulder muscles, half hearing Angelo's released breath as Mario's weight came against him.
Tommy counted in his mind as they swung. One, the swing. Two, they flipped out together, a sickening launch into empty space that still, always, caught his stomach with a little flip of fear: Did we get off the bar straight? Did a gust of wind blow it sidewise, with nobody to catch and drop it? Three! His hands went around the bar and he heard the slap of Mario's palms beside his, the weight balancing. Four, their four feet hit the platform and their four hands made a fast balancing motion that looked like a stylish flourish, inviting applause.
Tommy straightened, hot and shaking, sweat rolling down his temples. Somebody shouted from below, "Nice work, kids!" On the ground, Big Jim Lambeth—the boss, and he really was big, six-foot-three and broad to match—and Margot Clane were laughing and clapping their hands. Mario gave Tommy an exuberant little squeeze before releasing his shoulder. He muttered, "Buon' ragazzo, " and Tommy, who knew Mario never lapsed into his mother's native tongue unless he was either furious or delighted, felt himself swelling with pride.
On the ground, Jim Lambeth was talking to Mario. "It was your idea to make a flyer out of the Zane kid, wasn't it?"
"And the kid's idea. He's worked darn hard, Jim. "
"Okay, try him whenever you're ready. That duo routine looks good. Some small town where it won't matter if he's nervous and messes it up. "
"He won't, " Mario said confidently, "and I'd like to start him in San Angelo, okay? He's got pals there. "
"Okay by me. Only, one of you better talk to the kid's family, huh?"
Tommy, digging his bare toes into the ground, felt a strange little lurch in his stomach. His father would understand how he felt. Only it wasn't his father he was worried about; it was his mother, and his father usually did what his mother said. Even at fourteen he had an unfocused notion that maybe his father had taken up training lions and tigers to get his own way sometimes.
Tonio Santelli said firmly, "I will speak to Elizabeth Zane

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myself. " Tommy relaxed. He couldn't imagine anyone— even his mother— arguing with Papa Tony.
Later Tommy picked at his lunch, though his mother had fried a chicken. He sat at the table in their trailer, nervously chewing an oatmeal cookie, while his father stretched out on the sofa, smoking an after-dinner pipe. But when Papa Tony knocked on their trailer door, his father got up and invited him to come inside. Then he sent Tommy away, declaring: "Listeners never hear any good of themselves. Go do your work with Ma Leighty, and I'll talk to you later. "

CHAPTER 2

ma Leighty's trailer was parked where it always was, just beside the performers' entrance to the ring. Ma Leighty— everyone from Jim Lambeth to the smallest child with the show called her Ma—was wardrobe mistress for the circus acts. She had once, they said, been a famous bareback rider. She was seventy now, and not even an elephant could have supported her huge bulk in comfort.
Tommy had been four years old when Ma first dressed him up in a miniature Uncle Sam costume and set him on the back of the most sedate of the ponies. He couldn't remember; he'd only been told about it. Ever since he could remember, he'd been wearing different costumes, in the parades and in the "spectacle, " the opening walkaround of costumes, called "spec" in the show. Most of the wives and all the children of the performers, even the workhands, put on costumes and marched—or rode ponies, horses, or wagons—in the spec; this made the small show look bigger than it was. The year Tommy was ten he had started helping Ma Leighty sort and care for the costumes.
A veteran this year, Tommy enjoyed being in charge of the younger children. But today he fidgeted, his mind back in the trailer, until the old woman said sharply, "Tommy, what's gotten into you today? Keep your mind on your work! You've put the Chinese hats with the wooden shoes!"
"I'm sorry, Ma, " he mumbled.
Margot Clane, collecting the pink gauze skirts for the aerial ballet, pulled herself up into the trailer. She was a small,

sun-tanned woman. Her faded reddish hair was done up in curlers, and she was wearing patched dungarees and a man's - faded shirt.
"Tommy, I saw you this morning. You looked pretty good. Listen, Tom, I came looking for you this morning, but you were up on the rig with the Santellis, and then Lambeth came along and I forgot about it. Betsy Gentry slipped on the ladder when she came down last night. She hurt her foot; she's gone to have it X-rayed. I'll go on for her this afternoon, but that makes it awfully hard to get changed in time for the balance act. If her ankle is broken, you'll have to turn out and rehearse with us tomorrow, probably go on with us for a few days, okay?" She didn't wait for his answer, just went off with the aerial ballet costumes over her arm.
Tommy scowled angrily. Nobody ever asked him, damn-darn it! They just told him. He didn't mind going on with the aerial ballet, but if he was going on

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with the Santellis some time this week he ought to rehearse with them instead!

In the distance there was a short rhythmical toot which sounded—to an outsider—like someone in the band warming up for the show; to the performers it was the thirty-minute warning that meant the box office was open and performers should start dressing for the matinee. Tommy picked up the rack of spec costumes and went off toward the spare wagon that served as a dressing room for the male extras.

For the next half hour he was busy buttoning smaller boys into costumes, checking hand props against the typed master list on the wall, good-naturedly taking bubble gum away from a few of the kids. In the other half of the wagon, Little Ann Clane, Margot's daughter, and Ellen Brady, whose father was the bandmaster, were doing the same for the little girls. Tommy lifted the smallest children to the backs of ponies or onto floats, his mind not on what he was doing. He took his own place on the jungle float, jerking his leopardskin straight and taking the end of the chain which held the monkey.

Next year I won't just be making spec, I'll be flying.

Nothing was said, between matinee or night show, or afterward, about Papa Tony's visit, and Tommy knew better than to ask. After the night show the whirlwind routine of the teardown commenced, but Tommy was asleep in his family's trailer before they pulled out. He had no idea where they would wake up; he never did.

By eleven the next morning, the anonymous vacant lot of the unknown new town had been transformed into an exact replica of the former one, every trailer parked in the exact same location, each rigging put up in the same place, the ring laid out where it always was. This town had an oil refinery instead of a cotton gin, and smelled to high heaven. But the town was just a backdrop to the lot, part of the scenery. Like all circus children, Tommy had been brought up on the story of the performer who lost his watch in one town and the next day had everyone in the show turn out to look for it, forgetting that yesterday's lot was thirty miles away.

Tommy was waiting for the Santellis at the foot of the flying rig when Margot came in search of him. He felt his heart sink.

"How is Betsy's foot?"

"Not good. It's all taped up and hurts her pretty bad. You'd better come and practice with us—you haven't been on for a month or so. "

Angelo had arrived at the end of the flying rig. Tommy ran over and explained, and Angelo nodded. "I'll tell Matt. So we skip the duo this one day, what difference?"

Tommy felt flat, deflated, as he lined up with the nine girls in the aerial ballet. He knew all of them, of course; Lambeth was a family show, and acts stayed with them year after year. Now and then a fine performer moved up to one of the big shows—Sorenson, Woods-Wayland, even Starr's—or a drunken or incompetent performer would be fired; some such mishap had created a vacancy for the Santellis. But as a rule the show was the same, year after year.

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Aerial ballet! He'd started doing that when he was ten years old! Large fixed trapezes, like steel ladders, were mounted in spangled steel circles; ten girls in ruffled ballet costumes climbed a rope—known as a web—to the ladders, and did simple gymnastics there, in time to the music. There were even webbing loops to slip one foot into, so nobody could come loose in a spin, and a ground man held the web taut and steady at the bottom.
Tommy slid into the circle beside Little Ann Clane. Up in the bandstand somebody put on a record of the music the

aerial ballet used in their act. Tommy counted to himself as they began the measured climb, with a pause every fourth.. beat for a kick and spin. He knew the routine perfectly.
"Hold it, hold it! Left leg raised!" Margot shouted, and Tommy scowled, concentrating, then realized that it was the girl next to him who had missed. Tommy could have gone through the routine, he supposed, by watching Little Ann. She was a small, snub-nosed girl with shining hair twisted, for rehearsal, into two short pigtails. She went through the routine with sleepy confidence, as if she were only half awake. She was a year older than Tommy and had been doing acrobatic tricks in the ring with her mother since she was six years old.
"Marie, tuck your elbows in! Little Ann, keep your hands in line with your body—don't flop all over the place! Tommy, what do you think you're doing? Five counts, and don't stare off to the side! Zelda, watch that foot. " It was a sound Tommy seemed to have heard all his life, Margot's light voice shouting, counting.
He stole a look at the girls as they were coming down. They all had blonde hair, natural or bleached, and most of them had their hair in curlers or rags or pigtails. They were wearing assorted shorts, halters, romper playsuits. He thought he must look awfully funny in the middle of all those girls.
When they had all gone, Margot called him over. "I spoke to your mother already. She said okay. "
"Don't you think I'm going to look awful funny, one boy in with nine girls?" In the three years he had been doing it, the thought had never occurred to him before.
"With the wig on, nobody's going to know if you're a boy or a girl or a chimpanzee in skirts. " Margot surveyed him, her head cocked to one side like an alert bird. "If it was up to me, I'd have had you in the ring regular, six, eight years ago, like Little Ann. Only Beth wouldn't hear of it. I wish I knew what Tonio said to her. Okay, as soon as you get out of your spec costume at the matinee, you come over to the girls' trailer and I'll have the costume and wig ready for you. "
Tommy said a polite, "Yes, ma'am, " then ran off toward the flying rig. But the Santellis had finished and gone.
The crowd that afternoon was like any other matinee crowd, preponderantly children; Tommy could not imagine

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why it seemed somehow different and hostile. Today he left the after-spec costume checking to Ellen Brady and ran over to Margot's trailer, a long red-and-white one which doubled as a dressing room for the girls in the aerial ballet. When Tommy knocked, she came to the door with her arms full of pink tarlatan. Somebody had the radio on, blaring out the war news.
"You're too big this year to dress in a trailer full of girls, " she said. "Go back to your own trailer and put this on, then come back and Ann will fix you up. "
He went to his family trailer, his arms scratching against the stiff tulle. Last year I used to go on in the web act without thinking twice about it. Why am I so mad about doing it now? Sullenly he pulled on the costume, jerking at the tulle skirts. There was a pink satin bodice, which fit him very badly, and a worn pair of pink ballet slippers. The net scratched and pricked his legs. He felt foolish walking across the lot in the pink outfit, but though the backyard was full of people, they were all busy with their own work. None of them paid the slightest attention to him.
Margot had gone, but Little Ann was waiting for him, and Betsy Gentry was there, a small, faded, fortyish woman, her lame foot strapped in bandages. She motioned him to sit down and bend his head. She fixed the wig into place, cautioning him to be careful in the spins. "If it should fall off while you are at the top there, you will look a proper fool, my boy. " She had a very faint accent. Tommy knew she was not American, but didn't know where she had come from. He had never cared before. Now, suddenly, he was curious; but this was no time for questions.
"That waist of yours, it will be falling off in a minute. Hand me one of those makeup towels, Little Ann, dear, and I'll fix it. " She began to stuff the towel into the bosom of the pink bodice, but Tommy shoved her hand away. "Quit that, " he muttered. "I'd rather let the darn thing fall off!" He, was enormously embarrassed. He didn't want to look like he had a bust, for goodness' sake! Always before this they had given him one of the little girl's costumes, with a straight top, not one with a shape like this.
"Your shoulders are too broad this year, " Betsy said, exasperated. "Fasten it with a safety pin, then, Little Ann. "
Fastening the safety pin, Little Ann whispered in his ear.

"What's the matter, Tommy? Don't be nervous—you could do this stuff in your sleep!"
"I'm not nervous. I just feel like a dumb jerk in this thing!"
"Mother says not to say jerk, " Little Ann chided primly.
"Why not? All the kids do. It's not a bad word. " Tommy looked into the mirror. He felt skinny and awkward, his shoulders too wide, his face pale under the straw-colored wig. Little Ann, her hair brushed out into ringlets, looked cute in the pink costume. He just looked like a dope.
"You want some lipstick or something?" Little Ann asked.
"Drop dead!" he yelled at her. "What the heck do you think I am, anyhow?"
"Well, you need something, " Little Ann argued. "What's
the matter with you, Tommy?"
"What I need is a bag over my head, " Tommy muttered.

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"Let him alone, Little Ann, " Betsy said firmly. "And you, Tommy, no one will be knowing or caring what you look like, not at all. "
"What I look like is something out of the freak show on the midway!"
"No such thing, " Betsy said. "You are only one of ten, and unless you do something which is a real disaster, which you won't, nobody will be looking at you at all. Run along now, both of you. "
He stood beside Little Ann in the "back door, " the performers' entrance, wishing he were invisible. Tom Zane, senior, still wearing the pith helmet and white suit he wore in the big cage, paused briefly and looked Tommy over from head to foot. He didn't speak, merely raised the end of his styling whip in salute and went on.
"There's our music, " Little Ann said. "Two minutes. " She was patting her hair into place. "Just watch me if you get lost—Hey. Tommy, what's the matter?"
"I just feel kind of funny. Like I'm going to be sick. "
She grabbed his hand in hers. Like his own, it was hard and callused from handling trapeze bars, dried with resin. "Sure you do, " she said. "Everybody does. I always do, but you'll get over it. Mother says it's stupid for you not to be in an act regular; then you wouldn't get the jitters when you have to. I mean, you were brought up on the lot and everything. Mother told Aunt Beth—" Abruptly she broke off, squeezed his hand, and let go. "Okay, we're on, " she said, and began to run toward the rigging.

As he and the nine girls fanned out under the webs and ladders, Tommy stole one quick look at the audience. The sun was full in his face as he began climbing the web toward the spangled metal circle fifteen feet above him. Not until the drumroll and spatter of applause six minutes later, when they were all on the ground again, did Tommy have time to think about how he felt. As they came out of the ring, he stumbled on one of the ribbons of the ballet shoes and fell against a clown who pushed him away without anger. Back in the performers' entrance Margot gave him a quick pat on the shoulder and said, "Fine, fine, just watch your beats a little closer next time, " and ran off toward the balance act, which was forming up in the back door. Tommy went to take off the pink costume and wig.
He went on again in the night show, and later that night, while the workhands were striking the show and breaking up the lot for the long haul to San Angelo, Margot knocked at the door of the Zane trailer. It was dim inside, for the power cable to the generator truck had already been unhooked. By the light of a kerosene lamp Tommy was helping his mother cram dishes inside the cupboards.
"Come in, Margot, " Beth Zane invited. "There's some coffee left—got to drink it up or throw it out. " She poured some into a paper cup.
Margot stood and sipped the bitter black coffee. "I want Tommy in the aerial ballet until Betsy is all right again. I'll see that he gets paid something, too. "

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"Aunt Marge, " Tommy blurted, "I was supposed to go on with the Santellis tomorrow in San Angelo, remember?"
"Well, we need you and they don't. I'll talk to Tonio. "
"Mother—" Tommy appealed, but Beth stood with her back to him, rinsing the coffeepot. "Do as you're told, Tom junior. "
"Yes, ma'am, " he said dejectedly. There was nothing else to say.
San Angelo, as they set up their show in the rodeo grounds outside town, looked smaller than last year, dirtier, dustier, bleaker. Tommy found it hard to imagine he had actually lived here from October to May last year, gone to school, known the local streets, made friends. Now it was just another town.
The Santellis had turned out early to supervise the setting

of their rigs. Angelo was at the top of the rigging, checking guy wires with a spirit level, but Mario, checking the net by the time-honored method of jumping up and down in it, stopped in midbounce to say good morning.
"Hey, something wrong, kid? You look like you lost two bits and found a nickel. "
Tommy told him what Margot had said, and Mario shook his head. "Tough luck. "
"Yeah, I really wanted to—"
"I mean tough luck Betsy breaking her foot, stupid! Look, there's going to be other towns. I'll talk to Papa Tony, but maybe coming on twice in one show would be a little bit too much. There's plenty of time. " He must have seen the bitter disappointment in Tommy's face, for he added with offhand kindness, "Sure, I guess it's tough luck for you, too, but even if you didn't get started till next year, we could still bill you as the youngest aerialist in America. Hey, Angelo, " he called, "Think we can bill Tommy, next year, as the youngest aerialist in the United States?"
"Not a chance, " Angelo shouted down. "That guy in Bloomington has a nine-year-old flying!"
"I'm not as young as all that, " Tommy said, nettled.
"No. and Josie isn't the oldest performing elephant in America, either, but it looks good on the posters. Hey, your act is waiting for you. Scram, " he added, turning away, and Tommy, fighting angry misery, ran to join the web act in rehearsal.
Before the afternoon show, while the crowds were waiting for the box office to open, Tommy went outside to locate his friends. He saw them from a distance and, ducking under the rope barrier, he called:
"Jeff, Nancy! Over here!"
"Hi, Tommy! Good to see you, pal. "
"Town's still here, I see. "
"Heck, no, it blew away last dust storm, " Nancy Marlin said. She was taller than Tommy this year and had bobbed her hair. He decided it looked better that way than in plaits. "What you been doing all summer?" she asked.
"Just traveling, like always. What you been doing?"
"Getting in shape for football this fall, mostly, " Jeff said, "and they got a new swimming pool here in town. You going to school here this winter?"

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"I don't know. I guess not; Dad says it's too dry here for the cats. "
"Too bad. I figured we'd be going out for football together, " Jeff said. "You're small but you handle yourself good. " He was looking past the rope barrier into the bustle behind the lot. "What all's going on back in there?"
"Want to come inside and look around?" Tommy offered.
"Will they let us?" Nancy asked.
Some youngsters were being firmly edged back from the barrier, but Tommy said with a small surge of arrogance, "Sure, they'll let you if you're with me. " He had made a point earlier that day of asking permission. Jeff and Nancy still looked skeptical as Tommy led them toward the barricade, but when the man there recognized him, nodded, and allowed them to duck under the rope, the skepticism gave way to respectful grins.
Tommy took them first to his family trailer to exchange courtesies with his mother, then led them around the backyard and the ring already set for the matinee. The wanted to see everything, were curious about everything, and Tommy, as he answered their questions, felt the morning's accumulation of frustration drain away. It was good to be looked at with respect, admired, not ordered around without ever being asked what he wanted!
"Are you in the show?" Nancy asked. "I'll look for you in the parade, the Grand March, whatever they call it. "
"Spec. It's short for spectacle. " Tommy started to tell then about the jungle float, then remembered he was in an aerial act, even if not with the flyers. He pointed out the swinging metal ladders of the aerial ballet. "I'm in the web act. Not regular, but one of the girls hurt her foot and I'm filling in. I wear a wig, though. "
"Up there?" They were obviously impressed. "How do you get up?"
"Just climb up the web. " They did not understand, so he repeated: "Up that rope. Like in the school gym. It's easy— I bet you could do it, Nancy. Lots of the girls in the act are about your age. "
"I'd be scared, " she said, and looked at him with awe. Jeff seemed impressed, too.
Tommy grabbed the rope and swarmed up. One of the workhands, setting rigs at the far end of the ring, came over and shouted, "Hey. you kids, keep off that rigging! Oh—it's

you, Tommy. Okay, but you keep the other kids off, you hear me?"
"It's okay, Bill, I was just showing them how easy it is, " Tommy said, swinging upside down in the small metal ladder in the circle, hanging briefly by his heels.
"Please come down, " Nancy begged in a small voice. "It makes me dizzy to watch you. "
Tommy slid down the rope. "It does look kind of easy at that, " Jeff remarked, but he sounded impressed. "I didn't know you were an acrobat—aerialist—whatever it is. "
"This isn't a real aerial act, " Tommy said scornfully, "but all summer I've been working with the Flying Santellis. " He led them over to the flying rig. "I

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was supposed to go on with them tonight, only they needed me for the web act. "
"Oh, go on, " Jeff scoffed. "You, up there?" He was looking with awe at the dizzying upward stretch of the cobwebby aerial ladder. "You? Way up there?"
"Sure, " Tommy said, but he realized suddenly that they did not believe him. It was his first experience with the way in which a truth, however stated and however sincere, can sound like a lie. He was almost relieved when it was time to take them out front to their seats and to dress for spec.
When it was time for the aerial ballet, today he felt surer. He knew the wig would not fall off when he spun or hung head downward, that he would not make any foolish mistakes in counting. Betsy was walking today, but her foot was still tightly bandaged. For the first time he wondered how old she was. She had been with the show for as long as he could remember. It seemed funny that anyone should still be doing this simple act at her age.
"Your wig's a little crooked. " She gave it a tug, smiling companionably. "How's your foot, Betsy?"
"Some better, " she said, "but the doctor told me to give it a good rest. And Margot says that all things considered, you are doing very nicely. So you can have the experience; it will do you no harm. "
Margot chuckled. "You're like an old fire horse, Betsy, always wanting to rush off to one more fire. "
"And proud of it, " Betsy agreed. "What else would I be doing? Running a mitt camp on the midway, maybe?"
"There's your music, " Margot said sharply. "You're on, girls!"

Tommy was sure enough of himself today to take a quick second look at the audience from the top of the web, to look for Jeff and Nancy in their seats. He had arranged to meet them after the show and go downtown with them. He felt calm and relieved, getting into his street clothes, and just a little proud of himself. If he'd made any mistakes today, they hadn't been big enough for Margot to tell him about. He was feeling a little cocky as he walked up to Jeff and Nancy, who were standing just inside the gate.
"Sorry I kept you waiting, " he greeted them.
Jeff laughed, and it was not a pleasant laugh. "Hey, Tommy, " he said, "you make a real cute girl. "
Nancy's giggle was shrill. "Where are those cute blonde curls, Tommy? Or maybe we ought to call you Tammy?"
"And oh, those pink ruffly skirts, " Jeff cooed.
"Cut it out, " Tommy said uneasily. He didn't mind being kidded, but he had the notion, somehow, that they were hitting below the belt. "Let's go and get that soda. Where we going, Walsh's?"
Nancy asked, "Are you always a girl with the circus, Tommy?"
"No—no, of course not. " Tommy wondered why they were making such a fuss about it. "Only, like I say, one of the girls hurt her foot, so they let me fill in today. "

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"Let you? They couldn't make me, " Jeff said. "They couldn't pay me to put on those ruffly skirts and blonde curls and go out in front of all those folks!"
"Oh, " Nancy said, with a high sweet giggle, "I think he makes a darling girl. Hey, Jeff, you reckon they'll put Tommy in the girls' gym class this winter?"
Tommy realized, too late, that they were not just joining in a good joke. They were deriding him. "Quit that, " he said angrily. "Somebody had to work the act while Betsy was hurt! If you think it's so darn funny, I'd like to see you do it!"
"Oh, " said Jeff in a falsetto, "I think you were real cute! Hey, Nancy, we'll have to get all the kids down here tonight —the fellows will have to see this! Beauties of the Big Top, they call it? Hey, Beauty of the Big Top—" He sidled up to Tommy and said in a suggestive whisper, "Hey, cutie, you like a date? How'd you like to be my girl?"
Tommy felt a blind rage surging up over him, wiping out sanity. He rushed at Jeff and hit him.

The next thing he knew, Pick Leighty was hauling them all apart. Tommy had a long scratch below his left eye, and his mouth was swelling from a blow, but Jeff's nose had begun bleeding, and one eye was shut. He had the last word, sneering, "Hey, you fight real good for a girl!"
"Go on, now! You town kids get off the lot!" Pick gave Jeff an angry shove and scowled at Nancy. He bent and picked up her hair ribbon and threw it at her. "Nice manners for a young lady, a guest on the lot!" he said scornfully, pushing Jeff toward the gate. But as they walked off, he turned his anger on Tommy.
"I'm ashamed of you, young Tom! Ask, like a special favor, can you bring your pals on the lot, and then you get into knock-down-and-drag-outs in the backyard! And fighting a girl, too! If I was your father, I'd give you a licking you'd remember for three seasons! Come to think of it, when that eye swells up, you won't need no licking!"
Tommy stared at the ground and slunk away. His mouth was puffy and tasted of blood, and his knuckles were sore. He felt as if he were going to cry, but his eye hurt too much to shed tears.
He had boasted of being an aerialist, an acrobat. And all he was, was a girl dancer, a silly-looking thing, in foolish pink skirts and a blonde wig. Probably everybody in the stands was laughing at him because they could see he was a boy dressed up in girl's clothes. And Jeff had seen his shame. Jeff would tell all his school friends, kids he'd known and liked, that he worked in the circus in a blonde wig and pink tarlatan skirts!
Maybe it was his own fault for bragging that he worked in the show! Maybe he deserved it! He lagged across the lot, sunk in self-disgust. His mother was putting supper on the table when he finally slouched in. She frowned at him. "You're late, " she said. Then, "Tommy, have you been in a fight? Your mouth, your eye—"
"No, ma'am, " he fibbed, crossing his fingers behind his back. "I hit my head on a—a corner of the ladder. "

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"And you skinned your knuckles on a corner of the ladder, and split your lip on it, too?"
"Leave him alone, Beth, " Tom Zane, said from the sink where he was washing his hands. "You can't expect a boy to tattle about a fight. Come get washed for dinner, Junior. "

Tommy only poked at his plate, but his mother's sharp eyes noticed that, too. "Aren't you eating anything?"
He had to lie again. "I had a couple of hot dogs at the grease wagon. "
"You shouldn't fill yourself up with that junk, " his mother scolded.
"Never mind. He can have a bite after the night show, " his father said.
Tommy guessed what his father was thinking: that Tommy was edgy about the show tonight. He was, but not in the way his father thought. What was making him sick was the knowledge that he would have to put on that awful pink gauze costume and go out, dressed up as a girl, in front of the whole town, people he had gone to school with last year. He muttered an excuse to his mother and hurried after his father, finally cornering him near the wild-animal cages. He knew it was a major crime to disturb his father with any personal matter just before a show, but his pain and confusion were so great he risked it.
"Dad, I got to ask you something. Do you think—do you think they laugh at me because I wear a girl's costume in the web act?"
Tom Zane was checking his whips and props, laying them out for the performance. "Why should they? A performer wears what they tell him to wear. "
"Dad, " he said, "do I have to go on with the web act?"
His father turned and stared. "Now, you listen here, " he said. "For the last two years every other word out of you has been trapeze, trapeze, trapeze. Now you got started in the show, you do what they tell you, you wear what they give you, and you don't argue about it. Confound it, Son, I'm busy now! Scram!"
He scrammed. His father's words might have been some comfort—A performer wears what they tell him to wear— but they did not banish the memory of Jeff's mocking face, the lewd suggestiveness in his words. How'd you like to be my girl? He felt sick. And his father hadn't even been listening!
There was one person he could ask. Mario. He wondered if Mario would have agreed to put on a pink costume and blonde wig and go on with the girls. The idea was ridiculous; for some unknown reason it made him feel a little sicker.
But the long dark rigging truck, which had the words the FLYING SANTELLIS emblazoned across the full length of the truck,

and which the Santellis used as a dressing room before the performance, was dark and deserted. He even sought out their house trailer, something he had never ventured to do before, but it too was dark and there was no answer to

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his knock. They must have gone to have dinner in town, Tommy thought as he turned away into the shadows, his throat aching.
It wasn't fair! Papa Tony had promised he could start with the flying act in San Angelo, where he had friends, but instead he was all fouled up in a ballet act wearing pink skirts, with all his school friends seeing him as a girl and making dirty cracks!
He wandered disconsolately through the backyard, not knowing what he was looking for. A couple of the little girls with the show were jumping rope outside their family trailer. A clown, his face already made up, was sitting in a trailer door combing the hair of a poodle and putting a ruff around its neck. Ellen Brady, outside the large trailer that held her family—she had four younger brothers—was taking down a long line of washing, tights and diapers and rompers all mingled. He knocked at the door of Margot's trailer, and Margot put her head out.
"Hi, Tom, you're early. Want to take the costume with you?"
He blinked in the light from the door. "I came to ask, how is Betsy's foot? Okay again?"
"Well, she thinks so. I don't. What's the matter, Tom? Not feeling good? Come on in. "
He stepped up into the trailer. Betsy was there, her foot propped up, and Little Ann was eating a sandwich, a towel around her hair. He said shakily, "Aunt Marge, the kids here in town—they all know me here. I can't go on in a girl's costume! I just can't do it!"
Little Ann put down her sandwich. "But that's silly!" she protested. "They're just a lot of townie kids, civilians. What do you care what they think?"
"Aunt Marge, Betsy said her foot was all right. I—I just can't, " Tommy said desperately. "Honest, I'd rather lie right down here and die than put on that dress and wig and go out in front of all those kids who know me from my school!"
"Now, you listen here, Tommy Zane—" Margot began, but Betsy interrupted. "Aw, let the boy be, Margot. I heard about it. A couple of

children from his school, this afternoon, tormenting him and trying to beat him up. Children, they can be cruel—how well I know! My foot will be holding up well enough—"
"Oh, Betsy, could you? Just here in this town—"
"Betsy, you know very well what the doctor said, " Margot interrupted, turning on Tommy angrily. 'Tommy, I'm ashamed of you! You have no right—
"
"Margot, he's a boy, " Betsy said. "Don't I know, and my own boy just like him at that age? And now out in the Pacific fighting the Japs. I'll manage with the foot, Tommy. Run along, now. " Betsy braced herself against the metal door. The corners of her mouth whitened, but Tommy refused to see. She ought to know, he told himself. She ought to know about her own darned old foot! He stepped away from the lighted door.
"Yes, " said a deeper, scornful voice, "run along, little boy!"
Tommy felt it like a dousing of ice water. "Mario?"

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Mario was standing in the dusk near the trailer. In his town clothes he looked like a stranger, a dark, hostile, unfamiliar stranger. His black curls were slicked down with a fresh haircut; beneath the slanting brows his eyes blazed.
"Mario, I—"
"Oh, I heard. " Mario cut him off with a scornful gesture. "I came to ask Margot— Well, no matter. And here I thought— Oh, hell, I wouldn't trust you to run a cotton candy concession! Believe it or not, I thought you were pretty well ready to call yourself a performer, and here I find out you're just a damn crybaby kid!"
He cut off Tommy's protest with a gesture of dismissal.
"Go on, run along—va la, va la, ragazzo—run along, keep out of the way—some of us have work to do! Scram, run along, get lost, you!"
Tommy didn't try to answer. He bent his head and scuttled away. He had felt ready to cry, but now he wanted to die of shame.
His family trailer was dark; his father would be checking the drops on the cages, his mother helping Ma Leighty with the costumes. He ought to be there now. He gulped, trying to hold back a flood of tears. Crybaby kid. They came anyway.
Mario's words hurt worst. Tommy had let Jeff, an outsider, make him ashamed of being what he was: an acrobat,

a performer who did what he was told and didn't think about himself, just about what he was doing. How could he expect to be a flyer, if he didn't have the gumption to put on a wig and a few yards of gauze because it looked silly? Well, it looked a lot sillier to have an empty spot in the act, or somebody up there who didn't know the routine!
What made him think anyone even looked at him, anyhow? He was just another pink skirt. Now probably Margot would never let him fill in again. And as for Mario—Mario was probably through with him.
He heard the first blare of noise from the band and the booming of Big Jim's voice—not the words, just the sound through the loudspeaker. The noise, the sound, the music of the band, the laughter and screams of the kids in the audience. Oh, murder, he ought to be there! Had he gone completely nuts? Who was going to be riding his float? It would be the only time he'd missed in six years, not since he had the mumps when he was a little kid! Ma Leighty would be mad at him, too, now, and his mother. What had gotten into him? Ma Leighty trusted him! And when his father heard about it... Dad hadn't spanked him for a couple of years, but this time he wouldn't blame his father for breaking his neck.
I really fouled it up this time!
There was a heavy banging on his trailer door.
"Tommy! Hey, you in there?"
Tommy fumbled for the light switch. His mouth felt dry. In the harsh light outside, Mario looked drawn and grownup. He had on the gold tights of his costume, and a heavy sweater over it. "Tommy, damn it, where you been hiding out? Little Ann's hunting you all over the backyard! Get yourself over there—pronto, presto!"

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"Listen, you heard her tell me—"
"No, you listen, you young rascal, " Mario said coldly. "While you sat back here feeling sorry for yourself, Betsy stepped down hard on that bad foot of hers and passed out! This time she's probably torn a tendon. You don't belong in the show, I grant that. If I were three inches shorter, I'd put on the damn costume myself and go up before I'd let you set foot in the ring! But you're the right size and you know the routines, so you get yourself the hell over there where you belong, or I'll kick you every step of the way!"

Tommy opened his mouth to speak and Mario grabbed his shoulder and shook him. "Not one word, damn it!"
With a sudden, desperate urgency, Tommy said, "Mario, wait—"
Mario let him go and said, coldly, "You got about twelve minutes. What is it?" Then, changing his tone, "Hey— Tommy, what's the matter, kid?"
"Mario—" Tommy was struggling to keep a hold on himself. "I got to ask you something. Jeff said—Jeff said—" His throat closed as the pain of the memory caught at him. Would Mario brush it aside casually, put him off with a casual What do you care what they think?
But Mario, hands in his sweater pocket, eyes alert, was looking straight at him. "Okay, kid, okay. What's eating on you? Come on, you can tell me. What's happened?"
Tommy blurted out, "He said— He acted like there had to be something wrong with me. With any boy who'd wear a girl's costume—act like a girl... " His throat closed again. "He—he acted like I was a girl—asked me for a date—he was bein' funny. Only it wasn't funny... " He couldn't go on.
Mario's face was unreadable in the darkness. He didn't speak at once, and Tommy, braced against instant, offhand, uncaring reassurance, tensed, then, slowly, relaxed.
Mario said at last, almost in a whisper, "Christ, I should have known. So that's it! I should have known-—you're about that age, it would bother you. Okay, listen, Tom. You know who Shakespeare was?"
Tommy, startled by the non-sequitur, said slowly, "I guess I heard about him in school. He was a writer, wasn't he? He wrote Hamlet, or something like that?"
"Well, yes. Only, one of the things he wrote was 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. ' So tell me, do you feel like a girl when you wear that costume, do you want to be a girl?"
"Christ, no!" Tommy yelled. "What do you think I am?"
"That's the whole point, " Mario said in the darkness beside him. "You are what you think you are. If it doesn't make you feel like a girl inside, okay, then, it's just a costume. If it made you feel wrong inside, like you were really a girl, then I'd say don't wear it, put up a fight about it. But if you feel like a man inside, who the hell cares what you wear in the show? Anything a man does is manly, isn't it?

Or do you think you have to go around with your fists up, or slinging guns like Tom Mix, to make yourself feel like a man?"

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Tommy suddenly felt foolish—foolish, but relieved at the same time. He said, "You don't think I look too much like a girl?"
"Hell, no, " Mario responded immediately, and as they came into the lights near Margot's trailer, his sober face cracked suddenly into a grin. "Ragazzo, there's nothing effeminate about you. You don't look like a girl, you don't walk like a girl, you don't fly like a girl—and I started flying with my sister, so I know what I'm talking about. Nobody could take you for a girl, even in that costume, except the rubes in the grandstand, and if you care what they think, you're in the wrong business. "
That is what his father had said, what Margot had said; but for some reason, coming from Mario, the truth hit home. Tommy let out a long, shaking sigh. He no longer felt like crying.
"Go on, " Mario said, "your act's waiting for you. If you were two years older, they'd soak you with a fine for missing spec. You want to be treated like a trouper, Tom, you better start acting like one. Go on—better run. "
He ran, not looking back. Margot's trailer was confusion, filled with girls and fluttering skirts, powder, gauze. Tommy stepped in, hesitantly.
"Tommy, thank goodness!" Margot seemed not to remember that he had been there before. She thrust an armful of pink tarlatan at him. "You haven't got time to go back to your trailer and change, just step back in the kitchen. "
He went meekly, shucking his clothes in the cramped space between stove and icebox, pulling on the ruffled costume. He came out tying the slippers. The girls had all vanished in a flutter of pink. Betsy Gentry was lying in Little Ann's bunk bed, a faded kimono wrapped around her. She looked very small. Her ankle was resting on a burlap bag filled with ice from the snow cone stand, dripping on a piece of oilcloth.
Tommy stopped beside her.
"Betsy, why didn't you tell me?"
"Because she's a performer with a show to do, " Margot said brusquely. "Hurry up, Tommy. Your face is a mess. " She flung a wet washrag at him, and Tommy, realizing his

face was smeared with tears and dirt, submitted meekly to the indignity of letting Margot scrub his face.
As he was hurrying toward the entrance (he saw with relief that he was not late, that the group of pink-clad girls and women were still waiting there), he remembered again that his school friends would see him performing as a girl. But it didn't seem to matter now.
Why should he care what they thought? He was an acrobat, doing what he'd been trained to do, and what the show required. Maybe, behaving like a crybaby kid, he'd lost Mario's special friendship and interest. But he could get back his own respect.
The band had gone into the opening bars of the "Pink Lady Waltz"; he heard Zelda, beside him, whispering the counts under her breath. Then he was on the rope, climbing, and the faces in the stands were blurred out by the lights. The world out there was real, more real than he had ever been able to believe—but it would never have any power over him again.

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CHAPTER 3

during the intermission, while the pitchmen were selling peanuts, cotton candy, and toy monkeys on strings, Tommy sat in his gym shorts and sweater, watching the acts form up for the second half of the program. He had seen a couple of faces he knew in the audience. No one had been laughing, and one boy who had been in his grade last year had given him a friendly wave. Maybe Jeff and Nancy had only wanted to take him down a peg or two for bragging. What difference did it make?

None, in him. And yet he realized, without knowing just why, that somehow something very important had happened to him, that he had surmounted some crucial crisis without even knowing for certain just what it was.

Shuffles Small, the wirewalker, was standing in the entrance in his silver and white costume, getting ready to go on; he opened the second half of the show.

"Are you still here?" he said to Tommy. "Tonio Santelli was looking for you a few minutes ago—you're supposed to be over at their trailer.

You got a lot to learn about timing a show, kid. Better get along over there as fast as you can. "

Tommy went in the direction indicated. Already there were large bare gaps appearing in the backyard; workhands and rigging men were striking the riggings and apparatus from the first half of the show. The aerial ballet riggings, the poles and circles and webs, had come down and were being loaded into one of the trucks; the cage truck with the lions had already pulled out. Tommy reached the rigging truck with the FLYING SANTELLIS on the side, and saw Papa Tony scowling at him from the doorway.

"What's the matter with you? You forgot? This of all things you forgot, that Lambeth said we start you in San Angelo?"

"No, but I thought—Mario said—"

"Mario does not yet do the thinking for this act, young man. Lambeth says we start you out in San Angelo—very well, we start you out in San Angelo. Anyway, we have the duo rigging up; it was put up this morning. You come out with us, stand on the platform. Then we open with the duo routines, so we can get the second rigging up, out of our way. After that, you can handle the ropes, nothing more this time. "

"Honest?" Tommy hardly dared to believe it.

"You think I talk for the pleasure of hearing myself? But not in your shorts! Go inside and they will find you some tights, " Papa Tony ordered and then walked off.

Inside the trailer Mario and Angelo were standing in front of the board they used for a dressing table. Mario was shaking out the green and gold capes they wore into the ring. Angelo nodded curtly at Tommy. "About time you got here! Next time, get over here during intermission, remember? Here, get Into these. " He felt out a pair of faded green tights. "They're mine, but I guess they'll fit. Just tie the tapes good and tight—you don't want them falling down around your fanny in the ring. You really would look like a damn fool then. "

"Fine time to start talking about people making damn fools of themselves. In case you meant me. " Mario was in a foul mood.

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Angelo handed Tommy a green singlet top with a gold stripe down the front, like the one he was wearing. "Calm down, Matt, your temperament is showing. I mean it, kid, you sit down and have a cigarette or do some deep-breathing

exercises or something. You walk out there looking like that, and Papa won't let you try it, I'm telling you. No, I'm warning you!"
Mario muttered something savage in Italian. Angelo came over to Tommy, who was nervously smoothing up the scratchy wool tights. Angelo showed him how to fasten the tapes and tuck the ends inside. Then he wound a fold of gauze around Tommy's wrists so the adhesive would not burn his skin and strapped adhesive tape over it. "That too tight? Tell me now if it is, and I'll fix it. "
"No, it's okay. "
Angelo had never paid so much attention to Tommy before. Under ordinary conditions Tommy was a little afraid of him, but right now he was too shaky to think about it. He had never been allowed to hang around when the Santellis were actually getting ready for a performance. There was none of the laughter and good-natured horseplay of rehearsal; they were quiet, and tense, and deadly serious.
"Your hair's got sand in it. Here. " Angelo handed him a comb. It was not any too clean, but Tommy used it without comment.
Mario was still standing in front of the mirror, settling the green-and-gold cape over his shoulders. He turned around. As always in the bright stage costume, he looked larger, his face dark, the slanted eyebrows giving his features a faintly satanic look. He said shortly, "When we go in the ring, you walk between Angelo and Papa Tony. You've seen the propman taking our capes?" Tommy nodded. "You do that tonight; it will give the audience a good look at you. Papa Tony's first, then Angelo's, then mine, then give them to the rigging man—you know the bit. Just don't rush it. "
Angelo looped his cape at his throat. Tommy had none; he was just a spare part, an extra man. They walked across the backyard toward the entrance, arriving just as the band crashed into the slow, impressive music that heralded the entrance of the flyers. For the hundredth time, Tommy resolved to ask one of them what it was, and realized he would probably forget again.
"Come on. " Angelo took his elbow and steered him toward the entrance.
Mario still hadn't spoken. Tommy knew that some performers were more nervous than others before they went into the ring—he himself felt as if he'd be lucky
to get as far as the foot of the flying rig without being sick—

but Mario looked as if he were walking in his sleep. Angelo gave Tommy a quick, tight grin, then said in a whisper, "Okay, kid, take it easy, you've done it a hundred times, no reason this time should be any different. " He reached past Tommy and grabbed Mario's elbow.

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"You're guyed-out, Matt, tight as a tent. You still feeling lucky? I don't mind, if you don't. "
Mario said something, but Tommy didn't hear what it was, for the voice of Jim Lambeth was booming over the speakers:
"The Flying Santellis... "
Tommy took a deep breath. He felt wobbly, as if his legs were not quite long enough to touch the ground. He tried to walk the way they did, in measured slow steps, looking neither left nor right. As the solemn entrance music changed without a transition into a graceful, swaying waltz, Tommy reached right and left, taking the heavy capes and passing them to the rigging man. He was last on the ladder and the lights were shining in his eyes. As he stepped on the platform it felt oddly like the first time; his feet were not quite steady. Then he found his balance, as he took hold of the side rope. Mario's hand was hard and steady on his shoulder.
He was cold, inside and out. The floodlights made the trapeze bars look oddly different, thin strange dark lines, and Angelo, and Papa Tony on the second catcher's trapeze for this opening trick, looked strange, larger than usual. He only half heard what Big Jim was saying:
"Appearing for the first time anywhere... youngest trapeze flyer regularly appearing with any circus in America... first time the Santellis are joined by a new member of their troupe... Mario and Tommy Santelli on the duo rigging "
As they pulled down the bar, Mario whispered, "You can see all right with the lights?"
"Sure. "
"All right—now!'"
The inside count clicked off without any need for conscious thought. One: four hands slapping on the bar with a single sound. Two: the long outward swoop, the high, flexed kick and return. Three: the backswing for momentum—and in a flash under the unfamiliar lights, Tommy saw the thin dark line of the net below. Four: the launching sweep into space, the slapping of Papa Tony's hands around his wrists,

the sudden weight on his shoulders... knowing, not seeing, Mario smacking into Angelo's grip, the identical curve and flex of their bodies as they swung together, practiced until it was reflex, automatic. The backswing, the shift to face the platform, the swing boosted across empty space, the split-second numbing terror of which he was never quite free at this point—if the trapeze had blown sidewise, even a little, in the wind—the heart-stopping relief of feeling it safe and squarely caught in their four hands, balanced, no ragged catch to make it slip to one side or the other. Palms gripping. Long roll of drums, or was it his heart pounding? His feet jolted on the platform and he heard the applause, his first, rolling up, surging, like the pounding of blood in his head. Strangely, he felt no exhilaration, no pride, only a curious, drained relaxation. Exhilaration would come later.
He watched the second trapeze being drawn up out of the way. Later—he had heard this discussed—he would make a cross in this empty space in the show.

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But not this first time. Papa Tony joined them on the platform. Mario pulled down the slightly narrower single bar. "Okay, " he whispered, "you're through. Just keep clear. "
Tommy stood at one end of the pedestal, alert, watching the tricks that had become so familiar he could see them in his sleep: Mario's back double, Papa Tony's forward two-and-a-half, the midair pass.
Mario, nervously rubbing his wrists, whispered, "Give me plenty of room. "
Papa Tony passed the bar to Mario and said something under his breath. Tommy could not hear the words, but they had the lift of a question. Mario nodded. Papa Tony raised his hand, signaling Lambeth. Usually this last trick, which closed the act, was the two-and-a-twist—the difficult double somersault with a half twist in between. Papa Tony usually finished the act, although once in a while, lately, Mario had done so instead. Tonight, it was Mario's name that Big Jim called out.
"And now... ladies and gentlemen... direct your attention to the high trapeze.... The most difficult of all aerial feats... Mario Santelli will attempt a triple somersault to his catcher's hands.... Mario Santelli!"
Tommy gasped aloud. I didn't know he was going to try that tonight....
Mario swung out, with a high, flexed, driving swing. He

made an extra backswing for momentum, then drove his trapeze forward again, upward and upward to an almost unbelievable height. At the last moment before the ropes buckled, he flipped off the bar, snapping back into a closely tucked somersault at incredible velocity; then a second, unbelievably higher than the first; a third, in falling momentum.... Tommy had forgotten how to breathe... At the last split second Mario straightened, and Tommy felt, with a jolt that hurt him, deep inside, the wrists slamming into Angelo's hands, the grip that slid, locked just at the moment when it seemed that another instant's swing must throw him backward into the darkness beyond the catcher.
Tommy felt that his own harsh breath was louder than the sudden screams and applause from the seats. Mario and Angelo swung together, locked wrist-to-hand and hand-to-wrist, and Angelo was beaming.
Then Mario swung back to the pedestal, dropping off lightly. Turning to the audience, he flung up his hand in a stylish gesture and waited for the resurgence of applause.
It came, storming higher and higher—louder, it seemed to Tommy, than any applause he had ever heard. Then, one by one, they were diving into the net, somersaulting over the edge and out of the ring, and the clowns were running in for the finale.
Tommy had almost forgotten that tonight he had fulfilled his own years-long daydream. So, even facing his own ordeal by fire, Mario had been willing to spare time and energy to come and shake some sense into him! Tommy felt numb and ashamed.
Just beyond the canvas flap of the performers' entrance, Angelo whirled and grabbed Mario in an exuberant bear hug. Papa Tony was beaming at them with an inner glow, radiating pride and happiness. Mario looked white and

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shaken; he had begun to shiver, and Tommy, reaching for the pile of capes on a prop box, flung one of them around Mario's shoulders. Mario managed a grin.
"Some show, hey, kid?"
Hardly realizing what he did, Tommy threw his arms around Mario's waist and hugged him. Mario held him hard for a moment, and Tommy gasped, "You did it! You did the triple! But why didn't you tell me—why didn't you even tell me you were going to try it tonight... ?"
Mario sounded almost like himself again when he laughed.

"I figured you had enough on your mind for one night. C'mon, c'mon, let's quit blocking the entrance here!"
Neither Angelo nor Papa Tony had said a word to Tommy about what he had done. Tommy felt that was quite proper, that all their attention and excitement should go to Mario. They walked back toward the rigging truck to change, Mario's hand on Tommy's shoulder. After a minute he lifted it, asking, "What's this, Tom?"
Startled, a little confused, Tommy put up his hand to the little medal, which was pinned inside the singlet top. Quite automatically, completely without conscious thought, he had transferred it from his shirt to his costume, pinning it into the neckline without being aware of doing so. This was the first time he had noticed it. He felt himself blushing.
"Oh, " he said, "it's that thing. That medal. Heck, you gave it to me!"
"Well, I'll be damned, " Mario said softly. "I guess he's looking after us both, then. I guess I was right; I figured you'd be—lucky for me. "
His eyes, dark and glowing, were intent on Tommy's. They stood like that for a minute. Mario's hand on his shoulder. Then the older boy sighed and laughed.
"Run along, Lucky. Your family will be wanting to know you didn't break your neck, too. "
"Mario, you're a wonder, " someone boomed out, and Tommy saw Jim Lambeth standing in front of the rigging truck. Behind him was a crowd of performers still in costume. They swarmed in to congratulate Mario, and Tommy, not wanting to infringe even for an instant on Mario's moment of triumph, slipped silently away Into the darkness.
As he ran across the backyard to his parents' trailer, Tommy heard someone call his name. He stopped. Little Ann, a coat pulled on over the costume she wore with her mother in the tumbling act, hurried toward him.
"Why didn't you tell me you were going on with the Santellis? Listen, I think that was a mean trick!"
"What was a mean trick? I don't get it. What did I do?"
"Not you, Mario, " she said vehemently. "Didn't he even tell you he was going to do a triple tonight and spoil everything?"
"What are you talking about?" Tommy demanded, confused. "I don't think he told anybody except Angelo, but he's

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been trying to do it all season. Heck, the whole show knows he's been working on it! What's the matter?"
"Everybody's so crazy excited about it, they've clean forgotten about it being your first performance, " Little Ann said crossly. "A new flyer in an act is worth making a little fuss about, darn it! I bet he did it on purpose. He's got such a swelled head he can't stand thinking of anybody else getting any special attention!"
Tommy scowled at her, baffled, bewildered, and just a little angry. "Good grief, don't you have the faintest idea of what Mario's just done? The triple somersault, Little Ann! Don't you know what that means? Only two or three other flyers in the whole world ever did it, and nobody's done it lately except Barney Parrish, and he got smashed up doing it! And Jim Fortunati, with the Big Show—he's center ring at Starr's! And you think they ought to make a fuss over me? Little Ann, I think you must be nuts or something!"
She stepped back as if he had hit her. "Well, excuse me for living!" she said angrily, then turned and ran away toward her own trailer. Tommy took a step to follow her— she was his best friend, and he hadn't meant to make her mad—then shrugged and let it go. What did it matter, anyway? He wondered, suddenly, if his father had seen him in the ring.
A week later, the Lambeth Circus broke up for the whiter. Tommy had appeared every night with the Santellis, and in one matinee performance. Mario had attempted the triple only once more. On the last day, after the matinee, Tommy was helping his mother clear the trailer for the long haul to winter quarters when he looked up and saw Mario standing in the door of the trailer. He ran out to him.
"Tommy, we're pulling out right after the night show. I probably won't see you to speak to, just in the act. I thought I'd say good-bye now. " He hesitated, put a hand on the boy's shoulders. "Where you spending the winter?"
"Lambeth winter quarters, somewhere in Texas. I forget what town. Why?"
"Oh, you never know, I might send you a Christmas card or something. Actually, Papa Tony asked me to find out. " He hesitated, seemed about to say something more, then said, "Okay, see you next season, I guess. "
"Unless they draft you in the Army, " Tommy said. "How

come you stayed out this long anyway? You got flat feet or something?"
Mario's face shut tight, like a steel trap. "Or something. You ask too goddamn many nosy questions. "
"Hey, don't get mad, " Tommy pleaded.
Mario sighed and shrugged. "Okay, okay. Look, I got to get back. Angelo's prowling around like a bear with a sore tail, worrying about whether we're going to make it to California on those tires. " His hand still rested on Tommy's shoulder. He touched, briefly, the lump the little metal tag made inside the neckline of Tommy's shirt and murmured something in Italian, of which Tommy knew only a few words. Then Mario turned his back, lifted his hand briefly in farewell, and walked away.
Beth Zane was packing pots and pans into a crate when Tommy returned to the trailer. "Come here and help me with this. Did Mario want something?"

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"Just saying good-bye till next year. "
She glanced sideways at him. "I suppose—" she began, then stopped.
"Mother, you speak Italian, don't you?"
"I used to, a little. You pick it up when you study music. Not a whole lot. Why?"
Tommy stumbled to remember unfamiliar words.
"Tu sei—I didn't get all of it. Fortuna. And sventura—"
"You're sure? Fortuna—that's luck, good fortune. And sventura—you're sure about that? That's bad luck, trouble. Something about good or bad luck, I guess. Did he say that? Maybe it's some kind of proverb or old saying, but it's funny he wouldn't tell you. "
"I guess he was wishing me good luck instead of bad, " Tommy said, and quickly went to finish his work, but he had put the phrase together by now. Mario had called him "Lucky" a few times. But now what he had said was You are my luck... good luck or bad. Tommy carried the words inside himself just as he carried the little medal pinned inside the collar of his shirt, as a talisman, without quite knowing why.

CHAPTER 4

A high November wind was blowing late-falling leaves from the trees as Tommy walked slowly home from school. The sun had already dropped over the edge of the world, and the leafless trees wavered, like a limp net, above him.
The small house where he and his mother were spending the winter was lighted up inside, for he was late. His father lived fifteen miles away, on the grounds of the circus winter quarters. Tommy had never quite understood his mother's refusal to live there. None of them ever put it into words.
He did not really see less of his father, for Tom Zane came home almost every day, but the distance created an odd, disjointed sense that the world was split into two parts. And that fifteen miles made some sort of indefinable difference to his mother. What, he couldn't understand, but it was there, and he had found out before he was ten that he couldn't discuss the topic with his mother.
The living room was empty; a smell of cooking came from the kitchen. Tommy put his books in his bedroom and sat down on his bed, kicking aimlessly with one sneaker.
It was a bare and characterless room, the furniture cheap and showing the marks of many past tenants. The floor was swept and bare; the dresser was painted white, strewn with his toilet articles. He had added nothing to the room except a few photographs tacked up on the poison-green walls. One was a large autographed glossy photograph of the Flying Fortunatis—center-ring attraction with the Starr Circus— which Margot Clane had given him two years ago. She had known the Fortunatis years ago, and the photo was autographed across the bottom: "With love to Margot from Cleo, Lionel, Jim. " The second picture, cut from a magazine years ago, was a blurred halftone of a man in tights, just seizing a trapeze bar in a pirouette. It was the only picture Tommy had ever been able to find of the great Barney Parrish, who

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had invented the triple thirty years before. The third was a snapshot Little Ann had taken with her birthday camera; she had had an extra print made for him. Snapped at re-

hearsal, it showed Mario, Angelo, and himself at the foot of the aerial ladder, all in practice clothes.

Tommy propped his chin in his hands, and stared at the wall. He had stayed late every evening at school for a month to practice with the group trying out for the basketball team. He had thought it was an oversensitive imagination when he felt persistent unfriendliness around him. He was too small for a guard, of course, but he was fast on his feet and quick at the game, and he never missed a basket shot. He felt he had a good right to hope. That afternoon, getting back into his street clothes, he had looked up to see the coach watching him.

"Come into my office a minute when you're finished, Zane. "

"Yes, sir. " Hastily Tommy tied up his shoelaces, then slammed his sneakers and gym suit into the locker and went down the hall to the coach's office.

Coach Seymour was a small man, wiry and muscular. He looked up at Tommy with level, unrevealing eyes. "You're a fine player, Zane, " he said at last. "No reason I shouldn't tell you, you're probably the best player down there. But then, I'm sure you know that. "

The emphasis puzzled Tommy. "Thanks, sir. I know I'm too short, but I've tried hard. "

"Sit down, Zane. What's your name—Tom? Well, Tom, I was making up the team lists, and I was all ready to put you on the squad, and then I found out there was a few things I didn't know about you. " Suddenly the coach's voice became hostile. "For instance... you are a professional acrobat, aren't you?"

"Who told you?" Tommy demanded.

"Never mind that. Your parents are circus people, aren't they? And you yourself have appeared professionally in the ring as a gymnast?"

"Why—not much—"

"Tell me about it, won't you? Doing what?"

Tommy sat on the hard chair, baffled by the mixture of curiosity and hostility in the man's stare, as if Tommy had done something dishonest. "Well, when you spend all your summers with the circus, it sort of soaks in. Tumbling, horizontal bars, that sort of stuff. And I got interested in flying-trapeze, you know—and one of the flyers taught me. But I

wasn't really in an act—only a few times, to fill in if somebody was hurt or something. "

"But you have appeared in the ring professionally as part of the show?"

"Sure, sometimes, " he said, more baffled than ever.

"Well, then, Zane. You know, of course, that schoolboy athletics are all amateur events. There's been some—talk— about choosing you, a professional gymnast, to go into competition with schoolboys who haven't had your special advantages. Under the circumstances, it seems a bit fairer to the other boys not to put you on the team. "

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For a minute Tommy felt as if he had dived from the rigging to suddenly discover the net was not where it belonged. Then the dignity he had learned, painfully, in the ring came to his aid. He sat up very straight.
"Whatever you say, sir. It's up to you. "
"We wouldn't want to take unfair advantage of the other boys. "
"No, sir, " Tommy said stiffly. What advantage? I don't play basketball with the circus!
"Nothing personal, you know. It could happen to anyone. Why, the Olympic star Jim Thorpe—you know who he was? —was disqualified from the Olympics because he spent one year as a professional when he wasn't much older than you. "
Coach Seymour kept him a few more minutes, asking foolish questions about the circus, as if to prove there were no hard feelings. But Tommy answered his questions noncommittally and escaped as soon as he could.
Now, in his room, he thought about the hostility, and the distance, and about something else. He could keep himself in condition, physically. But all the precise details of timing, precision, and balance demanded practice as well as skill. Next summer it would take him weeks, if not months, to get back to where he'd been in September. Performers all took a vacation at the end of the season, but not such a long layoff. He ought to be working, training, rehearsing. It had been different when he was just an amateur, working haphazardly when someone had time to teach him. But if he wanted to perform on tour next year—and he knew he did want to, knew it was the only thing he wanted—he ought to be rehearsing. With somebody.
He kicked off his shoes and went into the kitchen for a glass of milk, but as he was opening the icebox he heard his

father's voice in the other bedroom. Startled, he opened his mouth to call out, then quickly shut it. for he heard something he had never heard before: his father's voice raised in anger. Like all the men who work with the big cats, Tom Zane moved quickly but never unexpectedly, and he had a remarkably even, low voice. But now he was shouting, and he was in a rage.
"God damn it, yes, and among other things it would mean you could square it with your conscience to stop this nonsense and come live in winter quarters with me! Don't be so damnably difficult, Beth!"
"Tom, he's only fourteen. He ought to have a normal life. School parties, and dates with girls, and basketball games, and baseball, and fishing—"
"It's already too late for that, sweetheart. Look, maybe it's my fault—I wanted you and the kid on the road with me every summer. But Tommy—where he's concerned, you've got to admit—"
Very quietly Tommy tiptoed into his bedroom. He put on his shoes and came walking noisily into the kitchen again. "Hey, Mother, I'm home. "
His parents came out into the kitchen and Tommy pretended surprise. "Hey, Dad, what you doing home on Wednesday?"
"I have to have a reason these days?"
Tommy shrugged. "You're late, Tommy. What happened?" his mother asked.
"I had to talk to the coach. I'm not going to be on the basketball team. "

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"What happened, Son?" Tom Zane asked.
"Coach said—I guess there's some rule about it—I was a professional acrobat. So I'm not eligible or something. I didn't tell him—somebody must have heard about it. He said it wasn't fair to the other kids. "
"You see?" Elizabeth Zane said over her son's head.
"I see one: thing, " Tom retorted, staring at his wife with an outthrust jaw. "I see that if he'd gone to school over near winter quarters where everybody takes circus people for granted, instead of treating them like freaks, he wouldn't have to go through this. Did you really want to be on that team, Tom junior?"
Tommy looked straight into his father's eyes. "No, Dad. I guess not. "

His father didn't answer. "Run and get your coat. I want to take you and your mother for a drive over to the grounds. King got so old we had to shoot him, and Lambeth bought a new cat for the season. I'm not working him yet. " He fished in his pocket. "Letter for you. It came to winter quarters. "
Tommy took it, surprised. He never got letters, and it was too early for his usual Christmas card from Little Ann.
It was a colored picture postcard, mostly blue ocean and sand. On the message half of the card Mario had written, "I'm giving lessons this winter in tumbling and acrobatics at, of all things, a ballet school. Most of the boys are not as easy to teach as you. Angelo says hello and see you soon. " It was the first time he had seen Mario's handwriting. A square, very small hand, the downstrokes very straight, every t carefully crossed with a neat horizontal bar, it looked more like drawing than writing. He put it in his coat pocket and went out to the car.
The smell of winter quarters—the mingled odors of animals, canvas, hay, sawdust, and dung—was familiar to Tommy, and gave him a curious, homesick feeling. He drifted around the darkening grounds. Only a handful of performers stayed with Lambeth at winter quarters; most of them traveled with indoor circuses of stage shows.
Tommy dropped in at Ma Leighty's trailer and showed her Mario's card. It made him somehow feel less lonely. In the ring barn a strange riding act was working on harness. He finally returned to his parents, finding that Big Jim Lambeth had come out to join them. His mother was scratching old Lucifer through the bars with a stick. It made Tommy cringe. He simply didn't like cats.
Lucifer had been born with the circus—Tommy had heard the story a hundred times—and like most cats in captivity had to be taken immediately from his mother; caged lionesses usually killed their cubs. Beth Zane had raised the huge kitten on a bottle; he had slept on her bed until he was half grown. Everyone with the circus knew that Beth had a way with animals. When Tommy was very small she had worked in the big cage with his father, opening and closing the cage drops, sometimes running the animals through their tricks. She could handle the cats as well as her husband, although when Tommy was six or so she had stopped working in the ring.

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Old Lucifer was her special pet. Tommy wasn't afraid of Lucifer, not exactly, but he hated to see his mother so close to the bars. As for the other lions, Lady and Big Boy, he hated them.
He knew, of course, that of all the big cats, lions were the least dangerous, that most of their snarling and pouncing was cleverly contrived by his father to make them look fierce and give a good show. And of course he knew that the dangerous cat was not the one who sat up and roared—that was just high spirits, like the tail-wagging of a dog—but the one who put its ears back and crouched. But he never watched his father working; it made his toes curl up and his stomach twist inside.
"Well, what do you think of the new one, Tom junior? I'm going to call him Prince. "
Tommy looked at the ground and scuffed it with his shoe. Prince was a young male, tawny-gold with great golden eyes and a golden-tawny ruff. As Tommy glared at the beautiful cat, he opened his great mouth and yawned, displaying enormous teeth, then sheathed his claws and spread them playfully. Tommy felt the skin on his back tighten all the way down to his toes.
"Dad, he's beautiful, but he isn't—safe. You aren't going to work him, are you?"
His father laughed. "Now, Tom junior, do I try and tell you how to fly?"
Lambeth came and towered over Tommy. "How's the world's youngest aerialist? You going to be flying this season?" he demanded.
"I guess that's up to the Santellis. "
Tommy sensed that his mother was angry, although he didn't know why and didn't know how to ask. Elizabeth Zane remained silent all the way home, and when they arrived his parents sent Tommy to do his homework and talked on, in carefully lowered voices, till very late. Even in his sleep, he seemed to hear the sound of their voices, the tones of conflict still penetrating his dreams.
November wore away. A few days before Christmas, Tommy came home to find his father's car in the drive and his mother's face swollen as if she had been crying.
"What's the matter, Mother? Dad—Dad, you haven't been drafted or anything, have you?" In the last months of the war,

even men in their thirties, even men with children, were being called up. His father shook his head. "No, if they'd been going to draft me, they'd have done it two years ago. My eyes aren't good enough for the Army. No, there's just something we have to talk over with you. Sit down, Son. "
"Dad, what's the matter? What's wrong? Mother... "
"Your father will tell you. " His mother looked away from him. Tommy sat down uneasily on a chair.
"Relax, Son, " Tom said finally. "No trouble, nothing's wrong. But a letter I got today, it upset your mother. Tell me, did any of the Santellis say anything about their plans for next year?"
"Why, no. Though Mario said he'd see me next year, so I guess they're going to be with Lambeth. And he said I might be appearing with them once in a while.

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That was all. Why? Has anything happened? Aren't they coming back to Lambeth?"
"Mario sent you a note—I'll give it to you later. Son, I want to ask you something serious. Do you really want to be a flyer?"
"Why, sure, you know I do. "
"No, wait, Son, not like that. I mean, are you perfectly sure that's what you want to do? Or have you just been fooling around, doing it for fun?"
Tommy squirmed, uncomfortable because his father looked so grave. Before Tommy could answer, he went on: "Maybe I made a mistake. Maybe I should have made you settle down somewhere, go to school, boarding school. Live someplace all year round. "
"Dad, for goodness' sake, I couldn't live that way!"
"Tommy, Tommy, Tommy, most people never live any other way! I ought to have known you'd catch the fever! I let Margot teach you tumbling, mostly to keep you out from under people's feet. And when you started talking about flying—well, I thought you'd get sick of it before you ever got off the ground. "
"How'd you think—"
"Oh, a lot of kids get the notion they'd like being a circus star. I thought, when you found out how hard it was. you'd quit. So did Tony Santelli. He said if you were just amusing yourself, the sooner you got sick of it, the better. He told Mario not to go easy on you, but to work the pants off you. You surprised everybody by keeping it up. "

Tommy opened his mouth and shut it again, but his father said, "Go ahead. "
"It isn't just that it's fun, Dad. It—well, it is fun, of course, but mostly—well, it's something I want to do and I can do, and the more I work at it the better I want to get—"
"I know what you mean, " his mother broke in abruptly, "but here's the point, Tommy. If you're just in it as an amateur, now's the time to drop it. You've had your fun. They even let you appear with them a few times. Now what?"
"Mother, I don't understand. I'm not nearly good enough for a flyer—I'm not good enough even for a spare part. I've just started. I can't quit now!"
His father sighed. "You're right, of course. As an amateur you're pretty good. If you want to be a professional, of course, you've hardly begun. But—but I don't want you to wake up someday—oh, say, when you're college age—and find out there's nothing you're good for except to be an acrobat. "
"Well, " said Tommy, puzzled, "what else is there that I might want to be?"
He saw his mother meet his father's eyes with a curious, resigned look. "I guess that answers that, " Tom nodded thoughtfully. "Okay, Son... today I got a letter from Tonio Santelli. He said what I've been telling you: They want you in the act next summer. "
"Dad—"
"I know how you feel. But there's a hitch. He wants you under contract to him, personally, for three years. He says it will take at least that long before you'll be worth anything much to the act. You'll get a small salary—that part is all right; it's perfectly fair, what he offers—and this year, at least, they'll be with Lambeth, so you'll be living with your mother and me on the road. But

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here's the catch, and your mother—no, Elizabeth, I'll handle this—your mother asked me to say no to them without even telling you: They want you in California next week. "
"Next week?"
"Yes. Right after Christmas. You'll spend the winter with them—you'll live with Angelo's sister; she keeps house for the family, I think—learning, getting ready for the season. "
"Leave you and Mother?"
"Yes. He says otherwise you'd be out of form by the time

the season opens, the tour would be half over before they could use you full-time in the act. He wants our answer this week, otherwise they'll have to find another man in California. "
"Oh, Dad, please, I've got to go! I want to—I want to be the one!"
"I can see Tony's point, of course. They've given you a lot of time and gone to a lot of trouble working with you. Now they have to know, once -and for all, if they can count on you as a real part of the act. "
His mother cried, "But you're so young, Tommy. Not— not even fifteen—"
Tommy got up and went to his mother, and held her around the waist, feeling her shaking all over with sobs. "Mother—Mommy, don't, please, don't cry—can't you see? Mother, I've been working so hard. In fact, I was thinking just the other day how I ought to spend this winter working, rehearsing, not laying off like this. If they get somebody else, I'm finished—I'm through before I ever get started. Mommy, Mommy, I can't go if you're going to cry like that, but I've got to, can't you understand?" He was almost crying himself.
She raised her head. She was not crying now. Her eyes glowed blue, and for a moment it seemed to Tommy that they had the incandescent glare of arc lights.
"Tom junior, " she said very quietly, "look at me. Now. Before God, Tom, this isn't a game. Is this what you want?"
He swallowed hard, trying to steady his voice. "I'm sorry, Mother. I know you don't like it. But you know it's what I wanted. It's all I ever wanted. "
"Then"—he saw the muscles move in her throat as she swallowed—"I won't say another word. Go ahead. "
Tommy's father came and put an arm around each of them. He said, "All right, Tom junior. You're old for your age, you've got a good head on your shoulders, and you work hard. I've watched you doing workouts on your own, and at your age that takes a lot of doing. You'll go to school out there, but after this year you'll have to get your schooling the best way you can—under your own steam. "
"Dad, I don't care whether or not I finish high school. "
"But I do, " his mother said quickly. "Promise me, Tom. "
"Look—Dad, Mother—"
"We won't even discuss it, " his father said flatly. "You finish high school. Somehow. Nobody can get along without a

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high school diploma these days. And after the war's over it's going to be worse. "
Tommy bent his head. "Yes, sir. " He still couldn't see it, but compliance here might be the narrow thread on which it all hung.
"One more thing. It made a good joke for one week last fall, but they want to bill you as Tommy Santelli. "
"Well, " Tommy said, "the act is the Flying Santellis. "
"And you want to be one of them? Not Tom Zane, Junior?"
"Oh, Dad—" he said helplessly, then realized his father was laughing.
"All right, Son. Here's your letter from Mario; take it along and read it. But be sure, Tom, because this is probably going to mean the rest of your life, and once I write Tony, you'll have to go through with it. It will be a legal contract. "
"I want to go, " Tommy said steadily.
He woke in the night, not sure, wondering if he could really leave his parents. A stray glimmer of moonlight hit the photographs on the wall. As clearly as if it were day, memory showed him the faces. Mario, Angelo, himself, grouped carelessly around the aerial ladder. He remembered the day Little Ann had taken the picture. It had been her birthday. It had also been the first day Mario had managed to do a triple in rehearsal without losing control and falling. And then, on his way back to the bar, Tommy had dropped it a fraction of a second too fast; it had hit Mario's elbow, numbing his arm, and he had had to drop off. Tommy had been almost frantic with dismay, knowing he had spoiled what should have been a triumph. Papa Tony had yelled at him for five minutes straight, punctuating it with explosions at Mario, and then stormed away. Tommy, almost in tears, came down from the rigging, and Mario looked up and grinned, still nursing his elbow:
"Relax, kid. You'd better learn Italian. Most of that was aimed at me. "
Angelo, bending to put on his shoes, looked up briefly. "Next time you do that, Matt, go straight to the net. You were so damn dizzy you couldn't have got back to the bar even if Tommy had dropped it right. Your timing was shot to hell. "
Mario spread his hands with a rueful laugh. "O, Dio mio,

what a family I have! I finally manage to do a triple and they raise hell about the way I get back to the bar!"
"Yeah, " Angelo had said gently as he bent over and twisted his fingers into Mario's curly hair, pulling his head up. "You think I don't know that? But I don't want you breaking your neck either, ragazzo. One in the family's plenty, huh?"
They had forgotten about Tommy; or they took him so much for granted that he felt as if he belonged. And at that moment Little Ann had come along, finishing up a roll of film on her new camera, and snapped their picture.
It never occurred to Tommy, as he lay staring into' the dark, that such persistence as his, with time, would surely have brought him into a flying act of some kind, sooner or later. To him, flying still meant Mario.

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A week later the contract arrived and his father read and explained it to him. "In effect, " Tom Zane told him, "this means that Papa Tony is your legal guardian until you're eighteen, and has legal control over you. "
"Why is that necessary?"
"Various reasons. Among other things, anyone your age not living with his own parents has to have a guardian. This way he can sign contracts for you, and sign up his whole troupe without making out a separate contract for you that I'd have to countersign. But he can't farm out your contract to anyone else because it stipulates, right here, that whenever you're not living with your mother and me, you have to live under his roof and under his personal direct supervision. What they call in loco parentis—in the place of your parents. About money—all the money you earn, except for a little pocket money—I fixed it so it gets put in a bank in your name, and fixed up so nobody can touch it, not even your mother or me, not even you till you're twenty-one. "
"My gosh, Dad, don't you trust him with my money?"
"If I didn't trust him with your money I certainly wouldn't trust him with my son, " his father said, "but I want you to have something to start with when you're grown up. Anyhow, you can't legally handle money until you're twenty-one. " He hesitated and smiled, but there was a serious glint behind the smile. "Hard work and nothing but pocket money —and you know how Tony treats his family. Last chance, Son; still want me to sign it?"
Tommy nodded. His father signed his name, and then

Tommy took the pen and wrote under his father's signature his own full name: Thomas LeRoy Zane, Jr. Suddenly he wondered how it would feel to be Tommy Santelli.
Christmas Eve, it hit him with delayed shock. All week, shopping for the things he would need, he'd been too excited to take it in. His father was sprawled in a chair, smoking a cigar from a box Jim Lambeth had given him for Christmas. His mother was humming a Christmas carol in a small, sweet voice. Tommy wanted to cry. He started to jump up, cry out, beg his father to write and tell the Santellis that it had all been an awful mistake, that he didn't want to go away from his parents.
His father shifted his weight in his chair, met his son's eyes, and Tommy had the feeling that his father was reading his mind. He'd worked around animals so much that Tommy always felt his father knew, without being told, everything that was going on.
"Better enjoy being lazy while you can, " he said through a yawn. "Won't last long. "
The words Tommy had started to say vanished without a trace. A few days later, packing his new suitcase with his clothes, he didn't believe that he had ever hesitated or doubted.
On New Year's Eve, in a pouring rainstorm, he climbed aboard a bus for Los Angeles. His mother and father stood watching as the bus pulled away, and as he waved good-bye, Tommy knew, without quite understanding, that he was. waving good-bye to his childhood.

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He felt a little sad as the bus pulled away and their faces were lost to sight. Even the house was gone, for his mother was moving to winter quarters with his father. It had been just another temporary place, anyway, not really home, as they had always been. He felt oddly suspended in the middle of nowhere. But he was too young and too resilient to be sad for long. By the time the bus hit the highway he was sound asleep and dreaming.

CHAPTER 5

the bus station in Los Angeles was crowded with winter travelers. Tommy moved through the crowds uncertainly, heavy suitcase in hand, looking into strange faces. He was used to a different kind of crowd, the noisy casual crowds on the midway; this big-city crowd frightened him a little. In the mirror surface of a glass door he caught a glimpse of himself, foreshortened by distance, a short thin boy with a mop of red curls, rumpled, untidy, and it seemed to him, in his state of fatigue and confusion, that the mirrored face looked frightened.

"Tommy? Over here. " Without any formal greeting, Mario came and picked up Tommy's suitcase, then headed toward the door. "My car's out front. Been waiting here long? I had to find a place to park. "

"No, just a minute or two. "

"You look awfully tired. That's a hell of a trip by bus. How come your father didn't send you by train?"

"Trains are too crowded. Anyway, he couldn't get a what-you-call-it, a priority. "

"Had breakfast?"

"We stopped for breakfast a couple of hours ago, but I didn't feel like eating. "

"Then we'll stop somewhere before we get to the house. New Year's Day is a madhouse, so there won't be anything to eat before late afternoon—there never is. Lucia—that's my mother—was going to come and meet you, but she had a million things to do, and anyway she doesn't know you and you don't know her, and I had to come past here anyway on the way out to the house. I haven't been out to the place in a couple of weeks, but I called up last night and they said you were going to be on this bus, so I said I'd pick you up. Here, let's put your suitcase in back. "

He stowed Tommy's suitcase in the back seat of a battered blue Chrysler, about ten years old. The window glass was cracked on one side, the front seat's upholstery gaping, but a tartan lap robe was tucked over the worst of it. Mario opened the door on the driver's side.

"Slide in under the wheel, that door doesn't open. Handle's busted. " He got in himself behind Tommy and slammed the door.

Tommy said, mostly to have something to say, "I didn't know you could drive. "

"Have to, out here. Everything's so far from everything else, and the buses only run every three days or something like that. I don't drive a lot on the road—Angelo doesn't like the way I handle a car, says I drive like a homicidal maniac. I picked this one up cheap last fall, mostly to have something to go

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back and forth to work in. " He turned in at a low curbing. "Let's get you some breakfast. I haven't had anything, either. "
He walked easily along the sidewalk, leading the way into the cramped, steamy interior of a coffee shop. They sat in a booth with padded leather seats.
"How is Papa Tony?" Tommy inquired politely.
"Same as always—status quo—the nations tremble when he lifts his head, or however it goes. I haven't been out to the house for a couple of weeks, but I'd have heard if anybody was sick. "
"You don't live with the family?" Tommy found he was oddly disappointed.
"Well, I do and I don't, " Mario said slowly. "It's sort of a family tradition. From the time the tour breaks up, till New Year's Day, everybody goes where they want to, does anything they feel like or can afford. Angelo's down in Mexico with some kind of circus there. I wrote you about my job in the ballet school. " He broke off as a thin dark boy in a white jacket set down thick white mugs of coffee on the tabletop. "Thanks, Ronnie. Bring us along some eggs and some of that sausage, will you—that okay with you, Tom?"
"Sure, anything. "
Ronnie scribbled on a pad of counter checks. "Coming right up. Out early today, aren't you, Matt?"
"Starting the New Year right, " Mario said with his most satanic grin. "Keno been in yet this morning?"
"He came in for coffee and ran right out again, " the boy said.
As Ronnie moved away toward the kitchen, Mario picked up one cup of coffee. "Sugar? Cream? Drink up, you look half frozen. "
"I thought California was warm. "

"Well, it is, compared to Chicago or places like that. But it gets cold nights. Anyway, like I was telling you, it's a family tradition that on New Year's Day, or around then, everybody who's going on tour this season turns up and starts work. Angelo's going to be late this year—he's down in Mexico with Tessa, his daughter. "
"I didn't even know he was married. "
"He was married, " Mario corrected. "Teresa was killed in a highway accident last spring—just before we came out with Lambeth. It's why we didn't go out earlier, why we came over to Lambeth when they had an opening midseason. Tessa's only four or five. She's in a convent boarding school in Santa Barbara—up the coast a ways—but Angelo took her to Mexico with him. He's managing an indoor circus down there, over the holidays. He wanted me to go along with him, but I like the job I've got, so he took along an act called the Flying Barrys. " He set down his coffee as the boy arrived with plates of eggs and sausage. "Thanks, Ronnie. You want anything else, Tom? Pancakes, doughnuts?"
"No, thanks, this is plenty. "
Ronnie paused a minute, then asked: "What goes, Matt?"

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"Nothing special. I kind of figured I'd run into Keno here, but he must be out tomcatting around somewhere. " As the boy moved away, Mario explained to Tommy, "That kid is in one of my classes at the ballet school. "
"Do they call you Matt all the time, out here?" Tommy asked.
"Everybody outside the family. "
"How did you come to change it?"
"Like I said, there's always been a Mario in the family. I never did fill you in on the family history, did I?"
"Just bits and pieces here and there. "
Mario glanced at his wristwatch, a wafer-thin one on a strap of woven leather; he followed Tommy's glance and laughed. "On the road I wear a pocket watch like everybody else. This one was a present. I kind of like it, though Lucia has a fit when I wear it at the house. The guy who gave it to me probably didn't realize that there are still people who think a wristwatch is"—he hesitated—"kind of sissy. Look, I'll fill you in on the family while we eat. Don't let your eggs get cold. "
Briefly, what Mario told him went like this: Early in the 1890s, Mario di Santalis and his sons Tito and Rico had

come to America, survivors of an Italian-Austrian family of acrobats and jugglers known to European circuses for a hundred years. They had toured America with half a dozen circuses and briefly, before World War I, managed their own. Mario's son Antonio, our own "Papa Tony, " married the daughter of another circus family, Carla Fortunati. Di Santalis proved too much for American ringmasters to pronounce, so they became the Santelli Brothers and then, when Antonio pioneered one of the first flying-return acts on the then-new flying trapezes, the Flying Santellis. After Rico's retirement Antonio had toured with his sons, Joe and Angelo, and his daughter, Lucia.
"Matt Gardner—my father—joined the act as a catcher, " Mario said. "Lucia was the star of the show then, and a real beauty. They got married, and she was too busy for a while having us kids to do much flying. There are four of us: Liss, my sister, is the oldest, then me, then Johnny and Mark— they're twins. My father died when the twins were just babies. None of us can remember him, not even Liss. "
"Was he—was he killed in a fall?"
"No. He died of typhoid during a long stand in Pittsburgh. After he died, Lucia went back on the road, until the accident. " Abruptly he pushed his cold coffee away. "Come on, it's time to be on our way to the house, I guess. "
Mario guided the car through the jammed downtown traffic and turned off on a broad winding parkway lined with unfamiliar shrubbery, green grass, and leaves. It seemed warm now to Tommy; he pulled off his sweater, and Mario laughed.
"Wait till you get used to it. Our climate always seems warm to newcomers, but when you've been here a couple of winters you'll be shivering when it drops down to sixty, too. " He drove dangerously, taking the corners fast. Tommy found himself filled with a dozen more questions. Were Mario's

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brothers also flyers? How many were there in the family all together? But before Mario's closed face he discovered he didn't want to ask any of them. Abruptly Mario slowed the car again and glanced at Tommy. "Did your father tell you anything about Johnny?"
"About who? No, nothing. "
"Before we get to the house, " Mario said, "I guess I better tell you why you're really here. " He kept his eyes on the street. "I want you to get this so you won't say the wrong

thing at the wrong time. Here's what happened. You know Lambeth liked those four-man two-trapeze duo routines we did. To be truthful, Lucky, I thought you were too young and I said so. I wanted you to spend another year just filling in now and then, not on a regular basis. Angelo and Papa Tony know everybody in the business, of course; they could have found us a dozen men just like that, but we usually don't work with anyone outside the family. It's sort of a family tradition, " Mario repeated. "So naturally we thought about my brother Johnny. He toured with us before we came to Lambeth—in fact, at first I was second catcher, with Angelo, and Johnny and Liss were the flyers. Johnny was no great shakes as a flyer, but he was a very good catcher. In fact, when he was good he was very very good, and when he was bad, like the nursery rhyme says, he was impossible. He and Papa Tony had a row, and Papa Tony told him he wasn't fit to call himself a Santelli, and Johnny said okay, that was fine by him, he wasn't ashamed of being a Gardner. Which, as you can imagine, wasn't calculated to soothe the savage breast, especially not Papa Tony's. "
Tommy blinked, trying to imagine anyone talking back to Papa Tony. Mario, following his thoughts accurately, laughed a little.
"Well, Papa Tony grounded him—refused to let him fly— and Johnny refused to go back to being spare man and errand boy, threw over the act, and went off and got a job with a carnival. Than which, according to Papa Tony, there's nothing lower on the face of the earth. Before he left he damned all the Santellis, past, present, and future, and none of us heard a word from him all the time we were with Lambeth. I guess he sent Lucia a card now and then just to tell her he was still alive, not in the Army or anything.
"Well. Early this fall, we saw a write-up in Billboard about Freres and Stratton Shows, about a midway flying act, and there he was in the middle of it, large as life. So a few weeks ago, when we decided we needed a fourth man, Lucia suggested Johnny, and Angelo suddenly spoke up loud and clear, and said if Johnny came back he was leaving.
"I wish you could have heard him. You know how quiet Angelo is. He never raised his voice, didn't get mad, just sat there dropping ashes all over Lucia's rug and said if we took Johnny back into the act he was quitting, and that was all there was to it. He said, "That Zane kid. He may not be bril-

liant like Johnny, but from the first time Matt let him up on the rigging, he was all business. ' Angelo said, 'He makes mistakes, sure, but we can trust him not to pull some damn fool stunt just for the fun of it. Also. ' Angelo said,

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that kid's got some respect. He's not a smart-aleck, and he doesn't talk back and argue all the whole damn time. '
"Well, you know, that was it. It really was. Papa Tony acts like he owns us all body and soul, and I make noises like a prima donna from time to time, but it's Angelo who keeps this show on the road, and don't you ever forget it, kid. "
"Angelo said that? About me?" Tommy would have been willing to swear under oath that Angelo had never paid the slightest attention to him.
"That's what he said. I'm not saying all this to give you a swelled head or anything. You got everything to learn yet, you got to work like hell this winter if you're going on tour this summer with us, but—"
"I know that—" But Tommy was stunned. Angelo liked him, then. It was Angelo who had spoken up for him!
"Good. But this is the thing, kid. Johnny was great when he put his mind to it, but then he'd get some wild idea, try out new tricks without warning people what he was going to do, try some stunt in front of the audience without clearing it first with the rest of us. Oh, they'd come off, all right— he's got the devil's own luck—but you just couldn't tell him anything. He wouldn't take orders. He wouldn't turn out and practice. He said he was better without practicing than the rest of us were with it, and the hell of it is, he was right He is good. He's a goddamn genius. But that kind of attitude just doesn't go down in the family. He wouldn't do his share of the donkey work. And he talked back all the time—to Angelo, to Papa Tony. Lots of times he wound up doing what they said, but he always wanted them to tell him just why he had to do something or other, and you know the way Papa Tony is, and Angelo too. They want to say, 'Do something, ' and you do it and no questions asked. And on the road, that's the only way to run an act. We all got sick of Johnny arguing any time anybody told him to do anything. So Angelo was a lot easier to live with after Johnny quit, and when Papa Tony started talking about taking him back, like I said, Angelo threw a fit So we decided to give you a

chance instead. For all we knew, Johnny would have told us all to go to hell anyhow. And here you are, and that's that. " Mario drew a deep breath as he applied the brakes and swung the car onto a wide gravel driveway.

CHAPTER 6

the car turned in through a wide iron gateway, the gate open and slightly askew on the hinges.
"There it is. Regular old monster of a place, isn't it?"
At the far end of the gravel drive, the house was just a dark, looming building, but Tommy got a random impression of bay windows and turrets and wings jutting out in all directions.
"It's a monstrosity, " Mario said candidly. "Papa Tony and my father bought it cheap back in the silent-movie days —during the Depression. This place went for taxes when the star who owned it committed suicide or something. They tore the old ballroom to pieces and set up the flying rig in it. For about six years, back then, this was winter quarters for eight or ten flying acts. But no one uses it now except the family. " He got out of the car, taking Tommy's

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suitcase. "Papa Tony talks, now and then, about putting it up for sale and buying a smaller place. There are a lot of us, it's a big family, but not big enough for a place like this. But you can't sell oversized dumps like this anymore. You can just hardly manage to give them away. "
Three other cars were parked in the wide driveway: the gray Ford sedan the Santellis used on the road, an oversized black Hudson, and a small, sun-faded MG sports car, spattered thickly with red mud and clay on wheels and fenders.
"Liss and David must have a new car, " Mario said, frowning. "That isn't California mud, though. Minnesota plates? I wonder who that belongs to... "
He flung the door open.
"Come on in, Tom. "
To that first glance the hall was dark and enormous, lighted by an old-fashioned chandelier that threw down more shadows than lights. Some jackets and sweaters and children's overshoes were flung on a cedar chest. Underfoot

the carpet was faded, scuffed, threadbare. There was a delightful aroma of coffee and spices, which Mario sniffed appreciatively.
"Smells like Lucia's getting all ready for the New Year, all right. " He set Tommy's suitcase down, and as if that had been a signal, Papa Tony appeared at the end of the hall. "Is it you, Matt? And did you meet—yes. I see. Tommy. Glad to see you. " He came down the hall, moving noiselessly in carpet slippers, and extended his hand. The sleeves of his blue chambray shirt were rolled back, showing the knotty, sun-tanned sinews in his forearms. His heavy gray hair was carefully combed back from his low forehead, but the gray eyebrows sprang out, unruly, emphasizing his scowl. Tommy felt that the sharp dark eyes, making one brisk trip from his head to his feet and back, saw and recorded everything about him, including the loose button on his sweater and the scuff marks on his shoes,
"How is your father, Tommy?"
"Very well, thank you, sir. "
"Matt. Where are we to put him?"
"In Johnny's room, I thought. "
"No. Johnny is here. " He spoke the name with an inflection that made it sound more like Gianni. "Didn't you see his car in the drive? And he has brought a partner with him, a young woman. Some place must be found for her as well. Well, Lucia must contrive something. " He gave Tommy a brusque nod, evidently meant to be kind. "Make yourself at home, my boy. "
Mario threw a door open at the right of the hallway, into a large, long, high-ceilinged room. Thick sun-faded draperies were pushed back from bay windows on two sides, and an open fire was burning in an enormous fireplace. Around the fire, their backs to Tommy and Mario, what seemed like a large number of men, women, and children were gathered, some in high-backed leather chairs, a few on battered leather hassocks, and a girl around Tommy's age with a younger boy on the floor. At the very center of the group a

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handsome blond youth in a blue sweater was standing, gesturing humorously, and Tommy heard him saying:
"... so I told old Frenzel what he could do with his orders, and didn't wait around to see whether he did it or not. That night while they were tearing down the sidewalls I sneaked around behind the line of trucks and I told the

prop boss just what the deal was—and I gave him a choice. He could give Stella her father's equipment and rigging without making a fuss, or I'd give him—-"
A short, dark woman got up from a chair and came quickly over to them. She stood on tiptoe, taking Tommy's shoulders between her hands. She studied him gravely for a minute, then smiled. "So this is Tommy, " she said. "My son has talked about you a good deal. Matt, I didn't hear you come in. "
"Who could, with Johnny holding center ring?" Mario laughed softly. "Tommy, this is my mother, Lucia Gardner. Lucia, where are we going to put him? My old room?"
"No. When Papa Tony gets to rehearsing, you'll be sleeping here most of the time. What about the old room next to Angelo's?"
The nursery? Good God, Lu, the crib's still set up in there—Liss will want that for the baby. And I've told you and told you, I will not be sleeping here!"
Lucia Gardner spread her hands with a humorous gesture. It occurred to Tommy that she must at one time have been a very beautiful woman. The materials of beauty were still there: the high intelligent forehead, the wide-spaced dark eyes under slanted, winged eyebrows very like Mario's own, which gave a perpetual look of question, of daring, to the face. She was a small woman, full-breasted, but with a slender waist and lovely slender hands. She said, with a graceful shrug, "Well, it is far too late for me to tell you where to sleep, " and turned back to Tommy. She had been talking past him, very fast, to Mario. "Take off your sweater, Tommy. Here. " She took it from him—again he noted, and filed in his mind, the deftness and beauty of her gestures—and laid it on a table, as if it were some movement from a dance. "Come to the fire and meet the family. It won't hurt Johnny one bit to give up the spotlight!"
Mario detained his mother with a touch. "Didn't Liss get in?"
"No, she wired from San Francisco. Davey has a cough and a little temperature, so they'll come down when he's well again. "
Mario's face fell a mile. "I wanted Tommy to meet Liss. "
"Well, you might say hello to your brother, too, " Lucia chided good-naturedly. Whirling about, she called,

"Johnny. " Her voice was not loud, but had the whipcrack of authority. "Be quiet a while!"
She drew Tommy forward, into the center of the group, and flung out her arm, displaying him.
"Everyone, this is Tommy Zane. You remember, he made his first appearance with us last summer. "

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Tommy stood mute under the impact of eyes and raised faces, all subtly alike. Blessedly, Mario came to his aid, moving through the chairs to his side.
"Our new third flyer. Don't all jump on him at once—he isn't used to Santellis en masse. "
Johnny, having suddenly lost his audience, came over to them. He eyed Tommy, then said, "Hi, Matt. This the protégé Lu was telling us about?"
"This is Tommy, yes. Tom, my brother. Johnny Gardner. "
"Hi. " Johnny stuck out a hand. He had curly, unruly fair hair, and a small crescent—scar or birthmark—gave his face a raised-eyebrow, devil-may-care expression. He was as blond as Mario was dark, but had the same taut, rakish good looks. They faced each other, Mario smiling nervously, Johnny standing with his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his trousers, good-natured and belligerent.
"Steal my thunder, will you, Signor Mario? I come in all full of myself and bragging because I've outsmarted a manager, broken up an act, got myself a partner and a season's booking, and Papa Tony quietly caps everything I say by telling me that oh, by the way, your big brother caught a triple last season. That must have been some performance—" he added, "Tommy makes his first appearance and you go around doing triples all over the place—must be something in the Texas air. " He put his hand on Mario's shoulder and shook it lightly. "Nice going, big brother. Wish I'd been there to see it. "
"You will. What's this about getting a partner, Johnny?"
Johnny whirled them around, one arm through Mario's crooking the other into Tommy's elbow, and drew them toward the fire. "Come sit down and I'll tell you all about it. "
Tommy sat down on a high-backed wooden bench at right angles to the fire. Johnny folded himself up gracefully on the floor and reached out toward a blonde girl who was sitting on one of the hassocks. She leaned forward, smiling, then slid onto the floor beside him.

"Fellows, this is Stella Kincaid, and far your information, we're booked for the whole summer with Moorcock Shows!"
Stella Kincaid was small and slender, as small as a child, in a plaid skirt and fuzzy sweater. She had a small, pointed face, fair skin, and very short, very curly silver-blonde hair that bunched in wispy tendrils around her thin temples. Her hands were bony, with red chapped knuckles; her legs were thin and looked awkward in dirty saddle shoes.
Mario smiled at her politely. "Dancer? Tumbler? Ballet broad?"
"Flyer, " Johnny said defiantly, "but she was doing head balance and loop-the-loops, and we finished the season in a double-trap routine. They billed us as Frankie and Johnny —can you figure it?"
"Moorcock Shows? That's a carny outfit, isn't it?"
"Mixed show, " Stella said softly. "They set up their midway at county fairs and things, but they put on free acts to draw the crowds. "
"We came here to work out a good act for next year, and to ask Lucia about costumes and things, " Johnny explained. "Papa Tony was really grand about it. I was halfway expecting him to do the never-darken-my-door routine with

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us, but he just said sure, the place was open to any of us, which was pretty decent of him—considering... "
"He's a pretty decent old boy, and don't you forget it, brother John. "
"Hey, listen, " Johnny said, "we inherited a stack of mixed riggings, and when we lit out, we just threw it all in the back of the car—I don't know what half of the stuff is. Don't we have Teresa's old cloud-swing stuff somewhere around? Lu said you'd know about it. I was telling Stella—"
Tommy's attention slid away. He was trying to get his bearings. Papa Tony had greeted him and then vanished somewhere; he felt as if he were surrounded by strange shadows that kept coming and going, not quite real. Even Mario seemed shadowy and unreal in this setting. Johnny's rakish flamboyance, Lucia's imperious manner, even the unreal fairylike prettiness of the girl Stella, kneeling beside Johnny on the carpet, made them all flicker in and out of focus like characters in a costume movie. He stared at the carpet. It was worn almost thread bare, and there was a burned patch next to his shoe. Somehow it gave him a toehold on reality. Enormous and strange as it seemed, it

was just a house, not a sinister castle. Just a big old house, inhabited by a big and noisy family.
A short, heavy man with curly white hair got up and came over to Tommy. "When the boys start talking riggings, they'll keep it up for hours, " he said. "Come on over and meet my kids. My daughter's about your age. "
Tommy didn't feel much like meeting any more strangers, but he acquiesced, politely. "I'm Joe Santelli. This is my son, Clay, and my daughter, Barbara. "
Tommy dismissed Clay at once; he was chubby and dark and only about eight years old.
Barbara was slight and dark and delicate. She was stretched out on the rug, listening to Johnny and Mario, but when her father spoke to her she turned over and sat up. She too had the slanted, exotic Santelli eyebrows. Tommy decided she must be about twelve.
"Hello, Tommy. Do you feel like you've landed in the local booby hatch? Most of the time We're fairly civilized, but New Year's—well, I guess it's just that we're all getting together again. At that, it's sort of quiet this year, with Liss still up in San Francisco and Uncle Angelo down somewhere in Mexico. "
Joe said, "Tommy, I used to know your mother and father. Do they still work together in the ring?"
"No, sir. Mother stopped working the cats when I was just a kid. "
"A pity, " Joe commented. "Good women trainers are rare. One year, I remember, Beth had a mixed act with cheetahs and a tiger. "
"I was too young to remember, but I've seen pictures of it, " Tommy nodded. It struck him as strange that it should be his mother's work, rather than his father's, that was remembered.
Barbara was looking at Tommy with intense curiosity. "How old are you?" she asked.
"Fifteen, " Tommy said, exaggerating by five months.
"I'll be twelve this winter. "

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"Are you a flyer, too?" Tommy asked politely. "I mean, being in the family and all. "
Barbara wrapped her thin arms around drawn-up knees. "Lucia lets me go up and swing sometimes when she feels like standing around and being bored to death watching me. I think I'm ready to go over to the catcher, but Lu can't help

me with that and Mario says not yet. " She smiled, showing generous dimples.
"Well, " said Tommy, "I was already thirteen when I started, and besides I'd been in a web act for a long time. I'm probably stronger than you are. "
"I'm strong, " Barbara protested. "I've been in ballet school for six years, and that makes you just as strong as tumbling. Mario says so. " Of all the Santellis, Tommy realized, Barbara was the only one who had yet called him Mario, except for Johnny, and Johnny had done it ironically, as an obvious joke.
"All the girls in the family have always studied ballet, " Joe Santelli said. "Lucia was very good, and Elissa could have been, and Teresa, of course, was once a professional dancer. I have no objection to Barbara learning to fly if she wishes, but it would be nice to have a ballerina in the family—"
A tiny wraithlike woman, deep in an upholstered armchair, suddenly stirred and said something in Italian. She was gray-haired and wrapped to the chin in a thick white hand-knitted shawl, but her face, heavily lined and as pale as a skull, had the delicate bones and slanted, well-defined eyebrows of all the Santellis. She said then, in a high, sweet, querulous voice, "Is it Rico? Why doesn't he come to speak to me?"
"No, no, Nonnina, " Joe said gently. "This is Matt's new partner, Tommy. Tommy, this is my grandmother. "
She looked old enough to be anybody's grandmother, Tommy thought, even, at a pinch, Papa Tony's. At Joe's gesture he lifted the thin, brittle hand she extended to him, saying politely, "I'm glad to meet you, ma'am. "
The faded eyes looked very troubled. "We were expecting you days ago, " she said irritably, blinking.
Startled, Tommy protested, "Please, I don't—"
"It's all right, " Barbara whispered, "don't argue with her. She doesn't know— "
The old lady said, in a tone of surprising sharpness, "I know perfectly well what is going on, Lucia. Do you think I don't know that today is the New Year? You young people are all the same, no respect for discipline. " She spoke very good, clear English, but something in the intonation betrayed that it was not her native language, and the accent grew more marked as she went on. "Rico, if you would listen to

your father, not spend all of your time with worthless people and hooligans... " She broke off, then muttered in a low, unsure voice, "Lucia—Lucia is looking for you, I think—"
Lucia Gardner had reappeared in the doorway, and Mario, his attention suddenly caught, said abruptly, "Save it, Johnny, we'll talk later, " and swung himself up to his feet. He was at Tommy's side in two steps. "Come on, you'd

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better get your room before someone else grabs it. " He bent over the faded little lady, brushing her withered cheek with his lips. "Buon' giorno, Nonnina, come sta?"
She smiled at him, her lips trembling, and said something in Italian that Tommy couldn't begin to follow. He whispered to Mario, "What's wrong? Did I say something I shouldn't have, something to upset her?"
Mario bit his lip. "No, but what she said was 'Why doesn't Rico come and kiss his mama?'" The old lady looked uncertain and miserable now, turning her head in confusion between Tommy and Mario, the faded eyes full of tears. On an impulse Tommy bent as Mario had done and kissed the lined old cheek. She smiled, put her free hand to Tommy's face, and spoke to him in Italian before Mario quietly induced her to let him go.
Lucia was waiting in the doorway. Mario asked, "Did you find a place for everybody, Lu?"
"I think so. There are twin beds in Barbara's room; the Stella girl will have to go in there, and Barbara will have to make up her mind to not having overnight guests this winter. When Angelo comes I will take Tessa to sleep in my room until she returns to the convent, and he can move in with Papa; then Liss and David can share Angelo's room, next to the nursery. Tommy can go into your room, and Johnny can either sleep with Clay or put up a cot in the sewing room, whichever he wants to do. Shall I help you come and get settled?"
"No, we'll manage, Lulu, but you'd better go and speak to Nonna. She thinks Tommy is Uncle Rico. "
"Madre Santissima! Did he—"
"It's all right, Lulu, he handled it like a real member of the family. But if you could straighten her out—"
"Yes, I know. All right, Matt, you take him upstairs. " Lucia brushed past them and went toward the old woman.
The wide, curving stairs were covered with worn dark carpeting, but the landing was wide, balustraded in beautiful

cherrywood. Along the broad corridor at the top of the stairs, doors half open gave glimpses of different rooms: a room with yellow wallpaper, rabbits on the linoleum, and a crib, a big light room with rose-colored dimity curtains, a dark untidy chamber with two opened suitcases spilling tangled clothes on the floor. Mario said, as they turned an angle in the hall, "I suppose you gathered, my great-grandmother isn't in her right mind all of the time. She doesn't always recognize us. If she calls you by some other name, just do what you did downstairs, just answer to it. She's almost ninety-four years old. She almost always recognizes Papa Tony—he was her oldest son—and most of the time Lucia can get through to her, although about half the time Nonna calls her Clara—that was Papa Tony's wife, my grandmother. But the rest of us—well, Liss and I got used to it when we were just babies. "
"Joe said she was his grandmother. " Tommy was still trying to get the relationships straight. "Is Joe one of Papa Tony's brothers?" It didn't seem logical even as he said it.

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"Good Lord, no! What gave you that idea? No, he's my mother's brother, he—Oh, of course, " Mario said suddenly, "his hair. It's been white for years—it turned white when he was only about forty. He's older than Lucia, but not much. His wife, Stacy, died several years ago. She wasn't a flyer. "

At the end of the hall Mario opened a door. "Here, this is my old room, where we're going to put you. Clay's next door, and Barbara's across the hall; we passed Liss's old room and the nursery. You'll have to share the bathroom with the kids, I guess; there's another one down there, under the stairs. Joe and Nonna and Papa Tony are all down in the other wing, and Angelo's around there—" He pointed. "There are some more rooms up on the third floor, but we closed that whole floor off, years ago—costs enough to heat this old barn as it is. Then at the back of the house there's the old ballroom. It runs all three stories high, and it's not much bigger than the Hollywood Bowl. "

He stepped inside the room. "I see Lu brought up your suitcase. " He shook his head, exasperated. "I wish she'd ask one of the kids to do things like that; her back's not all that strong. "

The bedroom was dark and narrow, with old-fashioned striped wallpaper, and all the furniture was dark, too, and oversized, making the room look crowded. There was a big

bed, a bigger bureau, and one chair. "You'll probably find some of my stuff in the closet and bureau drawers, " Mario said. "You might even have to put up with me moving in on you now and then, for a night or so, if rehearsals get hectic— since everybody's doubling up this year. " He moved to the window, pulling back the cretonne curtains.

"I'm glad you're here, Tommy. I guess I didn't have much of a chance to say so, downstairs. "

"I'm glad to be here. "

"I was telling you about Uncle Joe, wasn't I?" Mario came back and sat on the foot of the bed. "When I was a kid, " he began, "Joe and Lucia were the stars of the act—stars of the show. We were with Starr then, the Big Show—center ring. Then—oh, it was about nine years ago now—there was a bad accident. "

"My father said something about it. Only my mother wouldn't talk about it in front of me, " Tommy said. "What happened, Mario?"

Mario spread his hands behind his head. "It was pretty awful, " he said quietly. "Mark—that's my other brother; you haven't met him—Mark was the only one of us kids who did see it, and he used to wake up screaming bloody murder for months and months afterward. I've always thanked God I didn't see it. Because Mark never could fly, never could go up on the rigging. Every time he tried—and he really did try, no matter what anybody may tell you—he'd just quietly turn green and drop off. "

"How did it happen?"

"God only knows. Liss and I had been on the rigging just before the same show. Liss was fifteen, and they were just letting her start to work now and then in the act, only she wasn't working that day. Just luck she wasn't, too. Joe was coaching Liss, up on the board, and then Lucia came out to work. She

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sent me and Liss to take a bath, but Mark stayed to watch the show, and saw the whole thing. A ring on the fly bar broke, and Lucia and Joe fell together. Joe tried to break my mother's fall—he wrapped himself right around her and hit one of the spreader ropes with his head. It's a miracle they weren't both killed, right then and there, but you never know, with that kind of accident. Barney Parrish hit a spreader rope once and bounced out on the floor, and he wasn't even hurt, he only sprained his thumb. Anyway, Lucia broke both shoulder blades and her collarbone, and

they thought she'd broken her back, too. She was in and out of hospitals for a couple of years, had all kinds of operations. She made a marvelous recovery, even tried to go back to flying, but there was just a little too much damage to one shoulder.

"Joe, though—everybody thought he was perfectly all right, he wasn't even knocked out. All the time a big fuss was being made about Lu, getting an ambulance, rushing her off to the hospital—they thought her back was smashed and that she might not even live through the night—everybody thought Joe was just fine. He went on in the night show, but while he was climbing the rope, he fell off—said he couldn't see. He broke his arm, falling from the rope, but the real damage had occurred in the fall with my mother. He was blind for three weeks—there was a nerve gone wrong in his head somewhere. And when he got his sight back, he couldn't handle heights anymore, couldn't even climb the rope. It wasn't that he'd lost his nerve, or anything; he just couldn't balance. There was something wrong in his head—he kept having these awful dizzy spells, kept falling over, couldn't walk or anything. His hair turned white inside a couple of months. It was"—Mario spread his hands in a gesture of futility—"it was awful. He traveled with the show for a while after he could walk all right again, but he never got completely over the dizzy spells. He still has them sometimes— not very often. Vertigo, they called it. Finally he quit and settled down here in town. He owns some amusement-park concessions out on the beach. "

Tommy shut his eyes. The face of the merry little man with the snow-white hair suddenly seemed terrible in its gaiety.

"Things happen like that in this business, " Mario said somberly. "One slip—and boom! One minute, center ring, on top of the world—next minute, nowhere. If it happened to me, I'd hope I'd break my neck and be done with it. "

"That's a nice morbid thing to say!" Tommy said angrily. He shivered; it was cold in the dark little room.

Mario sat up and leaned over to unsnap Tommy's suitcase. "I didn't mean it that way, not really. Joe was in a bad way for a while, but he's okay now, he gets along fine. And it didn't make him morbid or anything. He loves to come down and watch us, and he's letting Barbie learn to fly. I guess I'm

just sort of depressed because Liss didn't get in. I sure wanted to see her. "

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He helped Tommy unpack and put away his clothes, clearing drawers in the dresser for him. After they had shoved the last drawer shut, Mario said, "Now I'll take you down to the practice room and show you around. "
The back stairs were narrow and dusty, and the double doors at the foot of the staircase were carved and ornate and rather dirty, contrasting oddly with the polished and shiny look of the rest of the house. They stuck slightly when Mario turned the knob; he finally threw his weight against one of them, and it burst open, revealing the enormous practice room.
Inside, Mario stooped over and untied his shoes.
"House rule. Throw yours in that box over there, Tommy. "
The crate was of rough wood with Keith's Apples stamped across the side, but a piece of felt had been glued to the bottom so that it slid noiselessly on the floor. "Papa Tony has the floor sanded every December, " Mario explained, "and God help anyone who scuffs it up. He memorizes every shoe sole in the house. "
Mario flicked on a light. The fluorescent lighting was the only modern thing in the room. Around the walls old rococo carvings and moldings framed wide mirrors in blackened gilt frames, remnants of the room's days as a ballroom. The walls were immense, and the mirrors, reflecting and redoubling the carvings and the lights, made them seem even vaster, as if the room stretched into empty space. A great expanse of shiny floor, polished to glassy luster, reflected the lights that shone high above it. Tommy, used to the makeshift practice barns of most circus acts, was impressed and startled, and in later years the riddle of Papa Tony was to find repetition and solution in the memory of the shiny floor and preserved antique carvings.
At the far end of the room the flying rig had been mounted; a big bundle rolled into a canvas sack—the stored net—was lying beneath it. So immense was the room that the flying rig neither crowded it nor seemed crowded. Against the sidewalk, a web and a rope ladder were fastened from the ceiling. About fifteen feet high a single fixed trapeze had been mounted; another, at about eight feet, had a thick mat below it. Mario pointed to the lower trapeze. "Belongs to the kids, " he explained. Moving quietly in his socks, he led

Tommy out into the middle of the floor. Up over their heads, just above the door by which they had entered, was a small gallery.
"The old musicians' gallery, " Mario said. "There's a door to it from the front part of the house. People can sit up there and watch, though there's sort of a rule about that, too. You'll think this place is worse than the Army, all my talk about rules, but actually, outside the practice room, this place is Liberty Hall. Nobody argues with Granny, but aside from that, it doesn't matter much what you do. Down here, though, we have stiff rules, and we keep them. "
He seemed to be waiting for comment, so Tommy said, "I guess you'd have to. "
"Sure. If anyone breaks them—and that means anybody, not just the flyers, anybody from Papa Tony down to Clay— he gets down on his hands and knees and polishes the floor. It sounds silly, " Mario laughed, "but it really works—you'd be surprised. It's a big floor, and once or twice at the most, with the

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others standing over you making wisecracks, you don't break that rule again. "

"What are all these rules?" Tommy asked apprehensively.

"Mostly the obvious sensible things. " Mario flung a door open. "This door leads into the change room. That's what we call it—although the family, of course, usually changes clothes up in our bedrooms. But Papa Tony's trained a lot of flyers, and for a few seasons we had a couple of dozen acts coming in and out, using this place for a practice hall in the winter. And this is the rigging room—" He opened a second door into a musty jumble that smelled of metal and hemp and resin and dust. "We keep the spare equipment in here—old riggings, tumbling mats, that stuff. These rooms used to be serving pantries or servants' quarters or something like that. And now, " he said dramatically as he closed the doors, "I'll introduce you to the family rules. We make a little ceremony of it. "

He led Tommy to what looked like a framed picture on the wall, but it was not a picture. It was a very old, yellowed piece of paper, with beautiful copperplate handwriting in faded ink. Tommy stood on tiptoe to read it, then drew back, disappointed.

"Why, it's in Italian!"

"What else? I doubt if old Mario di Santalis ever learned any English, He died before I was born, of course, so I don't

know for sure. But back then, circus families were a lot more clannish than they are now. And all of us still lose our tempers in Italian—or make love. Haven't you ever heard Papa Tony get good and mad?"

Tommy nodded, laughing. Papa Tony's explosions were already a legend, after one season, with the Lambeth Circus.

"Papa Tony had this framed after his father died; they're sort of a family tradition. There's a typed copy in English posted in the change room. Here, I'll read them for you, " Mario said, but instead of reading he leaned back, his hands in his pockets, and quoted from memory.

"The following rules will be observed at all times in our family:

"One. It is forbidden to smoke at any time in the practice halls.

"Two. Shoes must not be worn on the floor or on the riggings.

"Three. It is forbidden to rehearse without the net firmly fixed in place.

"Four. No one may work on the high riggings when alone.

"Five. Not for any reason may street clothing be worn on the riggings.

"Six. Idlers and outsiders may not watch unless given permission.

"All infringements of discipline will be suitably punished. The careful observance of discipline is the mark of the artiste. "

Standing there, listening to Mario's quiet, grave voice, Tommy had the sudden, blindingly clear awareness that here —not up there in front of the warm fire, but back here in the cold, bare, dusty room, behind the protective glass of the frame—lay the real heart of the house. He shivered, looking up at the bold, arrogant European signature, which was all he could read of it: Mario di Santalis.

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"You see, " Mario said, smiling, "All the rules make sense. No matter how sure of yourself you are, you never, ever practice without a net, and nobody, ever, steps on the rigging unless somebody is there with him. Street shoes ruin the floor, and you'd be surprised what a temptation it is, when you want to try something and don't want to be bothered to change, to go up on the rigging in your street clothes. And

as for that other rule... It goes without saying, in a family like this, that everybody's curious about what everybody else is doing, so here's how the system works: Once you're working, you automatically take precedence over anyone else not in the act. So if you make up your mind, say, in the next few weeks, while you're getting back in trim, that you don't want my mother, or the kids, watching you work out—and don't kid yourself, they'll be curious—just ask them to leave. They won't think you're rude; it's just the way we run things in this family. It works both ways, too. If anybody else is working out or practicing here—say, Johnny and that girl partner of his—and you come in, you ask if you can watch. If they say yes, okay, then you watch from down here or in the gallery, either one. If they say no, you disappear, right away, and you don't argue or get offended. "
"I see. "
"Some of us don't mind and some of us do. Liss, for instance—my sister. While she's rehearsing she's nervous as a cat, and it drives her crazy to have anyone watching. Papa Tony's worse than Liss, though he keeps it under control a lot better. " Tommy remembered Papa Tony, on the road, chasing the circus children away from the flying rig during rehearsals. "Angelo doesn't care one way or the other, and Cleo always was a regular show-off. And so it goes. "
Tommy wondered who Cleo was, and how Mario himself felt, but he didn't feel able to ask. Mario went on: "The low trapezes—the kids' things—don't count. You can work out on them, and on the parallel bars and the mats without anybody around, if you want to. Barbara does her ballet barre work down here—that's why we have the low mirror over there. Lucia had it put up when Liss and I were kids. "
"You don't live in the house, you said?"
"No, I don't. I love my family, but I have to get away sometimes or I'd go crazy. I get enough fratellaccio on the road. "
"Enough which?"
Mario chuckled. "Brotherhood—but don't repeat it in that form to Papa Tony; the proper word is fratellanza. Anyhow, I have a place out in Santa Monica. I come here for meals most of the time, and sometimes when rehearsals get heavy I sleep over. But I like having a place of my own. Oh, they kid me about it. Liss has a standing joke about my

opium den. Lu's probably convinced I got the place to take women there—and Angelo hopes I did. "
"Huh?"
Mario chuckled wryly. "Family joke. Forget it, hey?"

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But it hadn't sounded quite like a joke, and Tommy asked suddenly, "Do you have a regular girl?"
And just as suddenly Mario was angry. "Now when in the hell would I have time for girls? I'm on the road eight months a year, and the rest of the time I'm working. Hell, no. "
But it wasn't like that, Tommy thought, not even on the road. There were men with the show who knew girls in every town, and anyway, there were two girls for every man in the show. What was Mario talking about? But he didn't press the question; instead he turned back to the framed rules.
"What was that last thing down there, about discipline?"
"The careful observance of discipline, " Mario read again, "is the mark of the artiste. "
Papa Tony repeated the words from the open doorway: "The careful observance of discipline is the mark of the artiste. " He came across the floor, and Tommy noticed that he had slipped out of even his soft carpet slippers and was barefoot. But even barefoot with rolled sleeves, he still had all the lordliness of a king in his own domain.
"You might have waited until tomorrow for the guided tour, Matt, " he reproved gently. "I'm sure Tommy must be tired, and hungry, too. " But Tommy had the impression he was not at all displeased to find them down here. Papa Tony laid one hand on Tommy's shoulder and the other on his grandson's.
"I see you have already been introduced to the traditions of our family. Has he told you how many years the di Santalis family have been performers, here and in Europe? But don't let that intimidate you, son. Down here you are one of us, as he told you, with the same rights as any of us. And beyond that door"—he smiled, suddenly, and the smile lighted his whole face—"you are one of us, too. " It seemed incredible to Tommy that the stern old man he had feared so much could smile like this. He put his arm around Tommy and stood holding him as he went on:
"I want you to hear what I said to the family—and to your father, too—before you came here. We do not take outsiders into the Flying Santellis, Tommy. Anyone in the fam-

ily act, anyone who carries our name into the ring, must be one of us. We expect to treat you just like one of us, " he added gravely, "our son, our brother, not just a stranger working with us. But listen to me, my boy—" He turned and stood holding Tommy firmly by the shoulders. "This means a responsibility, too. Unless you are willing to be one of us, a child of our house, a good obedient son and a younger brother to us, not a guest or a stranger, this will not be successful. You cannot be a stranger here. "
Tommy felt embarrassed by the intensity with which the old man spoke, but he was moved, too. He said, in a low voice, "I'll try, sir. "
"Good. Good. " Papa Tony released him, smiling, and wrinkled his nose at the aroma stealing through the open door. "I think dinner is ready. Lucia will be calling everybody soon. Matt, take Tommy upstairs and show him where to get ready for dinner. "

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"You bet. Come on—" Mario hesitated, glanced at his grandfather, then laughed, gave Tommy a pat on the shoulder, and said, "Come on, kid brother. "

Tommy suddenly realized that he was, indeed, cold and extremely tired, and, in spite of the big breakfast, extremely hungry. The tension of the trip and the introductions was running out of him like water now. He wondered what there was for dinner—it smelled delicious, but so unfamiliar that he couldn't even make a guess about it. He knelt down obediently beside Mario to collect his shoes from the box on the floor before going upstairs.

CHAPTER 7

the practice room was dark when Tommy opened the door a few days later, but a crack of light was coming from the half-open door of the change room. He went in and saw Mario there, kneeling in the corner between a pair of enormous cardboard cartons.

"What's up, Mario? Saying your prayers?"

"Not likely. " Mario straightened. "Housekeeping chores.

Next year this will be your job. Low man gets all the dirty work. "

There was a curious smell in the room: camphor, glue, a stale smell he could not identify. Mario bent over the cartons again.

"Every year we swear we'll do this the day the tour breaks up, and every year we end up bundling it into cardboard boxes and telling each other how much easier it will be to get through it at home. Next thing we know, it's New Year's and time to start getting things together for another season. "

Tommy had forgotten to take off his shoes. He bent quickly and rather guiltily to unlace them, and took them out to the box in the practice room. When he came back, Mario had finished his preliminary exploration of the boxes. He upended one of them and dumped the contents out on the floor. A tumbled mass of cloth, black and green and gold and white, fell out in one lump and separated into a ragbag cascade. Mario repeated the process with the other carton, scattering mothballs, which rolled into the corners of the room with a little scurrying noise, and surveyed the pile without enthusiasm.

"What a mess!" He caught Tommy's eye and laughed. "Everything gets thrown in together at the end of the season, and it's my job to sort it all out, decide what's good for another season, what can be patched up and used for practice or something, and what should have been thrown away on the road instead of being hauled home. "

Tommy was amused and startled. The Santellis were so methodical on the road, almost frantically so. He voiced his thoughts to Mario.

"Yes, and by end of season we're so damn sick of triple-checking every little thing that somehow every year, that last night when we're getting ready to haul off, all we can think is Hell, let's chuck everything into the box and hit the road for home. "

The room where they were standing was about fifteen feet square, lighted by an enormous frosted-glass window. On one wall was a long low counter with a square sink in the middle—the room had once been a service pantry, and

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cupboards over and under the counter had been roughly carpentered into lockers. On another wall was a bulletin broad, and Tommy went to inspect it.

Mario followed slowly. "That's a copy of the house rules, more or less, in English, " he said. "Lucia put it up when there were a lot of outsiders coming in and out. "
Tommy stood on tiptoe to read:
ALL GYMNASTIC APPARATUS IS DANGEROUS IF IMPROPERLY USED!
For your own safety and ours, we ask you to observe the following rules:
Please do not wear street clothing or shoes in
to the practice room at any time.
Do NOT go on the rigging unless your manager or instructor is with you.
Do NOT make ANY adjustments to ANY
piece of rigging at ANY time!
Ladies, your hair must be properly secured
so it is out of your eyes!
Please do not smoke down here.
ANYONE CONSISTENTLY VIOLATING OUR RULES WILL BE BARRED FROM THE ROOM!
"You'd be surprised, " Mario said, "at the people who think those rules are unreasonable. But Papa Tony's chucked out half a dozen people for not keeping them, no matter how much they were paying to practice here or for lessons. I could tell you a funny story about every one of those rules. But we've never had a serious accident down here, and we're proud of it. "
There were other things on the bulletin board: half a dozen circus cartoons clipped from newspapers or magazines, a few blurred snapshots, taken in the practice room, of various family members and strangers, and a little painted wooden sign that said simply, down with the law of gravity.
Tommy chuckled. "Sure, if it wasn't for gravity, we'd have it made!"
"Oh, I'm not so sure. Without it, everybody'd be able to fly, and then how'd we make a living?"
A large piece of unframed cardboard was thumbtacked to the adjacent wall; in childish but very neatly printed red crayon letters it read:

ANGELO SANTELLI FLYING AND REFORM SCHOOL
Temperament
Tears
and
Tantrums must be deposited with the management
(for safekeeping) LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA, VOI CH'ENTRATE.
All around the border were silly little crayon sketches of flyers: a monkey hanging by one foot from a trapeze, a girl with a long pigtail jumping through a hoop held by a grotesque figure with a huge mustache, a catcher hanging upside-down and consulting a huge watch whose hands pointed to midnight. The figures were amateurish but had a shrewd element of caricature; the mustached figure was obviously Papa Tony and the pigtailed girl bore a

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strong likeness to Mario, with the family's slanted eyebrows. Tommy burst out laughing. "Who on earth did this?"
"My sister, Liss, " Mario said. "She was about fifteen, I guess. "
"What do the Italian words mean?"
" 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here, '" Mario translated. "They're supposed to be written up over the gates of hell in Dante's Inferno. "
Tommy chuckled. "Flying and Reform School, huh?"
"It was during a winter layoff, " Mario said. "Angelo was just letting us start doing a few easy catches and picture tricks. And—well—Liss is temperamental. So one day Angelo yelled at her. Some perfectly ordinary remark—ordinary for Angelo, that is. Something like 'Keep your big fat bottom tucked in'—you know how tactful he is. "
Tommy laughed, remembering several of Angelo's more tactful comments. "Oh, sure. "
"Well, Liss was so upset or offended or outraged or whatever that she dropped off into the net and had a screaming tantrum right then and there. And Angelo—he never did put up with that kind of stuff—came down and spanked her. So Liss went into shrieking hysterics and roused the whole house, and Lucia came down, and Nonna, and Lu slapped Liss with a wet towel. All things considered, it was the rumpus of the year. Liss was a pretty chastened kid by the time she

went upstairs, and after she was calmed down Papa Tony gave her his Lecture Number Three—the one about discipline and self-control—and barred her from the practice room for a week. That's the next step in what old Mario used to call 'suitable punishment'—one step more serious than the floor-polishing routine or getting your pocket money stopped. Well, when she came home from school the next day she sneaked into Angelo's room and thumbtacked this up under his bathrobe, and when he went up for his shower after rehearsal, there it was, and you could hear him howling with laughter all over the house. Well, we all got such a laugh out of it—and actually, I think Lucia had a word or two with Angelo about anyone Liss's age getting turned over his knee and spanked like a baby—that for the first and last time in family history she got let off, and Angelo brought this down here and put it up in the place of honor. We've kidded him about the Flying and Reform School ever since. "
"Your sister must be quite a girl. "
"She is. " Mario kicked at the muddled heap of clothing. "Come on, let's get started. Next year I can push all this busywork off on you, and I guess you'll be stuck with it until Clay grows up. "
He gathered up a handful of black tights, shrunken like snakes, and thrust them at Tommy. "Here, look these over for worn spots and moth holes. If they're hopeless, chuck them into this carton for the rag man. If they have a couple of thin spots, put them over there, and Lucia and Liss— when she gets here—can patch them up for practice. "
Tommy sat down, the tights in his lap. They smelled musty, but through the mothball smell there was the old familiar odor hanging about them of resin,

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sawdust, and sweat, the smell of his childhood. Mario was sorting a clutter of sneakers and slippers.
"Angelo should have thrown these out last year, " he said, pitching a pair of worn cloth pumps into the rag box. "Did you get enrolled in school all right? One of us should have gone with you. "
"It was okay. They put me in the second year high. "
"What time do you get out in the afternoons? Around three?"
"Well, that was part of what I wanted to talk to you about. Mrs. Santelli—I mean, your mother—only she's Mrs. Gardner, isn't she?"

He broke off, remembering the encounter just a few minutes ago in the upstairs hallway, when he had been explaining the school arrangements. She had said, with one of her pretty and definite gestures, "Oh, Tommy, everyone here, down to my grandson, calls me Lucia. Why should you be the only exception?"
He had demurred. 'It doesn't seem polite somehow, Mrs. Santelli—I mean, Mrs. Gardner—"
And she had said, with her soft laugh, "See what I mean? It's just too complicated any other way. " But the soft voice had the whipcrack of authority.
He repeated this to Mario now. "I don't know, it just doesn't seem—well, respectful. My mother would have a fit. You really think I ought to?"
"If she wants you to, why not? We all do it. According to Angelo, it used to give my father fits, too. When Liss was just a tyke learning to talk, Lu made it very clear that she wasn't going to be called Mama, and we all grew up calling her Lulu. And Papa Tony was always just Papa to all of us. I think he'd die of the shock if anyone, even Clay, said Grandfather to him. Why argue? Call her what she wants to be called—seems to me that's the really polite thing to do. "
"I guess so, " Tommy agreed doubtfully. "Anyhow, she offered to take me up to school this morning, but I said I could go by myself. All the schools are split shift, though, and I got put on a morning shift. "
"Great, " Mario said. "I can keep my job at the ballet school a few more weeks. If you were going to school afternoons, Papa Tony would want me to quit work right away so we could all rehearse mornings. "
"Well, I guess it's all right, then. " Tommy poked his finger through a moth hole. "I don't know, your mother will have to be awful good at patching if she can mend these. "
"Oh, murder, I should think so, " Mario said, "Chuck it in here with the rags. Are they all as bad as that?"
"No, these have a couple of thin spots on the feet and that's all. "
"Well, that's something. " Mario was turning a rather worn black ballet shoe in his hands. "How did this get in here, I wonder?"
"Mario, tell me something—I've meant to ask. How did you ever get started teaching ballet?"

Nervously Mario turned the slipper inside out and then right side to again.
"Oh, I don't teach dancing. Just acrobats and tumbling, for the kids who are

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studying ballet. But I started out to be a dancer, before I ever did any flying. "
He stared at the slipper in his hands. "Liss and I were enrolled in ballet school when we were just babies, every winter. Then after Joe and Lucia had their accident, all year. Johnny never was interested, or Mark, but I kept it up. The year I was sixteen, they offered me a position in the regular corps de ballet with the Studio Ballet group. But that year Papa Tony had his heart set on taking all of us on tour. And—oh, I don't know—once I got on the road I sort of fell in love with the circus all over again. I did quit flying again for a year, later—Grandfather Gardner wanted me to go to college. It was the same year Liss got married. He said he'd send me to college up at Berkeley, where my father went— he'd pay all my tuition, living expenses, everything. I didn't want to, by that time. I was just getting so I could catch and hold on a double, and already I had this thing about doing a triple someday. But Angelo said I should give it a try for a year, so I did. "
"So you went to college?"
"Yeah. Don't laugh. I thought I might like to teach school some day. "
"I'm not laughing. I'd think you'd be a good teacher, " Tommy said. "So many real creeps take up teaching. You know—you've been in school. "
"But I haven't. I never went to school. We were on the road all the time. When Lu was the star of Starr's, she was important enough that they got a tutor for us kids, but after the accident I just sort of lived at the ballet school. But I passed my college boards all right. I was supposed to have a high IQ or something like that. I kind of liked college. "
"So why did you quit?"
"I didn't, " Mario said, his face suddenly a complete blank. "I got thrown out. "
"But why?" Tommy burst out, shocked.
Mario looked cold, alien and completely grown up, a stranger. "You ask too goddamn many questions. If you've just got to know, I got drunk. I got into trouble—real bad trouble —so I got sent to jail, and then I got thrown out of school. Are we going to sort this damn wardrobe or are we going to

sit around asking each other nosy questions?" He flung the faded ballet slipper into the carton.
Tommy bent his head over the mound of clothing, his face stinging as if Mario had slapped him. He ran his fingers carefully along the seams of the tights, rubbing each heel and toe for thin spots, looking all along the crotch of each pair for torn places. As so often with Mario, Tommy had the feeling that he was blundering around a dark and unfamiliar pitch. He never knew when he was going to say or do the wrong thing.
As far back as when Mario had first been teaching him to swing on the bar, Tommy had encountered the same unfathomable temper. For a few minutes Mario would be friendly, patient, encouraging; even when he laughed or yelled, it was in a friendly, companionable way. Then, always without warning, as if an invisible wind had changed, his mood would shift and he would say roughly, "That's enough—now scram, run along. " At first Tommy had blamed his own stupidity or slowness to learn for exhausting Mario's patience; later he had begun to wonder if Mario's attention span was brief.

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More recently he had realized that it was something else, something more than ordinary irritability; to understand that it had nothing to do with him, with Tommy, at all.
Mario was kneeling on the floor, his head bent, shaking out ornate, spangled vests and belts. Tommy watched him out of the corner of his eye. His hair grew low on his neck, and he needed a haircut. He had on faded dungarees and a worn black turtleneck sweater—Tommy wondered how many of them he had, and if he ever wore anything else—and flat woven Mexican sandals.
"Kid—" Mario said at last.
"Yeah?"
"Look, you hit me on a nerve, that's all. I'm sorry I blew up that way. It's a long story and not a very nice one. I'll tell you all about it someday. Here, come help me sort this mess. Throw all those towels over there; they'll all have to be washed. "
Tommy came and began to sort through the muddle, separating tights from belts, spangled tops, towels, and robes. Mario picked up a roll of the inch-wide muslin tape with which they bound their wrists and fiddled with it, rolling it tighter. "Tom, something else. Do me a favor, will you?"
"Sure, if I can. "

"You know they're going to bill you as Tommy Santelli? Well, listen, I'm not asking you to lie or anything, but if I take you anyplace with me—and I might—I'm just going to introduce you that way and let 'em take it for granted you're my kid brother, okay? Even if I call you Tommy Gardner, don't contradict me, huh?"
"Why, sure, anything you say, " Tommy agreed, confused.
Mario raised his head and now he was grinning again. "You see, I take what Papa Tony said real serious. What he said, you know, was mostly for my benefit. Not yours. "
"I don't get you, " Tommy said, completely baffled,
"You mind being my kid brother?"
"Heck, if you can stand it, I can, " Tommy said. He was thinking, again, that you never knew where you were with Mario.
The next morning, downstairs in the huge practice room, they began work. Tommy caught a glimpse of himself in one of the old mirrors while they went through a few preliminary stretching and bending exercises: thin and long-legged, in an outgrown T-shirt and gym shorts. Long ago he had overcome self-consciousness, but he felt troubled by his relative stiffness.
Mario—bare to the waist, in shrunken black tights patched at knees and feet—was holding the bar fixed along the wall and stretching his legs alternately above his head. He turned and grinned.
"It won't take you more than a day or two to limber up again. Remember, I've been working out all winter—naturally I'm in condition. " He pulled himself up on one toe. "You know the worst thing that ever happened to me, just about? I was, oh, maybe fifteen, and I was practicing for a dance recital. I was real proud of myself because I could do all the fancy stuff, high leaps, fast spins, flips, pirouettes, you know—did you know a ballet dancer learns to

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pirouette just like a flyer, just the same way exactly?—and I could kick higher than anybody else. And one day Mr. Court— he was our instructor—Mr. Court scowled at me and said, Trouble with you, Matt, is you're not a dancer, you're just a goddamn acrobat!' I was still young enough to go home and bawl over it. " Mario laughed. "The funny thing was, he didn't have the faintest notion how right he was. He didn't

know Liss and I came from a circus family; he was just using the word as a sort of catchall term of abuse. "

Tommy laughed uneasily. "Well, when I was a kid, Dad said that the worst thing you could say to anybody in show business was 'May all your children be acrobats'!"

Mario let go the bar and started across the floor. "Come on, let's get the net strung up and surprise the others when they come down. "

They worked in silence, Mario curt and preoccupied, stopping every few minutes to check and supervise Tommy's fastening of a rope. When they finished testing it. Mario somersaulted to the floor.

"Wonder what time it is. You've got to get ready for school, and I've got to shave and go to work—my first class today is at ten-thirty. We could leave it till this afternoon. Everybody will be down here then. "

Tommy felt unreasonably disappointed; not till now had he realized just how eager he was to get back to work. Mario watched him, then shrugged. "Oh, well. Might as well see if we've still got our timing. I haven't been up myself since last fall. "

As Tommy climbed the ladder, the looming walls, hard and confining, seemed to close in on him. He glanced uneasily at the trapeze, calculating the arc of the swinging ropes. Suddenly he envisioned himself cracking his head against one of those too-close walls. Holding with one hand to the ladder, he glanced uncertainly at the skylighted ceiling. If you swung too far, too high, you could hit it....

"Keep your mind on what you're doing!" Mario shouted. "That ladder's twisting like a snake!"

Rebuked, Tommy put his mind on his climbing, feeling the jolt of Mario's weight on the ladder behind him. He stepped off onto the platform, then turned to steady the ladder as Mario got off. They stood together for a minute, Mario whistling a little tune under his breath. Then he said, "Andiamo, " and signaled to Tommy to pull in the bar on its long hook. He gripped it a time or two, but was unsatisfied. He reached up and slapped his palms around the resin bag, then took the bar again and swung off, working up into a smooth, straight, arrow-neat swing, the four straight practice swings with which he always began rehearsal.

Then, swinging back to the pedestal board, he dropped off. Tommy reached for the bar and caught it, and it flew up,

striking Mario on the elbow. He overbalanced briefly, catching an elbow around the guyropes, and snarled, "Watch what you're doing! If you're going to catch the bar when I drop it, catch it—don't shove it in my face!"

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Tommy said, "Sorry, " but Mario had already taken the bar in his hands again and swung out. The trapeze swooped out, the man's body weighting it into a perfect arc; he pulled up. rolling over the bar in a neat turn. On the backswing, so swiftly that Tommy could hardly follow the separate movements, he threaded his ankles through his looped hands and swung there, his body arched into an inverted hoop. Then he flipped over and around the trapeze, hung briefly by his ankles, and dived into the net, landing on his back and letting the taut cords toss him high.
Wading toward the ladder, he called up, "Your turn!"
He stood beside Tommy on the board, frowning, as Tommy took the bar. "Head up, more flex in your elbows, and take that scowl off your face—you're not a weight lifter!"
Tommy swooped off into space. For a moment it seemed that he was flying straight at the opposite wall. At the end of his swing Mario yelled, "Change around!" but he had missed the timing. On the quick, twisting pass where he shifted hands and flipped his body around to face the platform, he missed his grip. Mario shouted, "Let go!" but already, by reflex, Tommy's muscles had tightened in the snapping twist as he plunged down—he knew enough not to try to hang on with one arm—turned, struck on his back, and bounced up.
"Well, at least you still know how to fall, " Mario called, "but what happened?"
Tommy started to say that the enclosing walls had seemed too close, then swallowed the words back. "I dunno, just missed. "
The door creaked and opened. "Hey, boy, " inquired a familiar voice, "getting an early start?"
Tommy turned, his feet tangling in the meshes of the net. Mario shouted, "Angelo!" and dived off the board. Tommy tumbled sidewise as Mario hit the net beside him. Mario vaulted to the floor and ran across the room to where Angelo was stooping to unlace his shoes. They hugged one another, and Angelo grinned at Tommy as Mario let him go.
"Getting off to a flying start on the season, huh?"

In city clothes Angelo looked heftier and shorter, almost completely unlike himself; only his voice and his grin were familiar. "When did you get in?" Mario asked.
"About four this morning—didn't you hear us? Lucia came down and made me some coffee, and we've been sitting in the kitchen ever since, talking. "
"No, I didn't sleep here, just came in early to put the net up before going to work. How was Mexico?"
"Hotter than hell, as usual, and just as infuriating. Dust, no water you could drink, horses getting sick, and that damn flying act spent more time chasing the senoritas than thinking about what they were doing. One of them did too much chasing in the wrong spots and wound up with a dose of you-know-what, and I had to finish the season filling in with the flying act, damn them all. We broke up at Laredo night before last. Tessa really had a ball—she came back chattering Spanish so fast even I couldn't keep up with her. She even wanted to see a bullfight, but I figured I had to draw the line somewhere. But she was all excited because she made a little friend down there and was a

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special guest at her friend's First Communion—there was a special Mass in the mission church for the kids. And of course she made a big hit with everyone in the show. She rode in the spec, and a girl in a Roman-ladder act taught her to do flips and hand balancing. Even put her in a mechanic one day and let her up on one of the ladders. I put a stop to that damn fast, of course. But just three days later I had to climb up and haul her off the aerial ladder — she climbed up to the platform all by herself, the little devil!"
Mario laughed. "Sound familiar? Seems to me Johnny pulled the same trick when he was about five. "
"Yeah, I remember. I tanned his bottom for it, too. Tess pestered me all the way home to let her travel with us this year, on the road. "
"Why don't you let her? There are lots of kids with Lambeth. "
"If Liss was still with us, damned if I wouldn't bring Tess along. Hell of a note when I have to spend eight months of the year away from my own kid, " Angelo said.
"Where is she now? Did you leave her at the convent?"
"No, she's upstairs in Lucia's bed—didn't even wake up when I brought her in the house. I'll drive her down to Holy Name next weekend. You know, I told Lucia—"

"Hey, " Mario interrupted abruptly, "what time is it?" "Quarter to eight, " Angelo said, and Mario whistled. "Cut and run, Tommy—you've got to get to school, " he ordered, and Tommy, obedient as always, felt a sudden reasonless resentment as he heard their voices rise again behind him.
He was apprehensive, curiously excited, when he returned to the practice room that afternoon. Mario and Angelo, both in practice clothes now, were standing at the foot of the aerial ladder; they turned their heads briefly as Tommy came in but paid no further attention to him. He took off his shoes and stood waiting for something to happen. After a while Papa Tony came in, followed by Lucia. He looked around and glared, his wide nostrils flaring in disdain.
"Angelo, " he said, "you are eager to start the season by giving the floor a good polish, maybe?"
Lucia put her hand over her mouth to hide a smile. Angelo, who had absentmindedly taken a pack of cigarettes from his sweater pocket, quickly put them back.
"Where is Johnny?" Papa Tony demanded. "Are he and his young friend not going to practice with us?"
Lucia said quickly, "They've asked me to help them work on an act, Papa. They're going to rehearse evenings when they won't be in the way. "
Papa Tony gave Angelo another quick glare, but said only, "Very well. Shall we begin, then? We may as well know what must be accomplished before spring. "
Before they came to a halt, Tommy was breathless, dripping sweat, his nerves ragged; but now he realized it wasn't only the beginners who got stepped on. Today Papa Tony had concentrated on Angelo, but Mario had not escaped, either. Angelo and Mario had criticized one another so loudly, in shouts and

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snarls, that they reminded Tommy of a pair of young lions. As for Tommy, he got it from all sides; he couldn't move a finger or a foot without evoking scorn from everybody.
He was tired as he had never been tired in his life. His shorts and shirt were so drenched with sweat that they left damp marks on the bar, and every muscle ached like a separate tooth. But he liked it; he wasn't playing any more.
Finally Papa Tony jerked his head at him. "Go down. You are tired. "

"Oh, no, I'm all right, " Tommy protested, not truthfully.
Papa Tony's dark eyes flashed at him. "I say you have had enough. You are beginning to shake—that is when you will fall. Go down with you, and put on your sweater. "
Tommy had forgotten to bring a sweater to the practice room, and so he became the season's first target for one of Papa Tony's legendary outbursts.
"So, you will run around the cold and drafty stairs in clothes dripping sweat? Basta— you deserve to take pneumonia! And your legs bare like an amateur or a woman! Find yourself some tights before you come down here again, hear me? Now get down from there! Get down from the rigging, get out from the room!"
But as Tommy fumbled with the doorlatch he heard the powerful bass voice raised again. "Angelo, per nome di Dio, is it in Mexico you have forgotten how to come down a rope? So you slip, and what is happening to the skin on your wrist? And where is your wrist guard, anyhow? You think because it is the first day only, that you have grown leather skin there? You Pinocchio on wires, you—"
Tommy shut the door on a flood of staccato Italian, but he heard it open softly behind him and shut again. Mario, tiptoeing up the stairs behind him, whispered, "I thought I'd better escape before Papa Tony started throwing a few pet names in my direction!"
Tommy's life fell quickly into routine: early practice alone with Mario, school, another practice with the act in the late afternoon. About a week later, as he was turning on the lights in the practice room for the early session—Mario had been charged with giving Tommy the extra coaching he needed—they heard steps on the back stairs and Johnny came in. He looked bigger, more solid, in faded tights that had once been red.
"Mind if I join you?" he asked diffidently. "Stel won't get up this early. Could you use a catcher?"
"Come ahead, " Mario said offhandedly. "Tom, you don't mind, do you?"
"No, I don't care. "
"Come on, let's get to work, then, " Mario said, "I've been catching the kid up to now, but I can do better on the platform with him if you're there to catch. "
He started up the ladder again, then turned back.
"That reminds me. Tell Stella she could do us a big favor if she would get up early once or twice and come down to

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work out with us. I'm teaching Tommy to swing in the catch trap, timing it with the bar and so forth, but he's still a flyweight—couldn't catch me without breaking his arms. And I don't think Barbara's ready. Stella doesn't weigh much, does she?"

"Hell, no—ninety pounds or so. Okay, I'll ask her. But what are you teaching Tommy to catch for? I thought he was going to be a flyer. "

"Because, " Mario explained patiently, "it's a good idea to learn it from both sides. And if Stella's going to be part of a family act, she ought to start taking her turn—"

"Okay, okay"—Johnny dodged as from a blow—"spare me the lecture. I see you're right in the old mold of the Angelo Santelli Flying and Reform School. " He went and started checking the ropes at his end of the net, then began climbing to the catcher's trapeze. "Let's see this flying of yours, Signor Mario—and I can get a look at your protégé. "

As they watched Johnny work up his swing, then lower himself backward to the catching position, Mario said under his breath, "I'll go over first. I want to make sure he won't try any monkeyshines. "

Tommy watched critically as Mario swung out, made a forward flip over the bar, and caught Johnny's wrists, a neat catch without strain or fumble. As he returned to the fly bar, he nodded. "Neat, Johnny, " he called. "Would you be offended if I told you you're pretty well in the mold of the Flying and Reform School yourself?"

When it was Tommy's turn to cross, he realized at once that Johnny was a good, deft catcher; he was instantly aware of the precision of Johnny's grip as they locked into the reciprocal wrist-catch, the extra little boost that impelled him back exactly as Mario's call released him. Nevertheless, he was a little regretful. He had enjoyed these early-morning sessions alone with Mario. And though he brushed the thought aside—Good grief, you're acting like a grade-school kid trying to monopolize your best friend!—he still felt an odd, undefined resentment.

Late that afternoon, after the group practice, Papa Tony went upstairs to dress, but Mario stayed to do some extra work with Angelo. Tommy was holding the bar for him at one end, when, below them, the door opened and shut, and a light feminine voice called, "May I watch?"

"Liss!" shouted Mario, and Tommy, looking down, saw a girl standing in the doorway—at this distance only blue skirt, a dark mass of hair, a dark sweater. "Don't come down—go ahead, " the girl called. She knelt on the floor; alter a minute she jumped up, throwing her shoes into the box, and ran across to the foot of the rigging.

Mario signaled to Angelo, then swung and whipped over into a single forward somersault. But instead of returning to the platform, he dropped from Angelo's hands into the net, made a fast turn to the floor, and ran to the girl, picking her up in an exuberant hug.

"Liss, Liss, I thought you'd never get here! Come on down, Tommy, " he called.

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The girl gave Tommy a quick, hard handshake and a merry grin. "So this is Tommy. I heard a lot about you, last year, in Matt's letters. "
Elissa Gardner Renzo was a pretty girl, slight and dark, with a quick, vivacious smile. She had abundant dark hair, pulled away from her face in a silky horse's tail, and dark feathery bangs above wide-spaced eyes, surprisingly blue. In the curve of Mario's arm, she looked very small.
"Where's the offspring, Liss?"
"Davey? Oh, I parked him upstairs with Lucia. He'll spend the next three days, at least, making the rounds from one lap to the next. And Johnny, bless him, hauled David off to see his sports car. But I wanted to come right down and see you, Matt, and your protégé. Is he really good?"
"Darned good, " said Mario seriously.
Angelo joined them on the floor, kissing Elissa's cheek and adding a hearty hug. "Hello, kitten. Did you come down to see the famous triple?"
She flashed excited blue eyes at him. "I can't wait. Oh, Matt"—she seized her brother's hands again—"Lu told me, and it's so wonderful, after all this time!"
"I did it on the road just once, but I've got it half a dozen times since. On good days. On bad ones I don't try. Not today, sweetie, if you don't mind—I'm all excited about seeing you. You look wonderful, Liss. "
She gave the ropes of the aerial ladder a tentative little tug. "Can I come up?"
Mario looked somehow pained, but he said quietly, "If you want to, Liss. " He said to Tommy and Angelo, in a tone of overdone comedy, "I believe the girl's homesick!"

"Oh, I am. " Then she looked shyly at Tommy and said, "I'm out of practice, though. I haven't been on a flying rig since Davey was born. "
"It was your own choice, Liss, " Mario said. "Regretting it?"
"Not really. David's an angel, really. And Davey's a lamb, now I've got over being afraid I'll drop him. And a settled old mama can't go traipsing around the country with a circus. And so forth, and so on. "
"Your own mother did, " Angelo pointed out, "and very nicely, thank you, starting when you were about six weeks old. "
She laughed. "I'm just quoting David, Uncle Angelo. And I'm really perfectly happy. Oh, I wouldn't display my rusty technique in front of just anybody, Matt, but I did want to try again—oh, let's say, just one more time. No, I won't say that. When Davey's older, who knows? But—Matt, please? Angelo?"
Mario laughed. "How much do you weigh, angel?"
"Ninety-nine pounds, fully dressed and wringing wet, " she flashed back at him. "I've lost weight since I had Davey, not gained it!"
Angelo put his hands around her little waist and lifted her. "I believe you have, at that, " he said approvingly. "Nice tough tummy muscles, too. "
He set her on the floor, and she giggled. Mario came around behind her, taking her elbows in his hands. "Allez-y, " he murmured, and lifted her into an elaborate arabesque. She went up delicately on her toes, then let him raise her in a high, balanced lift.
As he set her down she made a quick spin, whirled, then sank in a graceful pose. "That's about all I can manage without blocked shoes, " she confessed.

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"Yeah, you'll hurt your ankles going pointe on barefoot, " Mario said. "You know that. "
"You two ballet dancers!" Angelo muttered with a gesture of amused disgust.
"If you really want to come up, Liss, " Mario said, "I'll catch for you. "
"I don't know. Let me see how I feel after I swing a few times. All right?" Then she glanced uncertainly at Angelo. "Oh, but you were working—"
"Forget it, " Angelo said. "I wouldn't get any more work

out of Matt anyway, now you're here. We were about through anyway. Want me to stick around and call for you or anything?"
Mario shook his head. "No, thanks, we'll manage. "
"Not that you want to get rid of me, or anything, " Angelo grinned. "Okay, you stay and play with the boys, Liss. I'm going up and see how much my favorite grandnephew has grown!"
Liss shouted after him, "Don't you dare give him any candy, " but he slammed the door on the words, laughing. She said ruefully, "Every time I come down here, Davey gets spoiled perfectly rotten. "
"And it does him good, " Mario said. "Did you bring some tights, sweetie? You can't go on the rig in that outfit. "
She unbuttoned her flaring blue skirt at the waist, without even a glance at Tommy, and stepped indifferently out of it. What he had thought were dark stockings were black ballet tights. She raised her arms and tucked her hair a little more securely into its bandeau. Then she took one or two steps backward, looking at the bare wide floor with a curious, impersonal watchfulness. Methodically she raised her arms up over her head and whirled over into a row of steady, perfectly balanced four-point cartwheels. She came up to her feet the length of the room away, waved at them, and laughed.
"Okay, you've made your point, " Mario said. "Go on up, if you want to. "
Tommy held the ladder for her. She went up neatly, placing each black-clad foot with dainty care; the ladder did not twist or swing. Mario murmured to Tommy, "Liss used to be pretty good, for a girl. Most girls are rotten flyers. They can swing around and look pretty on a bar, but their center of gravity is too low for the big tricks. But she wasn't bad. "
"Mario, would you rather I cleared out? You told me once she hates being watched... "
"No, stick around—I want you to. But stay down here a minute. I'm going up with her first and watch her swing, before I let her go over. "
He climbed up to join his sister, and they stood on the platform side by side. Tommy could hear their low voices, but not their words. After a minute Elissa rubbed her hands with resin and swung out. At the end of the swing she reversed her hold, pulling herself up on the trapeze and sitting

on it like a child in a swing; then she lowered herself back until she was hanging by her knees. At the end of the third swing she pushed up again, took the bar with her hands, and jumped off neatly on the platform, releasing the bar into Mario's hands without an instant of overbalance. She called down to Tommy, "How's that for a rusty old homebody?"

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She looked exhilarated and sounded it. Tommy called back, "Fine!"
"Come on up, " Mario directed, and Tommy climbed up to join them on the platform. Mario said, "If you want to try, Liss—"
"Oh, please!"
"I still have the feeling Lucia would make you try it in a mechanic first. " He looked her up and down doubtfully. "Let Tommy come over first and you throw the bar. That way I can see how your timing is. "
He went down into the net, waded to the opposite end of it, and started to climb the web toward the catcher's trapeze, hand over hand. Liss, left on the platform with Tommy, seemed at a loss for anything to say. Finally she smiled and remarked, "Matt's written a lot about you, Tommy. I'm a little jealous of you—getting a chance to fly with him this season!"
"It seems funny to hear everybody calling him Matt. I never called him anything but Mario. "
"I guess they do call him that most of the time, on the road. " They watched Mario settle himself into catching position. "I really am jealous of you, though. Honest. He hates working the catch trap. He never would catch for anyone but me, before this. He made Johnny—"
"Liss, Tom—ready?" Mario called. Liss pulled in the fly bar, passing it to Tommy with deft precision. He gripped it in his two hands and stood poised.
"Now, " Elissa said, and Tommy pushed out, went over the bar in a single somersault, and straightened out, catching Mario's outstretched hands. They swung once and he saw Liss throw the bar for the return—right on time— then the swift arch and drop, and he was back on the platform beside Liss. For once he did not overbalance and grab the ropes as he released the trapeze. She caught it and drew it neatly out of his way.
"Neat, " she said in appreciation. "And your first season?"

"All right, Liss, " Mario called, "come ahead. What are you going to do?"
"Silly question, " she called back, "the Minneapolis Express!"
Mario, upside-down, choked with laughter. "My God, do you still remember that? Look out, or I'll pull the watch trick on you! Okay, Tom, she's going to do a seat jump. "
Tommy stepped carefully past her, then handed her the bar. She went off in a graceful, sailing swing, pushed up until she was sitting on the trapeze, then jumped off in a neat, arching leap toward Mario's hands. For an instant Tommy thought she had missed; then her hands found her brother's wrists and closed around them. He smiled as they swung together.
"Not heading for Minneapolis today!"
"Canceled my reservation, " Liss said merrily. Tommy dropped the bar; Liss sailed toward it, caught it effortlessly swung back to the board, and dropped off, smiling at Tommy in shy self-satisfaction. She called to Mario, "How's that?"
"Good enough after a two-year layoff, " Mario called, "but Holy Mike, Liss, don't grab that way! You're up to your old tricks, trying to fly and catch at the same time!"

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"And you're up to your old tricks, " she retorted, "preaching at me! Here endeth the Gospel According to Saint Matthew!"
Mario sat up, circling the ropes loosely with his arms as he swung. "Seriously, Liss, six weeks and you'd be as good as ever. "
"Hah, when I get six weeks!"
"I didn't realize how well you'd kept in shape. "
"Oh, I teach all the neighborhood kids to do flips and somersaults and things. And I dance a lot. "
"'Come on, Liss. '" Mario swung down into the catch position again. "Try a half twist. And this time let me do the catching, huh? It's what I'm up here for. "
"Okay. " She turned to Tommy and said anxiously, "I always push the darned thing sidewise. Throw the bar just a little to the left this time, will you?"
"My left or your left when you're coming back?"
"Like this. " She demonstrated. "Your left, I guess. "
"Sure. Ready? All right—go!"
Liss was gone, soaring toward the oncoming catcher. Be-

low them, Tommy heard the door open, but he had his eyes fixed on the returning trapeze. He caught it, watching the girl swing in Mario's hands; then he dropped it. As she broke free, someone yelled, "Elissa! What in God's name—"
Tommy gasped as the girl's smooth flight broke. For a second he thought she would miss the bar, but she got her hands on it raggedly and managed to kick up momentum again, arching her body backward; she swung up and dropped off on the platform. Angrily she whispered, "Damn!"
"What's the matter, Liss?"
She didn't answer. Tommy didn't think she heard. Mario shouted, "David, you infernal fool, never yell at anyone when they're flying!"
Liss muttered, "It's my husband. I could have bet—" She broke off and called down, "It's all right, David, I'm just playing. "
"Some game. Come on down, for heaven's sake—it makes me dizzy to look at you!" The young man in the doorway came across the floor, and Tommy looked down at him. He was a thickset young man, dark-skinned and curly-haired, who looked as if, under most circumstances, he might be good-natured. But now he looked angry, and frightened.
"I mean it, Liss. You come down off that thing, right now. "
"Oh, Dave! I'm enjoying myself! I haven't had a chance to try this in years! Watch. " She picked up the bar, flipped off the pedestal, and went into a dizzying spin at the end of her swing.
"Liss! Please!"
She made a fast half twist, reversed her hold on the bar, swung up, and sprang off on the pedestal again. Mario dived down into the net and somersaulted to the floor. As he went across the floor toward David, Tommy could hear the tremble of rage in his voice. "Listen, you stupid jerk, if you ever, ever, ever yell at anybody when they're on the fly bar again, I will personally break your goddamn neck. We don't do that in this family. I

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thought even you had brains enough to know that. That's how people get killed! My God, didn't you know you could have startled her just enough to give her a bad spill?"
"I want her down off there. Right now, " David said

sharply, ignoring Mario, and called again, "Elissa! Sweetheart, please!"
Liss suddenly plunged downward. David cried out sharply in fright, but she tucked her head under, bounded springily to her feet in the net, and vaulted to the floor.
Mario called, "You'd better come down too, Tom. "
Tommy paused to fasten the bar to its hook; by the time he climbed out of the net Liss was saying soothingly, "But, Dave, I'm as safe up there as you are behind the wheel of the car. Safer, really, because everybody up there knows exactly what he's doing, and you can never be sure of that on the road. Why don't you calm down, take off your shoes, and sit down and watch, and Matt and I will show you something to make you really sit up and take notice!"
David Renzo put a hand on his wife's arm. "Liss, you are not going up there again. I forbid it. " His voice was still shaking.
"If you'd only stop worrying! I won't get hurt—I never do. Matt only lets me do easy things anyhow. Things any little kid could do. Half of them you could do yourself. "
"Dave, " Mario said, "don't be a damn spoilsport. Liss doesn't fuss if you want to go sailing or surfboarding, does she? She and I—all of us—grew up on a trapeze just the way you'd ride a bike. "
"Damn it, Elissa, I thought you came down here to watch!"
Liss's hair was slipping out of the bandeau that held it, and her leotard was dark with sweat. Tommy handed her his sweater, and she put it around her shoulders without looking at it. She said, trying to control the temper that sparked from her glowing eyes. "I didn't promise anything. This is the house I grew up in, and Matt's my own brother. Where do you get off, trying to tell me what I can do and what I can't?"
"Before I ever agreed to come down here this time, you promised me there wouldn't be any more—"
"I didn't promise you any such thing, and you know it!"
"You know perfectly well I would never have brought you down here if I'd any idea you were going to start all this flying business all over again! Oh, no, you wanted to see your mother, you wanted to see your family—not one word about this flying stuff. You knew perfectly well how I felt; we had that all out before Davey was born!"
Mario took his sister's hand. "Liss, just say the word and I'll pitch him out of here ass over teakettle!"

"Listen, you muscle-bound moron, " Dave said, "this just happens to be a private fight between me and my wife, and nobody asked you to stick in your big nose! If you're the one who put her up to this, I'll break your neck. "
"Suppose you try it, " said Mario, very quietly. He was smaller than David Renzo, but the other man looked at Mario's bare torso, the heavy arm and

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shoulder muscles, and stepped back half a step. He swung around to Liss. "Damn it, you put on your skirt—you're half naked—and take off that filthy sweater!"
Liss seemed aware of the sweater for the first time. "Whose is this? Tommy's? Oh, thanks, Tom. David, he put it on me because I was all sweaty—you wouldn't want me to stand around and get pneumonia, would you?" She turned to Tommy with a nervous little grin, trying to simulate an ordinary social manner. "It's silly to stand here and argue. Tom, this is my husband. David Renzo. Dave, this is Tommy Zane: my brother's been teaching him to fly. "
"Hello, " Dave grunted, turning back at once to Liss. "Your brother can teach the whole damn state of California to fly, provided he lets you alone. "
"Please—Dave, can't you understand? I was just having fun. Come on, I'll take you up to the platform. Once you're up there, you can see for yourself that there's nothing to be scared of, if you know what you're doing. "
"Not on your life, thanks. " Dave looked up at the high rigging and paled. "Liss. I'm going to make an issue of this. I want you out of here and dressed in ten minutes, or I'll take the baby and get in the car and start for San Francisco. When you get ready to come home, Davey and I will be at my mother's—and don't come back until you're good and ready to forget all this circus business once and for all. "
He stalked out of the practice room, not looking back. Liss, tears running down her face, knelt and rummaged in the box for her shoes. Mario bent over her, and she turned her face into his shoulder and sobbed aloud.
"Matt, it isn't that he's mean. I just can't make him understand!"
"Liss, " Mario begged, "don't let him make you jump like a marionette. This is your home, sweetie. You have a perfect right to do anything you want to. Just you say the word, and I'll tear him into cornflakes for you!"
Her swollen mouth trembled. "That wouldn't help. He al-

ready thinks circus people are a gang of hooligans. " She blinked away her tears and looked at Tommy. "I'm so sorry you had to be in on that, Tom. I had no idea— He isn't really always like that—"
Mario spun his sister around so she faced him. "Liss. Why do you stay with that fatheaded ape? Come back on the road with us this year. You know Papa Tony would love to have you back in the act. In three months you'd be as good as ever. In three years—who knows?"
"Oh, if I only could, " she whispered, and for a moment she hid her face against his chest. Then, slowly, she pushed him away. "There's Davey—"
"Bring him along. Lucia trouped with all four of us. " "And look at us. Anyway, the Renzos would take him away from me. David might let me go without a fight, but not the baby. And anyway"—she hung down her head, helpless—"I love him, Matt. And he loves me, or he wouldn't be so scared. "
"Fine kind of love, if he wants to tear you out by the roots!" Mario held his sister's arms. "Liss—sweetie—please, please, be you! Don't crawl up those stairs like a whipped puppy! Don't let him make you do that. Fight, Liss! If he really loves you, he'll realize how much it means to you. " "No, " she said

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unhappily, the tears making gleaming stripes down her chin, "I've got to go up to him, Matt. He's really miserable, because he's afraid for me. Maybe someday I can show him it's nothing to be afraid of. "
"And by that time it might be too late for you, piccina. " "I'll have to take that chance. "
Mario said, in a vicious undertone, "And they still wonder why I don't get married, " as Liss blindly tied the laces of her shoes and, flinging her skirt over her arm, fled up the stairs.

CHAPTER 8

in the next weeks Tommy slipped effortlessly into his place in the Santelli house and in the family. They treated him exactly like one of themselves, and he quickly lost his early diffidence. It was impossible to feel like an outsider when he

found Lucia matter-of-factly sewing a loose button on his coat, when Barbara demanded help with her homework, or when Angelo came out of the living room and yelled at whoever was making that damn racket on the stairs to shut the hell up before he got his rear end tanned. (That time it happened to be Tommy, racing Clay upstairs.) He learned to answer the old lady whether she called him Rico, Angelo, or Matthew, and after a while, seeing that it really confused and distressed her every time he said "Mrs. di Santalis" or "ma'am, " he began shyly to call her Nonna, as Clay and Barbara did, and no one seemed surprised, or even to notice,
He went regularly to school, and was punctual and attentive, but he made no friends there, or outside the family at all. The Santellis were a clannish family, and seemed to need no one outside. Barbara had one or two friends at the ballet school, but she rarely brought them to the house. Even Clay, young as he was, seemed to prefer the company of his family to that of his schoolmates. Saturday afternoons, he went to the movies with Barbara and sometimes Clay, or to swim in a nearby pool. Occasionally Johnny and Stella, and sometimes even the older ones—Liss and David, though rarely Mario—would join them, to make a close-knit family group of young people. Tommy was proud of the way they accepted him; he realized how little they needed or would tolerate outsiders.
They had not quite accepted Stella the same way, not yet. It was partly her own fault, of course. It was not that she was unfriendly or standoffish, but simply very quiet, very reserved. She rarely spoke unless spoken to directly. Tommy didn't think he'd ever heard her offer an opinion on anything. She helped Lucia with cooking and cleaning and housework, and took upon herself, without any fuss, the detested chore of patching the faded, shabby practice tights. Two or three times when Lucia was out, she volunteered to stay with Davey so that Liss and David could go out together. Tommy thought she talked more to Davey than she did to anyone else in the house.
Tommy paid little attention to her until the day he made his first catches. Mario had made Stella put on a mechanic —the leather belt, strung on two ropes running through pulleys in the ceiling and held from below, used to break the flyer's fall in case of a missed trick. While she snapped it

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around her waist, Tommy watched with surprise; Mario had never used a mechanic, even when working on the most difficult new tricks, and he had trained Tommy without one.
"Why is this?"
Mario explained coldly that a flyer who knew how to fall could miss a trick without hurting himself, but if the catcher fumbled and missed, the flyer couldn't fall into the net properly; he was more apt to go shooting out over the edge of the net, to strike the wall, or drop to the hard floor. "So I'm going to be down here holding her on the ropes. I don't give a damn if you break your own neck, but I don't want you smashing up anyone else's!"
That seemed reasonable enough to Tommy; but after one or two misses, he found that he could catch Stella smoothly and unspectacularly, without strain or fuss. It was simple enough, it was just a question of being there at the right point in space when the flyer was; it was just timing. When Mario called them down, and he went up with Angelo to work on his own more difficult tricks, Tommy sat on the floor with Stella and they talked. She looked pretty even in Barbara's old gym suit, which she had put on for practice, a threadbare men's sweater wrapped loosely around her shoulders, her hair damp with sweat around the thin blue-veined temples.
She had been born under canvas and literally cradled in the top tray of her mother's wardrobe trunk. Her mother had been a bareback rider; her father, a "joey, " or acrobatic clown. Her mother had taught Stella to ride almost as soon as she could stand. When she was only four years old, her father had used the little girl for a top-mounter, balancing her on his shoulders as he went through his comic routines. At nine she had been a veteran in the ring, appearing in a Risley act in which one of her uncles, an acrobat, lay on his back on the ground and, on his upstretched feet, spun and juggled Stella and one of her small cousins like two bouncing balls. Sooner or later she had tried virtually every acrobatic act in the circus. They had been traveling in Australia, the first year of the war, when her mother was killed in a train crash. Stella's father had remarried almost at once. It was Stella's stepmother who had taught her trapeze work, and for a while, under the name of "The Swallows, " the two of them had appeared in a double-trapeze act. Stella grew evasive about her teens, or what had brought her to the carnival

where Johnny had found her, but she talked freely about the work she had done.
"These days they won't let you do anything unless you're almost old enough to vote. I worked in New York one winter at a Shriner circus. I was eleven and I'd been doing swing-overs for three years, but Daddy had to tell the police I was sixteen or they'd have turned me over to the Gerry Society— some of the kids in the show did get taken away. "
"How old are you now, Stella?"
She said quickly, "Twenty-one, " but Tommy did not believe her. She looked no older than he was himself. He was never to know her exact age, even years

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later when it became a point of dispute, and he sometimes wondered if she knew it precisely herself.
One afternoon they had come down earlier than usual. Johnny was catching, and Tommy and Stella were on the board together, Mario coaching them from the floor, when Papa Tony came in. The old man climbed the ladder briskly, stepping out beside them. As he rubbed his hands briefly on the resin bag, he cast a contemptuous glance at Stella's faded gym suit.
"Have you no tights?" he demanded.
"No. Mrs. Gardner said this would be all right, " Stella murmured, shrinking slightly, and Papa Tony scowled:
"This is something new, for Stella and Johnny to join us here. "
"I asked them to, " said Mario from the floor.
Liss was perched on Barbara's low trapeze, swinging gently back and forth less than six feet off the floor. She said, "Stel's the only one light enough for Tommy to catch, Papa. Except me, and you know I promised David. "
"I see. " Papa Tony flashed a disquieting glare at Stella. Then he called, "You are working with us, Johnny?" As always, he pronounced it Gianni.
'That's up to you, Papa. I'll go down if you like. "
"No, stay where you are. Angelo is not yet here, and I have not yet had the opportunity to watch you working. Tommy"—he turned his head—"go down. We will let the young lady handle the bar for me, I believe. Well, Miss Stella?"
Stella gave him a nervous little smile. Tommy started to step off on the ladder, but Papa Tony said sharply, "Let me

see you throw a somersault into the net. Do you think you can do it without landing on your face?"
Tommy drew a deep breath. He could drop or fall from the bar at any point in his swing, but so far Mario had not allowed him to attempt a forward somersault from the board to the net. He held his arms, bent at the elbows, before his head, then dived off the board, spun, clasping his arms around his tucked-up knees, and struck heavily on his back, bounding up to his feet.
"It will serve, but you are not a jumping jack, " Papa Tony called down harshly. "You will black your eye or break your nose on your own kneecap, that way. Keep your head tucked under and roll with the sway of the net, hear me?"
Tommy picked up his sweater, tied the arms around his neck, and dropped to the floor to watch. Above them Papa Tony swung out and back, then made a neat perfect pass over the bar, cleaving the air like a gull; he twisted in mid-flight so that Johnny's extended hands took not his wrists but his ankles. They swung together; then Papa Tony passed his hands behind his arched back, bringing up his body through their loop, and then he was swinging by his wrists from Johnny's hands. On their second swing together, Johnny released him and he flew back to the trapeze.
"Gorgeous!" Liss called, clapping her hands, and added to Tommy, "I used to do that—it was one of the first tricks Lulu taught me. "
"It is a woman's trick, really, " said Papa Tony scornfully, "and very simple if you have the strength. The thing is to make it look pretty. "

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Johnny called, "Think you can do it, Stella?"
"We shall see, " Papa Tony said. With a seigneurial little nod, he passed the bar to Stella, and said sharply, "Go!"
She swung out, her body bent at a slight angle, and pulled herself up, poised over the trapeze; at the end of the forward swing she threw herself over the bar and twisted slightly in midair, Johnny's hands slapping around her ankles. She flung her arms wide, then buckled, bending awkwardly at the waist in a clumsy, tucked-up attempt to pass her body through her clasped hands.
"Keep your fanny tucked in, " Liss called from the floor.
Papa Tony shouted, "Clumsy! Is your spine made of sawdust?"
Johnny caught her hands and they swung together, but the

effect of the trick had been quite spoiled. As Stella returned to the board Papa Tony snorted audibly. "You had better try it again, " was all he said, but Tommy, looking up, saw a grin pass between Mario and Liss.
"Anyway she did it, first try, " Johnny yelled down, "so take off that Cheshire-cat look, kitten, because I remember somebody who didn't!"
Stella swing off again, flipping over the bar and twisted, throwing her ankles into Johnny's grip. Papa Tony called, "Wait for the momentum of the swing... wait—now!" This time Stella raised herself more deftly, shifting her hands past her ankles without the awkward pause and buckling, so that the grip transferred smoothly to her wrists.
"It is better, but you still go flop like a rag doll, " Papa Tony shouted angrily at her. Stella came loose, sailed toward the trapeze, and reached for it, but her fingers barely brushed the taped bar; she grabbed and missed.
"Roll over!" shouted Mario, Tommy, and Liss in unison and she snapped over on her back, dropped, and sank deep in the net.
"Come up, come up!" Papa Tony snapped in annoyance. "Can't you even manage to get back to the board?"
Over Tommy's head Liss bent down and murmured to Mario, "Flying and Reform School in full session, huh?"
"Glad you're out of it?"
Liss murmured a reply that was inaudible to Tommy. She and Mario conversed quietly as Stella climbed the rope ladder and began her third attempt at the trick.
"No, no, no, no!" Papa Tony suddenly exploded at the top of his powerful lungs. "Dio mio, ragazza, you will break your wrists or Johnny's! Off with you, you—you rag doll stuffed with sawdust! Get off the board! Get out of the room! My patience is gone! Out with you before you break your foolish neck! Can you throw a somersault into the net without breaking every bone in your clumsy body, not that it would be anyone's loss if you did? Or must you climb down the ladder with your backside sticking out like an elephant on a tub? Down with you! Out from here! Learn to take a bar in your two hands before you come up again! Elissa!" he shouted.
Liss, startled, jerked her head up. "Yes, Papa?"

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"Come up here, up on the board, and handle the ropes for me! David, David, never mind what David says—I will deal

with him! This—this rag puppet here is about to shed tears! Get down, Stella—-what are you waiting for, wings?"
The girl dived down into the net, turning in her flight. She landed properly on her back, but Tommy heard her breath jolt out harshly as she skidded on the taut ropes. "You okay, Stel?" Johnny called.
"Sure. " Stella got out of the net and her face crumpled as she looked down at a large rope burn near one elbow.
"You overbalance, " said Liss briskly, putting her toe around the outside rope so that it barely touched the outside rung of the ladder. "I used to do it too, Stel—you try to brace yourself in the net with one elbow and it's a real good way to pull your shoulder right out of the socket. Keep your elbows tucked in when you fall—and roll, don't skid. " She started up the rope, adding casually, "If it hurts, there's some stuff in the change room. "
"Elissa, I am waiting, " Papa Tony snarled. "A little attention, if you please!"
Tommy followed her with his eyes. "David finally came around, then?"
Mario's smile only stretched his mouth a little. "Lucia talked to him. She promised faithfully not to fly, so he decided to be generous. He says she can play around down here and go up and handle the ropes for us. "
Tommy picked up Johnny's threadbare sweater that Stella used for a robe and started after her. She was standing in the middle of the change room, very small and disconsolate, her back to him, her sweat-streaked blonde hair slipping out of its elastic band, her elbow raised as she touched the red, abraded patch with careful fingertips.
Tommy let the heavy door swing shut. "Stel, you'll catch cold. Here. " He laid the sweater over her shoulders, and felt -her shivering.
"Why don't they heat this old barn?" she muttered. "Because heat rises. Before it would be even halfway comfortable on the floor, it'd be hot enough to stifle us all, up on the rig. Does your elbow hurt?"
She gave it a dispassionate glance, but he noticed she kept the sweater carefully away from it. "Lost a couple of inches of skin, that's all. "
"Let me put some stuff on it. " He got out the first aid kit and motioned her to sit on the bench. She did not speak or look up as he got out the tube of antiseptic salve and

squeezed some on a gauze square, and he had to take her elbow in his hand and turn it up before he could lay the dressing over the raw patch. He anchored it lightly with two strips of adhesive tape. "There you are. "
"It was okay—you didn't need to bother, " she said in that light, toneless voice. "I'm used to rope burns. I'm not really all that much of a greenhorn. "
"Well, you could get it infected. Mario would simply raise heck if you went around with a rope burn not covered up. "
"And wouldn't that be just awful, " she retorted, and as he put the cap back on the tube of salve he saw that her gray eyes were brimming with tears. Hastily she bent her head, fumbling in the pocket of the faded gym suit for a

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handkerchief. It was streaked with sweat and stiff with resin; she drew her wrist hurriedly over her eyes.
"Stella, did you hurt yourself? Really, I mean? You want to go up and lie down?"
The girl shook her head, and he saw the muscles in her throat move convulsively as she swallowed. She was so thin that every vein showed blue in her face and wrists and bare legs. Tommy put his hand on her shoulder. It felt sharp and narrow, like a cat's. Carefully, as if he were trying to pet some frightened animal, he put his arm around her waist and drew her close to him. She felt very light and small, her face cold and wet against his cheek, her body taut and quivering like a frightened kitten. As he drew her closer he smelled salty sweat, resin, the stinging smell of antiseptic over and around the mysterious scent of her skin and damp hair. "Don't cry, " he murmured, against her wet cheek. "Don't, honey. "
She clung to him, shaking, her head on his shoulder. "Tommy, they hate me, they all hate me. Why?"
"Stel, they don't. Honest, they don't, honey, it's just the way they are. Listen, " he added earnestly, standing back to look at her but holding on carefully to one of her thin wrists, "even after Papa Tony bawled hell out of you like that, didn't you notice that he told you to somersault down? He never even let me try that till today, and I've been working with them for ages. "
"I could do it. I really could. If they just wouldn't yell at me like that. "
"I know, " Tommy almost whispered, "it sort of gets to me, too. But that's just the way they are, Stel. You'll get used to

it, like I did. And anyhow, pretty soon they won't have anything to yell at. Even I can tell that. "
"You really think so?"
"Sure I do, " Tommy said.
She was standing with her wet face raised to his, and Tommy, bending just a little, grazed her lips with his own. Her mouth felt cool and soft. As if moving in a sudden, dazed dream, Tommy hugged her against him; he felt her small breasts through the rough stuff of her suit, her hard little body suddenly pliant, molding itself to his. Then, flushing, her cheeks almost pink, she broke quickly away and said shakily, "I'd better run upstairs and—and change before I catch cold. " Clasping Johnny's sweater around her shoulders, she ran out of the change room and up the back stairs, and after a minute he heard an upstairs door banging shut.
That evening in the big firelit room, as always, Stella was the only silent one. She sat apart, withdrawn, her colorless hair bent in the circle of the lamp over a patched pair of tights, her needle flashing in and out and nothing else but her small hard-knuckled fingers moving at all. She did not look at Tommy, but neither did she seem to avoid his eyes. He sat with his algebra book in his lap, not focusing on the pages, his thoughts playing queer tricks on him. He had never kissed a girl before except in confused erupting dreams from which he woke in startled bewilderment. The reality was infinitely less exciting than the dream, and yet she had felt very nice, very soft to hold. Her mouth had a

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strange taste. He refused to let himself look again at her mouth. She wore no lipstick and it made her look like a boy. He wondered if she and Johnny were sleeping together, and the thought made disturbing pictures in his mind.
He looked at Johnny, seated with Liss and Mario at an old card table, a Monopoly board spread out before them. Mario usually went home right after supper, but tonight, for some reason, he had stayed on. Tommy noticed, almost for the first time, that Johnny too had the Santelli eyebrows and good looks; he was so blond that he looked unlike the others, but upon closer scrutiny, the features were almost the same. Johnny paid so little attention to Stella in the family circle—he paid less attention to her than he did to Liss or his mother—that maybe, Tommy reflected, she was just his partner and he didn't think of her that way at all. He sup-

posed Johnny could have any girl he wanted. How would a girl feel about Johnny, cocky and handsome, rough and strong? He thought about Johnny's hard hands catching him firmly in flight; but would he be gentler with a girl?
Mario was handsomer than Johnny. Even in faded practice tights, a shrunken T-shirt stretched across his chest, he was nice-looking. Stella had let Tommy kiss her without any fuss. Did she like to be kissed? Would she have let Mario kiss her like that? The thought was oddly disturbing.
"Come on, Stella, " urged Liss carefully, "put that junk down and come over and take a hand with us. It's more fun with four. "
She looked up shyly. "I don't know how to play. You'd have to stop and teach me. "
The fire made a soft hissing noise. Clay and Barbara, stretched on the floor, were yawning over their homework. Papa Tony, sprawled on his spine, was half asleep in a deep chair. Lucia, in her straight chair, was never idle; as always, her hands were busy with exquisite embroidery. Tonight a piece of peacock-blue satin spilled over her knees and she was sewing on sequins, one by one, from a small paper in her lap.
Mario looked up from the dice cups. "You know how to play, don't you, Tommy?"
"Sure. "
"Well, sit in, then, " Mario said, with an air of command. Tommy stood up, edging past Angelo, who was soldering a loose spoke in the wheel of Clay's bicycle, before the wide-eyed gaze of Liss's son, Davey. Little Davey was a chubby, active toddler with huge blue eyes, the apple of everyone's eye and outrageously spoiled. Tommy didn't know much about babies, but it seemed awfully late for one of Davey's age to be awake. The child suddenly grabbed at the silvery coil of solder, and Angelo gave him a menacing scowl. "No, Davey, hot. Liss, take him away before he burns his hand off!"
"Grab him, Tommy, " Liss said negligently, and Tommy lifted the squirming youngster.
"Come on, kiddo. You don't want that stuff. "
Davey glared at Tommy with wide, stubborn eyes, debating whether or not to set up a howl. "Down!" he shouted, kicking angrily at Tommy.

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"Here, here, you little dickens!" Tommy held him out warily at arm's length. "Liss, take him!"
"Okay. Come here, nuisance, " Liss said. "What are you trying to do, Davey, burn yourself to a crisp? Drive everybody nuts?" She frowned as she lifted him into her lap. "Oh, murder, wet again! Who'll hold him while I get a dry didy? Here, Tommy. " Gracefully she leaned over Tommy,. where he had slid into a seat at the card table, and plunked the child into his lap. "Careful, he's wet. "
Mario chuckled aloud at Tommy's grimace of dismay and held out his arms, scooping Davey into his own lap. His thin face had softened, and Tommy watched with surprise as Mario laid his cheek against Davey's chubby one and kissed the fat neck a time or two, murmuring nonsense at him in Italian. The baby abandoned his struggle to get down, plunged his fists into Mario's hair, and began bounding up and down on Mario's knees.
"How do you do it?" Liss marveled when she returned with the clean diaper. "Magic! Hang on to him while I run up and get his sleepers, will you?"
"I'll go. " Stella flung down her sewing and ran toward the stairs.
Angelo raised his head from the wheel of the bike and inquired, "Shouldn't he be in bed, Liss? It's awfully late for a tyke that size. "
"If I put him to bed, he'll scream the house down and I'll have to stay up there and keep him company. Just let him wear himself out. He'll fall asleep on the rug after a while, and then I'll carry him up and put him in his crib— Thanks, Stel. " She took the sleepers from Stella; Mario held out his hand for them and Liss surrendered them thankfully.
Mario, holding a naked and squirming Davey across his lap with one elbow, pinned on a clean diaper and hauled the sleepers on deftly with his free hand. He gave the child a brief, loving spank on the bottom. "Now, behave, and try to keep from driving your mother nuts for a while yet, Davey. " He deposited him gently on the floor. Joe picked him up, and Davey, apparently exhausted by all the attention, abruptly thrust his thumb into his mouth, snuggled against Joe's shirtfront, and closed his eyes. Joe rocked thoughtfully on, shifting his magazine so the turning pages did not disturb the baby, and Liss sat down and picked up her dice cup with a sigh of relief.

"We used to play this by the hour on the road, " Johnny said, moving his pawn. "We had a game once that ran three weeks. We'd leave it set up and play between shows, and go back after the night show and play some more until Lucia chased us off to bed. Who won that goddamn game anyway?"
"Five cents, " said Lucia, raising her eyes from her sequins. Ruefully Johnny dug into the pocket of his dungarees, fished out a nickel, and deposited it in the huge, hideous purple pig on the mantelpiece. Tommy had learned that this had been a family custom since the time Lucia, at nine, had repeated something she had heard one of her uncles say; he understood now why Mario and Angelo and, in general, Johnny were so clean-mouthed.
"I remember that game, Johnny, " Liss gloated. "I bankrupted Matt first, and then he sat behind my chair and helped me lick you. It was the only time I

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ever managed to get four hotels on the Boardwalk and Park Place both, and all the railroads. "
"Yeah, " said Johnny, rolling out the dice, "I remember now. You two always ganged up on me. You even used to speak Italian so I couldn't listen in. "
"Nobody kept you from learning the language, " Mario said. "We all grew up speaking it. "
"You fixed us, though—you always got even some way, " Liss grinned, showing the dimple at her chin. "Matt, remember the time he put a hunk of cactus in my bed, the time we were playing through Arizona? I got in, and I hit it with my feet, and let out a screech you could hear way back in the elephant cars. I had to go sleep with Matt, and Lucia gave me he—Hail Columbia. We never did get all the stickers out of my mattress, either—I was picking them out of my heels all the rest of the season!"
"Any time people talk about the fun of big families, they should try trouping with a pack of teenage kids. " Angelo let the wheel rest on the floor, laid the soldering iron down so that the hot tip rested safely on the stone fireplace, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "It was bad enough when they were little kids, and adopting strange kittens and frogs and things. And Liss, by herself, was okay—the worst thing she ever did was sneak a cigarette now and then, or start gobbling banana splits between shows and bust out of her tights. "
"I never! I never did! Angelo, I'll kill you—"

"But the years we had the three of them on the road, when they were in their teens... Man, I tell you, I used to look forward to the show because it was the only time I could trust you all to behave—and at least when you were all together at the top of the rigging, I knew where you were!"
Mario, shuffling the Chance cards, grinned at Tommy. "That was before we came over to Lambeth. We traveled with Carey-Carmichael Shows, and Lucia toured with us to look after Liss. "
"Fat lot of looking she did, " Angelo snorted with an affectionate smile at Lucia. "You know who looked after all the kids in the family from the time she got 'em on a bottle! Uncle Angelo, that's who!"
Lucia shrugged. "Well, you like kids. I never heard you do any griping about it. "
"And who'd listen if I had?" Angelo picked up the soldering iron again.
"Lucia was the finest manager we ever had, " Papa Tony said, opening his eyes. "She was always far better than I at it. I had never believed a woman could manage us better than any man, but she did. I wish I could persuade you to travel with us this year, dear Lucia. "
"I had quite enough of that before Liss was married, thank you. " Lucia tossed her head, with the whimsical turn that showed where there was, still hiding, a dimple like her daughter's. "I'm quite comfortable here. The nicest thing about having children is being able to neglect them when they're old enough to take care of themselves. "
"The dowager queen, " Joe laughed, putting aside his magazine. "Papa, remember the time she socked the propman?"

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Papa Tony threw back his head with a shout of laughter, and Lucia made a mock-despairing, flyaway gesture of hiding her face. "I should have pitched a tantrum every other performance, like Barney Parrish, and maybe they'd let me forget my one and only. The one time I lose my temper, it becomes a circus legend!"
"Tell us!" Clay clamored. "I never heard that one, Lucia. Daddy, tell us!"
Lucia fingered her temple thoughtfully. "Look, I've still got the scar. " She turned her head so that the children could see a narrow white line running up into her hair. "Yes, tell them, Joe. "
Even Stella looked up from her sewing, and Tommy stared

with curiosity at the queenly Lucia, bent like a blushing girl over the satin in her lap, but smiling a little, too.
Joe said, "Well, it happened in Denver... was it before or after Liss was born?"
"After, " said Papa Tony. "Lucia had been working again for almost three months. "
"Well, that year we ended our act with a trick we called a triple flyaway. Me on the board, and Matthew in the catch trap—big Matt, that is—and then Lulu would go into a long swing, and spin on the bar—and she could really get up a beautiful spin when she put her mind to it. Then, just as she'd go so high everybody was gasping, she'd whirl the trapeze right up over the supports and swan-dive down, just as Matt and I dived down, and we'd all three hit the net together. There was something about the sight of the three falling bodies that always made the stands scream, even with the net right there in plain sight. "
"I remember that trick. You had the kids do it, back when Matt—young Matt, that is—was still catching, just about the time Johnny learned to fly, " Angelo said.
Liss made a face. "That routine... that was murder! Matt and Johnny and me. We always managed to get all tangled up. We kept getting black eyes and bloody noses from falling on top of one another, and finally I broke Johnny's finger and Lulu took the routine out of the act for good. "
"It's not a trick for amateurs, " Joe admitted complacently. "Well, that day in Denver, a prop man got in a hurry about fixing one of the spreader ropes, and when Lulu hit the net, the damn thing broke, snapped up, and whacked her across the face. It laid her cheek open to the bone, and collapsed that whole end of the net. She rolled right out on the ground. Matt and I managed to grab the ropes, but Lu went right out. "
"She couldn't land bad if she wanted to, " Angelo put in. "She was groggy, out on her feet, but she rolled over, did four ground somersaults, came right up on her feet, and bowed. The crowd thought it was part of the trick and went wild over her. "
Lucia put her face in her hands, laughter escaping between spread fingers, as Joe went on: "And then she saw the prop man standing there. Our nice ladylike Lucia, the girl they used to say was the only aerialist in the world with no temper-

ament at all, our Lulu—she lost her temper. She called him—"

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"Joey, " Lucia said faintly, "if you repeat what I called him it will cost you five cents, and anyway, the kids don't know that much Italian—I hope!"
"Well, she called him, uh, a dirty name at the top of her voice and then socked him square across the face. And in those days, believe me, our girl had the muscles for a real roundhouse punch! She laid him right out in the sawdust, and then she stood there with the blood running down her face— and she kicked him!"
Davey, on Joe's lap, sat up and said sleepily, "Lulu?"
Lucia hastily put her embroidery aside and picked up her grandson. "Yes, Lulu, " she said in a voice thick with laughter. "Yes, for once the act had a real dramatic climax. I can only think of one time it had a better one, Joey. That time we were both in on it. "
Abruptly, and with tense, total silence in the room, they realized that Lucia's bright eyes were shining with tears and her voice breaking. Hastily she turned, holding Davey up against her. "Liss, sweetie, you're almost as rotten a mother as I was. What in the world are you thinking of, keeping Davey up this late? Go on with your game, kids—I'll take Davey upstairs. "

CHAPTER 9

the mild California winter moved on without incident, until early February, when there was a break in the routine.
Another branch of the Santelli family, the sons of Papa Tony's brother Rico, had moved up to Santa Barbara and left the circus permanently. A daughter of this family was a postulant nun in a convent there and was about to take her final vows. Papa Tony and his children were invited to the ceremony, the cousins in that family had not seen Johnny in four years, and in the end, when they all drove away, only Tommy and Stella were left alone in the big house. They had both been separately invited to come—Stella by Liss and Johnny, and Tommy by both Lucia and Angelo—and had separately declined.

They both felt a little awkward, alone in the huge house. Stella spent the morning tediously cleaning up the big kitchen, and Tommy loafed aimlessly around the practice room, trying to find something to do with himself. In midafternoon Stella joined him on the porch and asked, "Want to go for a drive?"
"You got the keys to Johnny's car?"
She laughed. "It was my father's car. It's mine now. Come on, we'll go out for a while. If nothing else, we can stop and get an ice cream cone. "
He got his denim jacket from the hall and joined her. He had been curious about what he had supposed was Johnny's car; it would be the first time he had ridden in an MG. Stella walked toward the car, loosely wrapping a scarf around her blowing hair. She was wearing faded white dungarees and a boy's sweater.
"When did you learn to drive?" Tommy asked her.
"Oh, Lord. My dad taught me to drive when I was a little tad—nine, ten years old. Just as soon as I could get my foot down on the brakes. Lots of men don't like to see a woman drive, but even when I was little he wasn't like that. He said if Amelia Earhart could fly a plane I could sure learn to drive a car. " She

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got in and started the motor. "It happened like this: after I got fired from the show and Johnny stuck his neck out to get my rigging back for me, we were both in sort of a spot. We had no place to go—that is, I didn't. He had a place to go, he said, but no way to get there. I had the car, so we decided to stay together, and came on here. " She put her foot down on the accelerator and swung the wheel hard, backing out of the curved driveway.
She drove fast and expertly, shattering Tommy's male illusions about women drivers within five minutes. Quickly they were out of town and on the highway, and she turned onto a deserted road. Tommy had never been in such a powerful car; old and battered though it was, the racing motor purred, not with the quiet of an ordinary car but with the controlled snarl of one of his father's cats. Stella pushed the speed higher and higher, flying along as the indicator nosed gently up: 65, 70, 75, 80, 85—Tommy drew his breath against the rush of wind past his face, tensed to the tremble of it. The desert highway rushed past, blurred to streaks of brown and gray and green, scenery leaping out and falling away; for a few minutes he was not aware of time at all. His father had never driven their sedate old Hudson over the le-

gal speed limit. He saw Stella's lips move as she spoke to him, but he did not hear what she said and didn't care. The world was rushing by and he was conscious of a strange taut telescoping, as if he were being whirled into a vortex. Stella was an irrelevance; nothing existed but this strange tumbling sense of himself in space and time. He finally realized that the wind was softening on his forehead and that they had slowed to a moderate fifty miles an hour and that Stella was speaking to him, a trifle impatiently this time.
"Sorry, Stel, I didn't hear you. " Why couldn't she be quiet? What could she have to say that could possibly match his mood? Perhaps no one except maybe Mario could have matched that mood. He remembered something random Mario had once said: Angelo says I drive like a homicidal maniac.... Now Tommy knew why—the violence, the deliberate ravishment of speed....
"I said I don't want to get a fine for speeding. I can't afford to pay any fines, and Johnny and I got caught in a speed trap along here one time. We'll get off on the other road. Would you like to drive for a while?"
She said it so casually that he was stunned. Would he? Would he like to drive this beauty?
"You do know how to drive, don't you?"
"Sure, my father showed me how last year. " Then with scrupulous truthfulness he confessed: "I've only driven a few times, though. Maybe four times. "
"Well, there's no traffic out here, so you can't possibly hit anything. Slide over. " Matter-of-factly she jumped out and walked around the car. Tommy slid into the driver's seat and listened, in a curious sort of disbelieving daze, while she showed him, meticulously, the different controls. She laughed a little at him:
"You're a funny kid. Liss's husband, Clay, even Angelo— they knew it from fender to fender before it had been in the drive three days. I got the notion you didn't care much about cars. "

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Tommy only laughed a little helplessly. The gear lever felt unfamiliar and the wheel was smaller than usual; for a time he over-controlled and the car swerved on the road with every touch of his fingers. But his reflexes were the perfect reflexes of an athlete, and before long he felt confident enough to ease the speed up to sixty. He held the wheel hard, feeling tense and cautious, keyed up to concert pitch.

He cast a little sidewise look at Stella. She was leaning forward, alert and smiling, but she wasn't watching every move he made; she trusted him. A curious warmth filled him. He leaned back in the seat, steadying the wheel, and for a long few minutes he tasted the strange sweetness of jumping, without responsibility, into a full dream of manhood. He was hardly aware of anything except the wheel, the road under the car. Under oath he could not have said, afterward, where they drove.

It was growing dark when they turned back toward town and Stella took the wheel again. He surrendered it reluctantly, but once back in the passenger's seat he realized he was exhausted with the strain and was grateful to her. Neither of them was quite sure of the way home. They took a wrong turning on one of the roads, quarreled briefly about it, and finally crossed the L. A. city limits well after the houses on the road was glowing with lights. They stopped at a roadside stand and bought bowls of hot chili, neither of them talking much. When they came out of the diner, it was cold; a bitter wind was blowing, and fog was beginning to sweep across the lighted streets. Tommy was cold and emptily exhausted, and Stella looked pale in the recurrent arc-light glare. Suddenly a hard splatter of rain splashed the windshield, and abruptly, before they had time to know what was happening, they were both soaked to the skin in the violent pouring rain. Stella cursed under her breath, words that shocked Tommy, even knowing he was not supposed to have heard, but when she turned to him she was laughing through chattering teeth.

"Stop and put the top up?" she yelled. "Or make a dash for it?"

"We sure can't get any wetter, " Tommy yelled back. "I don't guess we're going to melt!" Somehow the pouring rain and their drenched clothes were funny. Lights sprang at them and melted away on the slick black streets, but Stella handled the car perfectly; then they were rushing up their own street and under the shelter of the carport. They ran up the steps together, Stella laughing wildly, her bedraggled hair falling out of the scarf and clinging wetly to her neck. The house, dark and enormous, wrapped around them warm as they slammed the heavy door. Tommy fumbled for the light switch, touched Stella's hand as she reached for it, and suddenly, as he had done in the change

room, caught her against him and kissed her. Her face was icy cold from the wind, her hair cold and wet against his cheek, but her mouth was warm and her body, sharp and narrow, fitted clumsily against his through their thick jeans and sweaters.

In a voice shaken with giggles she said, "Oh, Tommy, we're so wet—don't. "

"Like I said, we can't be any wetter. " He tipped up her face between his hands and kissed her again. As his mouth touched hers they were both wild with

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mirth, but she quickly grew still in his embrace, standing there awkwardly with her body pressed against his.
"Don't, Tom, " she said in a whisper. "Come on, we're both all wet—we'd better both go up and get dried off. "
Meekly he let his arms fall and stepped back. Her hair, dark with rain, straggled against her collar; she looked untidy and thin and endearingly pretty. They went silently up the huge quiet stairs and Stella turned away toward her own room, then suddenly turned back. "Tommy—"
"Go an' get on some dry clothes, " he said quickly. "You don't want to catch cold. "
"I'll turn on the heater in my room. " She vanished behind her door.
Tommy, with a curious letdown sensation, went into the little room with the striped wallpaper. He heard the rain smashing hard on the window; a car roared by on the canyon road. He wondered if the Santellis had started back yet and if so when they would be here. He pulled off his wet pants and shirt, found his underwear was wet too, and stripped to the skin. He put on a dry pair, pulled on clean pants, and rummaged in the bottom drawer. Mario had left a jumble of clothes here: pajamas, a couple of faded pairs of tights, socks, shorts, T-shirts. Tommy hesitated, feeling guilty about it all over again, but finally, unable to resist the compulsion, he took out one of Mario's T-shirts and put it on. He always had the excuse ready that he had taken it by mistake for one of his own, but so far no one had even noticed, let alone challenged him, and since Mario brought his clothes to the house to be washed anyway, Lucia never noticed them in the laundry.
He went along the hall to the room Stella shared with Barbara. The door stood just a crack ajar; he started to walk in, then rapped on the frame. "Stel? You decent?"

"Sure, come on in. "
She was sitting in front of Barbara's dressing table, wrapped to the neck in a shabby, faded pink chenille bathrobe. It was a pretty room, done in white paint and flowered chintz. Tommy had an odd thought that Stella looked out of place in the done-up prettiness of the room, and as if she had caught the thought from him, Stella turned away from the mirror.
"I love this room. I never had a pretty room like this. In winter quarters we lived in rooming houses, each one worse than the last. Dirty and sometimes bedbugs. And on the road, any old place that would take show people in. " She bent to slide her feet into old scuffed slippers. "Maybe we ought to go downstairs. Lucia doesn't like it when the boys come in here, and she bawled Barbara out for going into Angelo's room even to take his laundry in when he wasn't there. "
"I'm so used to living in a trailer I never think about it, " Tommy said, not truthfully.
Stella came and sat down on the bed, moving Barbara's brown stuffed teddy bear out of the way. They held hands gently for a minute without talking. After a time Tommy leaned over and kissed her again. She felt warm now in the soft robe. They sat there awkwardly turned toward each other, then

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Tommy gently pulled her back on the bed. She rolled a little away from him, embarrassed, then laughed and let him put his arms around her. He rolled over, supporting himself on his elbows, and leaned over her. She looked lovely, fair and childish, her hair spread out on the pillow, still damp with rain and curling in small golden rings. She pulled him down to her. When they broke apart to breathe, Tommy was breathless. Her ribs were hard and bony against him, her chest almost as flat as his own, but when he drew his hand against her breasts he felt her draw a gasp that shook her whole body. The touch of her hands on the nape of his neck made him shiver. He wondered if she was wearing anything at all under the robe. Suddenly he was frightened and anxious without knowing why. He lay there hugging her, his face buried in her hard shoulder. It wasn't anything like the vague dreams he had had, kissing faceless girls.... He tried to pull the robe apart, but she held his hand. Her wrists, which looked frail and brittle enough to break, had the steel-wire strength of every flyer's.

"No, Tommy. Don't, now. Be nice. "
He didn't insist. This was almost enough. They kissed again softly and the thought flashed through his head that he would like to sleep here. Just to sleep—he meant no more; he would have liked to fall asleep here with his head on her shoulder, just like this, her soft body holding him close, like this and no more. He felt inexpressibly lonely without quite knowing why. He wondered if this was what it felt like to be homesick, and said fiercely to himself, Of all the damn dumb things, here you are making out with a girl and you start that....
She rolled a little away from him. "Tommy, we shouldn't be doing this. "
"We're not doing much. " Suddenly the image flashed across his mind of Johnny's arm protectively, possessively around her, and he asked abruptly, "Are you and Johnny sleeping together?"
She pulled the robe over her breasts again and sat up swiftly, pushing her fingers through her tumbled hair.
"Under his own mother's roof?" she asked, with a brief flash of irony. "Lucia wouldn't like that. She had a nice little talk with me. "
"You don't like Lucia, do you Stel?"
"She's been very kind to me, " Stella said, nervously pleating the edge of her robe. "She's taught me a lot. And I'm under her roof, as a guest. I guess she didn't expect me to have any kind of notions of how to behave in a—well, a decent place. Well, I guess maybe—she knew my folks were carny people, too. And really, she's been just as nice as she could possibly be—they all have. Lucia—she made me two dresses when she made my costumes for the act, and she made over one of Liss's coats for me. I guess mine was awfully raggedy. She told me once that she hoped Johnny'd marry me. I don't know why—I'm sure I'm not the kind of girl she'd pick for her daughter-in-law. I'm not—oh, not so respectable and nice, I don't know how to talk—I forget and talk dirty sometimes... I'm just not like the rest of them—" She swallowed and was silent.

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"Because she knows you're going to be a flyer, Stel. A good one. A real one, I mean, like Mario—not a fake like Johnny. " "Johnny isn't—" she flared, then fell silent and stood up.

"Tom, you'd better let me finish getting dressed. Then well go down and fix some supper, okay?"
Tommy put out a hand, trying to reestablish the intimacy of a moment ago, but the mood and the moment had veered away. An odd, deep-cut melancholy settled on Tommy for the minute that had somehow slipped out of his arms with Stella's gentle gesture, for Stella giggling and tousled as she had been a few minutes ago. He could still feel the warmth of her body, but she was well across the room by now. Briskly, not even waiting for him to go, Stella slid out of her robe, bare and thin and innocent in ragged cotton panties, and pulled her dress on over her head; and that somehow broke the mood more violently than if she had chased him out of the room with screams of outraged modesty. You dope, he berated himself. Why did you ask her that dumb question about Johnny? That's what did it.
Smiling with the most innocent friendliness, Stella put out her hands and tugged him up to his feet. They ate in the kitchen; it was very late when they finished putting the dishes away. The big living room, fireless, was too gloomy for sitting, so they sat on the stairs for a few minutes before Stella drew her hand across her eyes.
"Tommy, I'm sleepy. Do you mind if I just say good night and go up now?"
"I guess I will, too. There's no telling, they may not be back till three or four in the morning, or they may even spend the night with their people up there. "
On the landing, on an impulse, he caught her narrow arm and pulled her, unprotesting, against him again. "Stel, " he whispered. His whole body had suddenly come alive in imagination, and he was struggling with wonder: How would it be, then? He hugged her against him, but she broke gently away, shy and demure again.
"Tommy, don't. Don't. Please. "
He backed her against the wall, holding her there hard and at the same time a little worried about hurting her; her bones were so small and so close to the surface of her skin. He didn't want to talk. He said into the curve of her neck, "Stel, let me come in for a while. "
She shook her head mutely.
"Why not, honey? Why not?"
She touched his cheek gently. "It wouldn't be nice. Not here in their house. And suppose they came back all of a

sudden? And anyway— Oh, hell, " she said, stood on tiptoe, and brushed his lips lightly with hers. "You're a nice kid, Tommy. Use your head. " She turned swiftly away, broke free, and went into her room. The door shut, firm and final.
Tommy went into his room, suddenly very tired. He shucked his clothes and got in between the -cold sheets. He could not chase away the image of Stella in her bed alone at the end of the hall. With a sort of tactile memory he felt again

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her cold, wet face against his and the awkward softness of her thin body bundled in the heavy warm robe. Briefly excitement stirred in him, but he was too tired even for that.
He lay seeing random pictures in the darkness: the tremble of the MG wheel between his gripping hands, the rain beating on Stella's bare head, his mother standing in the rain before their trailer... the windy tremble and sway of the aerial ladder in the high Arizona wind on a blustery day.... Dreaming now, he felt the sway of the ladder beneath him, Mario and Liss—or no, it was Stella—on the board just above. Then he stepped up on the board and handed the black taped bar to Mario, who gripped it and soared out, flying, free.... Then Tommy saw that the rigging was at the very edge of the canyon, the edge of the world, and he and Mario were swinging out in their duo routine over the great gulf, and far below them the rushing noise of surf.... He made a stifled sound of protest, murmured, "Uuuhh—" and sat up in bed. Through the opened door, the light from the hall was shining in his eyes.
"Ssssh, it's only me, " Mario whispered. He looked tall and unfamiliar in his pressed dark suit and tie; he was carrying his shoes in his hand. He closed the door softly and came, in the stream of moonlight, across to the bed.
"It was so late when we got in, Papa Tony told me to stay over. I'm sorry I woke you up—I hoped I could get in without disturbing you. "
Still a little dazed by the dream, Tommy sat up and rubbed his eyes. "You can put the light on if you want to. "
"That's all right. " Mario put his shoes down and sat on the bed to loosen his tie. "Were you and Stella lonesome here all day alone? You should have come—it's a nice drive up that way. What did you do?"
"Stel took me out and taught me to drive the MG. "

"Hell, " Mario said, "I've been meaning to teach you all winter, but I keep forgetting. So Stel beat me to it! More fun to drive an MG than that old wreck of mine, I guess. " A billow of white shirt fell to the floor. He walked to the bureau, moving lightly in the semidarkness. "All this junk in the bottom drawer here... Yeah, here's some pajamas. Come on, we can talk in the morning—just move over and go back to sleep. "
Obediently Tommy moved over against the wall. Mario sat down on the edge of the bed to draw the pajamas up over his legs. Suddenly Tommy was embarrassed because he slept naked. He could see Mario very clearly in the moonlight, buttoning up the buttons. Mario turned and touched Tommy's bare arm, lying on top of the blanket. "Aren't you cold?"
"I sort of got out of the habit of wearing anything, " Tommy muttered.
He heard Mario laugh under his breath. "If you spent the winter in a fleatrap like mine and had a landlady as stingy with the heat as mine, you'd sort of get back in the habit real quick. " He lay down, pulled up the blanket and turned on his side, his back to Tommy,
"You want some more of the pillow?"
"No, this is fine. 'Night, Tom. "
"Good night. " Tommy shut his eyes and lay very still. His bare leg was just touching the cloth of Mario's pajamas; he moved it carefully away, afraid to

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disturb Mario. He opened his eyes again and lay looking at the moonlight. Mario stirred, and Tommy held his breath; the other made a slow, drowsy, settling-down movement and turned on his face, his arm pushed under the pillow. Tommy, lying very quiet next to the wall, listened to Mario's quiet breathing, his own eyes dropping shut....

Suddenly Tommy realized that he had slept again, for the moonlight was gone from the room and it was black dark outside. It seemed some movement of Mario's had roused him; he slept restlessly, shifting from side to side. He lay facing Tommy now, his warm breath, his arm lying across Tommy's bare chest. Tommy felt stiff and cramped from lying so still. He moved carefully to free himself, but the movement made the bed creak, and Mario stirred again, drowsily muttered something unintelligible, and stretched out his arms. Startled wide awake, Tommy flickered through

an instant of abashed resistance, then let Mario pull him against his chest. They lay curled up together, back to front, Mario's arms wrapped around Tommy's waist, their knees bent into a close-fitting curve. Tommy shut his eyes, comfortably. They could sleep perfectly well like this, he thought. It was perfectly all right. It seemed quite natural to fit into Mario's arms like this. Tommy wanted to sleep, he felt that he really ought to be asleep, but instead he lay quite still, awake but sleepily enjoying it. He knew in a dreamy sort of way what he would try to forget later: that he had always wanted Mario to hug him and hold him like this.

He was slipping back and forth over a razor edge of sleep, pictures rising and sliding away in his mind: Mario, standing with his arms around Johnny; swinging, his body curved into a perfect arc; the soar, leap, and drop as they passed each other; the jolt of catching the trapeze, letting it take and toss you higher, higher, into the launching flight across space—an arrow of streaming light, a dart of fire.... Mario standing in the change room naked, his face beaded with sweat, jerking the towel in vigorous swipes over his wet shoulders— Abruptly, startled out of sleep with the shock almost of a fall, by the tense trembling tautness deep in his body, Tommy realized, with a sudden shamed fear, what was happening. Suppose Mario should know, should notice? He tried cautiously to free himself from the warm, disturbingly close embrace, but Mario was hugging him tight, his face pressed roughly into Tommy's bare shoulderblade. Scared now to the point of panic, Tommy straightened out of their close-folded embrace and rolled free.

He felt, rather than heard, the rhythm of Mario's breathing alter; then Mario, his hands firm and aware, tightened his grip firmly on Tommy's shoulders and rolled him over. They lay face to face, just barely touching. The drowsy sense of comfort had been startled out of Tommy; he was wide awake now and rigid with embarrassment, an almost frantic awareness. Oh, Jeez... an' I thought I was dreaming... what a hell of a time to be getting up hard....

Mario's cheek felt rough against his. He smelled of sleep and sweat. For a moment Tommy, deep in confused excitement, had thought Mario was awake too, but now he was quite certain he was not. Disregarding Tommy's nervous, careful attempts to free himself, Mario pulled him

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close. In a sort of shaken wonder, Tommy let himself be folded into a close embrace; he thought fleetingly, through a taut, scared, erupting tremble. He's asleep, he doesn't realize.... Then, beyond thought, beyond control, he fell into a strange confusion of tumbling images: the sudden roughness of a hairy chest crushed to his own, bone-hard; a touch accidental like scalding; the unbearable random torture of Mario's hand like a hot iron at the small of his back, still within seconds of the first touch, as he felt the unyielding bones of rib and hip and leg crush and refuse to give way in that painful embrace. He was still thinking, He's asleep, he's got to be asleep, he doesn't realize or he wouldn't as the hot-iron touch became an embrace, a brief and convulsive struggle, and a falling, empty dizziness. On an indrawn gasp, with a sudden savage twist of his head, Mario kissed him on the mouth; Tommy felt the thrust and convulsion and leap of breath in him, and then the slow fall of quiet. Dim and incredulous now, and a little light-headed, Tommy dimly knew—as Mario sighed and stirred, as if shifting to a deeper level of slumber, relaxing softly into heaviness, his arms still around Tommy's waist, that he had not ever been awake at all. Jeez, how low can you get, Tom junior? Abruptly he shut his eyes and dropped into a bottomless pit of sleep.

He slept quietly and heavily this time, without stirring. When at last he roused, it was with Mario's hand on his shoulder, the dark eyes bending over him, smiling.

"Wake up, stupid! Surprised? We got in so late, Papa Tony made me stay over. You were sleeping so soundly, I don't think you even turned over when I came in. "

Tommy started to say sharply, "Are you nuts or something? We were talking, you dope!" and then, in some glint of Mario's eyes, in some touch of memory, in the vague, relaxed warmth in his own body, he knew what Mario was trying to say to him without saying. So it was like that. He should have known, if he had bothered to think, that such a thing could not be carried into daylight and leave them able to face one another. Whatever it had been, drunkenness or sleepiness—What the hell, maybe he thought I was his girl friend—it was something that must be swiftly repudiated.

"Yeah, " he said slowly, "what time did you get in, anyway? I was sleeping like a log. "

CHAPTER 10

one morning late in March, Tommy went down to the practice room to find Johnny there alone, dressed in street clothes but barefoot, fiddling with the springs on the trampoline frame.

"Playing hookey, Tom?"

"No, school's closed. " Tommy tossed his shoes in the box. "Where's Stella?"

"Upstairs with Lucia for a costume fitting—we're taking off soon. The hayseed circuit starts early, and the Gardner-Kincaid team is what you might call broke. " He gave a final tug to the braces of the trampoline. "You any good on one of these?"

"I don't know. Haven't been on one since I was a little kid. "

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"Nothing to it. Angelo set it up when we were kids—guess he wanted to have something Mark could do with the rest of us. "
"Mark's your twin, isn't he? None of you ever talk much about him. What's he like?"
"He's okay. " Johnny added slowly, "It isn't so much that we don't talk about him, but—oh, this is a hell of a thing to say, but I keep forgetting there is any such person. I never see him anymore. He has a heck of an affliction for a Santelli: He's afraid of heights. Papa Tony could teach a deaf man to conduct the Philharmonic, but he couldn't do a damn thing with Mark. The kid was willing enough, but any time he got six feet off the ground he'd turn green, drop off, and go away and lose his lunch. Didn't Matt tell you?"
"He once told me he lives with your relatives up in San Francisco. "
"With my father's relatives, yes. After my father died they wanted to adopt all four of us—there was even a kind of custody fight, a row about whether Lu was a fit mother, traveling all over the world the way she did. Fortunately Starr's is the most respectable show in the world, and nobody could look twice at Papa Tony and doubt he could bring us all up by the straight and narrow. So Lu got to keep us—

God knows why she bothered. But when we got older, Mark liked living in San Francisco, and after a while Lu started leaving him there every season. He's graduating from Berkeley this year, unless the Army gets him. "
"Mario went there, too, for a while, didn't he?"
"Yeah. " Johnny's mouth shut like a trap, and Tommy knew that again he had trespassed on some family reticence. Then Johnny shrugged, leaning on the trampoline frame.
"Mark's not a bad guy, but we don't have a lot to say to each other anymore. It's like he's sort of a distant cousin or something instead of my brother. The only one of us he ever sees is Liss—Dave Renzo was a college pal of his, a fraternity brother or something. We all figured Liss would stay with the show, marry somebody with the circus. But she went to spend one summer with the Gardners, and—well, you know how Lu is. All the time we were with the show she watched Liss like a hawk—never one minute out of her sight, pigtails and pinafores and no lipstick and no dates, and if any man with the show said three words to Liss outside the ring, there was Lucia or Uncle Angelo standing over them. So when Liss went to stay with the Gardners and they treated her like any other girl twenty years old, I guess she got drunk on freedom or something. And the next thing you know, there she was, married to the guy. The Gardners, of course, thought it was simply marvelous—one more of their grandchildren out of show business and settled down with a nice young man doing something respectable. "
Johnny gave a short laugh and jumped up on the trampoline. "Heck, you don't want to hear all this ancient history, do you?" He bounced once or twice, building momentum, then flipped over backward into a tucked-up somersault, landing on his feet. "Come on up and try, Tom. "
Tommy hesitated, for he was in street clothes; but then, so was Johnny, and anyhow, the trampoline wasn't trapeze equipment. He jumped up beside him.

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He miscalculated in his first attempt to somersault and struck Johnny in the chest; they fell in a heap together. Unlike Angelo or Mario, however, Johnny did not yell or laugh derisively at his clumsiness. Instead, he said encouragingly, "Take it easy, now. Try again. Here, let me show you—keep your knees bent just a little—" He flipped up neatly, then came unrolled, demonstrating how to take the weight. "Steady—steady—that does it. "

Once he had caught the knack of timing for two to work on a trampoline together, Tommy proved an adept pupil, and soon they were bouncing over one another like a pair of enthusiastic young frogs. Neither of them noticed the passing of time until Mario opened the door suddenly and said "Good Lord, have you two been down here all this time?"
"Since about eleven. " Johnny rolled off the canvas to the floor, and Tommy followed. The hard floor seemed unsteady after the springy surface of the trampoline. "You ought to do some tumbling with him, Matt; he's good. Nice timing. "
"I know. I want to take him to the ballet school someday and show the kids some stunts. "
"Well, you watch him in that crew of pansies, " Johnny warned good-naturedly.
Mario laughed. "I meant the little kids, brother John!"
Abruptly, all trace of joking gone from his tone, Johnny said, "Matt—listen, let me ask you something. How do you all stand it?"
"Stand what, Jock?"
"The way Papa Tony treats you all. And not just you. He treats Lu and Angelo just the same way he treats the kid here. And you, you're his star flyer. Why don't you ever tell him where to get off?"
"Because the old boy's forgotten more about flying than I'll ever know. And I want to get as much of it as I can. He isn't getting any younger, you know. "
Mario's sober face cracked suddenly into a grin. "And much as I hate to mention it, fellas, you are in street clothes and caught in the act —literally as well as metaphorically, if you follow me, I'll get the dusters. "
"Oh, no, " Tommy groaned.
"Look, down here on the trampoline—" Johnny protested.
Mario's loud laugh raised echoes in the high gallery overhead. "Objection overruled. I cite the famous case of Gardner versus Santelli. Remember Liss's shorts, the pair with the buttons on the cuffs? Angelo told her they weren't safe, and she told him all her tights were in the washing machine, and do you remember the judge's final words on the case?"
Johnny grimaced. "Yeah. He said, 'Well, kitten, you can go and put your shorts in the wash, too, when you finish up the floor. ' You know, Matt, I let Tommy in for this. I didn't change, so he probably thought the trampoline was okay. Oh, hell, I guess the floor needs polishing anyhow—we've

all been too law-abiding this year. Time was when it got a good polish every day or so. We must be growing up. Never thought a month would go by that I didn't break some kind of rule and get in trouble. "

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Tommy took the lightly oiled cloth and began polishing from his corner. Floor and cloth smelled faintly and pleasantly of cedar oil. Johnny worked in silence for a few minutes, then laughed.
"Funny. I swore I'd never do this again, that I was a big boy now and finished with all this crap. But—being here in the house—it has a funny effect on me. Funny peculiar. I sort of like doing it. " He rubbed the cloth in wide swipes over the shining wood. "Makes me feel like a kid again, with the old man pasting into us. He came down and watched us rehearse last night. You know how he is—can't just watch anybody. Pretty soon he started in on Stel—"
"I heard him, a few weeks ago, " Mario said.
"Yes, and what he says is worth listening to. I tried to make Stel see that, but she got so shook up I came down and tried to tell him, politely, that please, Grandfather, my partner hadn't been brought up on Flying and Reform School methods and anyhow I was a big boy and I could train my act myself. "
"That, " Mario said, "was the mistake of the year, I bet. "
"It's all right for you to talk, " Johnny said sullenly. "You weren't there listening to Stel have hysterics. "
"I remember Angelo used to deal with that situation very efficiently, " Mario said, chuckling.
Johnny's mouth tightened. "He'd better not try it on Stella. I take a very dim view of spanking nubile wenches. "
"For Christ's sake, be your age, Johnny! If Angelo had thought of Liss as a nubile wench, he'd never have laid a finger on her, and you know it. He still acts like she's twelve —or didn't you hear her ask him for a cigarette the other day? He said, 'Kitten, you know Papa doesn't like you kids smoking. '"
"Well, anyway, as I was telling you, Papa Tony flew into a rage. I can ignore it myself, but he started in on Stel, and some of the things he said—well, he was pretty rough. He said a real performer could learn from anybody, even a heckler booing from the blues, and did she want to spend her life as a third-rate performer, just a pretty girl showing off her legs on a trapeze? He asked, 'Do you think you are

so beautiful that no one will notice whether you know one end of the bar from another?' And Stella started to cry and said she'd been working in the ring since she was four years old, and he snarled at her that she ought to have learned something in all that time!"
"Yeah, I admit that was a little rough. But Papa Tony is like that, Jock. It's just the way he functions. And Stella could do a lot more than she does. She's had rotten training. "
"Yeah, in that filthy carnival. But she's coming along. She does what I tell her, but I try to be tactful about it. Anyhow, when he said that, she just flew off upstairs. I yelled at Papa, 'Now look what you did, ' and then I ran upstairs. I found her in Barbie's room crying on her bed, and she said she'd do anything I told her to do, but unless I kept the old man off her neck, she was leaving. It took me the better part of an hour to calm her down. And just as I was starting to get somewhere, in walks Lucia! Hell, I was just talking to Stel, the door to the hall was wide open, and we were both dressed—well, I had my

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tights on and Stel was in her bathrobe. Anyhow, we were both on the bed, and Stel was bawling all over me and I had my arms around her, and it was just plain murder trying to explain to our Lulu that my intentions were perfectly honorable. And of course while I was doing that, Stel went into worse hysterics than ever—"

Mario groaned. But he was laughing, too. "Oh, hell, Jock, you know what Lucia's like!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. She was raised old-country style, and she tried her damnedest to bring us up the same way. I suppose it never occurred to her that I could be on the same bed with Stel without even thinking about you-know-what. But just the same, I got mad. Damn it, what kind of bastard does Lu think I am? I've got some respect for the family, too! Does she think I was going to bring a girl here under my mother's roof and—and treat her like she was somebody I picked up off the streets?"

"I guess Lu figures that you picked her up in a carnival and that's about the same thing, " Mario murmured.

"That's not the point. The point is, if I was going to do something like that, and God knows, I'm not saying I'm any better than anybody else—I'm not a priest or a monk or anything—I sure wouldn't do it in my mother's house and right under Lu's nose!"

Tommy, his eyes on the floor, knew that both of them had forgotten him.

Mario bent over Johnny and patted his shoulder. "Okay, kid, okay. So what finally happened?"

"Well, the more I tried to convince Lu that we hadn't been doing anything, anything at all, the more upset Stel got, and the worse it all looked. So finally I just walked out, figuring the women would sort it out themselves. Lu never could be really mean to anybody. Sarcastic, maybe, but not really mean. So I went down and tried to tell Papa how much he'd upset Stel, and he just snorted that he had no patience with female hysterics and besides, he hadn't said anything she didn't deserve. "

"You know, " Mario said, "he's not so far wrong. Stel isn't bad looking, she has real talent, good timing—very good timing—a good physique—"

"Oh, I don't know, I like a girl with more—" Johnny's hands described curves in the air.

"I mean good for flying, stupid—small bones, no big rear end; she can turn as neat a somersault as Tommy here. But she isn't a professional. Tommy knew better than to answer me back like that, the first day I let him up on the high rig. "

Johnny shrugged. "What's talk? Gets it out of her system. Anyhow, she could be right. I'm not infallible, and she's smart. We're partners. I'm willing to listen to what she has to say. "

Mario shook his head. "I don't agree. That's just copping out, Johnny. The manager of an act has to take the responsibility for how it comes off, and that means being responsible for what the other people do, too. It isn't bossing them around, it's just that there has to be one major idea behind an act, and if she won't accept your leadership, what's she doing in your act anyhow? How

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can a performer have any control if he can't accept discipline? She ought to learn to take orders—and criticism, too. "
"That's a fetish with you!"
"Well, it gets results. Last year it got me a triple. And Papa Tony could teach her a lot, if she'd listen to him instead of folding up and running away to cry. "
"Yeah, I know, " Johnny agreed dejectedly, "but if she's doing something wrong, why can't he just tell her, instead of yelling and carrying on? Sure, he's the world's best, I know that. I wish he could teach Stel. I'd love to work with him—"

"Jock, there's no reason in the world why you can't! Look, when that damn contract with Moorcock is out, come on back! Papa Tony can talk Angelo around—he always could. And he's dying to have a really big act again, the kind where the air's full of flying bodies—"
"I worked one of those in Minnesota one summer. Flying Morellis. Nine flyers and three catchers. We were rehearsing one day, and somebody asked the ring boss about us, and he said, 'Oh, yeah, that's the confetti act. ' "
"Yes, well, Papa Tony's dying to have a confetti act. But he hates working with outsiders. "
"Sure. Because he can't own them body and soul. " Johnny gave the floor a furious wipe. "He made the gesture, you know. Said I'd settled down. Offered to welcome back the prodigal. But, Matt, I'm not like that. If he'd teach us, manage us on the rigging, and leave our private lives alone, that would be fine. But I can't go on year after year as if the oldest man in the act was God Almighty, with a few prophets thrown in, and the youngest some kind of flunky. You're already three times the performer Angelo ever was, even in his best days, which I suspect are behind him. But when Papa retires, and it can't be long now, what do you bet Uncle Angelo's all set to be a—a new edition off the old plates? And I've seen you training Tommy to step right into line, being kicked around by all of you, and in a few years, to start kicking Clay right into the same old pattern. " He shoved away the duster and got to his feet.
"Haven't you ever wanted to be somebody?"
"I am somebody, " Mario said. "I'm Mario of the Flying Santellis. I don't have to prove it. I do it up there. " He pointed to the top of the rig.
Johnny said angrily, "Maybe Stel and I aren't good enough for the Flying Almighty Santellis. Maybe we aren't in your class at all—"
"I didn't say that. "
"—but we work as a team, and we don't get tangled up in traditions and rules and dead letters like Old Mario's Sacred Goddamn Writings up there on the wall! I don't mind this kind of nonsense"—he kicked the dustrag—"if it's for fun; it makes me feel like one of the family. But the way you do it, it's not just a good joke like Liss's cartoon in there about the Flying and Reform School, it's dead serious, and I couldn't

take it, and I don't want to. And if I was a star, I'd want to be a star. Not junior flunky. "

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Mario said gravely, "If my work is star work, I don't care what I am the rest of the time. Until Tommy came along, I was the junior man. Now he's it. In the air, I am the star flyer. But I'm still the youngest in the act, except Tommy. Why should I want to throw my weight around?" "You don't even know what I'm talking about!" "I do, Jock. Papa Tony wasn't stingy with the credit. I was the one that got my name on the posters and called out for the last trick. " "And did all the housekeeping chores and took out everybody's dirty laundry on the road. "
"Why not? Youngest man always does. " "Oh, damn!" Johnny exploded. "You're hopeless!" "It's the difference between modern dance and classical ballet. No, Jock, let me finish. Modern dance has vigor and power, but it's undisciplined. Classical ballet never takes anything from today until it's proved its worth. Classic trapeze work is a lot like that. All discipline, carries on a special tradition. And it can't be faked. It just is. "
"That's a load of horseshit. It's less than a hundred years old. And it's changing all the time. I'm not half the reader you are, but I do know that they used to think nobody would ever do a two-and-a-half, let alone a triple. "
"Have it your own way, " Mario said. His face looked closed and stubborn. "I only know Papa Tony is one of the great flyers of the past, and if I stick with the ways he believes in, I just might be one of the great ones of the future. And if he gets curled into a ball with rheumatism, and I'm fourteen times over the star Barney Parrish ever was, he'll still make me jump when he nods. Just because of what he was, and is. "
"I hate to do this to you, big brother. " Johnny raised his head suddenly, with a wide grin. "But I feel it my solemn duty to inform you, conscientious follower of the family traditions that you are, that you are defiling our freshly polished floor with your big flat feet in your big flat shoes. " Mario said helplessly, "Well, shut my big mouth. " Tommy bent over and tried not to snicker aloud as Mario meekly fetched a cloth, got down on his knees beside Tommy and Johnny, and started polishing up the huge expanse of floor.

Johnny and Stella were leaving in a week, and it was a Santelli tradition that before any members of the family went out for an engagement they gave a special performance, a sort of dress rehearsal, for the non-working members of the family. All day a special expectancy hovered over the house; Lucia was closeted with Stella upstairs in her sewing room, and the regular practice session was called off so that Angelo and Mario could help Johnny set and adjust the rigging for his and Stella's act.
Just before dinner they all filed ceremoniously into the musician's gallery that opened onto the practice room, Nonna leaning on Liss's arm, Lucia tense and preoccupied. When the family were all seated, Mario, down below at the door of the change room, hesitated with a slightly self-conscious laugh; then the laughter slid off his face, and Tommy realized that for Johnny and Stella this would be the severest test of all. This was no ignorant audience they were facing, seeking only to be thrilled or entertained, but the serious, critical judgment of fellow performers. Even young Davey, in fresh rompers, seemed

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aware of the seriousness of the occasion and sat without wriggling in Barbara's lap.
Mario held their attention for a moment; then, imitating but not mimicking a ringmaster's manner, he said, "Lucia Santelli presents"—and gave a little upward flick of his eyes to his mother—"the aerial team of Gardner and Kincaid!"
He flung open the change-room door and revealed Johnny and Stella, standing with their arms about each other's shoulders.
They really were exaggeratedly beautiful as they moved slowly into the ballroom, turning gracefully to let Lucia have her moment of admiration for their costumes. Johnny was a slender golden Apollo, Stella a silvery-blue Christmas-tree angel.
"Lucia, " Liss asked reproachfully, "did you bleach Johnny's hair?"
Their peacock-blue capes were lined with silver satin, which flashed with a dull luster when they walked. When they laid the capes aside, they sparkled in electric-blue costumes, sequins catching the lights like flame, Stella had a soft ruff of blue plumes about her throat.
As Stella climbed the rigging, Liss whispered wistfully, "She's so pretty. "
It was not a flying act, though they had ingeniously com-

bined picturesque poses from the flying trapeze, especially those that best displayed Stella's beauty and grace, with the basic double-trapeze act. At the close, Stella somersaulted down from the higher trapeze, her ankles caught by Johnny just as it seemed she must plunge headfirst to the floor; then they pulled up side by side and clung to the lower trapeze, one leg apiece twisted around the rope, flung out into carelessly perfect arabesques. The family applauded generously, Grandmother Santelli beating her dry palms together and even Papa Tony nodding grudging approval.
"You've got to admit he's good, " Liss murmured as Johnny and Stella ran for the change room. "If only you weren't so down on him, Angelo!"
"I'm not down on him, kitten. And I never said he wasn't good. But he's dishonest. Not with money, I don't mean that —I don't think he'd snitch a postage stamp. I mean where it really counts, with work. He makes everything look harder than it is, and showy. Like that trick where they fixed it to look like Stel was going to fall. That's cheap, a cheap way to get people to applaud. It's crummy. It's a crowd-scarer. Playing up to the ghouls who come to see somebody get killed, not fine trapeze work. "
"You really don't like him, do you, Angelo?"
"Hell, Liss, it's not that. As my nephew, I'm as fond of him as I am of you or Davey or Clay. I love him. He's family. But as a Santelli, I don't respect him, and that's got nothing to do with liking him or not liking him. "
Liss frowned. "But that's show business, " she argued.
Mario, who had joined the others in the gallery after completing his ringmaster duties, was frowning. Watching Angelo as he picked up Davey and went down to the practice room, he said under his breath, "That's what it was. I knew there was something about that stunt I didn't like. Only I couldn't say it the way Angelo did. " He turned, suddenly, and grinned at Tommy.

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"But they're good, for what they are, " he said. "They aren't a flying act, they never claimed to be. Hell, Moorcock couldn't afford to carry a good flying act, and the rubes on their lots wouldn't appreciate a good one if they saw it. It's just what that carney crowd wants—they'll probably eat it up. Let's go on down and tell them how good they look. "
For once the rules about the floor were disregarded as they crowded around to hug and congratulate Johnny and Stella,

now wearing street clothes again. Stella, in her new pink-striped cotton frock, one Lucia had made for her, with puffed sleeves and a full skirt, looked radiant and flushed. Liss took the girl in her arms and kissed her soundly, then everyone else followed suit. Papa Tony planted a ceremonious kiss on her forehead, and Angelo gave her a robust smack on the cheek. Even Tommy, when his turn came, gave her a shy peck. Mario took Stella rightly by the shoulders and looked down at her, smiling.
"I wish you were flying, instead of fooling around with those trap routines. "
She flushed, looking down. "So do I. "
"Stella, listen—" Mario began, but at that moment Barbara came up and flung her arms around Stella.
"I'm so jealous of you I could scream!" she squealed. Mario, with a deprecating shrug, turned away.
Papa Tony said to Johnny, "That was very nice, my boy, very competent. "
Johnny flung his arms impetuously around Stella. "And all the credit goes to my cute, pretty, talented little partner here! Lulu, give our new star a big hug!"
Lucia put her arm around Stella's thin -shoulders and kissed her lightly on the forehead.
"My dear, I hope this is only the beginning. You have the talent for a much more sophisticated act, someday. You and Johnny work beautifully together. "
Stella was looking up at Lucia, her eyes brimming with tears.
"You've all been so good to me. As if I were really one of the family. "
Lucia smiled her gypsy smile. "Come upstairs, children. You've certainly earned your supper. "
Johnny and Stella were given the place of honor, side by side at the head of the table. Papa Tony, after pouring a ceremonial glass of wine all around (even Clay and Barbara were allowed a few drops in honor of the occasion), stood at the foot of the table, beaming and raising his glass.
"To Johnny and Stella, the newest and shiniest branch on the old tree. Come, come, Stella, no tears in those pretty eyes!"
Tommy was always to remember her best like this: a flushed, joyful child, crying with happiness, unable to speak until Johnny took her hand.

They all felt letdown afterward, quenched, suffering reaction. Liss, trying to play checkers with Barbara, finally pushed the board away. "I'm not in the mood for this. Lucia, can we get out the book? Tommy and Stel have never seen it. "

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Lucia hesitated, then shrugged. "Suit yourself. But don't let Davey get his sticky fingers on it. "
Joe looked up. "Did you get a picture of Johnny and Stella in costume, Lu?"
"I took some pictures yesterday when they tried their costumes on the rigging, but I've sent them off to be developed. "
"Why, you sneaky thing, I wondered what you were doing down there, " Johnny said affectionately, touching his mother's sleek head. She shrugged and smiled, but seemed pleased. Liss came back with a heavy scrapbook, which she placed on the card table. Johnny beckoned to Stella. "Come see this, honey. "
The book fell open of its own accord to a center page, where a slightly faded sepia-tone photograph had been pasted, carefully covered with cellophane.
"These were the Flying Santellis the year before I was born, " said Liss, "which always makes me feel as if I'd spoiled things. "
Lucia put an arm around her daughter's waist. "If you throw that up at me again, Liss, I might start believing it. " She spoke carelessly, but there were two narrow vertical lines between her beautiful brows.
Tommy bent curiously over the picture. How old was Liss? The picture had been taken twenty-five years ago, maybe. "Papa Tony looks just exactly the same, " he noted.
"Flyers never get old, " Angelo said, "just their nerves. "
Stella asked, "Who is the dark one? It can't be Mario—he wasn't born yet, was he?"
"Joe, of course, " Liss said, "and that's Daddy. My father. Matt Gardner. The first one. "
Tommy thought that the tall blond man at the center might have been Johnny, taller, older, somehow more sober. "That's you, isn't it, Lucia?" he asked.
"Why don't you wear your hair that way, Liss?" Stella asked. "You'd look just exactly like her. "
Liss shrugged. "That's why. "
Leaning over them to look, Mario said, "Lucia is the only

woman alive who ever looked pretty in those bulgy romper things women flyers used to wear over their tights. "
Joe laughed aloud. "Oh, they looked just as pretty to us as those slick-looking things like bathing suits look to you today. We weren't spoiled by seeing acres of female skin on every beach. "
"Speaking of beaches, " Johnny said, "we never did get to go. I wanted to take Stella. Why don't we ever get to the beach?"
But Stella was still studying the photograph.
"Who's the second girl? Was that Angelo's wife?"
"Good God, no, " Angelo said. "I was twelve years old when that was taken. "
Lucia smiled remotely at the picture, where her younger face and figure smiled out from the center, small and queenly. At her side was a small, impish girl, her arm tucked through Joe's.
"Oh, no. She's not a Santelli. Though for a while we thought she would marry Joe. "

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"Taking my name in vain?" Joe asked.
"Just wondering what would have happened if you'd married Cleo. '"
"That's perfectly simple, " Joe said, burying his nose in the newspaper again. "We wouldn't have Clay and Barbara. "
"No, she never had any children, did she, " Lucia said, frowning at the picture.
Stella demanded, "But who is she? I'm sure I've seen her somewhere!"
"No doubt you have, " Lucia said. "She was a talented little girl who joined the circus the year I married. She was one of Barney Parrish's pupils, and I encouraged her to learn to fly. Then, when I had to leave the act because Liss was on the way"-—her fingers touched, fleetingly, the end of her daughter's braid—"she stepped into all my routines. A couple of years later she married Jim Fortunati and went into their
act. "
"Cleo Fortunati—of course, " Stella said, awed. "I didn't know she'd ever worked with the Santellis!"
"She doesn't exactly advertise it, " said Lucia dryly, "but we're related to the Fortunatis, you know. My mother was Carla Fortunati. Jim and Lionel are my first cousins. "
Liss said, with a mischievous twinkle, "You know there's

still a big argument among flying people about whether Lu or Cleo was the greatest woman aerialist—"
"Oh, stop it, Liss, " Lucia said impatiently. "The question simply doesn't arise!" Her foot tapped restlessly on the floor. "When I was center ring, women didn't try to do the big tricks; we were supposed to look pretty and graceful, not display our muscles. I got more publicity for a back double in those days than Matt does for his triple! Just the same—turn the page, Liss, and show them the fancy pictures. "
She obeyed, and Tommy caught his breath. The magic of color film had captured a woman soaring, arms outstretched, from a catcher at full swing: golden tights, dark curls, above her the tense green-clad body rounding the full turn of a somersault.
Lucia spoke briskly, but her eyes held a faraway smile.
"That was one of the first stop-motion color photographs ever made, " she told them. "It won an international photography contest in 1936, was put on the cover of Life, and things like that. That's Jim Fortunati in the catch trap, and me, and Joe, in the midair pass. '"
Stella burst out, "Oh, I wish, I wish I could have seen you, Lucia!"
Tommy said nothing, but he looked with new eyes at Lucia, brusque and forever earthbound.
Joe said warmly, "For pure form, there was never anybody—anybody!—like you, Lulu. Cleo may do all the big tricks, but she'll never be what you were, Lu. You were an aerial ballerina. "
Lucia smiled. "And when you consider I had had four children inside five years—"

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Angelo pointed to the caption of the photo. " 'Flight Dreams, ' " he read. "That chap knew why flying appeals to so many people. The old dream of flying. Everybody dreams about being able to fly. And the flying trapeze acts out that dream for them. That's why there's nothing in the world more beautiful than a beautiful flyer. Man or woman, they're all so beautiful. "
Liss said with sudden hilarity, "Look who's making speeches!"
Angelo shrugged and grinned at her, trying to push it aside lightly. "Shall I show them the pictures of you with braces on your teeth, kitten?" he teased, and the mood dissolved as quickly as it had come.

Soon afterward, Lucia and Liss went upstairs with Stella to help her pack. Angelo went to do a similar service for Johnny, and the others drifted away. Tommy, Mario, and Barbara sat on in front of the fire, Mario cracking walnuts in his fingers and throwing the shells into the fire. Barbara lay flat on her stomach, her silky head propped up in her hands, gazing dreamily into the flames.
"Stella's so beautiful. Mario, do you think she and Johnny will get married?"
"How would I know, honey? Yes, probably, why not?"
"Did Liss ever fly as well as Stella?"
"No, " Mario said, "but don't tell her I said so. "
"I wish Lu would let me fly, " Barbara said. "Johnny said I'm ready. "
"Next year. "
Barbara rolled over and sat up, leaning against Mario's knee; Tommy, watching the cousins, felt suddenly shut out, lonesome, almost homesick. Mario handed Barbara a nut-meat and said, "You kids want any more nuts, crack them yourselves; my hands are getting sore. Tommy, come over here where you can see the colors in the fire. We go out every fall to hunt for driftwood along the beaches. It's the salt soaked into the wood that makes the colors. "
"I've never seen the ocean. " Tommy moved closer, watching the blaze and interplay of sulfur-yellow, wild green, lurid cobalt, leaping up and dying.
"Never seen the ocean?" Mario asked, "Barbara, what are you doing tomorrow?"
"What do I ever do on Thursday? School. Ballet class at three-thirty. "
"Hell, is it Thursday? I was going to invite you to play hookey. School you can miss—Lucia won't care—but you can't miss class. Listen, Tom, you can't leave California without a look at the Pacific. Let's drive out to the beach tomorrow. Since Barbie can't come, do you think you can put up with my company for a whole day?"
"Sure, " said Tommy, and suddenly he felt lonesome no longer.
"Look, " said Barbara, "that's just the color Lu picked for
Stella's costume—" She pointed to the blue blaze in the fire.
"Why don't you pick some time other than Thursday, Mario?
It's not fair!"
"You kids asleep?" The light snapped on overhead, dim-

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ming the hypnotic pulsing of the fire, and Johnny and Liss came in. "What are you doing here in the dark?" Liss asked.
"Baby-sitting, " Mario said, laughing.
"Thank God my baby's down for the night, " Liss said. "Matt, I'm leaving in the morning. Will you come out for a walk with me? I kind of wanted to talk to you. "
Mario hesitated, then got to his feet. "All right, sweetie, we'll walk and talk a while. Where's Stella?"
"Lulu put her to bed, " Johnny said. "The kid was beat. Lu wouldn't even let me come in to say good night. "
Liss said primly, "Now, Jock, you watch your step. That girl's in love with you. In case you didn't know. "
Johnny laughed nervously. "Oh, come on, we're just pals. Has Lulu been matchmaking, putting ideas into your head?"
"I've got eyes, " Liss said. "Seriously, Jock, will there be someone with the show to look after her? Moorcock Shows isn't much above carny level—anything goes with that outfit. "
"Liss, darling, " said Johnny, "come out of the Dark Ages. Stella is a big girl now. Did you enjoy it, having Angelo or Lulu standing over you every minute, making sure you— what is the polite term for it?—kept your virtue intact?"
"In other words, " Liss said, "mind my own business. I'm not ashamed I was brought up decent, and it meant a lot to David, too. If you're going to marry Stella, Jock—"
"Damn it, Liss, you're worse than Lucia!" Johnny flared. She shrugged.
"Okay, okay. You're both grown up. Maybe I ought to talk to her!"
"You butt in, " Johnny said, grabbing her by the wrist, "and I'll break your neck!"
"Lay off, Johnny, " Mario said. "Let go of her!"
Johnny started to laugh. "Just like always, ganging up on me. What's the matter, Liss, jealous? Already sick of being stuck in San Francisco bringing up the baby?"
Liss laughed, an odd self-deprecating laugh. "Maybe, a little. '"
Johnny threw back his head. "Hey, that would solve everything. Why don't you come along with us, Liss? You could chaperon Stella, and morality would be satisfied, and you'd be away from all the Renzo in-laws. "
Liss's grin was wry. "Don't tempt me!" She put her arms around Johnny and hugged him. "Have a wonderful season, Jock. Both of you. "

"We will, Sis. Look, take care of yourself. And when you get back up to San Francisco, say hello to old Mark for me. God, I'd like to have seen the guy. Tell him so. " Johnny kissed her forehead, then turned and gave Barbara's curls a tug. "Next year I want to see you doing all Stella's tricks, honey. So help me, if Papa Tony doesn't teach you to fly, I'll teach you myself next spring!"
Tommy grinned hesitantly and said, "Have a good year, Johnny. "
"You too, kid. " Johnny's face turned grave. "Hey, listen, Tommy, you mind if I sound off a little? The first year on tour can make you or break you. Take it easy—don't get too down if you have a bad time, don't get a swelled head if

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things go good and you're lucky. " He gave Tommy a light slap on the shoulder. "See, Matt? Papa Tony himself couldn't turn out wiser advice. "
"Ah, take the chip off your shoulder. " Mario put both hands on Johnny's shoulders. "Damn it, Jock, I wish you were going with us instead of heading off with that damn rag show!"
"Maybe sometime, big brother. Listen, Matt, don't break your goddamn neck inventing a three-and-a-half or something, willya?" He threw his arms around Mario, and to Tommy's surprise and mild embarrassment the brothers kissed each other on the mouth. He had never seen grown men kiss; he could not remember that his father had kissed him since he was a tiny child.
Johnny yawned, rubbing his eyes. "I guess I'll go on up. I'll be driving tomorrow. "
He started up the stairs, and Mario said, "You kids better go on up, too. Tom, I'll pick you up early tomorrow morning. Come on, Liss, get your coat. We'll walk around the block if you want to, and talk. "
Johnny and Barbara went up, but Tommy, delaying, heard Liss and Mario in the hall.
"Listen, Matt, why don't you come and take classes in Berkeley next year? You could stay with us. Dave wouldn't mind. "
"I would. "
"Don't be like that, Matt!"
"Anyhow, how would I manage it, sweetie? I never get in till October, and I have to leave—"

"You could work something out, preregister for the fall semester or something. People do. "
"Anyhow, you know what happened, sweetie—"
"Matt, don't talk like you were Al Capone or somebody! You were only on probation for three months. They'd take you back without any fuss... "
"Look, if you've got to talk about it here, " Mario said angrily, "for God's sake keep your voice down till we get outside!" Tommy heard the door slam behind them, and hurried up the stairs, baffled and distressed.
It was still dark the next morning when Tommy heard steps and voices in the hallway. He knew that Johnny and Stella were being roused, saying their final good-byes. There were hasty scurryings up and down the stairs, an early smell of coffee somewhere, the noise of the MG pulling away. He did not leave his room. This was strictly a family affair, and again he felt himself an outsider.
Some hours later he awoke suddenly to see daylight in his room and Mario bending over his bed, smiling. "Awake?"
"Sure. " Tommy sat up quickly. "You didn't have to come in and wake me up—you could have banged on the door. "
Mario turned away, looking out the window, "Bring along your swim trunks. You looked so peaceful I hardly had the heart to disturb you, but I thought we might as well get started before everybody else is up and Clay starts hollering to come along. "

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Tommy slipped into his clothes and they went out into a cool, pearly world of gray fog. At first Mario's car moved slowly through the streets, but the fog burned off quickly as the sun rose higher.

It was a strange day, and Tommy retained, always, a few sharp pictures from it. There was the polished floor and wall-length mirror of the ballet school, where he waited for Mario to finish his early-morning class. Mario stood slim and straight in the center of the class, shepherding the students, all younger than Tommy, with soft words and crisp finger-snappings through complex groupings—half dance, half acrobatics—that Tommy's untrained eyes could not follow. Tommy stood at one side, out of the way, watching with an odd jealousy. The students clustered around Mario, demanding attention as Tommy never dared, calling him "Matt" or "Mister Gardner" more or less at random. One boy of eleven

or twelve, short and slim and amazingly compact, seemed to be the class show-off and favorite; he kept posing, doing incredibly high kicks, spinning dizzily. Graceful and gay and impudent, he had a thick mop of dark curls, and his bright eyes followed Mario everywhere with obvious adoration. He was in the center of every group, and after one demonstration he rushed up and spoke to Mario in a fast, breathless voice. Tommy didn't hear what he said, but Mario put his hand in the middle of the boy's back, lightly supporting him as he bent further and further; abruptly the boy tensed like a coiled spring and turned a quick, neat back flip. Mario smiled as the child came to his feet. "Not bad, Eric. See, you can do it by yourself—you don't really need me to help you, "

Then he tilted his head, meeting Tommy's eyes, and suddenly Tommy's formless jealousy vanished. Mario was gentle and familiar with these children where he was rough, abrupt, and demanding with Tommy, but Tommy realized now that the difference was the greatest compliment Mario could have paid him. They were partners, fellow professionals, and Mario, scorning any indulgence, demanded the utmost Tommy could give.

Later they drove along a scenic highway overlooking the ocean, and spent hours on a sandy, deserted strip of beach. It was too cold for swimming, and Tommy found himself a little frightened of the noisy surf. Nevertheless, they went in for a few moments, and Tommy never forgot the shock of surprise when the seawater on his lips actually tasted salt. On the sand, in the lee of the rocks, it was warm and sheltered; they lay stripped to trunks, and Tommy had the curious sensation of being rolled on the surface of a spinning world, caught so deeply in the heaving in-and-out thunder of the tides that there was no need even for articulate thoughts. Dazzled by the sun and the sand, in a lethargy of content so full that he had drifted into a dream deeper than sleep, he lay there with one outflung elbow just touching Mario's shoulder, warmed through, in a happiness so absolute that it defied analysis. He was startled almost to pain when the incoming ripples of the tide finally reached and washed cold over their toes, and Mario turned over and said sleepily, "I guess we'd better go. "

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The sun was huge and red at the edge of the water, the sea on fire. Silently they picked up their towels and walked back to the car. Tommy turned for a brief glance at the tangerine

and gold brilliance, where sky, sand, and sea came together in a blaze of color, memorizing it. I'll never forget this, he told himself, fiercely, never. He never did.

As they struggled into their clammy, cold dungarees all the color had faded from the sky, leaving only a pale red at the edge of the water. As Mario started the car and turned it away from the beach road, he sighed. "I wish—dammit, I wish you looked a few years older, Tommy. "

Tommy blinked himself awake. It was the first time that day he had been conscious of the difference in their ages. He wondered now if this remark preceded one of Mario's abrupt changes of mood, when he would become sharp, bored, and restless, dismissing Tommy back into childhood and withdrawing into that life where Tommy had no part. But for once it didn't. Mario turned from the wheel and smiled at him.

"I didn't mean—it's just that I'm in the mood to have supper at one of my favorite places, and I'd like to take you there. But you're—how old? Fourteen, is it?"

"I'll be fifteen in a few weeks and you know it. "

"Even so, I couldn't pass you off for twenty-one in a bar. Not this bar, anyhow. Forget it. Would you like to have supper at one of those drive-in spots, fried chicken or shrimp or something, or would you like to drive out to the amusement park where Joe works?"

Tommy voted for the drive-in. The long day of sea and sun had put him out of the mood for the noise and racket of an amusement park.

They lingered at the drive-in over trays of fried chicken, and then there was a long drive back in the darkened car, up the coast; it was past ten when they crossed the city limits. As they moved through the twisting canyons, where great estates lay fenced behind gapped darknesses, the car's motion was lulling. The radio was playing jazz, muted, throbbing, stirring some heartbeat intensity under the layers of drowsiness. Tommy felt full and sleepy, his forehead stiff with the beginnings of a bad sunburn. He closed his eyes and after a while stopped being aware of the turned corners. In the warmth and darkness he curled up, rocked in the motion, and drowsily realized that his head had fallen against Mario's shoulder. He started to rouse and pull away, but in the very act sighed and slid back into the cozy darkness.

Without any sense of elapsed time, he realized that the car

had stopped and that his head was lying across Mario's lap. It was a faint movement that had roused him: Mario had leaned forward to switch off the radio. Still in a child's incurious twilight, between sleep and waking, he knew that Mario kissed him softly on the temple. He held to the pliant drowsiness for another moment, until Mario moved away and straightened; then, feeling the dream and the darkness recede, Tommy stirred and sighed.

"What is it? Where are we?"

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"We're home, Tom. Wake up. "
He had nevertheless the impression, as the last scrap of dream fell softly back into darkness, that they had been sitting in the darkened car for some time, and that only the quiet attempt to switch off the radio had brought the interlude to an end. He seemed to remember Mario murmuring something to him like, "Oh, hell, not here!" but already he was beginning to wonder if he had dreamed it all.
"What'd I do, fall asleep?"
"Yeah, I guess you were pretty tired. " There was a new note in Mario's voice, one Tommy had never heard before. He reached over and opened the car door. "It's late. You'd better go in the house. Maybe I'll stay and sleep over. "
"Well, now Johnny's gone, there's an extra bed, " Tommy said.
Mario hesitated. "Look, there's a light on downstairs. Somebody's" still up. Guess not—if I go in now I'd just catch the devil for keeping you out so late. You go on in. "
Because he sensed that in some fashion Mario was troubled, Tommy began, child-fashion, clowning. "Aw... not coming in to tuck me in and rock me to sleep?"
Mario laughed nervously. "Yeah, I'll rock you, all right— if I can find a big enough rock. "" He aimed a blow with an imaginary missile. Then his hand closed gently around Tommy's wrist. "I'd have taken you out to my place to spend the night if I'd thought of it. Only now, if Lucia's waiting up and heard the car, it would just mean a fuss. Some other time, okay? 'Night. "
Tommy knew he could not argue or insist. He wasn't sure just why. "Thanks, Mario. I had a swell time. "
"Any time. " Mario slammed the car door behind him and drove away.
Tommy walked up to the house, wondering what was the matter—why, after such a long day of new experiences and companionship, he felt suddenly so heavy and lost,

so filled with weary sadness and melancholy. He blinked in the dim light of the hallway; Lucia called out from the big room, "Matt? Tommy, is that you?"
"Just me. " He came to the door. Lucia and Grandmother di Santalis were sitting before the fire. The radio was playing softly, and he wondered if it was the same station.
"Matt isn't with you?"
"No, ma'am. He had a long drive back to his place, I guess. "
"I wish he'd stay here, " Lucia fretted. "It's so senseless— there's plenty of room here! Do you— Good heavens, Tommy, you've got a terrible sunburn!"
She got up from her chair, and for the first time since he had been in the house, Tommy noticed that not all her movements were graceful, that there was hesitation and awkwardness that looked like pain. "Come and let me get something for it. "
"Oh, it's all right. Please don't bother—"
"Just come along. Don't argue. " She led him into the kitchen, where she smeared his face with something that felt cool and stinging. "You'll be peeling

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for two weeks. Is it on your shoulders, too?" She peeled his shirt down. "Well, I should think so! I hope Matt had sense enough to put something on his. "
"I guess he was pretty tanned already. " Across Tommy's memory flashed a picture of Mario's naked shoulders, burned to gypsy brown, sea-water standing on them like jewels.
Lucia put the cap back on the bottle. "Don't put your shirt back on over that stuff. I've got three sons all older than you are, Tommy—I've seen naked kids before this. If I were you I'd sleep without your pajama tops tonight. And take this upstairs if you need it for your legs or your rear end. Want something to eat? Sandwich? Milk?"
"Milk, I guess, but we had supper. "
"Filling yourselves up with junk, I suppose, " Lucia scolded, handing him a glass. "Honestly. Matt ought to know better. Bringing you home with a sunburn like that. No wonder he didn't want to come in and face me. "
Grandmother came through the kitchen door with her uncertain steps and stood watching Tommy drink his milk. "And why didn't Matt come? It is so unfair—he and Elissa are always together, and poor little Johnny, he is like an orphan since you sent Marco away. It is always wrong to

separate twins—che il Dio ha fatto due... and Elissa is too much with the boys, a tomboy—"
"Nonna dear, " said Lucia gently, "it isn't Johnny, and Liss is grown up now with a baby of her own. "
"Elissa... " The old lady frowned and said something in Italian that this time Tommy could not follow. Evidently she was wandering in time again, for he caught the words "sempre" and "cosi, come tu stressa, Lucia!"
Lucia sighed impatiently. "Yes, Nonna darling, you told me, " she said softly, "but Elissa is very happy now with her husband and her baby, and so is Lucia. Please, cara, go to bed. "
Lucia laid a hand on the gnarled old wrist, but the old lady twisted away. "No, Carla, " she said with asperity, "I tell you —non m'inganni—Lucia is too much like me for that. I tell you, that child, she is miserable, miserable to stay here with me and look after the baby when her heart is out there with the others. In your day and mine it was different—the girls were back at work within a month after their babies, and worked as long as they could before the next one. But this Matthew, this husband of hers, he is an americano, he does not understand; the minute he knows, he is all afraid for her, and again he will insist—"
"Stop it!" Lucia shouted. "Stop it, shut up—shut up, and let me alone! Damn you, damn you, old witch!"
Tommy gasped. He had never heard anyone contradict the old lady before, never heard Lucia's gentle voice raised. She whirled on Tommy in sudden rage. "Get out, " she whispered, between her teeth. "Get out of here! Go upstairs! Let me handle this!" Then, with an effort, she unclenched her fists and drew a long breath. She wet her lips with her tongue.
"I'm sorry. I'm tired, " she said, "and sometimes it gets on my nerves. " And, though her smile was kind, he saw the lines of pain biting again at her face. As

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he turned to go, he saw her take the demented old woman's arm and lead her gently from the room, and he wondered at her control. He went slowly up the stairs through the sleeping house, and as he closed his door behind him, trying to take out the day and look at it, he found he could only remember a dying line of fire at the edge of the sea, and a fading dream, and the hopeless melancholy in Mario's tired eyes.

CHAPTER 11

As March passed, the Santelli house seemed empty and quiet. The routine of daily work had slackened; their act was settled for the season and the practice sessions became perfunctory run-throughs.

Tommy found himself oddly restless. He had mastered all the simple tricks he would be allowed to do this year; the others were resting, laying off, enjoying the spring weather. In a few weeks, he knew, they would leave for winter quarters, and spend about a week there, in the last-minute pandemonium of arranging the acts and dress rehearsals and settling upon their other duties with the show, before Lambeth went on the road.

More and more he felt at loose ends. At school he was a loner, an outsider, a shadow among the other students. He recited in class, turned in his homework, even now and then stopped to drink a Coke or glance through magazines at a newsstand with his classmates, but he felt he was not really there at all. Sometimes he found himself remembering the old question of his early childhood: In the winter, do they turn off the audience, too? He knew they did, because he was among them, and felt that they weren't there at all. And, in a curious way, he wasn't either. Not out there, among them. The only place he existed, now, seemed to be within the confines of the practice room. Only there did he know what he was doing or where he was, and he worked and practiced until even Mario, the perfectionist, told him sharply that enough was enough. As the days ticked away on the spring calendar, his inner tension grew. He missed Johnny's loud voice and unsquelchable cheerfulness, he missed Stella, he even missed Liss and the noisy, tiresome baby. When he felt he would burst with it, out of sheer nervous inability to stay still he would go down and try to dispel his stored-up energy on the trampoline, repeating the old gym exercises with persistent violence.

One day Lucia called him into her sewing room and measured him, showing him the sketches for his costume. Tommy had worn fanciful costumes all his life and had always en-

joyed assembling and caring for them, but the costume for his first season as a flyer was somehow special.

Traditionally the star flyer in the Santellis' act wore gold from head to foot; for many years this had been Papa Tony. Last year the decision had been made to put Mario at the center and dress him in gold: gold tights, close-fitting fleshings of cloth-of-gold, gold sequins. But after watching Mario and Tommy run through their duo routines, Lucia had insisted they should be costumed identically. The debate had raged on for nearly a week, until Angelo had startled Papa Tony, gravely offended Lucia, and amazed them all by

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raising his head at the dinner table one night and saying wearily, "This whole damn thing is beginning to bore the devil out of me. What difference does it make, anyhow? Why not forget the gold and pick some other color? I for one am getting good and sick of all this green-and-gold business, like a flock of goddamn parrots!"
Barbara snickered and hastily hid her face in her napkin.
The Santellis have always worn gold and green, " Lucia protested.
"Dear Lulu, I know that, " Angelo said, putting down his fork. "I've been in the act for a lot of years, and I'm neither blind nor—unfortunately—deaf. I have been sitting here and listening to you hash it over for a week now, and—"
"If you don't like my costumes, Angelo—"
"Lu, damn it—"
"And don't swear at me!"
"Lucia, Lucia, " Angelo said, with a sigh that seemed to be ripped up from his very depths, "I never said that. But this whole debate is damned—excuse me—this whole debate is nonsense, and you know it as well as I do. If we changed our colors every year, there might be a grain of sense in it. But we never do. So why not simply make up the costumes any way it suits you, without all this fuss? Nobody's arguing! Or, better yet, order the things ready-made and give yourself a rest!"
"You don't want to wear green and gold, Angelo?"
"Oh, damn it, Lu, I'm trying to tell you, I don't give a damn—I don't care what I wear, as long as the damn thing fits me. What I don't want is to listen to this everlasting, this endless, this goddamned fuss!"
Lucia flushed. "I admit I take a certain pleasure in dress-

ing the act and in seeing the Santellis wear what they have always worn. Is that a crime?"
Angelo leaned his head against his clenched fists. "Forget I brought it up. "
"No, now you have started—I don't wish to be tyrannical. Let us listen for a change to your artistic preferences. "
"Lu, lay off, " Mario muttered. "Angelo didn't mean—"
Angelo shoved his chair back. "I've said my piece. Well wind up wearing green and gold like always. Matthew couldn't change it, Cleo couldn't change it, and God help us, I can't change it either, and I don't know why I bothered. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. A-a-a-men!"
"Basta!" Papa Tony said sharply. "There is no need to be blasphemous! Such talk I will not have in this house! Respect to your sister, Angelo, or leave the table. As for wardrobe, it is her concern, and none of yours!"
"That's what I was trying to tell—"
"Enough, I said, " Papa Tony cut him off.
Angelo stood up, muttering, "No dessert, thanks, Barbie. Excuse me, everybody, " and stormed out. Tommy, his head bent over his plate of pudding, heard Angelo's steps recede and the slam of the front door.
Lucia said, and the hurt in her voice was obvious, "Papa —am I so unreasonable? This is all I can do for the act—am I such a tyrant?" He reassured her in Italian, and Tommy sat eating his pudding and frowning into

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his plate. How untypical of Angelo! They all took him for granted, a steady anchor among the volatile Santellis, hard-working, practical, dependable. What had gotten into him?

Once, Johnny had called Angelo, disparagingly, "a first-rate second-rate performer. " And although he had been shouted down at once, Tommy secretly felt that Johnny had put his finger exactly on what Angelo was. He was competent and painstaking, he looked good in tights, and his easygoing good nature made him pleasant to work with. His sense of timing amounted to genius—Tommy was still too young to value that at its full weight—and his great strength gave them all a sense of security when they leaped to his strong hands. But he had none of Papa Tony's flair, none of Mario's style or driving ambition, not even a trace of the family flamboyance. Tommy realized, with a small sense of shame, that Angelo seemed dull to him. He was such a nice guy, Tommy

hated to admit it to himself, but he was dull. And even more secretly, Tommy said to himself, Why, I'm more like the Santellis than he is.

On the day before their departure, Tommy went down into the change room with Mario, to clear the lockers of forgotten oddments, while Papa Tony and Angelo were helping Lucia transfer their possessions to the house trailer in which the Santellis lived on the road.

"Funny, " Mario said, looking across the deserted ballroom while he fiddled with the straps on a leather wristguard, "now nobody will come down here till next winter. Oh, Barbie may come down to work on the barre, or Clay may bring some of his pals down to play on the trampoline, but —we sort of pack this place up and take it along with us. "

Tommy smiled shyly. He knew precisely what Mario meant. He had felt on his first day that here—in this bare cold room—was the heart of the house, and Mario had said it, too, showing him old Mario di Santalis's motto on the wall. But now Tommy knew it was not on the wall at all. It had been built into him. It lodged in all of them. He started to say it, and then stopped and swallowed hard. He didn't have the words, and they would have sounded corny anyhow. Mario, standing there lazy and smiling in his stocking feet, gave him a warm grin that started behind his eyes and spread all over his face.

At that moment Tommy could have burst open with the emotion welling up inside him. He was one of them. He belonged. His whole life seemed to have been poured into a passion fiercer, purer, and more intense than anything he had ever known or would ever know again. He looked up at Mario again and grinned, bursting with happiness. He wished he could think of something to say. Just something to let Mario know how he felt. But there wasn't any way you could say things like that.

"We going to put on a show for the family, the way Johnny and Stel did?" he asked instead.

"Sure. We always do. "

"Where did Joe go?"

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"Down to the ration board to get coupons for the gas to drive to winter quarters. We've been saving up coupons all winter, but if we can get any extra we're going to need them. You know Papa Tony—he wouldn't buy on the black

market. Johnny got some that way and I thought Papa was going to have kittens. " There was a considerable silence.
"Really, " Mario said at last, "Uncle Angelo shouldn't have jumped on Lu that way about the costumes. You know, Johnny and I have had our rows, but I can forgive old Jock damn near anything just for what he did for Lucia this year. Asking her, instead of Papa or Angelo, to work on his act with him. Johnny acts like an awful jerk sometimes, but he can be a heck of a nice guy. "
Tommy said, "I got an idea that the whole thing practically bored Lucia to pieces. "
"So she fooled you, too?" Mario smiled tenderly. "Yeah, she puts on one hell of a good act, doesn't she? That's why it was such a damn nice thing, what Jock did. He got out of the family, and he acts like it doesn't mean a thing to him, but he was the only one of us who had the decency to do that for Lucia. She was the greatest one there was, you know. And she remembers, even if she acts like she doesn't have a thought in her head beyond the spaghetti getting cold. "
He leaned against the wall. "I remember the day it really hit her, that she wouldn't be flying again. She was in and out of the hospital, with casts and operations and all that stuff, but eventually she made a wonderful recovery—the doctors had thought she'd be lame for life. But she did get better and she came out and rehearsed with us for a couple of weeks, acting like she was all ready to go in the show again. We could all tell that her shoulders were giving her hell, but she never said anything about it to anybody. She'd go upstairs and cry sometimes, but she never said anything. And then one day she came down after rehearsal and she said, 'It's no good, is it, Papa?' And Papa Tony just shook his head a little and said, 'It's your neck, cara. ' But she said no, that was the hell of it—it was everybody's neck. She said, 'And this year all three of the kids are in the act, too. ' And then—so help me God, Tom, it's the only time in my life I ever heard my mother swear—she said, 'Goddamn it, I might as well be on crutches! Why the hell did I go through it all?' Then she walked out of the practice room and went upstairs and she never set foot in the practice room for the next three years. It's only the last couple of years she's been coming down again to watch the kids. She didn't gripe about it—she never said anything at all. I think it would have been

easier on us all if she had. " He sighed and stood up. "I guess we've got everything. Bring along those towels for the washing machine, will you?"
Tommy raised his head. "Who's that on the stairs?"
Angelo came into the change room. "Trailer's all packed, Any of this stuff go in the trailer? Sure that's all? Okay, Papa and I will take it out tonight. " He looked around the room. "All cleaned up, I see—nothing left for Lu to do down here. Somebody will come in and do the floor next week, after we're gone. "

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Barbara joined them in the hall. "Mario, Lucia wants you to stay in the house tonight so you can get an early start tomorrow. If you have to drive all the way out to that place of yours and all the way back in tomorrow morning, she said it will hold up Papa Tony an extra hour. "
Mario shrugged. "Okay with me. I ought to call Eddie, though. I sublet my place to a kid from the ballet school—'
"Anybody I know?"
"I don't think so. Eddie Keno. "
"I've seen him, " Barbara said. "Chubby guy with dark curls, the one who did the Toymaker in The Nutcracker last year? Nice, high voice, kind of sissy?"
Mario nodded. "Yeah, that's Ed. Been so many years since I've seen the Nutcracker you kids do at the school, I'd forgotten he was in it this year. "
"But the whole school was talking about it—didn't Mr. Court tell you? There was this big fuss, because he wanted to do it on pointe the way Sergiev did it in New York—"
"I don't really know him all that well, Barbie, " Mario said, frowning.
Even Tommy could see that the frown meant Drop it, but Barbara chattered on, not noticing. "There was quite a row. Eddie said that Nijinsky did Spectre de la Rose that way, and it was stupid not to let the men do it, and Court said that in his ballet only women dance on pointe. " Barbara giggled. "What he said was 'In my ballet, only real women dance on pointe—'"
"For God's" sake, " Angelo broke in, strained, "don't you two start yammering about ballet! If you've got anything to take care of out there, Matt, I can drive you out before supper, pick up anything you need, get you back in plenty of time. "
"Good old Angelo, " Mario chuckled, "Still checking up

on the kids. " He added to Tommy, "He used to do that all the time when we were on the road—line us all up and count noses before the train pulled out. "
He put an arm around Angelo's shoulders. "Thanks anyhow, Angelo, but I brought all my stuff up here, and Eddie's got a key already. But he ought to know I'm not going to be back, in case he wants to use the place tonight. "
"Why would that make any—" Barbara started, then giggled. "Oh, you mean in case he wants to take his girl friend there or something?"
"Yeah, " said Mario, "that's it. I'll call him after supper. "
Barbara said, "I found your other sneakers, Tommy. They were with Clay's in the back hall. "
"Thanks, Barbie. "
"I'm going to miss you, " she said as they moved along the hallway. "It's dumb going to the movies on Saturday with my kid brother. And Clay goes off to sit with that batch of little brats from the grade school. I wish I was coming on tour with you. Liss did when she was my age. "
Angelo smiled down at the girl. "You ought to have fixed that up with Lucia. Too late for this season. Next year, maybe. "
"Anyway, that would get Lucia back on the road, " Mario said. "She'd have to come and look after Barbie, and what do you want to bet she'd be willing to manage us again?"

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"I wouldn't want to bet either way, " Angelo said. "But with you doing the triple, it's a cinch we won't be with Lambeth any longer than this one more year. "
"I haven't seen it yet, " Barbara complained as they started up the stairs. "You always practice when I'm at school. Are you going to do it tonight?"
Mario looked across at Tommy and asked, "How about it? Is this one of my lucky days?"
"What do you think I am, a crystal ball or something? I don't even know if you're going to do it in the act regular this year!"
"If I was, we wouldn't be going with Lambeth. " Mario said. "No, I'm not ready for that. I want to do like I did last year: practice it, stick it in the act now and then when I'm feeling on top of it—no fanfare, no fuss. I don't want to put it in regular till I can get it every time. "
"Pipe dream number seven, " Angelo laughed. "Even

Barney Parrish never managed to do it more than nine times out of ten. "
"And I figure I get four out of ten, and I never try it unless I'm having a good day. "
They were in the upstairs hall now. Tommy noticed an old and battered suitcase outside his door and asked, "You going to sleep in here with me tonight, Mario?"
Mario hesitated. "Guess not. The room Johnny had is empty now. I'll put my suitcase in there. Is all your stuff down in the trailer, Tommy?"
"Everything except my costume for tonight and the clothes I'm going to wear tomorrow. "
Mario took the suitcase from Barbara when she picked it up. "Don't you haul that heavy stuff around, honey. You want to see a triple? Okay, I'll show you one. Considering, of course, that all you might see is me going for the net. "
"I'll settle for that if I have to, " Barbara said, "but, Mario, why is that triple thing so fantastically difficult anyhow? Every flyer worth the name does a double, and Lu used to do a two-and-a-half. Yet only one in a hundred ever does a triple. There was Gerard Might, and Barney Parrish, and Jim Fortunati, and now you. Does that extra somersault really make all that much difference?"
Tommy had wondered about that himself. His own transition from a single back somersault to a one-and-a-half, with the extra half turn that threw not his wrists but his feet into the catcher's hands, had been accomplished without much trouble.
Mario leaned against the doorframe. "Damned if I know, " he said, frowning. "There used to be a theory that after two turns an acrobat couldn't control his muscles anymore, that his body was moving too fast for-the brain to control. Parrish and Fortunati tore that theory all to hell. But unless you're awfully good, even two turns will get you so confused you can't get yourself sorted out in time to find the catcher. "
"I can't figure that out, " Barbara said. "When Johnny was teaching us to work on the trampoline, he could do six, seven somersaults. Even Clay can do

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two, and once I did four. Why is it so different? Is it just because it's forty feet up?"
Tommy said, "Look, on the trampoline, you don't—" Angelo said, in the same breath, "For God's sake, there's

a lot more momentum—" then stopped, laughed, and looked at Mario.
Barbara said, injured, "I was only asking. "
Mario did not smile. "No, Barbie, nothing to do with the height. The thing is, on the ground, or on the trampoline, you touch between each turn and get yourself sorted out, reoriented. But up on the rigging, you have the momentum of your swing, and the weight of the bar, to give you more speed. If you make two whole turns between the time you leave the bar and the time you reach the catcher, you're moving twice as fast, and you're fighting gravity, too. Two turns at that speed will make anybody dizzy, but if you have your muscles under control, you can make two fast flips and still have just a tiny fraction of time left to find out where the catcher is. But in order to have room for three whole turns between the fly bar and the catcher, first of all you have to swing so high, and so fast, that when you come off that bar you're moving like a cannonball. " He gestured. "Jim Fortunati told me, when I was a little kid, that he figured it out at sixty-two miles an hour, and he's more of a brain than I am, so I'll take his word for it. It's not much of a trick to get yourself into that third turn—your trick is to get yourself out of it again. At that speed you black out, just for a tiny fraction of a second—I do, anyhow—and when you come out of it, you're right on top of tie catcher, everything's still foggy, and there he is coming at you like an express train. And if you make a ragged catch the way kids do"—he gave Tommy a little tap on the arm—"you know you'll tear his arm off, or he'll tear yours. At that speed every catch has to be just perfect, dead center—just ask Angelo—or somebody's shoulder gets ripped right out of the socket. And if you miss or fumble, you're out over the net apron, and there goes your neck. "
Barbara shivered. "Remind me not to ask so many questions! Now I'm going to be scared to watch you tonight!"
"Hey, hey, honey, " Mario said, putting his arm around her shoulders and giving her a little squeeze, "that's no way for a Santelli to talk!"
Tommy said quickly, "Yeah, but Mario, I've seen you miss the triple a hundred times, and you never miss the net, you never come down in the apron, and you never get hurt. How do you manage that?"
"Tell you a secret, " Mario said, twisting his mobile face

into a grin. "I made a pact with the devil. I sold my soul, and he said—"
"Hey, kid, that's no way to talk, " protested Angelo, obviously offended. "I don't like it. Lu wouldn't like it. And Papa—"
"No. Seriously, Mario, " Tommy said, and Mario's grin slid off.
"Okay, " he said, "seriously. I decided a long time ago, when I was first learning the triple—even before I started working on it—that I'd learn it the way Barney Parrish did, without a mechanic. I figured the more falls I took,

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the more I'd learn about how to fall without getting hurt too bad. Angelo and I argued a lot about that. "
"I thought he was nuts, " Angelo said, "but it worked. "
Mario nodded. "I must have fallen a couple of thousand times. I figure by now I could almost fall without a net and come up alive. " He rapped the doorframe and murmured, "Touch wood. I'm not figuring on trying it, though. "
Angelo reached out and unbuttoned the cuff of Mario's long-sleeved shirt. He rolled it back and touched the red patch, always slightly scabbed over, of the rope burn on Mario's elbow. "But you've always got a couple of these. Someday you're going to get a bad infection and have some real trouble. Not to mention that it must hurt like hell. "
Mario shrugged and pulled the sleeve down. "Fuss, fuss, fuss. You're worse than Lucia! I never notice anymore. What was it Cleo was always saying to us when we were kids, about having an open mind about breaking your neck?"
"It wasn't Cleo, " Angelo said. "It was Barney Parrish. He used to say that anybody who wanted to fly had to have an open mind about breaking his neck. "
"Well, I don't, " Mario said. "I have this nasty narrow-minded prejudice about breaking my neck. You could even say I'm bigoted about it. So I figured I'd better get on damn good—excuse me, Barb—on good terms with the net. That's what the—the cussed thing is there for. It paid off, too. Ask Tommy. I taught him to fly without a mechanic—he's never had one on—and he hasn't had half the falls most beginners do. "
"But how do you fall without getting hurt?" Tommy persisted.
Mario shrugged. "Same way you do. Or anybody else. Instinct, I guess. By the time I'm lifting into that third turn, the

clock inside says yes or no, and if it's no, I don't try for Angelo's hands at all; I find I'm already rolled up to drop into the net. "
"That's not a bad kind of instinct to have, " Angelo said. "It ought to make you a good stuntman. Winters, I do a lot of stunt work down at World Films. I could get you all the stunt calls you'd take. I know you said you don't like it, but what the heck, it's a living, and it's a lot more of a man's job than that sissy crap you do at the ballet school!"
Tommy knew Mario was angry by the sudden tensing of his shoulders, but he twisted his face into a grin and said, "Nope. Not for me. Like I say, I've got that nasty narrow-minded prejudice about breaking my neck—anywhere outside center ring, that is. Lay off, Angelo, we've got a dress rehearsal to do. "
Tommy lay awake for a long time that night, pictures from their "dress rehearsal" still flashing through his mind. Mario stepping past him on the board, at once relaxed and tense. His own first swing, and the sudden awareness, in the split second before he got off the bar, that this was an audience more critical and exacting than he would ever face on the road. Mario, taut, signaling to Angelo for a triple, and the room going quiet, quiet, quiet, so quiet they could all hear the creak of the ropes as he worked the

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swing up and up, spun loose and over—over and over and over—broke away, turned, and fell hard. Lucia's cry, cut off in the middle, a sound of real terror. Mario's face as he came up out of the net, angry and thoughtful by turns.
Later Tommy had whispered to him, as they came down, "I'm sorry you missed it, Mario. "
But Mario grinned. "It's all right. I figured out what I did wrong that time. "
Later the family had crowded around them with hugs and congratulations. Barbara had thrown her arms impulsively around Tommy and kissed him. His ears burned again at the memory of Lucia's eyes resting on them, cool and amused. He had shoved Barbara away hard, with a muttered, "Cut out the darn kissing games, willya?"
Each of them had had something nice to say to him. Papa Tony's eyes had twinkled, even though all he said was "Well, you will not disgrace the Santelli name this year. "

Angelo had given him a rough hug in front of all of them and a hearty "Nice going, kid!" Joe had said, with slow, considered words, that he thought Tommy would do very nicely, once he grew up to his knees and elbows.
But what had meant most to him was the quick, hard, surreptitious hug Mario had given him as they were getting out of their tights. All he had said was "Okay, Lucky. Okay. " But it meant more than all the rest.
But later that evening Mario had gone away again, into the sudden, cold, adult isolation. Lucia had produced one of her spectacular celebration meals, but before they went up to bed, she had frowned at Mario and said, "Are you sleeping in the sewing room tonight?" When he nodded, she fretted, "Oh, Matt, I already took the sheets off in there! Can't you sleep with Tommy or Clay tonight?"
Mario hesitated, and Tommy said quickly, "It's okay with me, Mario. "
Then Mario's face shut down and was cold and strange and a million miles away again. He said, "Look, we're all going to be living in each other's pockets in that little trailer for the next three days. I'd rather be by myself, do you mind? And for crying out loud, Lucia, I'll make up the bed myself. You think I don't know how to make up a bed after all these years? Where are the sheets?" And he had gone off without a backward glance.
Tommy, remembering the night they had gone to the beach—Mario had shied away from spending the night in Tommy's room then, too—had felt flatly rebuffed, Mario was bored again with his company.
Yeah, he likes me, he thought. But I'm just a kid. He feels about me the way I do about Clay! Like I'm a pain in the neck, somebody he's got to look after.
They left the next morning, early, driving Angelo's car, the house trailer hitched on behind. It was a four-day drive, normally, to the small Texas town where Lambeth wintered. Once they had crossed the range of mountains east of Los Angeles, the terrain was flat, hot, and monotonous. The men took turns driving, mostly Angelo and Papa Tony. Mario was a good driver, but he got restless and fidgety at the wheel and tended to let the speed creep up and up, will past the legal limit, until Angelo leaned forward and warned him, "Watch it, Matt. Our tires aren't what they used to be, and

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God knows when we could get new ones. Don't you know there's a war on?"
Obediently Mario dropped his speed back, but after a time the restlessness of the flat country began to creep over him arid again the needle edged up, until finally, impatiently, Angelo gestured him to pull over and took the wheel himself.
By the end of the third day they were all restless and irritable. Mario was driving again. "Okay to let Tommy drive a while?" he asked.
"Not with the house trailer hitched on, you idiot, " Angelo snapped. "If you're tired of driving, Matt, I'll take over. Not that the kid could be any worse than you are!"
"Oh, lay off, Angelo! My license is as clean as a priest's collar! How many speeding tickets did you get last year?"
"Whether or not he is able to drive, he has no license, " Papa Tony said with firm finality, "and in any case, it is very different to drive a car with the trailer hitched on. It would take time for him to get used to it, and we have not the time. "
As usual when Papa Tony spoke, that ended it. Tommy wasn't eager to drive with the trailer anyway. He could feel the car sway, and he had noticed that even Angelo had to fight the wheel hard on a curve.
They stopped for supper in a cafe and argued briefly but rancorously about stopping overnight or driving through. They had all put on their lightest clothes in the blazing heat, but even so, it was cramped in the car and they were all sweaty and irritable. It was Angelo who discovered, leafing through the local newspaper, a public swimming pool, and after an hour's swim they all felt better. While they were dressing in the room behind the pool, Angelo said good-naturedly, "I've been dozing all day while you drove, Matt. It would be a lot cooler driving at night, anyhow. If we drive straight through, we'll be there sometime before noon. And if we lay over here tonight, we have to find a place we can park the trailer, and then hang around in the morning getting started. I'll drive; there's no traffic to speak of at night. "
"A fine idea, " said Papa Tony, parting his gray hair neatly by touch. "Are you boys agreeable?"
"If Angelo wants to drive, it's okay with me, " Mario said, picking up Tommy's damp trunks and rolling them into a

towel with his own. "What about it, Tom? Mind sitting up all night?"
"I won't be doing the driving, " Tommy shrugged, "so it's all the same to me. "
"Now, that's the way I like to see a kid act, " Angelo said with a grin. "Why can't you be that agreeable, Matt?"
"You don't ask me the right questions, " Mario retorted, rubbing his curly hair with a spare towel. "You look nice and cool, Tommy. I should have thought to bring along a pair of gym shorts, too. "
Papa Tony snorted, and Tommy looked at the floor self-consciously. In the heat and cramped quarters of the car, shorts had seemed to make more sense than his dungaree pants, but now he wondered if he had dressed unsuitably for the rest of the trip. He wouldn't want to go into a restaurant dressed in

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shorts; he was pretty big for that. But Papa Tony said mildly, "Matt, on a child Tommy's age they are perfectly suitable, but on you they would be absurd anywhere but at the beach. This thing today of boys wearing long trousers is ridiculous. When I was Tommy's age, I was still teasing my papa for a single pair of long trousers to wear to Mass on Sunday. Now little boys wear long pants and grown men let themselves be seen in shorts, and it is all very stupid!"

The sun had gone down, but there was still a hot, blister-big wind in the dusty streets of the town. They stopped at a service station for gas and oil and to put air in the tires, and stood around in the dry hot wind, drinking tepid soda pop from bottles in an icebox. Tommy snitched a chip or two of ice from the box and stood crunching it in his teeth; it felt comfortingly cold to his mouth, colder than the bland orange soda.

Angelo climbed under the wheel. "I'll drive first, Papa. How about it, Tommy, want to ride up front?"

Before Tommy could answer, Papa Tony said, "No, let the boys climb in the back where they can sleep if they want to. Mario has been driving all day and he is tired. And it is a long trip for a child; Tommy needs his rest. " He got into the front, with Angelo, and Angelo carefully steered the bulky car-and-trailer hookup onto the highway.

Mario was unwrapping a chocolate bar he had bought at the gas station. He broke off half and gave it to Tommy.

"Let's eat this before it melts. Good God, if it's like this at the end of April, what's it going to be in August!"

"In August we will be worrying about tornadoes in Kansas and thunderstorms in Arkansas, " Papa Tony said.

Angelo twisted his neck around briefly, teasing, "You eat too much candy, Matt. You'll get too heavy for a flyer. "

"Look who's talking!" Mario retorted amiably. "Who's the family chowhound, anyway?"

Tommy crumpled up the candy wrapper and shoved it out the window. It blew away into the gathering dusk of the desert. He had never seen country like this—treeless, houseless, with nothing growing along the roads. He was used to rural areas with a mile or two between houses, ten or twenty miles between towns. But out here there seemed to be sixty or seventy miles between houses, and between them there was no sign of any human habitation, nothing but the paved ribbon of roadway to indicate that this was not some alien world from a Jules Verne story, wholly clean of life. They left the little town behind them at sunset, and before he saw another isolated farmhouse it was black dark, so that the lights shone, alien and distant, across the barren flat land. He sat leaning against the windowframe, the cold metal against his hot forehead, his eyes straining ahead for anything beyond the lonesome range of the car lights. The country scared him, and he felt grateful when now and then a jack-rabbit broke from cover and scuttled quickly through the beam of the headlight to be lost again in the darkness. The moon was low on the horizon, a pale, faintly greenish crescent. Every time the road curved the crescent

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vanished behind one of the distant low hills and reappeared lower down; finally it disappeared and did not come back. The sky looked shabby and black, with a few stars twinkling like faded sequins on a discarded costume. He heard Mario sigh restlessly and shift his feet in the darkness, then bend down to slip off the woven Mexican huaraches he wore. He had unbuttoned his shirt to the waist. Angelo struck a match; in the brief flare of light Tommy could see Papa Tony's head, canted sideways, his mouth open, snoring slightly. Angelo whistled a little tune, just audible through the motor noise. Mario slid down and crossed his legs, yawned, shifted his weight again.
"You got enough room?" Tommy murmured. "Am I crowding you?"

"No, " Mario whispered, "but if you want to talk, slide over so we won't wake up Papa Tony. "
Tommy slid closer to him, across the seat "I was just going to ask if you were asleep, " he whispered.
"No, not quite. You sleepy?"
"Some. " Mostly, staring out into the endless lonely darkness outside the car made Tommy strangely uneasy. He had never heard the word agoraphobia, but he was suffering vaguely from an uncomfortable fear of all that open space out there, and he felt better when he was close enough to touch Mario in the back seat.
"Well, you better get some sleep anyhow. Here, lean up against my shoulder if you want to—lean back and get some rest, kid. "
In the front seat Angelo's lighted cigarette went out. He was still whistling the aimless, endless little tune. Papa Tony snored. The lights went on swallowing up the endless distances ahead of the car.
Tommy found himself remembering the night when Mario had driven him home from the beach. This had the same quiet, rocking closeness. He shut his eyes and courted, deliberately, that same drowsy quiet. He let himself lean a little against Mario, and felt the sleepiness recede instead of advancing. Mario reached out and put an arm around him, and still in the pretense of resistless drowsiness, Tommy let his head fall into the hollow of the man's shoulder.
You jerk, he told himself, you big baby, you! You might just as well be sitting on his lap, like you were four years old. He was reminded of sitting on laps when he was small. Women had always smelled of face powder and fruity perfume; he had always liked better to sit on male knees.
He let the pretended drowsiness merge into a kind of half-sleep. Mario had never touched him before... He blinked in the darkness, startled at his own thoughts. Working together, he and Mario brushed against one another continually on the rigging, gripped hands and wrists, were in one way or another almost always in continuous physical contact. They were always scuffling and wrestling, crowding and pushing at one another. But he felt suddenly that this was, really, the first time they had touched each other. No, the second. The first had been that night Mario came back from Santa Barbara. Of course there was also the night they drove back from the beach. But Tommy had been really too

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drowsy, then, to be aware of the contact He was very much aware of it now, his cheek resting against the soft, rough texture of Mario's shirt. His hand was lying so that the back of his fingers rested against Mario's leather belt; Mario's thigh was closely pressed to his. Mario always smelled faintly of cloves, and very faintly of sweat, and just now he smelled a little of chocolate. Suddenly abashed by the closeness, Tommy stirred and murmured, pretending abrupt waking, and pulled a little away.

"It's okay, " Mario whispered, his mouth close to Tommy's ear. "Go to sleep. "

Tommy did not answer. He felt embarrassed again. But he did not move to his own side of the seat as he had started to do, and after a moment Mario drew Tommy down against his shoulder again. Tommy, feeling foolish for no reason at all, pretended to have dropped off to sleep; he did not snore, but he breathed a little more deeply. He really did feel sleepy now.

After a while, through the sleepiness, he became aware that Mario was, very gently, stroking his bare upper arm. He stirred faintly, and instantly Mario was completely still, his hand motionless on Tommy's shoulder, as if he were only steadying the boy from falling off the seat around the motion of a curve. Tommy did not move; he kept his eyes closed, his face pressed into Mario's shoulder, in the darkness that was like the darkness of deep sleep. He heard Mario sigh and felt the deep, warm rise and fall of his chest Mario, too, might have been heavily asleep. And yet there was that curious, waiting, listening stillness in him.

Tommy felt that Mario was waiting for some sign from him, that Mario knew perfectly well that Tommy was not asleep but for some reason wanted to be sure he would continue to pretend that he was; the pretense of sleep had suddenly become very important. He stirred faintly again and sighed, and snuggled down a little closer, and felt that Mario was holding his breath. Suddenly the thought flashed across his mind: That night at the house. He knew I wasn't asleep that night, too. Deliberately Tommy reached out and slid his arm behind Mario, holding himself against Mario, his face buried in Mario's shoulder. He felt the effect of his movement like a signal, felt the soft, released breath against him, and felt Mario's arm tighten, holding him hard for a moment.

He kept his eyes closed, his face hidden. In the darkness, be felt Mario's hands move on him, tighten around his waist, move lower, touch his bare thighs, slide up inside the loose leg of the gym shorts. Now, unmistakably, Tommy was aware of just what kind of excitement was stirring inside him—unexpected, undesired... but, strangely, not unwelcome.

A fleeting, half-angry memory touched him, of a sneaked, furtive experiment with a schoolmate, years ago.... Heck, we were just little kids, fooling around. Once his father had warned him that there were times when a boy had to be careful around other men. He had given them a name: perverts; he had made it sound disgusting, and Tommy had been torn between revulsion and, reluctantly, curiosity. As he grew older he had found the thought, somehow, irritatingly intriguing. He had heard the word queer, and had had suspected misfits pointed out to him by school friends. He had a vague idea from the

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conversation with his father that it was not wise to linger in public restrooms or unpleasant strangers might come and make unspeakable propositions. But this was Mario, and Tommy realized again—as he had realized that night—that without knowing it, or knowing why, he had wanted Mario to touch him like this for a long time. As Mario's fingers moved on him, rousing him to hard excitement, it seemed to him suddenly that all of the winter past he had revolved in a circle with Mario at the center, that he lived intensely only when Mario was within his sight or watching him, that the strange tension and restlessness in him had been moving, inevitably, to this very moment. He remembered, and even in the darkness his face burned, how he had. watched with embarrassing attention, and something he now knew to be jealousy, when Mario hugged or kissed his brother, and even with the memory he felt the mysterious excitement in his body deepen.

Mario's hands moved on him, again, exploring between his legs, and Tommy's breath caught; he wanted to giggle from sheer nervousness. He had no idea what would happen next. In the front seat Angelo was still whistling the aimless, monotonous little tune, a single maddeningly familiar phrase repeated over and over. Tommy felt wide awake now, and tense, almost frightened, and the erection was so hard now that it was almost painful. Through the other excitement and fright he felt suddenly quite scared on an ordinary level. What would happen if right now Angelo turned around or

stopped the car? This was kind of a crazy thing for Mario to do.

Mario drew a long, deep breath. Tommy wondered if Mario was waiting for him to do something, expecting something from him, but he couldn't think what. He didn't want to think at all. He only buried his forehead a little more deeply in Mario's shoulder, then shifted his weight so that his mouth was against Mario's bare chest. The feel of the naked skin against his lips deepened the breathless excitement low in his body, and he found strange images moving in his mind, from nowhere, as his thoughts raced breathlessly.... I'd like to, I almost want to, I ought to—and blindly he reached out, seeking. Mario took Tommy's hand for a moment and laid it against him and Tommy felt the hard, hot excitement there under his own hand, but he was still too unaware to do anything but hold his hand there, shaking. He was conscious of the motion of the car, swaying and bouncing over the rutted road, of Mario's whole body pressing against him, of the jerky monotonous tune Angelo was whistling, which seemed to rise and fall and fade out almost in cadence with the touch that was blurring all other consciousness: Mario's hands on him, hard, demanding, almost painfully insistent.... He felt himself become rigid, move involuntarily, his breath catching in what he did not at once identify as a convulsive sob. His ears were ringing and he felt light-headed, curiously relaxed. Under his cheek he could feel Mario's breathing quiet to normal; then he bent down and the roughened chin rubbed softly against Tommy's cheek. Tommy knew he was shaking, and was conscious of the warm stickiness in his shorts. Mario's whisper was just a flutter of breath against his ear: "Okay, kid, okay. Ssshh. Go to sleep. " And after a moment he was asleep, his head still resting on Mario's shoulder, the little tune still

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whistling into his dreams. Once, later— much later, he thought, for the blistering hot wind had turned damp and chilly—he roused slightly. The car had stopped, and he heard the high, metallic pinging of a gas pump. He sat up, dazed, seeing a neon sign flashing truck stop. Papa Tony was changing places with Angelo to drive, and Angelo leaned over into the back seat, asking in a half-whisper, "Either of you kids want something to eat? Soda pop— anything?"
Mario said in a whisper, "Nothing. I was asleep. Look,

you woke up the kid here—" and Tommy felt Mario drawing him down against his shoulder again. "He's fast asleep— look. "
And Tommy tumbled down into deeper, real, sleep this time.

CHAPTER 12

he had almost forgotten when they woke up in the cold, stiff grayness of dawn. They stopped for breakfast on the road, and Tommy, sitting between Mario and Angelo and cheerfully stowing away enormous quantities of pancakes and bacon, had not the slightest inclination to give a moment's thought to anything that had happened during the night. He thought of it only briefly when they stopped at another truck stop to wash and change their clothes, and he noticed the faint stain still inside his gym shorts; but he stuffed them in the laundry bag without a second thought. Without that he might have thought it a rather odd and embarrassing dream and no more.
It was early afternoon when they pulled into the small town whose only claim to distinction was that it was the whiter quarters of the Lambeth Circus. Already there were a dozen or so trucks and house trailers parked at the far end of the huge open space at the edge of the cotton fields. Trucks and wagons were drawn up in neat formation, half a dozen small tents had been set up, and the bleak order of winter quarters was giving way to the definite feel of a show getting ready to go on the road. Tommy dropped out of the Santelli car almost before it stopped, and streaked away toward the familiar house trailer belonging to his own family.
After hugs, shouts, and greetings, and a second breakfast with his parents, he emerged into the familiar pandemonium. Aerial riggings had been set up inside a large roped-off area. He heard the crack of whips as a strange man in walking shorts cued a group of horses running round and round a roughly marked-out ring. Inside the roped area a strange man and a small blonde woman, looking vaguely lost, were supervising the setting up of a revolving-ladder rigging. Tommy recognized acts from last year, too: The swinging

ladders had been set up, and Margot Clane was holding the web for a girl in plaid shorts and a halter to climb up hand over hand. Tommy didn't see Betsy Gentry at all. Little Ann, in a faded playsuit, was sitting on a prop box. Tommy started toward her, full of questions about the new act, but Papa Tony corralled him and sent him to find Buck, Lambeth's regular rigging man, and help him set up and check their rigging.
"And don't worry too much, " Papa Tony told him. "You will be on display with us, but I have told Lambeth you are a competent part of this act, and he

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knows me well. If Tonio Santelli says that you can fly"—he raised his chin and looked very arrogant—"you need worry about nothing. "
He had never spoken in such a complimentary way, and Tommy felt overwhelmed. He swarmed up the rigging to help Buck with the ropes, feeling that he had never been so happy in his life.
In late afternoon he swung down from the rigging, where he had been checking the braces with a spirit level. Mario and Angelo had just come from their trailer, wearing practice tights. Tommy ran at Mario—as he had done a thousand times before—grabbed him from behind, and tried half seriously to throw him over before he could recover his balance. Mario stiffened instantly and pushed him away. "Quit that!" he said. "Quit your fooling around. "
Tommy stared as if Mario had slapped him, his arms falling to his sides. He was far too young to be aware of the sudden shift in Mario's awareness that had changed Tommy, abruptly, from a child to be played with or randomly teased, to a separate person from whom an unexpected touch may be meaningful or offensive but is, in any case, personal. Nor did it occur to him that Mario might have been afraid of betraying this change. He felt his face flooding with color and backed into Angelo. The older man grabbed and steadied him.
"Watch your feet, stupid! You have to play the fool the whole time? You want to fall and dislocate your wrist or something just before opening night? Scram and get your tights on—we've got to run through the act for Lambeth. "
Tommy ran off to change. When he returned, the Santellis were all at the top of the rigging, and Tommy climbed up to join them. He held out the bar to Mario, but he shook his head. "Go ahead. What you waiting for?"

"You always want to be first out. "
"Go ahead, damn it! I've got something wrong with this blasted wrist. " Under the cotton strapping of his wristguard, Tommy noticed, Mario's wrist was strapped in adhesive tape; he was fiddling with the end, twisting the muslin strips, trying with one hand and his teeth to strap a leather wrist protector over it. He scowled at Tommy and the boy felt almost physically bruised by the look. Suddenly, remembering, Tommy was overwhelmed by shame. He would have been able to forget the whole thing, take it as a sort of game, to be forgotten or ignored between them, had Mario been able to treat him exactly as usual; but now guilt and dismay overcame him. It did not occur to him—then or for years—what Mario was feeling. In a confused desire to put right whatever was wrong between them, and with a surge of affection, he touched Mario's wrist lightly.
"Did I hurt you, fooling around down there? You should've told me. Hurt your wrist?"
"Nothing, damn it—I slept wrong on it, or something. Now get going, willya, or get down?"
Tommy reached for the bar and swung out. Their swings and practice maneuvers, run through for limbering up, went well enough, but Mario was in one of what Angelo called his prima donna moods. Absolutely perfect swings and spins would be followed by returns so clumsy that even Tommy

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felt privileged to jeer, and twice, going for a double, Mario broke off at the last moment and dived into the net, without explanation. Even Angelo, the most even-tempered partner in the world, finally pulled himself upright at his end of the rigging and yelled wrathfully that if Mario was going to practice with the net, he'd go get a cup of coffee, and why in hell didn't he remember he had a catcher waiting at this end?

Finally Papa Tony called for their duo routines, and it became immediately obvious—if it wasn't already—that this was one of those days when nothing could possibly go right. They got off the platform so raggedly that Papa Tony shouted them back. On the next start Tommy lagged behind, his hands touching the bar a perceptible quarter of a second after Mario's, and under the uneven pressure the bar swung crooked and curved so far sidewise that there was nothing to do but drop into the net. As they climbed up again Mario snarled, "What the hell's wrong? Will you take your con-

founded timing from me, instead of trying to get it off in the sky somewhere?"

Nervously anxious not to repeat his mistake, Tommy reached too quickly this time; he caught the bar before Mario had his hands on it, so that it flew sidewise, striking Mario's bandaged wrist. Mario, clutching at the side rope for balance, yelled with pain, grabbing at his wrist. "Damn it, will you watch what you're doing?"

Papa Tony, swinging upright, called, "What is the matter with you two?"

Mario's hand, cold and callused, rested for a moment on Tommy's bare shoulder. "Let's get with it, ragazzo, " he said savagely, "before they kick us to hell out of here!"

This time they managed to get off the bar together, but went into their turn raggedly and off beat; Tommy reached Papa Tony's outstretched hands a fraction of a second before Mario's wrists slapped into Angelo's outstretched hands. The return threw them out together again, but they landed on the platform so raggedly that Tommy had to fling an arm around one of the pedestal supports to keep from tumbling ungracefully out into the apron. Mario got his balance without grabbing, but he turned on Tommy and swore furiously in Italian.

Papa Tony let go the second catch trapeze and dived into the net, signaling them down. He faced them scowling, his hair damp and disheveled and standing up like, Tommy thought, small twisted devil's horns. "What is the matter with you two?" he demanded savagely. "This is not a Punch-and-Judy show! I have never seen you act like this! Tommy, is this how you react to a word of kindness? I have confidence in you, and you reward me this way? Shame!"

Tommy swallowed, feeling sickened. But he had learned never to make excuses. "I—I'm sorry, I just don't seem to be able to get it. Can we go up and try again?"

Papa Tony scowled at Mario. "Matt, you trained Tommy to take his signals from you, and you are not giving them. You're slack, a puppet—someone has to pull wires! Nothing inside here!" He gave Mario a brief, hard tap on the breastbone. "In your own routines, sure, you get by because Angelo, he takes

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his timing by watching you, he can—what is it?—he can compensate. But in the duo—"
"I signaled, " Mario said edgily, "but the timing's all shot. "
"Look, it's my fault, " Tommy said anxiously. "I just got out of step—"

"Now listen, " Papa Tony said, his eyes on Mario, ignoring the younger boy, "no matter how well Tommy thinks he knows this trick, he thinks he takes his timing from your call; but really he has to get it from something inside you, like an electric current. You called the signal out loud—I heard you —but you didn't give him the timing; you were following what you were doing. Now, in this duo with Tommy, you two, you have to move like you have one head on two bodies, and it's got to be your head, Matt. Tommy's trying to work with your timing, and it's not there. You ever see a car with two drivers? You can't do this trick yourself, and let Tommy do it alongside you, and expect it to work, any more than one person can make love. If your timing is off, don't blame the boy if he goes ragged. "
Tommy listened in astonishment. He was so accustomed to Papa Tony's explosions of rage that the mildness of this lecture astonished him. Papa Tony said, "Avanti, you two— and, Matt, you light up inside, will you? Or this will be nothing!"
As he went back to his own place, Mario managed an edgy grin at Tommy. "I been throwing you off beat?"
"I thought it was my fault, " Tommy said honestly.
Mario grinned, a shadow of his usual grin. "Yeah, you would. " He turned toward the ladder. "Come on, let's try to stay in step this time. "
But, Tommy realized, that was the trouble. Instead of moving in unison, perfectly timed, they were trying to stay in step, and it wasn't the same at all. He knew, reluctantly, that it was not his fault. Mario was not giving in the extra something that made the trick go over. Instead of a duo routine, they were just two flyers, a veteran and a novice, doing the same trick at the same time—but not together. After another poor try, Papa Tony gestured with disgust.
"Basta! You two have gone stale, that is all—it is no good. Put away the duo rigging—we work on something else. "
But as they finished putting up the extra catcher's trapeze, Angelo broke off and called down, "You want something, Margot?"
"Tonio?" Margot Clane shouted. "That new Roman-ladder team is having a fit, and they seem all of a sudden to have forgotten what English they know—and nobody here speaks enough Italian to figure out what they're all yelling about! Will you come and straighten it out?"

Papa Tony climbed down and went off with Margot, and Angelo shouted, "Okay, Tom, try a forward over and try to keep your feet where they belong this time, okay?"
Tommy went through the trick easily enough, which made him feel considerably better. His confidence, badly damaged by the fiasco they had made of the duo routine, returned as Angelo called him over twice more.

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Then he called to Mario for a back double. Mario went out, swinging high, but as Angelo caught him, even Tommy could see the fumbled catch, and almost before Mario landed back on the platform, Angelo somersaulted down into the net. He was almost speechless with anger. He shouted, "Let's call it a day before you break your goddamn neck—or mine!"
When Mario and Tommy were on the ground again, Angelo sent Tommy on an errand, then beckoned Mario to him.
"I want to talk to you. "
The younger man came, shivering, his sweater tied by the arms over his shoulders, his face dripping wet. Angelo, buttoning his own sweater, picked up his cigarettes. He lit one and demanded, "What the hell goes with you today?"
Mario shook his head irritably. "You got complaints, make 'em. "
"I don't have a free weekend to start listing them in order, " Angelo said.
"That wrist bothering you as much as that? You better see a doctor, then. "
"It's all right. "
"Well, something isn't, that's for damn sure. "
"I didn't get much sleep last night. "
"Neither did any of us. I drove all night—remember? And I've seen you work with your wrists rubbed raw, so it's not that, either. Listen, if the kid's getting in your hair—"
"Tom's okay—for God's sake, don't go blaming him. Here, give me a cigarette, will you?"
"Certo. " Angelo shook one out of the pack for him, then held a match for him to light it. "Might do you good to take up smoking, kid, you're so damned edgy all the time. "
Mario laughed, taking a careful puff—a nonsmoker's puff, without inhaling—at the cigarette. "You slay me, Angelo. All through my impressionable years you lecture me, night and day, about how I ought to avoid all the pleasanter vices. Don't smoke, don't drink, don't—well, no need to get into that. But now you want me to take 'em all up for my nerves. "

"No need to overdo anything, even abstinence. " Angelo sat down on a ring bank. "Come on, ragazzo, what's eating you? If you're sore about something, get it off your chest. "
Mario stubbed out the cigarette. He had smoked less than half of it. "No, nothing. Just nerves or something. Can't I have an off day like anyone else? Come up and we'll try again, if you want to. "
"Forget it. You're all tightened up. I'd advise a hot shower and a drink and a long nap, but you suit yourself. " Angelo crushed his cigarette out in the sand, carefully scraping his foot over the ashes. "And—look, kid, I yell a lot, but if any-thing's really bothering you, we can talk about it. You know that, don't you?"
"Yeah, sure, Angelo, " Mario said, but he did not look at him. "Thanks for the cigarette. "
He went off between the wagons, and Angelo stood watching the younger man move away with that walk that was graceful even when he was slouching.

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Papa Tony came up behind him and said in Italian, "Did you discover what was troubling him, Son?"
Angelo shook his head and replied in the same language, "The good God only knows. Perhaps it is only that he has lost confidence for the moment; he will be well enough when we open, Papa. "
"Do you think I should make him see a doctor for his wrist? Is he in pain?"
Angelo shook his head slowly, still gazing at the spot where Mario had disappeared. "No, Papa, " he said at last, "leave the boy alone. "
On the road, the Santelli family lived in their old house trailer, but during the season, by a special concession in their contract—a concession given to no other act with the Lambeth Circus—they were allowed to use the rigging truck as their private dressing quarters so that they did not need to clutter up the house trailer with their costumes and makeup. (For although they used no makeup in the ordinary sense, Tommy had quickly learned how to keep his unruly curls out of his eyes with hair cream, to powder over a sunburn, or cover a small cut with flesh-colored adhesive, so that he always had the immaculate, unruffled look they insisted on.) The rigging truck was empty now; all the heavy aerial rigging was set up for the final dress rehearsals, and Tommy was

transferring wardrobe from the Santelli house trailer to the rigging truck. He hung their big mirror on a hook on the wall, arranged the folding dressing tables they used, then began to set up the costume racks and spread out the first night's wardrobe on poles and hangers. He had nearly finished when Mario came in behind him.
"My God, you've got this nearly done! One of us would have helped you with all that!"
"It's okay. I figured you all had something else to do, " Tommy said. "How's your wrist?"
"Okay, I guess. " Mario took off the leather wristguard, unwrapped the muslin strapping under it, and started to pull the adhesive tape loose. He couldn't get at it left-handed, so he tried to tear it with his teeth. Finally he stuck his arm out to Tommy.
"Here. Jerk this damn thing off for me, will you?"
Gingerly Tommy tried to work the stuck ends of the twisted tape apart.
"How'd you get it screwed up like that?"
"Sweat under the leather band, I guess. "
"I'll have to get the shears and cut it. " He worked the heavy points under the tight tape, and Mario winced.
"Easy, easy! If you break the skin I'll kill you!"
"Well, if I put tape on like that, you'd have me on toast for breakfast, you dope. " Tommy was using both hands on the shears, maneuvering them carefully, trying to get them through the tangled adhesive. Finally he snipped, carefully, and the ends came apart. Tommy laid the shears down, grabbed the ends of the tape, and jerked.
Mario gasped. "Ouch, dammit!"

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"You told me often enough to rip it off fast, not do it by inches. Doesn't that feel better?"
"I guess. " Mario took Tommy's wrist, still wrapped in the light fold of muslin strapping, in his hand. The touch was so deliberate, in contrast to the light tap that was their usual signal language on the rigging, or the rough shove with which Mario commanded attention or enforced an order, that Tommy glanced up, startled, half inclined to pull free. Then, slightly abashed, he forced himself to relax and let his wrist lie in Mario's hand, just at the precise moment when Mario sensed his rigidity and started to let him go.
"Listen, Tom—" Mario began. Then, ruefully, "Listen, I wanted to talk to you about—well, about last night—and all of a sudden I don't know what to say. "

Tommy fiddled with the tangle of sticky cut tape. He looked very young and confused, his forehead peeling, the naked skin of his shoulders shredding off in little flakes. Mario said at random, "You look like a hunk of raw meat with all that sunburn. Rare or well done?"
Tommy wadded up the tape into a little ball, still without looking up. "You don't have to say anything, " he said. Then, suddenly dropping the sticky clump of tape on the floor, he looked straight up, accusing.
"You knew goddamn well I wasn't asleep, didn't you?"
"Watch your language, " Mario warned automatically. Then, realizing exactly what Tommy had said, he dropped his forehead on his clenched fists.
"Jesus, Tommy!"
"Well, didn't you? Know I wasn't asleep, that is? You think I couldn't figure out what you were up to? What kind of dumb bunny do you think I am?"
Mario's face flushed darkly. The veins stood out, ridged, in his forehead.
"Yeah, " he said, "I knew, all right. I knew you wouldn't make a fuss with the others there, and I guess I wanted you to know you could stop it, any time you wanted to, by—by waking up. Or pretending to. That I wasn't trying to—to make you do anything you didn't want to. I wanted you to know—" He couldn't finish. "Skip it, skip it, I never should have brought it up. "
Tommy said in a low voice, "I'm glad you did. I've been— oh, wondering. "
"Well, now you know. " Mario turned away. "Call it any filthy name you want to. Queer. A fairy. A pervert. Or something worse, maybe. "
"Do you have to be so rotten about it?" Tommy heard his own voice shaking and tried desperately to steady it. "I wanted to talk about it because—I was going to say I—I guess I kind of wanted you to, and if you're what you say, I guess that sort of makes me one, too, doesn't it?"
Mario took a quick step toward Tommy, bending over him, his face set. "Don't say that! For God's sake, kid!" He was gripping the boy's shoulders in a frenzied, painful grip.
"Ouch, " Tommy said, tremulously, "my sunburn!"
Mario's hands loosened and slid down Tommy's arms; he held him that way.
"Kid, I'm sorry. You-—-you hit me on a nerve, that's all. What did you want to talk about? I guess I owe you that. "

"I don't know. Not really. Lots of things. You don't like— women?"

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"Not much. Not that way. Oh, God, " Mario said in a strangled voice. "Honest, I don't know what to say to you, and Angelo or Papa Tony's bound to walk in on us. I'm not trying to duck your questions—I swear we'll talk about it all you want to. Only not right here, not now. But—but you're not sore at me? I knew you wouldn't tell on me, but I—I've been hating myself like hell. "
Tommy turned his face away again, not knowing why. "No, I'm not sore. But I don't understand, not really. I do want to talk about it sometime. I'm sort of glad it happened because now we can talk about it. I thought maybe you—you'd want me to pretend it never happened. Like that other time. "
Now it was Mario's turn to look away, and Tommy saw the red flush creeping up his face.
"Oh, hell, Tommy, I don't—I don't know what to say to you. "
"Mario, tell me something. Were you mad at me, this morning? Is that why we blew up that way?"
"Mad at you? Hell, no, kid. " After a moment he said, "Ashamed, maybe. And taking it out on you. " Gently he turned Tommy around to face him. "It's okay? You're really not mad at me? We're still friends?"
Tommy's first impulse was to throw his arms around Mario and reassure him; then, although he was not quite sure why, he knew he could not. He said simply, "Sure. You know that. "
"I guess, this morning, I was—I was trying to turn off whatever it was inside me. I don't know, it all seemed part of the same thing, somehow. You know what I mean?"
Tommy nodded, slowly. He had had some such confused notion before this that their work on the rigging, and the intense closeness he felt for Mario, arose from some identical inner wellspring. "Yeah. I guess I know what you mean. "
"It was me, more than you, kid. You were okay. I guess, whatever it is that makes us work good together, I was fighting it off or something. Tom—kid, promise me something. "
"Not to tell? I know that, stupid!"
Again Mario lowered his head, with that embarrassed flush.
"No, that's not it. Something else. Listen, Tom, whatever happens, let's—let's never let it mess up our work again. Let's

keep it—keep it off the platform, never let it—let it make any difference to the flying. Promise me that, Tom?"
Tommy didn't understand, not quite, but the intentness in Mario's voice sobered him to an almost equal intensity. He said, "Okay, Mario. I promise, " and did not know that the promise he had given, without understanding, was to hold them steady through uncounted, uncountable tempests.
It was the only promise to one another they never broke.
They opened in Brownsville, Texas, on a soggy, steamy, hot afternoon. Tommy had a dozen small chores in the first half of the show: He stood at the foot of the web and steadied the rope for one of the women in the aerial ballet, he cleared the ring of props after a team of performing dogs, he stood by and held hoops and balls for a juggler. The matinee was filled with mix-ups and

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mistakes. Two clowns collided and left one another with bumps and bruises (the audience, of course, thought it was moderately funny and laughed), and a new rigger left two ropes unfastened. Consequently the flying act had to be held up for fifteen minutes, the clowns improvising, faking and muttering curses in the ring below, while Mario and Angelo, hot and angry, climbed up to fasten them properly.

All during the evening performance, clouds were gathering. The word had been passed for a quick performance, but the performers gathered behind the entrance, scanning the sky and making gloomy predictions about whether or not the clouds would burst in the middle of the show. A good-sized hunk of the audience left during intermission anyway.

As they were getting ready for the flying act, Angelo stepped to the door of the rigging truck and held a finger into the wind.

"Good Lord, " he muttered. "Tommy, you watch the ropes like a hawk! With that wind they'll twist if you give them half a chance. We'll have to skip the duo routines; somebody should stay on the board to handle the bar for every cross. "

"Okay. " Tommy tried to be casual, but he felt the queer little lump in his throat that he knew was fear. He had never worked before in a high wind, and he knew how performers hated it—with good reason.

"Well, the season's off to a flying start, anyway, " Angelo said cheerfully, "Shoulders still sore?"

"A little. " Tommy was covering up his bright-pink forehead with the neutral-tinted powder.

Angelo grinned. "Shame to cover up all those real sexy freckles. "

"Wha-at?" Tommy spluttered.

"That new girl in the aerial ballet—I heard her talking at rehearsal. She said, "That sunburned kid, the redhead in the flying act—doesn't he have the sexiest freckles you ever saw?'"

Tommy muttered, "Lay off. " He'd been teased enough about how good he looked in tights; he had begun to realize that flyers were like a magnet to the women in the show— and to the audience. Even the gray-haired and grandfatherly Papa Tony was always knee-deep in female admirers.

Mario was struggling one-handed with his wristguard. Papa Tony went and stood behind him. "Is that wrist still bothering you, Matty?"

"It's okay, but wearing the tape all the time keeps it rubbed raw. Get me the alcohol, will you, Tom?"

Tommy handed down the bottle. "Want me to fix it up?"

Mario let Tommy dab the raw spots with alcohol, then cover the wrist with a thin layer of cotton and gauze before strapping it again with adhesive tape under the regular muslin strapping. Papa Tony watched, scowling, as he fastened the leather guard over it.

"No more nonsense of working with a wrist rubbed raw, Matt. Tomorrow you find a doctor in town and have it looked after. "

"It doesn't bother me when it's wrapped up, Papa. "

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"Nevertheless. You are not to run around all season with an infected wrist again because of carelessness at the start, hear me?"
"Yes, Papa! Just as you say. " Mario looked angry and apprehensive. "God! Listen to that wind!"
"If it gets worse, we will have to cut the flying act. Even so, you had better not try the pirouette return. We will finish with a double, " Papa Tony said. "Let me hear the routine for the shortened show, children. "
With the dropping of the weighted cape on his shoulders, Tommy began to feel that twisting little sickness down inside him. These last minute checks were always tight, tense.
As they stood in the performers' entrance, Angelo glanced off to the north. "Thunder, " he said.

"What if it starts to rain while we're on the rig?" Tommy-asked.
"Then we get down the best way we can, before the bars get too slippery to hold us, and hope the audience is too busy running for shelter to watch us doing it, " Mario said.
"One good thing about playing outdoor shows, " Angelo said, "you can quit if it starts raining hard. Under canvas you have to keep going, even if the rain and wind are coming in so hard you can hardly see the bars. And up in the top of the tent, believe me, it gets pretty wet sometimes. I remember once when we were with Starr's—"
"Hold it, " Papa Tony said, listening to the band. "We're on. Andiamo... "
Briefly Tommy fingered the St. Michael's medal pinned inside his neckline. As they started crossing the lighted ring, Angelo murmured, "Take it easy. "
Tommy stood on the board between Mario and Papa Tony, hearing the applause for a moment before he pushed it all out of his mind again. Mario gave him a quick, tight grin.
"Easy, Lucky. Remember, it's just like the practice room. " He pulled down the bar, said out of the corner of his mouth, "Watch the ropes, " and swung out, a clean, arrow-straight line. Tommy drew a deep breath. He was where he wanted to be.
The finale was barely over, and the audience not yet dispersed, before the workhands were swarming over the field, hustling to get everything stored before the storm broke. The family trailers, and some of the equipment trucks, had been pulled out all during the second half of the show, each act, as its turn closed, hitching up and pulling away to get an early start toward the next pitch. Now the heavy rigging truck pulled out on the field, and Tommy, quickly scrambling out of his tights inside, pulled on dungarees and a sweater. He worked alongside Mario and Buck, the Lambeth rigging man, carefully wiping poles and bars dry before storing them, taking a hand at rolling the net into its proper neat bundle. If anything got wet or muddy it meant endless trouble, possibly expensive replacements or dangerously rotted ropes.
Before they had finished, Tommy's mother came looking for them, her feet thrust into boots, a scarf tied over her head. The rain was beginning to come down, thick and splashy.

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"Looking for Tommy, Beth?" Angelo asked. "He's inside the truck. "
Beth Zane thrust her head into the rigging truck. "Can you leave now? Your dad's already gone with the cage truck, and I'm ready to pull out with the trailer. "
"We're not quite through, " said Mario, wiping his face. "He can ride with us—you don't have to wait if you don't want to. Okay with you, Tom?"
"All right, " Beth said. "See you in the next town, Tommy. " She hurried away, splashing through puddles like a busy duck.
Buck said, "You could've let the kid go, Matt. We're about through here. "
"That's okay. Angelo, there's Papa with the trailer—you go ahead, why don't you? Tommy and I will ride with the rig truck. "
Angelo hurried away, and Buck stuck his head out, turtling his neck into the blue collar of his workshirt. "Jeez, it's going to be raining like hell, come five, ten minutes! Let's pull out before the field gets too muddy, okay? Everything all tied down inside here?"
Mario looked around. "Yeah, I guess so. " Inside the truck, every pole and bar of the flying rig and the other aerial acts transported here had been carefully stowed in its proper place, the collapsible board the Santellis used for a dressing table folded up on one end, covering the mirror. There was only a small space at the center, containing Buck's rolled-up mattress—when he could not find a cheap room in town, he slept in the truck.
"All set? Here, give me a hand with the doors, " Buck called. "You kids want to ride up front?"
"No, we'll ride back here, maybe catch a nap—okay, Tom?"
"Sure. " Tommy went to help with the heavy sliding doors. The lot, bare in the single spotlight remaining at the center, was desolate, only a few scattered papers and trampled popcorn bags remaining in the pounding rain. Most of the other trucks had gone. Jim Lambeth, coat collar pulled up over his head, ran toward them.
"Rig truck set to go?"
"All clear, " Tommy called, as he had heard Mario do a hundred times.
"Okay, that's it, then. Strike the light, Smitty, " Lambeth

shouted. The big spotlight on the generator truck went out, and it was no longer a circus lot—just a big, bare, rain-pounded empty field, lit only by a sudden sheet of lightning. Buck slammed the door and Tommy heard the bar slide shut.
It was black dark inside the truck. Mario pulled a flashlight from his pocket and flashed it quickly around. "Here, we'll sit on Buck's mattress. " He pulled off his muddy boots. "Get your sneakers off, Tom, we don't want mud all over the place. "
The truck began, slowly, to move. Mario stowed his boots in a corner, then tossed the damp sneakers after them. They heard the wheels splashing through mud, the gears grinding, the rain hard and heavy on the metal roof.
Mario yawned heavily.

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"Damn, " he said, "with the rain and all, we never stopped for supper, and by the time we hit Newton it's going to be one, two o'clock—everything'll be shut up tighter than a hard-boiled egg. Hungry?"
"I'll manage. "
"Have half of this, anyhow. " Mario flashed the light again, dug in the drawer where they kept their makeup, and fished out a large-sized candy bar. He broke it and gave half to Tommy.
Unwrapping his half, Tommy asked, "How'd you happen to have this?"
"Got in the habit in ballet school. Some of the girls—Liss was about the worst—would skip breakfast, or forget to knock off for lunch, and start fainting all over the place, so I got in the habit of carrying a chocolate bar around with me all the time. And while there was sugar rationing, I'd pick one up any time I saw one in a store, just in case. "
The thunder snapped loudly and Tommy said in the darkness, "What if we get hit?"
"Safest place in the world, in a thunderstorm, is inside a moving car. You're grounded on the rubber tires, or something. "
The wind whistled, and sharp little blasts came through the cracks around the metal doors as the truck built up speed on the highway. Mario said suddenly, "Look, I said a couple of days ago we'd talk. This is the first chance we've had without people around. I haven't been trying to dodge it, I just don't know what to say to you. "
Although Tommy had not thought of it once since the

day of the fumbled rehearsal, he knew exactly what Mario was talking about. A dozen questions brimmed over in his mind, but he was ashamed to ask. Finally he said, "When I was a little kid my father said something about—about queers. Only he made it sound nasty. You called it something else. "
"Homosexual. "
"I guess. He was—he was trying to scare me about it. "
"I didn't notice you were so awful scared. "
Tommy said fiercely, "Anything you wanted me to do wouldn't—wouldn't scare me!"
Mario touched his hand lightly in the dark. "Thanks. No, I wouldn't—wouldn't ever want to scare you. Or hurt you. But I'm glad you know it. "
"My dad acted like—like those guys, queers, homo— homosexuals went around grabbing kids—like, if I ever went anywhere near one of them... "
Mario sighed. "I don't know anything about that kind of people. Maybe there are some men like that. I don't know— I never met one. I—I never touched anybody who wasn't ready to go along with the whole idea. A homosexual doesn't have to be a—a pervert. A homosexual is just a man who likes other men. Instead of women. "
"You mean—that way. The sex way. "
"Yeah. "
"And you're homosexual?"
"Yes. I always was. "

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Tommy thought about that for a minute. Then he said, "I guess I ought to tell you. That wasn't the first time I—I ever did that with another boy. So I guess that makes me one, too, doesn't it?"
Tommy felt, though he could not see, Mario's quick glance at him in the darkness of the truck.
"How old were you? Or, I mean, how old was the other guy?"
"I guess we were both about eight. Maybe nine—"
"Oh, hell, no, Tommy. What did you do, jerk each other off? Look, all kids go through that stage. Boys, anyway. I don't know anything about girls—I never asked. It doesn't mean anything, one way or another. " He hesitated. "Look, don't answer this unless you want to. Ever had a girl?"
Tommy stared into the darkness and muttered, "Not really. I almost did once. I mean, this girl and I were sort of fooling

around, last year. This girl—well, she lets boys do things with her—"
"Rosa? Yeah, " Mario said, "everybody with the show knows about her—she must have screwed everything in pants on the lot. Maybe you're lucky nothing happened; she's probably got everything there is to catch. Papa Tony said if he caught her near the truck again he'd knock her block off, and if Angelo or I had anything to do with that one, we better get checked up by a doctor right away. So what happened? Couldn't, or didn't want to?"
"A little of both, I guess. She—she laughed at me and asked if I was queer. "
And a taunting ghost flashed across his mind, Jeff Marlin asking with a dirty snigger, "How'd you like to be my girl?... "
But Mario was laughing. "She would! Hell, no, kid, that's not how you find out!" Then, more gravely, "No, Tom, that doesn't mean a thing, except that she was the wrong girl for you. It's only if you've had lots of chances with different girls, girls you really like, and you still want men instead. "
Girls you really like. Suddenly Tommy thought of Stella the day they had driven the MG, wet and laughing in his arms, and how he had held her later, for a moment, naked under her thick robe. He knew, with a sudden, almost physical memory, what he had wanted then. He started to say something, then didn't. There wasn't any way to say something like that, not without giving the wrong impression. Mario might have thought Stella was like that Rosa jane. And she wasn't. Not at all.
Even if she and Johnny were sleeping together, Stel isn't like that.... But Mario didn't like women. He wouldn't understand.
Mario said quietly, "Some men—not very many, maybe, but some—will go to bed with other men when they can't get women. Like sailors. Or in jail. But unless they like men better even when they can get women, they aren't really— really homosexual. "
There was another long silence, filled only with the hard, metallic rain. "Tom, that was a low-down, filthy trick I pulled on you the other night. In the car like that. "
"I could've stopped you if I didn't want you to. I knew that. Like the night you—you slept in my room. You weren't really asleep, either, were you?"
"No, " Mario said, "I just wanted you to think so. "

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"Like I said... I guess I—I kind of wanted you to. "
"You know, " Mario said, his voice gentle, "you could have gotten me into terrible trouble. You're not really old enough—"
"Why would I want to get you into trouble?"
"Well, if I'd hurt you. Or scared you. "
"You keep talkin' about scaring me. What's to be scared of?"
Mario reached out and squeezed his hand in the darkness. There was another long silence. Finally Tommy said, "Don't you care at all for girls? Or can't you—"
"I can, " said Mario dryly, "and I have. I simply don't care that much about it. I have nothing against girls—some of them I like a whole lot—but I simply get no particular kick out of screwing them. There are lots of things I like better, that's all. "
Tommy started to ask what, which, how, but suddenly realized he didn't really want to know. The conversation had already gone a little too far for the present state of his emotions. Simultaneously he wanted to know and was afraid and ashamed of what would come then. His imagination troubled him with formless things. He wanted to change the subject but couldn't let it drop.
"Have you always been like that, Mario? Or am I too nosy?"
"I don't mind telling you anything you want to know. I wish—Christ, how I wish there'd been somebody to tell me when I was about your age. I'm just trying to think how to say it so you'll understand. It's sort of like trying to tell somebody how to fall in the net. It's something you get to feel in your guts, that's all. "
"Did it—did it start with somebody you liked a whole lot making a—making a pass at you?" What he really meant was like you did with me, but he couldn't make himself say it.
Briefly and bitterly Mario laughed. "No. In my case it was somebody I didn't really like that much at all. "
Distressed, Tommy wondered how you could do things like that with somebody you didn't like. After a minute he asked it, just like that.
Mario's voice was suddenly shaking. "That's the riddle of the universe, kiddo. The wisdom of lost Atlantis, or something. Why the hell you go out and screw people you can hardly stand the sight of afterward. "

"But—" Tommy felt as he might have felt if, in midswing, he suddenly realized the net was broken beneath him.
"Tom, what's the matter? This is a heck of a conversation to be having with a kid your age. I'm making an awful hash of it, I guess. What's the matter? Did I say something that upset you?"
Tommy blurted, "I—I wouldn't do it—unless I liked somebody, that's all. "
"Then you're goddamn lucky, " Mario muttered. Suddenly he drew in a harsh breath.
"Oh, Christ! What a jerk I am. What a goddamn nitwitted dumb—Tommy, listen. No, come here and listen to me—" He put an arm around the resisting shoulders. "Tom, for Christ's sake, did you think I was talking about you?

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Trying to find some sneaky way of telling you I didn't like you that much? Don't you know—ah, come on, kid, don't act like that!" By main force, he pulled Tommy close to him.
"Listen, Tom, " he said, in a strained whisper. "'You know what used to bother me most when I first realized I was— was queer? Knowing I'd probably never have kids of my own. I never was—never was awful close to either of my brothers. Johnny and I always fought like hell, and Mark—well, we just lost each other. But from the first day I started working with you, it was like—sort of like if one of my brothers had been the way I always wished they could have been. Really close to me, really liking me. You know something? When I started getting—getting excited about you, I kept telling myself I just liked you too much to start up the—the other stuff, the sex stuff, that it was better just having you like—like a little brother I could—could—" His voice broke, and he said, almost in a whisper, "could love—"
Tommy put out his arms in the darkness and wound them around Mario. He said, his face buried in Mario's shoulder, "I never had a brother. I used to pretend you were really my big brother. Like Papa Tony said. "
"Did you?" They hugged each other in the darkness, and Tommy was glad Mario could not see his face. He said, through the lump in his throat, "I used to be afraid you'd get sick of having me tagging around after you like—like a puppy. "
"Scared, I guess, " Mario murmured against his neck. "You were so damn young, and I was afraid I couldn't—couldn't keep my hands off you. Like that night we drove home from

the beach. God, I sweated blood! I figured you were going to run right in the house and tell Lu or somebody I made a dirty pass at you. "
"I wouldn't. I never would. If I was sore at you I'd've told you, not anybody else—I figured you knew that. " Tommy hesitated. "Mario, can I ask you something? How did you get to know you were like that? Homosexual?"
Mario was silent for so long that Tommy wondered if the question had offended him after all, but at last he said, "Okay. I was a couple of years older than you, I guess. Sixteen. You got to remember I was raised Catholic and every time we had any kind of thoughts about—about sex we learned we had to go confess them—'impure thoughts' is what they taught us to call them—and the priest would bawl us out and give us rosaries to say and tell us to pray for purity, or something. Well, I tried making the grade with a couple of girls, and it was just a big nothing—I mean, they seemed to like it all right, it went the way it was supposed to, I guess, but I figured it was one of those things, like drinking beer or sitting up all night, that sound like something big till you're old enough to do them, and then they're nothing special after all. After a while I figured I had a low sex drive and let it go at that. " He hesitated and laughed a little.
"It was the year I cracked this wrist, the one that's giving me trouble now—remind me, I've got to go hunt up a doctor tomorrow. Anyhow, I had to lay off for six weeks at the beginning of the season. I had to hang around, doing nothing, driving Lucia crazy. She was traveling with the act again, looking

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after Liss, but not flying, of course—she was still pretty lame—just working spec and Wardrobe and managing us. She said I could go home to L. A. until my wrist healed up, but I wanted to stay with the show. Well, anyhow, there was a route man with the show—hell, I can't even remember his name. Harry something, Bennet. No, Bennicke—that was it, Harry Bennicke. He asked if I'd like to travel with him one week, advance man, scout out the lots, put up the paper, locate the folks you have to give the ducats to—that stuff. Okay, I went along, we shared a hotel room. I had a pretty fair idea by then what the score was from a couple of things he said. He gave me a drink or two, but it wouldn't be fair to say he got me drunk. Anyhow, I found out there was nothing wrong with my sex drive—I'd just been playing in the wrong

league, is all. " He rubbed his wrist thoughtfully. "Anyhow, that was how it was. He wasn't a bad guy, I guess. And I was glad to know what it was all about. And after that—well, things happen. Only there's never been anybody I cared a lot about. "
Tommy hugged him. "I wish you'd told me. "
Mario smiled in the dark; Tommy could hear it in his voice.
"What for? Anyway, this is something any red-blooded American male would die before he'd admit, but I think I must have sort of a low sex drive anyhow. And I use up so much—so much energy on the bars that there's not much left over. I think—" He was silent, finally finishing diffidently, "I think maybe - people have just so much—just so much drive, and if you use it all up for what you're doing you don't have much left Over. People whose work doesn't satisfy them, or doesn't take enough out of them, they keep hunting for things to put in the empty place. Sex, the drive to make lots and lots of money, and all like that. Most people are sort of—oh, empty inside. Hollow. I read a thing in college about hollow men, and I thought, even then, that most people are like that, all hollow inside, and they keep trying to fill up the hollow with sex because they haven't got anything else inside. "
Tommy asked shyly, "Is that why you start up these things when you're bored or—or not satisfied with how things are going?"
"Yes, yes, that's it exactly!" Mario sounded excited, as if he'd just discovered something. "When I'm blue, or feeling way down low, or miserable—and it doesn't seem fair to other people to use them to get rid of my bad moods. Seems like sex ought to be something more than that. Only damned if I know what!"
Tommy ventured hesitantly, afraid to intrude, afraid to spoil this moment of rare self-revelation, "Maybe the—the bad moods come because you're thinkin' too much about how you feel. Maybe—I'm not very good at thinking things out—but maybe you need to be with people more, to stop thinking so much. I don't mean just sex, I mean getting into touch with other people, close— Oh, heck, you know what I mean, don't you?" "Yeah, I guess so. And I know something else, too: If we

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stay awake all night talking, it's not going to improve our work tomorrow. We ought to get that nap. " He put his arm around Tommy's shoulder briefly, then took it away again. "Get some sleep, kiddo. "

Tommy settled down obediently. He was keyed up, turning over in his mind everything Mario had said. Half eager, half reluctant, he had almost expected something more. It took some getting used to. He felt puzzled and a little alarmed, and through it all was a quite inexplicable tenderness.

"I'm glad you told me, Mario. "

In the darkness, Mario found his hand again and squeezed it. But he said nothing. They were both silent, in that suspension of contact which inevitably follows talk too personal, confidences that have touched on points too intimate. Tommy was conscious of this gap, this constraint. In making this kind of confession, Mario had to some degree placed the future of their relationship in Tommy's hands. Now the burden of any change or development lay with Tommy, and for a moment Tommy resented that.

He realized, hopelessly confused, that Mario had withdrawn again. It was always like that. They'd be together— close, friends, like brothers—and suddenly without any warning Mario would be a million miles away, on the other side of some invisible barrier. Even now.

He had as yet only the vaguest notion of the confused scruples that made Mario await his lead for anything further. He curled up on the mattress, feigning sleep. After a long time he felt Mario touch his shoulder, but he did not stir, pretending unawareness, and Mario moved away again. Tommy did not know if he was relieved or sorry. He escaped into sleep finally, to curious empty dreams of climbing ropes and ladders to the top of a huge rig, only to find there was another one far above, and another one above that... to swing on a trapeze whose ropes seemed to be fastened nowhere and whose bar felt in his hands curiously like living flesh; Mario was catching at the far end of the rig, but his hands were always just beyond reach, and Tommy fell through endless space and then fell again.... Tommy started, woke up sharply, and stared into darkness, sweating with the terror of the fall. Mario was breathing quietly, deep asleep at his side. Tommy moved close and put an arm

around him, but Mario did not stir. Tommy put his head down on Mario's shoulder and escaped back into a deeper level of sleep where there were no disturbing dreams at all. None at all.

CHAPTER 13

the Lambeth Circus moved up through Texas and north into New Mexico, and Tommy grew hardened to the routine of the Santellis. They worked him hard and mercilessly. As the youngest man in the act, he had all the odd chores formerly pushed off on Mario. It was his job to brush and air the capes, to see to the laces on the flying slippers, to deliver clothes to the laundry in any town where a two-day stand made it possible to have washing done. They sent him out with Buck on rainy mornings to test the security of ropes and nets; it was his duty to make the final check before every performance, to make sure the bars were dry, neatly wrapped and taped. He did not realize for another year that Angelo or Papa Tony had always unobtrusively checked his work; they

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impressed on him that he alone was responsible for their safety, and after a time it grew to be second nature. It was to last all his life.

He began to grow away from his parents; he appeared now in their trailer only to sleep and eat. Those who had been with Lambeth for years still spoke of him as "Tom Zane's kid, " but to all the newer acts he was "Tommy Santelli, the kid in the flying act. " By the end of June he was answering to that name without a second thought.

One night in early July he stood behind the performers' entrance, wearing the propman's red coat, which he wore in the first half of the show, watching his father work the cats. Now that he was a performer himself, he began to see the complete control and discipline of this act that had been so much a part of his childhood. It still frightened him.

Tom Zane caught the hoop that Big Boy jumped through, whacked his styling whip on the floor of the ring, and the lion sailed through, alighted with a soft snarl, and padded negligently back to his seat. Tom Zane tossed the hoop through the bars; the cage boy caught it, rolled it out of the

way, and Tommy let his breath go. Then, as his father wheeled, keeping his eyes fixed on Prince, snapping the whip against the floor, Tommy felt the old, sucking twist under his breastbone. Fear. Tommy knew that most of the snarling and pouncing, most of the whip snapping, was contrived to impress the audience. "Lions are lazy, " Tom Zane had told him all his life. "They are well fed in the ring; they think of the act simply as something they do before dinner. " He had tried often enough to encourage Tommy to take a turn as cage boy. But the very thought made Tommy feel sick, and finally Tom Zane had stopped talking about it.

Even now, safely outside the cage, there was a cold, sick tightness in him. He didn't really like watching. Even when the lion Tom Zane was working with was old Lucifer, whose paws Zane solemnly shook in the ring, who would playfully roll over, as he was doing now, and let Tom Zane sit on his huge ruglike belly, Tommy felt sick—and his mother had raised Lucifer by hand on a bottle. When the lion was Prince, he noticed that even his father moved with extra caution and kept his eyes fixed on the big cat. Tommy remembered what he had heard his father say so many times: "No big cat is ever 'tame. ' They are trained, sometimes; but always, they are wild animals; and always, they are very dangerous. Even old Lucifer, if I did something to frighten him or upset him, could forget his training and turn on me. It would be my fault, not his. But I would be dead. "

He turned away his eyes as, one by one, the cats leaped over his father to go up to their seats. Zane posed at the center of the pyramid of lions, two on either side, and Tommy drew a deep breath, watching the cage boy working with the drops. He had tried that job just once. Then his father had admitted that cat men were born, not made, and abandoned his hope of having Tommy follow in his footsteps.

The tableau broke up as Tom Zane snapped his whip and, again one by one, the lions jumped down from their poses and ran back to their places. The cage boy lifted the drop, and one by one the big cats ran, at their peculiar swaying

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lope, back toward the door. Tommy suddenly heard Pick Leighty gasp, "Oh, my God!" and saw him start to run. Prince had gone through the cage door, then suddenly turned, before the cage boy could close the drop on him, and run back into the ring. He laid back his ears and moved slowly, snarling, toward Tom Zane. He ignored the shouted

command, even the whip snapped near his muzzle. Tom Zane never actually touched his cats with the business end of the whip, and it wouldn't have hurt them if he had. It was their fear of the noise of the whip that he used to keep them under control—that and the tidbits he fed them. He shouted again, but Prince came on. Pick Leighty and Angelo were running toward the ring now. Inevitably, with a leap Tommy could feel all the way down to his toes, Prince sprang. Tom Zane jumped to one side, picking up the chair he used to fend off an occasional unruly animal, backing and circling; but as the lion's weight came full against him, he went down.

The band had struck up the noisy entrance cue for the next act. Angelo and Pick were inside the cage. Tommy ran toward the entrance. His father was on his feet now, blood splashed along his white ducks. Prince was snarling, switching his tail.

Someone caught Tommy by the shoulder. "For God's sake, don't go out there, Tom!" Mario spun Tommy around hard, facing away from the ring. A dozen prop men and roustabouts were clustered around the big cage, shielding it from the audience, and the performing elephants were being hustled into the ring. Tommy struggled for a better view and saw that his father was down again. His mother hurried toward the entrance, and Tommy came to his senses, the sickness in him condensing into something bleak and cold. He caught his mother around the waist.

"Mama! Don't go out there, don't—"

"Tommy, what's happened?" She looked very white, and for the first time, in sudden shock, he realized fleetingly, I'm taller than she is. He held her against him, shielding her as Mario had done with him.

"Don't look, " he said. "You can't do anything. Prince jumped him—" He was still seeing the horrible red splatter on the white ducks.

"No, let me go, " Elizabeth Zane said quickly. "I must go, Tommy. I can handle the cats better than Cardiff can, and if I don't get there now they're likely to shoot Prince—"

She freed herself quickly from his hands and began to run past the performers' entrance and out into the ring. It had not been a full sixty seconds since Prince made his first leap. There was a tense, ominous noise in the stands, audible over the gay clamor of the band. Tommy could see his father now. He was in the safety cage, with Angelo, and his mother

was in the big cage with Jeff Cardiff. Together they were forcing the cat back toward the drop, Cardiff with the chair, Beth Zane with a steel bar braced in her hands. Tommy took a step toward the ring. Angelo and Pick Leighty were helping Tom Zane to his feet. The whole top of the white costume was blackish-crimson, red strips dangling down that could be torn cloth or flesh,

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and his bent head flopped horribly. He took one step and collapsed in Angelo's arms.
Tommy realized that Mario was gripped him with rough fingers that felt like steel on his arms.
"You're not going anywhere, " Mario said through his teeth. "You've got maybe ten minutes to get dressed for the act!"
"Mario, it's my dad! He's hurt, maybe he's dead—"
"I don't care if half the county is dead out there, you've still got to be on the rig in ten minutes! Move!" He gave Tommy a rough shove, and Tommy stumbled back into the darkness of the lot.
He stepped up into the rigging truck, his mouth dry. He felt muddled and disoriented. The familiar smells were all around him—metal, damp cloth, resin, sweat—but they seemed new and strange, making his stomach tighten with something like nausea. Mario had already shucked his shirt and shoes. Tommy pulled out his tights, mechanically checking the tags at the waist. This was Angelo's pair. He got another, and it was his. He was beginning to realize that even if he had seen his father lying dead on the cage floor, he would still have to get himself into those tights and be up on the rig in eight minutes.
He put one foot into the tights, then leaned against the wall, shaking all over, a sick taste in his mouth. At the moment he hated Mario, calmly smoothing his tights up over his bare legs.
Mario turned and glared at him. "If you're going to throw up or anything, go outside and get it over with before we get into the ring. Damn it, kid, move! They'll stall the cycle act a couple of minutes if they can, but we've got to be ready! Get going, damn you!"
There was still a hard fist clenched under his breastbone, but the shaking had vanished in cold anger. He set his mouth and hauled up the legs of the tights. Angelo jumped up into the rigging truck, his shirt half off already. He skinned his trousers off in one movement, then jerked up his tights;

they snagged and he swore, bending to ease them up. Tommy's hands were damp; he dried them carefully, doused them with alcohol, and dried them again to get rid of the last traces of sweat. Angelo came and stuck out his wrists.
"Matt, get a hunk of tape on here, will you? Tommy, your dad isn't dead—they took him to the hospital in Albuquerque. He needs to be stitched up some, but he's going to be okay. Fix this up, will you?"
Mario gestured roughly with his elbow, and Tommy fumbled in a drawer for the roll of adhesive tape. There was a long streak of blood on Angelo's arm.
"Want me to catch tonight, Angelo?" Mario asked.
"I'll be okay. Just get some tape on it for now. "
Tommy stood by numbly as Mario wound the tape in smooth folds around Angelo's forearm. Somebody was always getting hurt. Tommy himself went through every day of his life now with a sprain or a bruise or a rope burn somewhere; once his elbow had hurt steadily every day for two months.
But the ripping claws, the long strings of bloody cloth... or bloody flesh...

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"Tommy, damnit, get your mind on what you're doing, " Angelo snarled. "Stick out your hands. "
Tommy managed to say thickly, "Sorry. You've got blood on your face... "
"Matt, throw me a wet washrag. Tom, clench your fists or this stuff will cut when you grab the bar, " Angelo reminded him. He finished the strapping, then thrust the roll of muslin at Tommy. "Here. You fix up Matt's bad wrist. I'll get the capes down. "
Tommy obeyed silently. Halfway through, Mario glanced up. "Easy, damn it, that's too tight!"
"I'm sorry—" Tommy heard his voice begin to shake.
Mario looked up with a fierce glare. There were beads of sweat around his hairline. "You want a good kick in the pants, dammit?"
"Easy, " Angelo said. "Go easy on the kid, Matt. "
"Easy, hell! Tom, you get yourself straightened out or I'll take you apart, hear me? You've got sand in your hair. Here. " He picked up his own comb and ran it quickly through Tommy's hair.
Papa Tony jumped on the rigging truck. He was already in costume, being one of the very few performers with

Lambeth who had no extra chores in the first half of the show. He grabbed his cape in one quick moment.
"Come on—we'll be late, " he said, and at the same moment one of the clowns stuck his head in the door.
"Santellis? Ready?"
Papa Tony lifted his chin proudly.
"The Santellis are always ready. Andiamo, ragazzi. "
Mario took Tommy's elbow and steered him toward the entrance. Tommy, through the sick daze in his mind, sensed something fierce, emotional, in the way they walked this time, clustered, close. The Santellis are always ready. For the first time, dimly, he had a hint of the way in which, someday, the knowledge that he had a show to do—right now, no matter what—would hold him steady through personal crisis, tragedy, death. The Santellis are always ready. And he was one of them. He lifted his chin and walked along at Mario's side, trying for the same calm arrogance.
The band crashed into their entrance music, the spotlight came to catch them at the edge of the ring, and Tommy drew in a deep breath. Automatically he put his fingers to his neckline and felt, with a flicker of surprise, the little St. Michael's medal there. He had not the slightest memory of transferring it from the neck of his sweater. The lights burned at his eyes. Then he was standing on the platform beside Mario, and his stomach felt tight and twisted, but that was a familiar sensation. He reached up for the bar, and felt it, hard and real and heavy in his hands. Now came the reality of Mario's white-wrapped wrists lined up next to his, the thin swaying ropes on the catch straps where Papa Tony and Angelo swung for this trick, his body arching higher and higher; everything else was vague and distant, and the world reduced itself to a thin flying line, a knife-edge of reality under his soaring body....

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Somehow the act was over: the final drumroll, the two-and-a-half, the storm of applause, Mario bowing in the usual way. Tommy felt dazed again as he slid down the ropes to the ground.
Back in the rigging truck, Angelo said, "Both of you, get dressed as fast as you can. You'll have to drive, Matt. I don't think I can manage. "
Jim Lambeth stepped into the truck. "Angelo, you all right?"
"Yeah, I guess so, " Angelo said briefly, and Tommy saw,

with renewed, sick horror, the blood that had seeped out beneath the tape on Angelo's arm.
"What happened, Angelo?" he whispered.
"You didn't see? He pulled your father right out from under Prince. "
"It's probably okay, " Angelo said, "but I better get a tetanus shot or something—a cat's claws are always septic. Anything I can handle there, Jim?"
"Yeah. Find out what Beth wants to do, " Lambeth said. "All she was worried about was that we shouldn't shoot that goddamn cat. Take it easy, Angelo. We'll get your rigging down and stowed. "
Tommy sat numbly between Mario and Angelo in the Santelli car. For once, Angelo said nothing about Mario's driving. They had to ask at a gas station before they found the hospital. In the merciless lights of the hospital corridor they looked like three roughnecks; they had pulled on old pants over their tights. Angelo still wore his costume top, a prop man's coat bundled over it. The crisp, neat nurse stared, drawing back ever so slightly.
"Mr. Zane? The case they brought in by ambulance from the circus grounds? Just a minute, please; I believe he is still in surgery. Come this way. "
She led them to a waiting room across the corridor. Tommy saw his mother there, pale and tired-looking, a great bloodstain across the front of her dress. She jumped up and ran to him.
"Tommy, Tommy, Tommy—" she whispered. He held her against him, feeling her shaking and crying. After a minute she quieted.
"Angelo, it was good of you to come. "
"Well, I had to come anyhow to get my arm looked at. "
"If it hadn't been for you—" she said and took his hand in both of hers, holding it. Angelo shook his head in embarrassment. "Okay, okay, Beth, forget it. How's Tom? What happened, anyhow? How bad is it?"
"Prince clawed him three times—once down the arm, then twice across the ribs. He lost a lot of blood, and there's a cut over his eye—" She broke down helplessly and began to cry. Mario took her by the shoulders and put her gently into a chair.
"Tommy, you stay here with your mother. Elizabeth, I'm

going to go and get you some hot coffee. Angelo, you find somebody who can look after that arm for you. "
Tommy sat beside his mother in the waiting room. After a time Angelo came back, with a thick bandage on his forearm. Mario brought coffee, handed

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Tommy a cup without asking. He took a sip, but it was bitter and he put it on the floor almost untouched. He said, "I knew that old cat was a killer. "
Beth Zane looked up, surprised and protesting. "Oh, no, Junior, it wasn't Prince's fault. Tom knew he had a sore tooth; he hit him by mistake on that side with his hand. Prince was scared, that was all, scared and hurt. They're just like babies, you know. "
"Some baby, " Tommy muttered. He had heard this before.
It seemed a year before the doctor finally came in.
"Mrs. Zane?"
All four of them jumped up together.
"Mrs. Zane, you can see your husband for a second now, and again, for just a minute, in the morning. "
"How—how is he?"
The doctor glanced at them, and again Tommy was conscious of how much they looked like ragamuffins, his mother in her shabby coat, the great bloodstain on her dress. "He's pretty badly hurt, of course. He has a broken radial bone in his arm and four broken ribs; I think the—the lion rolled on top of him. The arm was pretty badly chewed up, of course, and the big shoulder muscle is torn. We had to take over eighty stitches in the shoulder and chest, and there was surgery on the muscle, too. The eye is worst. We can't be sure until the swelling goes down, but the eyelid is badly torn. We may be able to save his sight, but, to be honest with you, it looks very bad. There's always infection with any wound from an animal's claws. "
Angelo crossed himself.
The doctor said gently, "You should go home, Mrs. Zane. Let your sons take you home. "
Beth shook her head. "They can take Tommy back to the grounds. I'm staying. Angelo, make sure Tommy gets back all right. "
"Sure. "
Tommy began to protest, insisting he should stay with his

mother, but Mario took him firmly by the arm and marched him out to the car.
"Want me to drive, Angelo?"
"Hell, no! The arm's fine—I've had worse from a house cat!" He waited impatiently while they climbed in.
Tommy felt the hard, twisting sickness again. When he had been with the show for twenty years, would he be able to walk into a lion's cage, casually save a man's life, then go through his own turn with a deep claw mark on his arm that he hadn't even mentioned?
His teeth chattered, and Mario looked across him at Angelo and said, "Speed it up a little. The kid's having a chill. "
"No wonder, " Angelo said. "Miracle he held together this long. You were damn rough on him, Matt. "
Mario put his arm around Tommy. "Listen, Tom. I had to talk tough or you'd have fallen apart. And if you went to pieces, the other performers would have fallen apart. And if they got upset the audience would have known and we'd

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have had a panic. I've seen that happen in a show where there was a bad accident Once the folks knew you were going to carry on okay, everything started to run smooth again. You can let go now, if you want to. Now's the time, when it's all over. "
Tommy said, "I'm just so—so—so damned cold. I must've —must've got chilled in—in the hospital—"
The circus lot was perfectly dark and still, but as the car turned in, Jim Lambeth jumped down from the ticket wagon. "Angelo, you okay? Tommy, how's your dad?"
He heard them out, then gave Tommy a brief pat on the shoulder. "Good kid. Mario, you get him to bed. The kid's a trouper. "
Tommy heard the accolade, but was too cold to understand. Angelo drew up in front of the Zanes' trailer; Mario got out with Tommy.
"I'll stay with the kid. You get some sleep, Angelo. "
"I'm okay, " Tommy protested, but Mario ignored him, shoving him through the trailer door. It seemed somehow unfamiliar, the lights still burning, his mother's sewing basket lying where she had left it with a pair of his own tights stretched over a darning egg, his father's shirt hanging over the back of a chair. Tommy's teeth were clenched against chattering; the cold seemed to have gone through to his very bones. He had forgotten what it was like to be warm.
It seemed to him that he had been holding his breath

against the cold, aching tightness for hours and hours. Mario went into the house trailer's bathroom and put a hand against the hot-water heater. "Thank goodness we're on a lot where they have good hot-water hookup. You get out of your clothes and take a hot shower—as hot as you can stand it. And get into some warm pajamas. "
"Look, Mario, I'm all right, I said—"
Mario gave him a rough shove. "Just do as I tell you once without givin' me a hard time, willya? Just be glad we've got a good water hookup and we're not playing under canvas where all you get's a bucket of cold water! You catch cold, it won't help anybody. Now move, dammit!"
Under the hot, pounding rain of the shower Tommy felt the physical cold subside. But the tightness in his chest was an ache, growing and growing. He pulled a sweater over his pajamas. Mario was in the kitchen part of the trailer.
"Better now? Where does your mother keep her coffee? I'll fix some supper—or breakfast or whatever. You'll be better with something hot inside you. "
"In that canister. I don't want anything. If I eat I'll be sick. "
"Okay, okay, go crawl in bed if you want to. But I'm about starved. I never eat a lot before the night show, and I've been up all night. Mind if I fix myself a bite?"
Tommy felt suddenly ashamed. "No, of course not. Let me help. Eggs all right? That's about all I'm sure we can find. " He bent and pulled out a frying pan.
"There's a couple dozen here. How many you want? Hadn't you better get out of your tights, too? You told me, often enough, about catching cold. "

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"Right. I'll do that. " When he came back, Tommy had slices of bacon draining on a paper napkin and was starting eggs. He saw Mario smile and vaguely wondered why. By the time the eggs were on the plates Tommy realized he was hungry. He sat down and Mario slid into the breakfast nook beside him. He picked up the cup of coffee. Its hot fragrant steam, the heat of the cup in his hand, seemed to dissolve the hard, aching lump in his throat, and he saw the plate of eggs through a burning mist.
Mario slid an arm around his shoulders.
"Okay, kid, " he said in a whisper, "steady. If you're going to get the shakes, this is the time for it, when it's all over with. Come on, drink up. " He took the cup to Tommy's mouth.

"Never mind if it burns your mouth. Get it down, that's the fella. "
Tommy gulped, swallowed, sniffled, started to choke, and gulped again. Half laughing, half crying, he took the cup in his own hand. "I'm—I'm okay now. You don't have to—have to feed me like I was a baby—"
"Then you start getting on the outside of those eggs, ragazzo. "
"Okay. " Tommy picked up his fork. They ate in silence. The first dim gray light was coming in from outside.
"Listen, " Mario said. "Wind. Or is that rain?" It was a harsh rushing noise outside. "You're closer—reach me some more coffee. "
Tommy brought the pot closer and tipped it over Mario's cup. Suddenly he began to laugh. "Look—your wristbands are soaked! You forgot to take them off when you washed up. "
"I must have had something else on my mind. " Mario pushed his plate away. "Get some sleep, kid. I'll stay with you. "
"I'll be all right alone now. "
Mario chuckled. "Relax! I'm not babying you, kid, but Papa Tony and Angelo are probably sound asleep by now, and I'd catch Billy-be-damned if I woke them up! You don't mind if I catch a nap here, do you?"
" 'Course not, " Tommy muttered. Mario went to the door of the trailer and looked into the graying sky. There was no light except the central spot, never darkened, on the lot. In the distance somewhere a tethered animal stamped softly.
"Rain, " Mario said. "No performance tomorrow—today, that is. Get to bed, young'un. "
Tommy pulled out the sofa that was his bed. He could not face the dark emptiness of his parents' room. He lay stiffly on his pillow, and as he shut his eyes the picture he had been holding away from his consciousness all that evening returned with an awful clarity: the horrible red bloody strings hanging down, his father collapsing into Angelo's arms like a marionette when someone lets go the strings...
... over eighty stitches... We may be able to save his sight...
Mario put out the light. The sofa bed creaked slightly as he sat down on the edge to pull off his boots. He stretched out in his clothes.

"Going to sleep in your clothes? I can get you a pair of Dad's pajamas. "

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"It's okay. It's almost morning anyhow. "
Without warning Tommy felt his breath catch in his throat and knew, shamefully, that he was going to cry.
Mario turned over. He said in a whisper, "Listen, kid, take it easy. People are always getting hurt around the show. You know that. Here, put your head on my shoulder. " His arm went around Tommy in the darkness. "That's better. "
Suddenly, weary all over, Tommy felt the aching weight dissolve, and he fell heavily into sleep.
When he woke the trailer was full of gray and rainy light, and he was alone. Outside there were sloshing steps, the sound of a car's engine turning over, protesting, a battery whining and gears grinding, the plaintive eerie call of an elephant protesting some bit of routine, the suck and clop of a horse's hoofs, a baby crying somewhere in another trailer. The familiar sounds of the backyard on a rainy morning.
Then, just outside, through an open door, came the sound of Mario's voice, cold and angry as he had never heard it:
"Angelo, if I had a mind like yours I'd wash it out three times a day with green soap! The kid was half sick with shock; I didn't think I ought to leave him alone. That's what it was, and that's all it was! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, what do you think I am?"
Angelo muttered something. Mario, not pacified, snarled, "So okay, okay, you want to tell the whole goddamn backyard about it? Go on, you go help Papa Tony, I'll manage! Unless you think you gotta check up and ask Tommy—"
"I just might, " Angelo said, and a minute later he came into the trailer without knocking.
"You awake, Tom?"
"Yeah, I guess so. " Tommy sat up, blinking. "What's the matter, Angelo? Something wrong?"
Angelo stared at him for a moment, then shook his head and said, "No, but Big Jim canceled the show for this afternoon—it's raining like blue hell out here. We're pulling out for the next town around noon. Get some clothes on, kid. We've got to see if your father can be moved. "
Tommy hurried into his clothes and found some milk left in the icebox. He drank a glass, without bothering to eat anything. Outside, the rain had beaten the ground into soupy

muck, with puddles of water standing where the ring walls had been. Most of the family trailers had already gone.
Jeff Cardiff, Tom Zane's cage man and assistant trainer, came up to Tommy as he crossed the lot.
"You going in to see your dad at the hospital this morning? Tell him not to worry, I can work the cats a few days. Unless your mother wants to. "
"Okay, I'll tell him. "
"Is your dad going to lose his eye?"
"I hope not. "

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"Tough on your mother. Especially now, when you'll have to be moving on with the show and she'll have to stay here with him, " Cardiff said. "Well, you give them both my best, Tommy. I'm going on with the cat truck. "
He went off, and Tommy stood in the soaking downpour, not even aware that he was getting wet. It had just hit him. He wasn't just a performer's kid, traveling with his family; he was a performer himself, under contract. He'd gone on the rigging last night not knowing whether his father would live or die; he would have to go on, this afternoon, to the next town on the route.
A workhand came up and said, "Tommy, I disconnected your folks' trailer. We'll have it hauled to a trailer park in town. Tonio Santelli told me you were going with them. You better get your clothes and take them to the Santelli trailer. "
Dazed again, Tommy obeyed, packing his clothes and practice tights. Angelo drove up in the Zanes' car and motioned him inside. He sat beside Angelo, watching the windshield wipers flick back and forth, back and forth. Angelo's hands on the wheel seemed steady and confident as ever. Only a small rim of bandage showed under his neat raincoat sleeve. He looked shaved, dapper, immaculate.
Inside the hospital, Tommy thought that at least today they didn't look like hoboes or tramps. A painful quiver went through him as he saw his mother in the waiting room, still wearing the bloodstained dress.
"How is Dad this morning, Mother?"
"Holding his own. If there's no infection he should be out of the hospital in a week. " It was years before Tommy understood quite how Spartan a code was behind that optimism.
"Beth, have you had breakfast?" Angelo asked.
"I wasn't hungry. "

"Nothing since before the show last night?" He seized her by the arm firmly. "I'm going to treat you like Matt treated your kid last night. Come on, march. "
He conducted her to the coffee shop across the street from the hospital, and refused to say a word until she had eaten eggs and potatoes and toast and was starting on her second cup of coffee.
"Mind if I smoke, Beth? Look, staying here was a fool trick, especially now. I got one hell of a lecture from Marg for letting you. " Tommy wondered when he had had time to talk to Margot.
"Oh, she told you—"
Angelo nodded, and Beth went on: "Ordinarily, while Tom was out of the act, I'd work the cats myself; they're used to me, and Tom would expect it. Now, though—"
"Cardiff said he could handle it, " Angelo told her, blowing a smoke ring. "Your trailer is in a trailer park eight blocks away from here, and here are the keys to "your car. Matt and Papa Tony are picking us up here in half an hour. But before that I have to settle it about the kid. We can get along without him for two, three days if you really need him. He can catch up with the show in Ruidoso—"

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"You're very kind, Angelo. But with Tom laid up, Lambeth won't want anyone else out of the show. Will you ask Ma Leighty to give him a bed?"
"Don't you worry about that. There's plenty of room in our trailer, and we all got used to having him around this winter. He and Matt get along just fine. "
"I don't like to impose—"
"Impose, nothing! Look, he's part of the act—you know how Papa is about family. " Angelo leaned on his chin in his big hands. "I know what's bothering you, Beth. But I'll look out for him. I got a kid of my own, you know. "
"No, I didn't know that... "
"Yeah. A girl, Tessa. Teresa, for her mother. She's in Holy Name Convent's boarding school, out in California. I'll look after Tom like he was my own kid, Beth, I promise. "
Beth said slowly, "All right. I'll know he's okay if he's with you and Tonio. "
She stood up, with an air of having settled everything.
Tommy asked, "Can I see Dad before I go, Mother?"
"Son, he's still doped—he wouldn't know you. He didn't know me when they let me in to see him this morning. " Beth's

hand, firm and cold, trembled a little in her son's. Tommy's chest tightened as he kissed her.
"Gosh, Mother, when will I see you and Dad again?"
"We'll keep in touch. I'll get the route from Billboard and send you a card whenever I can. "
Angelo leaned over and gave Beth a light kiss on the cheek. "That's from Margot, Now, don't you worry, Beth, we'll look after Tommy for you. "
"Bless you, Angelo. You be a good boy, Tom, and don't give the Santellis any trouble. "
He reassured her, but he felt, as he watched his mother walk back toward the hospital gate, that she had already forgotten him again.

CHAPTER 14

the old blue and white trailer that was the home of the Santellis on the road was neither large nor new; it had the haphazard look of a home no woman's hand has touched in a long time. Nevertheless, there was none of the squalor of some performers' quarters. Tonio Santelli never forgot, or allowed his family to forget, that they were the aristocracy of the circus. Not for him, or anyone working under him, the slipshod glitter of "up front" concealing backstage dirt or tawdriness. Practice clothes might be shabby, thriftily worn threadbare, but they were mended and immaculate. Angelo was not too old to be scolded for an unmended rip in a sweater seam, and however early the rigging men might appear to start setting poles, Antonio Santelli appeared to supervise them combed and clean-shaven, his mustaches damp and smelling of soap.
Three things had been trained into Mario so young that he passed them on to Tommy almost without spoken admonition. (Even now, by automatic habit, when he was dressing before the show, Mario remembered to spread out clean and unbitten fingernails for checking. He caught himself doing it and laughed at himself, and by now it was a family joke, but Tommy knew there

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had been a time when it had not been a joke at all.) And Tommy had quickly learned that it was not acceptable to show up with dirty el-

bows or a T-shirt that really should have been in the laundry. Their stage costumes were brushed and aired after every performance, tights and robes bundled up and taken to the laundry or the nearest self-service washhouse. The trailer, Tommy thought sometimes, was kept neater than his mother kept hers.

At the center was a small kitchen, crowded with a two-burner stove, a tiny icebox, a sink. There was a toilet and washbasin, but no shower; in the days when it had been built, house trailers had no such luxuries. "After all, " Mario told him once, half in apology, "we were all brought up playing under canvas, and you get used to taking your bath, washing your tights, and soaking your feet, all in your bucket. In the dressing top, everybody gets two buckets of water—period. If you want a hot bath, you have to wait for the big towns where you can find a swimming pool or public bath. "

At the back of the trailer, slatted wooden doors closed off a closet-like bedroom, which Angelo shared with his father. At the front, two short upholstered benches opened out into narrow, rather hard beds, and this was where Mario and Tommy slept.

As the youngest man in the act, Tommy had the traditional responsibility for all kinds of small chores. Even star billing, if by chance the youngest man achieved it—as was the case with Mario this year—could not exempt him from the traditional family chores assigned to the youngest. Tommy, living with his parents, had been spared some of them; now they all took it for granted that he would take over.

Actually Tommy found he enjoyed the chores: going with Mario in each town to drop off clothes at the laundry or to wash tights and sweaters in a self-service washhouse, getting late supper after the night show and clearing it away again, checking the trailer for misplaced articles before they pulled out, stringing clotheslines, patching costumes, hanging up wet tights. It kept him too busy for much worrying about his father. As they played through town after town, and then state after state, he settled into a routine of practice, performance, work, and sleep that left little room for anything else.

They moved into Lawton, Oklahoma, through a gray squall line. A day-long downpour effectively drenched any thought of an evening performance, and Lambeth canceled

the show, growled, and talked gloomily of consulting a fortune-teller instead of the local weather bureau. Most of the performers, however, after long runs and two outdoor performances a day, were glad to have a whole day and evening off.

Toward dusk Angelo came to the trailer to shave and change his clothes, and found Tommy tucked away at the kitchen table with his lesson books.

"Kid, I'm going to a movie in town with Margot. If you want to hunt up Ellen or Little Ann, I'll drop you kids off somewhere. "

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"Thanks, " Tommy said glumly, "but Little Ann's gone to bed with an earache; didn't Margot tell you? And Ellen's gone to something at the Baptist church with her family, some kind of strawberry supper or something. They asked me to go, but I figured I didn't like shortcake enough to sit through all that praying. So I guess I'll catch up on my lessons and mail the whole lot off to that correspondence school in Baltimore and not have to mess around with them for a month or so. The last card I got from Mother said to be sure I kept my lessons up. "
"Papa's gone to town. He knows a guy here who used to be a rigging man with Woods-Wayland Shows, so he went to have supper with him, meet his wife and grandchildren. You think Matt's going to want a ride to town?" Angelo was knotting his tie.
"No, he went to play cards with some of the crew. "
Angelo gave an expressive snort. "Well, he can't do much helling around with what money we get on the road!" By long-standing family agreement, Papa Tony handled Santelli finances during the season, giving out only small amounts of what he called "cigarette money" to the others. At the end of the season, money was divided up—or, in Tommy's case, banked—for the performers. Tommy got three dollars a week pocket money, but since that was more spending money than his parents had ever given him, he was content. With shoelaces two for a nickel, ice cream sodas fifteen cents, and movies thirty-five cents, he had little use for money.
"You going to be all right here alone, Tom? Don't sit up too late ruining your eyes with those damn Batman comics, " Angelo admonished, and left.
Tommy worked for an hour on his lessons, then put his books away and stretched out on his bunk with a comic book.

He had been reading for about half an hour when Mario came in, drenched to the skin. He flung off his wet shirt and got a towel from the closet.
"Going out again?" Tommy asked.
"Guess not. I lost ninety-three cents and decided I'd had enough high finance for one evening. These jerky little towns here in the Bible Belt where they still have local option, they bootleg Mexican beer up from the border, and it tastes like unsalted horse piss.... Hell, the lemonade you get at the grease wagon is better to drink, and has more of a kick! I thought you were going to town with Angelo. " Mario came and bent over the bunk. "What you reading?"
"Comic books. "
Mario riffled through them. "Green Lantern—Superman— Captain Marvel—Mandrake the Magician—never knew you went for this kind of stuff. " He picked up a Batman comic and leafed through the pages. "This one slays me. " He pointed to a picture of Batman and Robin on a trapeze at an angle no trapeze could ever have reached without the immediate repeal of the law of gravity, in attitudes guaranteed to rip several muscles in their arms.
"I bet the guy who draws this stuff never even saw a good flying act!" Tommy shoved the comic books off the sofa. Mario read a lot on the road—detective magazines, science fiction, air-war pulps—but Tommy knew he thought comic

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books infantile, and he had almost stopped reading them when Mario was around.
Mario took off his shoes. "Poker's a dumb way to kill an evening anyhow. I'd rather read a good book any old time. Only if I don't spend some time with the other guys they get to thinking I'm a standoffish bastard, and I've already got to live down that stuff about teaching in a ballet school. But damned it I care about sitting around half the night swapping dirty jokes and getting sick on that lousy beer!"
"I got to put a stamp on my math papers for the school. You got a three-cent stamp?"
Obligingly Mario looked in his wallet. "Yeah, just one. This the letter?" Mario stamped the envelope, laid it back on the kitchen table, and came back into the front room. Abruptly there was a crash of thunder and the lights in the trailer went off.
Mario laughed in the darkness. "That'll teach Lambeth to

try and save gas for the generator truck by tyin' in to the city power lines! I knew that was going to happen sooner or later. I'd sure like to know how they're doing on that poker game!"
"Probably lighted a candle. My mother does. "
"Yeah—and that sleight-of-hand artist, that Cliff, pockets all the aces while they're doing it!" The lights flickered on again. "Come on, let's fold out the beds before they go off again for good. "
They folded out the beds, then got in and turned out the lights. Lightning flickered outside, in great white sheets. Tommy heard Mario sigh and turn over restlessly.
"Asleep?"
"Hell, no. Who could sleep in this racket?" Mario sat up, his face very distinct in a sudden flare of lightning. The trailer seemed to snap and shake with the rolling crash of the thunder.
"Mario—"
"Yeah?"
"Mind if I—crawl in with you a while?"
The white light darkened, putting Mario's face out like a lamp. There was a flicker of dead silence, giving Tommy time to hear what he had said, before Mario replied diffidently, "Sure. If you want to. "
Tommy flung back his blanket. As he started to step across the worn flooring between them, Mario sat up. "Listen, Tom. Slip the bolt on the door first. Just in case. Okay?"
Rather shakily, Tommy obeyed. Mario rolled over to make room for him. Tommy stretched out on his back. Mario turned on his side, facing him, one arm folded under his head. He reached out with his free hand and drew the blanket up over them both.
"Now, as the ghost said, we're all locked in for the night. "
Tommy laughed, feeling his breath catch. "I'm sorry for the poor damned soul that has to haunt a house on a night like this. Specially if the roof leaks. "

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"Aaaah, I bet the ghost who has a nice chilly house to haunt is the envy of every damned soul in the graveyard. "
"You don't believe in ghosts, do you, Mario?"
"I used to think I did, " Mario said in a low voice. "Liss and I used to say that old Mario di Santalis—the first one—

haunted the practice room at home. We'd scare ourselves till we were afraid to go down there after dark. "
As always when he was nervous or embarrassed, Tommy overreacted by clowning. "Aw, you just know he's turning over in his grave when you go fooling around down there, "
Silence, rattling rain, and a nearer crash of thunder. Mario reached out and touched Tommy's bare shoulder; he wore only the bottoms of his pajamas. He asked, "What you thinking about?"
"I guess—the night we rode in the rigging truck. It was thundering that night, too. "
"I thought maybe you were. " Mario rose on his elbow and leaned over Tommy. A flare of lightning brightened in the trailer, showing his face tense and pale, then darkened again. He said, "Or maybe—another time. " He touched Tommy very gently in the darkness and murmured, "Well?"
Shy again, Tommy turned his face away. "What's the matter?" Mario asked softly, "scared to?"
"Not—not exactly—" Tommy flinched as an unusually bright bolt of lightning sizzled away. "Golly! I bet that hit something close by!'
"There are tornado warnings out, " Mario said. "One of the guys had a radio on. We had a blowdown in Kansas when I was a kid—turned the Big Top inside out. Good thing Big Jim didn't have them set the wire rigs. I remember one time—"
A blow of blue light shocked the room bright as day, and simultaneously a wild crash of noise rocked the trailer. Mario caught Tommy in his arms, and the boy cried aloud in involuntary terror.
"Oh, Jesus, " Mario whispered in the apocalyptic blackness and silence that closed down seconds later, "that must have hit right outside! Maybe it hit the trailer! Tommy, you okay?"
"Sure, " Tommy said shakily. "Just—just scared. But they say if you hear it, it didn't hit you. "
He was suddenly very much aware of the weight of Mario's warm body lying on his, holding him close. Mario started to shift his weight a little, and Tommy pulled him down so that their bodies were touching full-length. He said defiantly, "I'm awake this time. And—and I know you are. An' I know what I'm doing!"
He had time to feel his heart pounding in a sudden, ter-

rified anticipation of rejection before Mario sighed and, deliberately, leaned down and kissed him.
It had never occurred to Tommy that Mario would kiss him like that; and then he realized that until this moment he had never known anything at all about

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kissing. He accepted that first kiss childishly, almost passively, but by the time Mario kissed him again—a space of perhaps ten seconds —he knew, still formlessly, the space of. the chasm he had crossed, literally in a blink of lightning.

It was no longer a matter of a furtive and rather scary little game, played in the dark, of agreement to something really rather unpleasant for the sake of a moment's excitement. It was not that at all. He didn't know, yet, quite what it would be instead, but he was eager to find out. A flash of lightning, rather less catastrophic this time, showed him Mario's face again, and Tommy, now quite free of any embarrassment or shyness, reached up and drew Mario down to him and kissed him again.

Mario asked, hesitating, "Do you want to—?" Tommy realized that Mario was still talking to him like the kid he had been, that first time. Suddenly Tommy was ashamed, ashamed to the point of sickness, of his former pretense. How he had pretended to be asleep, his concealment of the sneaked, hidden pleasure. The way he felt now, that was a whole world different. He wasn't at all ashamed or worried about it now. But he knew that Mario didn't realize how much had changed inside him, that Mario was afraid to ask anything more of him, any more than that same thing: permission to fondle his passive body, the reassurance that at least he would make no actual protest. A sudden, almost anguished compassion overcame him as he realized, He thinks even that's a lot to ask me!

Fumbling for a way to express this new knowledge, Tommy put his arms around Mario's waist, very much conscious of the naked flesh, trying, with that new impulse of tenderness, to caress him. Childishly, with little pats, he groped, through his own inexperience, for some word or touch that could convey what he felt.

"Sure, I want to, " he whispered. "I thought you could figure that out. Only—only— I mean, what do you want, really? All the way, I mean. You've just been—been fooling around, haven't you? Not really wanting to—to try anything you think might—might scare me or bother me—"

"Yes, " said Mario, in a startled whisper, "but I didn't realize you knew it. How did you know that?"

Unconscious of the crude poetry in it, Tommy said matter-of-factly, "The way you kissed me told me how much more there ought to be to—"

Mario's mouth cut off the rest. Held close, shaken, almost ecstatic in that bruising embrace, Tommy could still feel some terrible, tense control in the man, as if, even so urged, Mario still feared. "Oh, God, you're just a kid, just a little kid, " he said in a hoarse whisper. "I ought to be horsewhipped—dammit, Tommy, do you know they could put me in jail for this?"

"Who's going to tell 'em, if you don't?" Tommy's voice failed him there. His hands, already learning gentleness from the ache in what they touched, went out in a fumbling, ignorant, but tender appeal, trying to ease and reassure that awful, tense constraint.

"Come on, " he whispered, "it's okay, Mario. Anything you want. Just—just show me what to do, tell me what you want. "

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He heard Mario swallow hard, and was not sure whether it was a laugh or a sob. "Okay, kid. But take it easy—it's not a dance where you have to learn the steps just so. Just lie here quiet a minute, close to me. Just let me hold you like this a minute... "

He could still feel 'the tension and fear in Mario, and it made him afraid in spite of himself, as if braced for some ordeal. And because of this he did not realize for a long time just how gentle Mario had been with him then, how carefully and gently he had eased him over ignorance and fright at new and unexpected sensations. His own growing excitement terrified him again, but it was lost in the rising, overwhelming pleasure. The way in which by waves the two gave way to one another made him think, confusedly, without awareness, of the long swing into space from the bars, dizzy and terrified, with the very fear a part of the excitement, excitement almost to pain... And then, at the very moment when he could bear no more, the ecstatic, triumphant moment of meshing, blending, the abrupt shock of it, gripping, safe in his hands, which were somehow there at the exact moment when another split second would have meant unconsciousness, death, and they were safe, swinging to-

gether.... And now excitement could rise again, and triumph... their hands clasped as they swung, like bodies convulsed in spasmodic pleasure—and in that moment of awareness he knew what he was never to be able to put into words: why for so long he had envied Angelo, this thing that was between the two of them as they worked endlessly for perfection on the triple, what had been missing for so long as Mario had taught him to fly... and then he lost that insight again, for years. The lightning was still coming and going, and it seemed, as he opened his eyes, that it was like an echo, a reflection of his own trembling, of the exploding deathly terror and pleasure that was slowly subsiding into a memory. He sensed, without conscious thought, how all that terrible tension in Mario had subsided, now that Mario lay spent and peaceful across his body, breathing heavily, his face resting on Tommy's stomach. And it was Tommy who gathered him up close, and pulled the blanket over them both and whispered, "Can I say something?"

"Sure. " Mario gave his arm a tiny squeeze.

Tommy whispered, almost inaudibly, "Love you. " And then he was afraid again. He had broken the unspoken rule, the hidden commitment; you couldn't say it like that.

But restraint was gone now. Mario turned and pressed his mouth to the soft bare shoulder and said in a low clear voice, not a whisper at all: "Tom, listen to me. I've wanted men, but, may God strike me dead right now, I never thought I could love anybody like this. I never loved anyone except Liss, and that's different. But I love you, Tommy, I do love you—I love you so much I could die. I'm a rotten bastard, Tommy, but I love you. "

He hid his face in Tommy's shoulder, and Tommy felt him crying, shaking softly with sobs. But Tommy, who had been close to tears himself in that deathly moment of terror and triumph, did not offer any unwelcome protest. It seemed perfectly natural to him that Mario should cry, and that he should

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hold him there, with no comfort except his arms hugging him tight. He let him lie there and cry, and felt his shoulder wet with Mario's tears, and gently wiped them away, his last conscious act before he floated into sleep.
... Mario was shaking him, hard.
"Tom, " he whispered urgently, "Tom, get up—quickly! Go back to your own bed! That damn bolt didn't hold!"

Tommy muttered sleepy protest and did not move. Mario's fingers bit cruelly into his arm. "Damn it, wake up!"
Galvanized awake, Tommy let Mario push him over into his own bed. He was aware that he was naked and pulled up the sheet. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mario kick his pajamas under the edge of the bed. Hardly a moment later a narrow crack of light widened from the folding door from the kitchen of the trailer.
"Matt?" Angelo muttered. "You kids all right?"
"Mmmrnm, " Mario mumbled, pretending sleep.
Tommy did not dare to stir. Angelo said in a whisper, "I thought the storm might have waked you kids up; the pole right outside the trailer was hit by lightning. I guess Tommy slept through it?"
"Yeah, I guess. Get the goddamn light out of my eyes!" Mario said thickly.
Angelo muttered, "So okay, okay, " and the crack of light went dark.
After a minute Tommy felt Mario reach for his hand in the darkness, across the narrow space between then" beds. But he did not move. He was wide awake now, and vaguely resentful that Mario should be so prompt and adept at hiding such a perfect, magical thing. His reason told him that it was necessary, that Mario had done the only thing he could do, but he was only fifteen, and he did his thinking, still, with his emotions.
Mario slid out of bed and knelt beside him.
"Tommy—"
"Go on back to bed. Angelo might come in again. "
Mario put his head down and kissed him on the temple. "Ragazzo, piccino—figlio, fanciullo mio... " he pleaded.
Tommy, understanding only that the words were endearments, said sulkily, "What?"
"I'm so sorry, Lucky. Oh, damn them all, we're going to have to be so careful it scares hell out of me. You think I wanted to do that to you?"
Tommy put his head against Mario's bare shoulder. "I wish I could sleep with you. "
"Tommy, honest, I'm scared to let you. Angelo will be coming in so early to wake us up. I wish we could, too. Maybe sometime. " He sat with his arm around him for several minutes, then printed a final kiss on his cheek and slipped back into his own bed. And Tommy, filled with the ache of

love, still felt that faint, depleted, afterache that was not disappointment, not disillusion, but a sadness which even under the most perfect conditions of love is hard to avoid, and under these conditions almost unavoidable.

CHAPTER 15

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when he woke it was faintly, fitfully sunlight. Mario was sound asleep, his back to Tommy. His blanket and sheet were kicked off, his pajama pants twisted around his calves and ankles, and his shoulders, so darkly tanned they hardly seemed naked, hunched down into a private cocoon of sleep. Tommy remembered something Mario had said once: "When you're asleep you look like a little kid. " But Mario, sleeping, was a man, much older, alien, invulnerable without the boyish grin or the unsureness of his waking personality. It was hard to reconcile the distant, invulnerable self-sufficiency of Mario's turned-away shoulders with the way he had clung to Tommy and cried himself to sleep. Even while Tommy stretched out, pleasantly aware of an almost luxurious relaxation in his body, he felt a little sad, a little puzzled. He heard steps outside; then at the back of the trailer Angelo coughed. There were creaks, and he heard Angelo talking with the rigging man at the kitchen door. Tommy pulled his blanket back, skinned into his trousers and shoes, and met Angelo in the kitchen. Leaving Mario and Papa Tony asleep in the trailer, they went out across the drenched lot to inspect the rigs.

Angelo looked sleepy. He was still unshaven. He had a heavy beard and thin skin, and to avoid shaving twice a day he never shaved until just before the afternoon show. It was a habit that did not fit with the Santelli emphasis on immaculate grooming, and it exasperated Papa Tony into periodic fits, although, pinned down, he conceded its good sense. But Angelo whistled softly, cheerfully as they crossed the muddy field. The roustabouts were already setting the ringwalls, swearing at the mud.

Tommy asked, "Good movie last night?"

Angelo gave him a drowsy grin. "Kid, tell you something. You go to a movie with a girl, if you can tell afterward

whether it was a good movie or not, you've got to be under twelve, over seventy, or queer as a three dollar bill. "

Tommy laughed uneasily. "I'll remember that. "

They got busy then, supervising the erection of end poles, checking the tension of wires and ropes attending to the millions of details which could not be left to outsiders because not only the success of the performance, but their very lives, depended on the perfect security of every screw and brace. When they came back to the trailer, Mario had coffee ready and Papa Tony had found a local bakery and brought back a sack of fresh rolls. Tommy shed his muddy boots and slid into a seat.

"Hey, " he said, "all the rig men were talking. You know there was a tornado right near here last night?"

Maria gave Tommy a quick secret grin. "I kind of thought so. "

Papa Tony was buttering a roll lavishly. "Remember how terrified Elissa always was during thunderstorms, Matt? She would get up and crawl into bed with her mother, or you, or anyone who. was near... "

Tommy snickered and Mario said hastily, "Hand me the coffeepot, Tom. " As Tommy stretched to comply, Mario gave him a quick, savage kick on the ankle.

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Tommy said hastily, "I got spanked once for crawlin' into a cupboard during a storm when I was about four. I went to sleep there, and Mother had the whole backyard out hunting for me—she thought I got lost or kidnapped or something. Weren't you scared of thunderstorms when you sere a kid, Mario?"
"Just between us, I was the one who got scared and Liss used to come in and comfort me. Only she used to tell Angelo she was the one who was scared because she didn't want him to know what a big baby I was, and nobody blames a girl for getting scared. "
"Yah, you rascal, " Angelo said affectionately. "A boy fifteen's got no business being afraid of storms. Or getting in bed with his big sister. You get that big, you ought to find another girl to keep you warm. "
"Angelo, basta!" Papa Tony snapped at him, and followed it with a flood of Italian. Tommy could not understand much of it, but he had known for a long time that Papa Tony detested suggestive talk and that he sometimes used Tommy's

presence—or, at home, that of the younger children—to stop it whenever it got started.
Angelo said good-naturedly, "Well, Papa, at his age he's probably figured it out for himself, and if he hasn't I guess he's hopeless anyway. " He stuffed a final bite of roll into his mouth and went off whistling to put on his practice clothes.
During the morning run-through, Tommy felt a little anxious. After last night, how could he touch his friend impersonally, without betraying all the new knowledge in him? Or even, would Mario suddenly turn on him again? But habit carried him through the first few minutes, while he arrived at the curiously disillusioning, but also curiously steadying knowledge which is the first aftershock of sexual adulthood: that even the most intense sexual experiences leave absolutely no visible traces. Mario's body was exactly the same strong, friendly, impersonal partner it always had been. And Mario was in perfect form; he soared from bar to bar with that perfect precision, that absolute split-second thereness, which for lack of any more accurate description was called timing. It was more than just knowing when to move; it was what made the difference between a competent performer and a star. Tommy realized, briefly and happily, how proud he had always been of his one real talent, for moving through their duo routine as if he were Mario's identical shadow, or as if the same clockwork signal moved them both in perfect congruence. He said to himself, We move as if we had only one heartbeat. He was still too ingenuous to think of repeating it later.
Later, watching Mario and Angelo work together on a tricky pass, he realized it again. They've got it, even more than Mario and I do—so damn perfect, like they were one person in two bodies. Filled with a sudden surge of confidence, Mario called out to Angelo, "Think you can hold me on a triple this morning?"
Angelo called back, "Sure. What are you waiting for?"
Mario tensed himself, and Tommy, watching, passing him the bar, looking across at Angelo already picking up his own swing, thought, Right now,

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Angelo's the only person in his world. Watching, his own muscles cramping as his consciousness went outward with Mario on that accelerated swing, the thought barely skimmed his mind, like a cloud briefly shadowing the sun,. I wish I was catching him on that... I wonder if I ever could.... and then it was all wiped away

again into total preoccupation with Mario, coming loose, turning... again... again... Tommy felt the shock almost in his own body as hands and wrists struck, meshed, slid to full stretch....

Behind him Papa Tony said matter-of-factly, "He's got it again. I knew it was just a matter of time. " He called across to Mario, "Now, when will you do it again in the act?"

Angelo answered for him. "When he gets good and ready, hey, Matt?" And Tommy felt a surge of affection that was almost love for Angelo, too. He thought, almost fiercely, Good for you, Angelo—don't you let anybody push him!

But if his first morning-after was kind, and without disillusion, there were harder moments. Out of that bitter experience of which he never spoke, Mario took entirely on himself the responsibility for policing their secret, and Tommy found himself meekly accepting the iron regulation of time and place, and loyally stifling his own pronounced opinions on the subject. But he resented it. He couldn't help it.

By an agreement no less strong because it was never put into words, they knew that what had happened was a bond which would be, must be renewed again and again, a commitment never spoken but doubly strong for its very secrecy. But it was not easy for them to find privacy and time alone. It was not easy for anyone.

In spite of common misconceptions about the slipshod morality of itinerant show people, such a strenuous and mobile life, combined with rigorous daily routine, leaves little leisure for irregularities of conduct. There were some, of course, quietly tolerated because busy people don't have time for meddling in other people's affairs. Furthermore, it was generally recognized that equally busy other people had better things to do than worry about small niceties of convention. There was, for instance, the affair between Angelo and Margot Clane. Everybody knew about it, more or less, depending on how well they knew Angelo or Margot, and nobody really paid the slightest attention.

But this was really different, and both Mario and Tommy knew it. There were always together for work, practice, and care of costumes and riggings, but they were never really alone, and knew desperately that they had no real excuse for trying to be alone. They lived perpetually under the

watchful eyes of Papa Tony, Angelo, Buck, and "the whole damned circus, " as Mario once snarled.

They both felt distressed, with an almost childike idealism, at some of the shifts they had to find. A few minutes, nervously alert for footsteps, in the rigging truck with the door "accidentally" blocked shut, was their usual makeshift. Once they managed, again, to ride in the rigging truck between

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towns, but Mario said it would be dangerous to try it too often. An occasional, if risky, compromise was the Santelli trailer in the period between the afternoon and evening show, when sometimes Papa Tony and Angelo went to town to play pinball or shoot darts in a cafe for an hour or two. Since Mario had never made a habit of joining them, his failure to do so now did not attract any attention.

But usually their excuses were flimsy and their occasions furtive; they both hated it, but neither could avoid the compulsion.

Once, when circumstances had kept them for a whole week virtually drowning in other people, unable even to talk freely, they found a small and dirty bar in a south Arkansas town and went into the back room, just wanting to talk alone, but the barkeeper frowned and asked, "How old is the kid?"

"Fifteen, " said Mario just as sharply. "What's the matter, I can't get my kid brother a soda while I drink a beer, or am I supposed to leave him hanging around in the street?"

"You didn't ought to bring him in here, " the man replied. He brought Mario a bottle of beer and Tommy a bottle of root beer without further argument, but Mario said in an undertone, "Let's get out of here, " and they left their drinks half finished and went.

"What's the matter with you, Mario?"

"He was on to us. "

"Heck, I don't think so. Some states got laws about serving kids in bars. Lots of places when I was a kid I could go in with Dad and Mother and get soda and eat peanuts while they had a drink, and other states they couldn't bring me in at all. "

"They got other laws, too, " Mario muttered. "You think I couldn't tell, the way he looked at us?"

"Oh, for cryin' out loud! You got bats in the belfry about that You think anybody can look at you and just tell? You're not swishy or anything, honest—nobody's going to

think anything—Besides, you like thinking you're different, you get some kind of kick about thinking you're something special, like people can tell by looking at you—"

"Come on, get in the car—don't stand here tellin' the world about it!" Mario opened the car door and slammed it shut. Tommy screamed; Mario had slammed the door full on his fingers. After that first involuntary shriek, he sat hunched over, shaking, his face contorted, holding on to his hand.

"Oh, God, " Mario whispered, almost crying. "Oh, God, Lucky, I didn't—"

Suddenly he exploded in anguished rage: "Can't you keep your goddamn clumsy hands out of the way?"

Tommy leaned against the back of the seat, gripping his wrist with his uninjured hand as if he could somehow keep the terrible, crushing pain from traveling up his arm. He sat that way, sick to his stomach and trying desperately not to throw up, while Mario drove him to the small county hospital. He sat on the high table in the emergency room where the nurse left him, and Mario stood behind him, his hand on Tommy's shoulder. Feeling the

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surge of sickness, Tommy leaned his head back against Mario, but Mario pushed him roughly away as the doctor came in.
Somehow he managed not to scream aloud when the doctor moved his hand, flexing each finger painfully. There were no broken bones, but the nail of the index finger was hanging by a thread and the knuckle was cut to the bone, white cartilage showing through the raw flesh.
"You must have strong hands, sonny. Just good luck that finger wasn't broken in a dozen places. Can you move the next one? Hmmm, good. " The doctor put a thick bandage and a small metal splint on it. "Car door, huh? That happens a lot. " He got out a needle and gave Tommy a tetanus shot. "You two kids from the circus? Hey, I saw that show last night. Aren't you from the trapeze act? You're the two who did that trick swinging on the same trapeze. That hand's going to keep you off the trapeze for a couple of weeks, sonny. Are you two boys really brothers? You don't look alike at all. "
"Half brothers, " Mario said. His face was twisted and pale. "Is his hand going to be all right?"
"I should think so. If he gives it a rest. Take him to a doctor in a couple of days, wherever you are, and have

these dressings changed. " He shook some pills into a bottle. "That thing's really going to start hurting in about ten or twenty minutes, when the numbness wears off. " Tommy wondered how it could hurt any more than it did now and how he'd keep from bawling like a baby if it did. The doctor gave the pills to Mario and said, "Have him take two of these right away when he gets home and one every four hours after that. You'll be looking after him?"
"I do a hell of a job of looking after him, don't I?" Mario said, and he was almost crying.
"If you're going to drive back, " the doctor said dryly, "perhaps I'd better give you a sedative, too, young man. "
Tommy managed to pat Mario's arm with his unbandaged hand. "Mario, don't. I know you didn't mean to hurt me. Don't feel so bad. "
Mario scowled and flung off his hand with the repressive frown Tommy had learned to recognize. He took out his billfold. "No, thanks, Doctor, I can't take anything that would make me dopey; I've got a show this afternoon. What do we owe you?"
Walking across to the car, Tommy felt so sick and giddy he thought his legs would give way under him. He took Mario's arm, only to steady himself, but Mario shook him off. "Watch it, watch it, " he warned sharply, and Tommy drew away. On the way back to the grounds Tommy only wanted to give way to the giddy sickness, to put his head in Mario's lap and let the pain have its way, but instead he sat straight and cold, fighting it.
"Listen, Mario, if you keep being such a goddamn bastard to me everybody's going to know something's wrong. So we had a row and you slammed the door on my hand. I know goddamn well you didn't do it on purpose, but you're actin' like you did. Come on, " he begged suddenly, weakness and pain overcoming him, so that he began to cry, "don't be mad, Mario—"

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"I'm not mad, I'm not mad. But don't be such a goddamn baby! You can't do that kind of thing in front of people. Cuddling up to me in the waiting room, crawling all over me in the examining room there—damn it, I told you often enough—"
"Yeah, you told me, and you can go straight to hell!" Tommy stared out the window, tears of pain and fury drying on his face. When they got to the lot he took the pills the

doctor had given him, answered the concerned questions with "It was kind of an accident; the door got shut on my hand, " and let Angelo cut his meat for supper. In the intermission of the night show Angelo brought him a pint carton of ice cream; Tommy had gone to bed, waiting for the pills to work. He went to bed without looking at Mario or answering his whispered good-nights.
He was out of the act only eight days, but they were like a month of tedium and boredom. With his right hand immobilized, he couldn't even do his regular work in the first half of the show, and Mario and Angelo divided it up between them without protest. On the third day Angelo took him to a doctor in the next town to have the dressing changed and the blackened nail removed, an ordeal from which Tommy emerged nauseated with pain and white as death—white enough to scare Angelo, who complimented him on his bravery on the way back to the car. He stopped on the way home to buy Tommy a box of candy and repeated the comments on his bravery that night at supper, which embarrassed Tommy more than the faint. With anguish Tommy remembered how Mario had even shaken off a hand to steady him, where Angelo had carried him to the car, his arms clutching Angelo's neck, without a moment's thought.
That night Mario slipped to his side and tried to coax and pet him into a good humor, but Tommy turned his back to the wall and pretended to be asleep. Mario said at last, in a taut, furious whisper, "Okay, you little bastard. Hell can freeze over before I come crawling to you again!"
Even when he got back to work, his hand throbbed fiercely every time he gripped it around the bar. The first night he was back in the act he fumbled a catch and took a mean spill into the net, giving himself a rope burn on the elbow that hurt as badly as his hand. Papa Tony hissed, "You clumsy clown!" as he climbed to the platform again, and Tommy set his mouth, shaking, somehow managing to keep his face serene, turning to the stands with a saucy wave as if the spill had been arranged on purpose to give them a fright. He ignored Mario's quick, concerned, "You okay, kid?"
The next day, at practice, he fumbled again as he started to climb the ladder, and Angelo motioned him down.
"Is your hand still that sore? Think you ought to stay out of the act another day or so?"

"Heck, no, " Tommy said defiantly. "Think I want it to stiffen up on me?"
"No, but we don't want you to get yourself hurt, either, " Mario said. He came and picked up Tommy's hand, gently flexing the fingers back and forth,

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moving each joint between his own strong fingers, exploring the sore muscles and discolored patches. Tommy stood there without moving or looking up at him. Mario finally said, "If he wants to go on, Angelo, it won't hurt. "
"That's all you know about it, " Tommy muttered.
"I mean, " Mario said coldly, "it won't do your hand any permanent damage. " He dropped Tommy's hand and walked away.
"Well, if you're going on tonight, you better try that catch again, " Angelo told him and sent him up to the platform.
After practice Papa Tony delayed him at the foot of the rigging. "Look, figlio, don't you think you've stayed mad at Matt long enough? He told me how he hurt your hand. You think he did it on purpose? Don't you know us well enough to know none of us would do a thing like that? No, mai— never—not in a hundred years! Now, come on, it's only little kids hold grudges like that—grow up a little, hey? You go to him like a man, shake hands with him, give him a chance to say he's sorry he hurt you, be friends again, okay? Like you were. Brothers. I don't like to see you and Matt like this; you always did get along so good. I want you two kids to be like you were. You do that for me, Tommy, huh?"
Tommy swallowed hard. "Sure, " he said at last, "I'll tell him. " He flew off to where Mario was glumly changing in the trailer.
He said shakily, to Mario's turned-away back, "Papa Tony said—he doesn't want us to—to go on holding a grudge. He said he wants us to be"—suddenly, he knew he was going to cry—"he wants us to be like we were. Won't you?"
"Oh, God!" For once wholly careless, Mario whirled and caught Tommy in a hard hug. "Oh, God, won't I! Won't I, kid!"
During the interval between shows that afternoon the older men watched them working together behind the trailer, hanging up wet tights, laughing and kidding each other as usual, linking arms as they walked off to the midway for a cold drink. Papa Tony beamed approval; Angelo, however, watched with a curious, narrowed frown. Nothing so tangible,

yet, as suspicion—only a sense that the quarrel, and the reconciliation, were more intense than they should have been.
It was harder than ever to find even a moment together, and twice, frantic with the need for each other, they took the terrible risks they had promised each other never to take. Once, very late, Mario slipped across to Tommy's bed in the dark, and lay down beside him. He held a warning hand over Tommy's mouth throughout, not to stifle but to warn away any betraying sound. It seemed to Tommy then, as he pressed his lips together to avoid even breathing loudly, that they had reached the depths—but they had not. A few days later, desperate for even a moment together, they clung to each other for a few minutes behind the locked door of a filthy restroom in a roadside service station. Mario looked so spent afterward, so hangdog miserable, that even Tommy, usually so inventive in ways of cheering him, could find nothing to say; there was only the dumb ache, the misery. They were riding on the back of one of the open equipment trucks; as they climbed to the top again, Mario burst into furious, bitter self-flagellation.

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"Dirty kids, " he flung into the rushing wind along the highway, "playing filthy games in filthy corners—you ought to hate me for letting you in for all this hell! If I had a grain of decency—"
Tommy did not try to argue with him. He only squeezed Mario's hand with helpless, painful love. For these horrible interludes only lessened the tension in his body; they did nothing for the worse and more painful tension like a tight fist under his breastbone, which he thought of, vaguely, as an ache in his heart.
That night he did the thing he had never dared before, the one thing Mario had specifically and in so many words forbidden him to do. If Mario broke his own rules for them, he need not obey them blindly, either. After the trailer was dark, Papa Tony snoring softly in the back room, he came and slid into bed beside Mario. Mario whispered furiously, "You crazy?"
"Mario—no, listen to me, please—please. It's okay. We don't have to—I mean, I just want to—just let me—let me lie here beside you a few minutes. Please. We get so worked up over—over all the other stuff, and never have any time to—to-—oh, God damn it, I sound like some dame in a damn

dumb jerky movie—I never have any time just to love you. Please just let me lie here and—and love you?"
Mario's arms went around him. For a moment of utter horror, Tommy thought Mario was laughing at him; then he felt the trembling in Mario's shoulders. "You poor, poor kid. " He kept whispering it, hopelessly, like a litany. "You poor damn kid, you poor damn kid. " He rocked him softly, like a child, whispering unintelligible endearments. "I'm such a rotten bastard, you poor baby. "
"Please, Mario. It's all right. Just—just go to sleep. I won't fall asleep here, and if I do, I'll swear I was lonesome and just pestered you till you let me come and sleep with you. Please. " He held himself close against Mario till the older boy relaxed, and drew him tight, kissing him softly. And by miraculous luck no one heard when, in the dark hour before dawn, Tommy began to giggle softly, for of course they had ended by making love—and he wondered if he had known, all along, that it would end this way.

CHAPTER 16

and then, as unbearable situations usually do, things eased off and got better. Perhaps sensing the overtones of strain, perhaps only seeing that Mario was depressed, Papa Tony put the two of them hard at work learning the midair flying pass. This trick required them both to be in the air at the same time, one grasping the bar for return as the other left it. It seemed inevitable that they would tangle or collide in midair and kick one another in the face, and sometimes they did. Angelo had protested that this routine was far beyond Tommy's present ability, and Tommy himself began to be discouraged, for they spent hours working at it and never managed to do it precisely right. They were not to do it well enough to perform in public for another year.
But the time was not wasted. Now that they were working hard together, the personal tension between them simply drained away. As always when it was a question of their work, an odd, impersonal tone began to color their

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companionship again. Where, a few weeks before, a harsh word from Mario had made Tommy bite his lip to keep back

tears, now, as in the early days of their training, it was all impersonal again. They practiced until they were exhausted, Tommy shaking with fatigue, Mario flaring into irritable rages, calling him stupid, clumsy, hopeless. But they laughed and kidded each other on the long runs between towns, yelled at each other about misplaced shoes and sweaters, and bickered good-naturedly about housekeeping chores without the slightest strain. Tommy realized, one night, that for three weeks altogether, after the night performance, they had eaten their late supper, cleaned up the dishes, and fallen into bed with no more personal word or touch than the brief, ritual handclasp between their beds. On a couple of evenings, alone and secure, they had simply stood together in the door of the rigging truck, Tommy's arm around Mario's waist, and it had seemed only peaceful, companionable.

A couple of nights later, dressing for the evening show, Mario said abruptly, "I'm feeling lucky tonight. Want to try and finish up with a triple tonight, Angelo?"

"It's your neck, " Papa Tony said. "Tell the director before we go on, though, so he can announce it beforehand. " Tommy felt the tightness grip hard inside his chest; he fingered the little St. Michael's medal nervously.

Later, when the bandmaster started the low, ominous drumroll, Tommy glanced at Papa Tony. As always when Mario left the platform for one of the big tricks, the old man superstitiously turned his eyes away; he would not watch even the double. But Tommy could not take his eyes from the arrow-straight driving flight of the soaring body. Up—and back—and out again, higher and higher and—Oh, God, the swing's going to buckle, you can't take it that high—he came away from the bar and spun—one, two, three-—the jolting grasp slid, elbow to wrist, and Tommy breathed again. He never heard the applause.

While they were dressing after the performance a couple of fans came back for autographs, and Tommy, watching unheeded while they made a fuss over Mario, thought he would explode with the love and pride surging up in him. The emotion was so fierce that he felt sure the heat in his face must be visible. Papa Tony put a hand on his shoulder while Mario, outside the truck, was laughing and talking with the little cluster of enthusiasts.

"You're quiet, Tommy. Never mind, don't be jealous— someday it'll be for you, too. "

Startled, dismayed—could Papa Tony possibly think he grudged Mario one scrap of the adoration?—he burst out, "Oh, no, no, Papa! It's not that. " He flushed hotly, helplessly. "It's just—he's so—heck, I feel just as—as excited about it, about him, as they do, and—and I'm here with you and he's my friend and it's—it's almost too much—I can hardly believe it, that's all!"

"I see. " The old man frowned slightly. "I wonder—" he said, but he didn't finish. Mario swung up the steps in high good humor. Tommy started to speak and found himself unable to get out a word.

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"Ebbene, Signor Mario, " Papa Tony said curtly. "I suggest you collect your towels and your makeup case, unless you wish them to be scattered in the next haul. You never did find the mate to your green sock, did you?"
Mario laughed exuberantly. "See, Lucky, in this family you don't get full of your own importance. Papa's bound and determined I'm not going to get a swelled head if he can help it"
He started to gather up his things, but Tommy said, "Please, let me—" He felt he would explode right then and there unless he could do something, somehow, to give visible form to the thing that was bursting in him—and this was the only thing he could think of. He gathered Mario's scattered towels, his tights, and his discarded flying slippers, folded his robe and cape, then gathered together all the scattered small items on his shelf and put them into his makeup kit. Mario, splashing his face with cold water and running the comb through his crisp curls, paused to look up and catch Tommy's eye with a smile, but Tommy dared not meet his eyes in the presence of the others.
Three hours later, as they were settling down for sleep, Mario knelt, with a little whispered laugh, by Tommy's bed.
"Lucky? Listen, you know—it's been a long time. "
Tommy swallowed and said stupidly, "Well, we've both been busy. "
"So you're like me? When you have enough else to think about, you don't miss it?"
"I didn't say I didn't miss it—" Tommy began with dignity, but Mario cut off the words with a quick, hard hug.
"Listen, I haven't decided to call the whole thing off, and

I haven't fallen for anybody else. I just figured no sense in pushing our luck for a while. You haven't really minded too much, have you?"
"No, " Tommy said honestly, "You've been so much nicer to me, other ways. "
Mario said, with a soft chuckle, "Guess this cussed flying pass has tamed us both down a little. " He bent close to Tommy and whispered, "Just the same, enough's enough. I heard Angelo go out—everybody with the show knows where he spends his nights—and Papa's asleep this last hour. If we're kind of quiet—"
In spite of the quick physical leap of excitement, Tommy tensed under Mario's hand sliding along his bare back. Would this start up another cycle of Mario's frantic edginess and guilt, spiraling into the unendurable? He felt a little scared that Mario had relaxed his own rigid precaution. But this was all inarticulate, and he was pliantly happy when Mario slipped under his blanket.
They did not speak again in words —they both knew the danger of that—but Tommy felt that Mario was telling him a great many things, just the same.
During what Tommy now remembered as "the bad time" they had had to take advantage of hurried moments; there had always been haste and—on Mario's part, at least —a certain roughness which, combined with Tommy's impatience and inexperience, had sometimes made their love-making almost more of a struggle than an embrace. He knew Mario could be gentle, too—even then there had been moments of tenderness and soft touches—but even at best there had been the frantic, frightened urgency. Now that, too, was

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gone. Tommy had the distinct impression that Mario had come to him tonight not out of his own hunger or need, but simply in response to Tommy's overflow of emotion. Not since their first night in Oklahoma, the night of the great storm, had there been so much tenderness. And he felt hazily, as he slipped into sleep afterward, a sort of wonder that knowing Mario as he did, he could still feel all the resentment dissolve in this aching adoration and delight. He thought, I wish he could always be like this. But whatever way he is, I love him. When Mario stirred to leave him, he felt naked and bruised; he made no move to hold him, but sensing, perhaps, what Tommy wanted most, Mario moved closer to him again and held him till he slept.

After practice one morning, Angelo came and said, "I'm going to town for groceries. Want to ride along?"
When Tommy hesitated, Angelo said, "Matt'll let you go for once, won't you? We kept the kid with his nose on the grindstone all this time. Come on, Tom, button up your shirt and put on a tie, and we'll do our shopping and stop for a milkshake or something on the way back. "
Maneuvering the car through the lot and onto the country road, Angelo whistled, rolling down the windows. It was August, and fiercely hot; the inside of the car was blistering.
"Don't forget to pick up some suntan oil, kid. That sun is devilish. "
"Yeah, and they've placed the rig so by this afternoon the sun's going to be right in my eyes on the backswing!"
"Me too. " Angelo laughed. "Let's start a new fashion: flyers in dark glasses. "
He pulled the car to the curb. "I heard Stella taught you to drive. Slide over—I'd like to see how well you handle the car. " He got out and came around as Tommy slid over behind the wheel. Feeling a little nervous, Tommy put the car in gear. He was afraid suddenly that he would stall it, handling the heavy shift, but he managed, and after a moment, moving the car carefully into traffic, he relaxed.
Angelo watched him carefully for a few minutes, not speaking, then said, "Not bad for a beginner. The reason I mentioned it is, in this state you can get a license at fifteen. You should go down some day next week and take a driving test. Then you can use the car sometimes. With your mother and dad out of the show, nobody's bothered to make sure you got some fun. You spend all your time working hard with us, and then you spend all your free time cooped up with us, too. You ought to get out more, have fun with kids your own age. "
Tommy glanced at him guiltily, but he was lighting a cigarette, cupping his hands against the hot wind from the open car window. Angelo said, "You don't smoke, do you? You can have a cigarette if you want it, but you better let me light it while you've driving. "
"Mario said he'd break my neck if I started smoking. "
Angelo put the pack away, laughing. "He's probably right. But you know, that's kind of what I mean. Most kids your age don't listen to what grown-ups say all that much. Maybe

you ought to listen to them more instead of listening to us all the time. "

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Tommy was watching the street carefully. "Most kids my age seem like they're awful dumb. "
"That's a stupid thing to say, " Angelo reproved. "Just because you're in a headliner act doesn't mean you have to be a nasty little snob. "
"If I'm a nasty little snob, " Tommy flared, "I don't see why the other kids would want me hanging around with "em!"
"Now, now, hold on, " Angelo reproved. "You sound like Matt; I never can say one word to him or he blows up all over the lot!"
"Look, Angelo, " Tommy said, holding his temper, "I don't want to be rude, honest. You're older than I am, and smarter, and you're my boss. I don't sass you about my work, do I? But, honest, I really don't think it's up to you"—he drew a shaky breath—"to tell me what I ought to do in my spare time. "
He had expected—had, in a curious way, been courting— harsh reproof; he was used to Papa Tony's quick temper and Mario's flaring rages. Angelo only leaned forward to knock the ash off his cigarette. "Hell, no, kid, it's none of my business what you do outside the act, long as you don't get yourself killed or in jail. But that's not what I'm talking about. We made ourselves responsible for you. Beth's a friend of mine, and I promised her I'd look after you like you were my own kid. That doesn't mean just seeing that you do your lessons and wear your overshoes when it rains and eat your spinach. " He hesitated, and Tommy had the distinct impression that he had started to say something else and thought better of it. At last what he said was "It means seeing that you don't spend all your time worrying about the act-—that you get some time to yourself, some fun with the other kids. It puts a lot on Matt, too—making him look after you all the time. "
Tommy felt as if he had been dealt a hard blow. "Did Mario say that? That I'm under his feet too much?"
"Hell, no, he seems to like having you around. But that's part of what I mean, too. Matt's so damned unsocial, and I hate to see you getting like that. You spend all your time with him, pretty soon you won't be able to talk to kids your age, and later that's going to mean a lot to you. "
"I don't like kids my own age very much. "

"Yeah, I know. That's the trouble. You ought to like them, and care about whether they like you. "
"God damn it, why?" Tommy argued. "There some law or something about it?"
"Oh, Christ, " said Angelo wearily. "Maybe we better skip it. I just wanted to talk to you. I'm not bawling you out, or trying to throw my weight around. "
Tommy's hands were shaking on the wheel. Angelo warned, "Watch it—watch that car, son, " and Tommy put on the brakes.
His voice was not steady when he said, "I guess maybe you better drive, Angelo. "
"Okay, kid. Sicuro. " Angelo got out and walked around the car to the driver's side, but he didn't get under the wheel. Instead he got into the back seat behind Tommy and said, "Listen, kid, are you in some kind of trouble? You shouldn't ought to get all shook up like this. "

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Tommy knew he was clutching the wheel in a death grip. He forced himself to unlock his fingers, one by one. He said to himself, He's guessing—he can't prove a goddamn thing.
"God knows, I haven't kept that much of an eye on you. You seem like such a sober kid, I sort of take it for granted you can look after yourself. And Matt, his head off in the clouds all the time, he's no more fit to look after a kid than one of the elephants down in the menagerie! You got girl trouble, or something?"
"Girl trouble? Damn it, Angelo, is that all you ever got on your mind?" Tommy exploded. "When do I get time for girls?"
"Well, at your age lots of kids got nothing else on their mind. Nothing wrong with that. I worry, that's all. "
"Well, what have I done wrong?"
Angelo sighed. "Nothing, nothing. That's half the trouble. You're so stiff and grown up, not like a kid at all. "
Tommy said helplessly, "Angelo, you got it all wrong. " He knew he could not say what he really wanted to pour out, but he felt a desperate need to reach Angelo somehow. Angelo's concern for him, fumbling as it was, had touched him more than he could manage to say. "You got it all wrong. I'm just—just not a kid anymore. " It was complicated: there were so many things he dared not even hint at, so many chances he could not take. He felt as if he were

trying to make his way, as he did sometimes in nightmares, along a road that had suddenly turned into the high wire, sixty feet up. "The—the things that get kids all steamed up, the things other kids my age want, they just don't mean anything to me anymore. The things they want seem sort of— sort of young and silly. They don't know what they want or where they're going. "
Angelo patted his shoulder, with clumsy tenderness. "I know, kid, I know. Matt's got you all worked up about all this flying stuff, hasn't he? The Santelli tradition, and how you should dedicate your life to it, and all that—that stuff. Right?"
"Something wrong with that?" Tommy asked with stiff hostility.
Angelo sighed. "Nothing, kid. It's great, so far as it goes. But keep your perspective, Tommy. Don't pour all your steam into it. Save out a little to enjoy life with. You're young. Enjoy it. "
"Yeah! Willya tell me who ever enjoyed being young?" Tommy shot back, and Angelo stared at him, shocked at the bitterness in the boy's voice. "I'm too goddamn young for everything, ain't I?"
Angelo said, "Oh, Jesus, kid, it's not that bad!" He stared straight ahead for a moment, without speaking, then said, "Look, we better get those groceries. We've got to be back before the early show. " He opened the door and got into the front seat; Tommy slid over, relinquishing the wheel.
"You know the real root of the matter is, " Angelo said, "I told Matt he was starting you in too young. That's the whole trouble. I told Matt, but you can't tell him anything. But he ought to know. It takes too much out of a young kid like you. "

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"But it isn't Mario's fault, " Tommy protested desperately. "I wanted to fly—I was the one who kept begging him to teach me. I'm not really all that young—"
"Hey, relax, relax, " Angelo said. "Don't get all steamed up! You kids, you get so damn worked up over nothing! Anyway, I guess it's as much my fault as Matt's; I could have put my foot down. I know—Lord, yes, I do know—we couldn't stop you now without breaking your heart. But don't —just don't make it your whole life, kid. There's more to life than flying. You get so worked up, you scare the life out of me!"

He turned the car into a parking lot. "Here, this looks like a pretty good market. Don't let me forget to get baking soda; something in that icebox stinks, and we better wash it out good tonight. "
They picked up a supply of groceries and then found a drugstore, where they ordered sandwiches and chocolate malts. As they sat finishing them, Angelo said, "Anyway, you been working a lot too hard. I don't want your dad to think we been running you ragged. I should've known, after bringing up Matt and Liss and Johnny, that kids tend to sort of lose themselves in things. Anyhow, you remind me, and I'll take you down to the motor vehicle department for your driving test next week, and then you can take the car sometimes, take one of your girl friends to the movies. "
"What girl friend?"
Angelo chuckled. "You wouldn't have much trouble finding one. Little Ann. Ellen. Little Ann was talking the other day—you know, you're getting a sort of reputation for being stuck-up. Like you think you're too good for the kids with the show, just because you're in the headliner act. Don't get the kids down on you, Tom. I mean that. How long have you and Little Ann been friends?"
"Gosh, I don't know—since we were babies, I guess. Mother said she knew Margot years before they joined Lambeth. "
"And now she thinks you're too high and mighty to speak to her. Tom, I'm not trying to run your life, but it wouldn't hurt you to be nicer to Little Ann. You can take the car if you want to take her to a movie some Sunday. "
"Okay, I'll ask her. "
"I ought to have thought of it before. That's the kind of thing I mean—you look and you act so grown-up, none of us remember to look after you like we would any other kid your age. " He pushed away his empty glass. "We better get back. "
"Don't forget the suntan oil, " Tommy reminded him, and Angelo laughed. "Guess we need somebody to act grown up around here! Damned if I didn't forget it again!"
Between shows that afternoon Mario caught up with him and asked, "What all did Angelo have to say?"
"Not much. Wanted to make sure I wasn't working too hard, " Tommy told him. "He said I ought to take Little Ann

to the movies sometimes. I guess it's something they expect of you. To take girls out. "
"Damn good idea, " Mario said. "I ought to have thought of that myself. "

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Tommy had been looking for support from Mario; this unqualified approval filled him with dismay. "But I don't want to take the damn girl out!"
"Well, you ought to want to. "
"You know damn well why I don't!"
Mario turned on him, savagely, and Tommy flinched.
"Mario, I didn't mean—"
"Shut up. I know what you meant by that crack!"
"You don't know a goddamn thing about it—"
"Lower your voice, " Mario said sharply. "People are looking at us. And watch your language. Although it might be a good thing if we had a fight, the way we usually go around like a couple of lovebirds! And if you want a fight, you just make one more goddamn filthy crack like that!"
"What the hell do you mean, filthy crack? I just said—"
"I heard what you said, ragazzo. And I know what you meant by it. And if you say anything like that again I'll knock your block off!"
"Yeah, and then Angelo would really start nosing around. If you throw a floor fit right out in center ring the first time I take a girl out!"
Mario gripped his wrist and Tommy felt the bones slide.
"Say that again and I'll break your rotten little neck!"
"Last time we had a fight you damn near broke my hand. This time you want to put my wrist out and keep me out of the act a couple more weeks?" Tommy twisted sharply, scuffling, and kicked at Mario's shins. "Take your goddamn hands off me!"
Mario, with an obvious and deliberate attempt to keep his temper, let Tommy's wrist go. "Okay, I deserved that. I'm sorry; I was out of line. Kid, I don't care how many girls you take out. If it calms Angelo down I'm all for it. "
Unreasonably Tommy was angrier than ever, but instead of being angry at Mario, now his confused anger was scattered; he didn't know whether to be angry with Angelo or with himself. "What do I want with some damn girl anyway? I don't have anything to say to a girl. Just because you're supposed to want to take girls out, Angelo thinks I ought to take Little Ann out. "

Mario's anger had confused the real trouble. Whatever the rights and wrongs of his emotions, they were always going to have to stay crammed down inside him. Angelo would have been full of friendly advice and all kinds of sympathy if he had had—what was that lousy phrase?—girl trouble. But for Tommy's real feelings and concerns, for his distress over Mario's moods of despair and guilt, for his misery over never having a moment alone with Mario without having to-lie about it-—for all this Angelo would have had nothing but horror and revulsion. The only safety he and Mario could have was in never letting anyone know. Never.
He could take Little Ann to a movie and everybody on the lot would smile and approve. He could fumble around in corners with that filthy jane Rosa; Angelo might frown, and warn him about disease and other risks, but he would still be tolerant, and if Tommy did get into real trouble Angelo would be glad to help. He could pick up one of the half-witted girls who hung around gawking at the flyers after every show, and nobody would care, they would

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just say that boys were like that. Hell, I could fool around with any lousy old whore, and they wouldn't like it, but they wouldn't really care. Just so it was a girl.
But Mario, who had brought out everything that was fine in him, everything that he thought of, incoherently, as noble and good and selfless and loving—any hint of what had been between them, and nothing could follow but ruin....
Mario was looking at him bleakly. "I let you in for all this, Tommy. I could kill myself when I realize I've spoiled all this for you. all the fun of—of growing up. I swear, I only want you to be happy, and I—I've taken away your youth—"
Tommy recognized, with a sinking despair, that Mario was going into one of those self-crucifying moods of guilt that were torture for them both. His nerves raw, feeling that after the strain of talking with Angelo that morning he could endure no more, Tommy let his agony flare into anger again.
"Oh, don't be so goddamn corny! I'll take the kid to a movie and that's that. I'm not going to take her out and screw her, for God's sake!"
Mario smiled, a funny, bitter smile.
"Why don't you? I'm sure she'd love it. "

"Listen, " Tommy said, clenching his fists again, "you quit that! Little Ann's a nice girl; I've known her all my life. I don't make dirty cracks about Liss, do I?" And then his resentment really boiled over. "And, damn it, if I want to take a girl out—or neck with her—or screw her, either—I am damn well not going to get down on my knees and ask if it's all right with you!"
Sunday morning, Tommy knocked at the door of the red trailer. It was opened by Margot Clane, wrapped in a faded blue kimono. "Why, Tommy, you're quite the stranger these days! Did you want something special, or did you just want to say hello? Won't you come in?"
"No, thanks. " He looked at her with eyes unsure and critical. He had known Margot Clane all his life, and for the first time he realized that there was an enormous chasm between the person he knew and the person she really was. Tommy was still too young to follow this thought to its logical conclusion: that since we can never know any human being ultimately, we must of necessity accept their surfaces. He had had his own awarenesses shaken without finding anything solid to put under them; he did not yet realize that he had actually known something of the real Margot in the kindly, quick-tempered woman he had called "Aunt Marge" when he was small, who had taught him his first trapeze work. Now, having glimpsed the enormous abyss between his Aunt Marge and the woman who was having an affair with Angelo, he was ready to believe he did not know anything at all about her. He was seeing her, too, for the first time as a woman, and that bothered him without knowing why.
"I was looking for Little Ann. She around?"
"Over in Ma Leighty's trailer. You're not working on wardrobe at all this year?"
"They got too much else for me to do, " Tommy said. He left and went over to the big trailer-truck that served as wardrobe for the Lambeth show. Little Ann was checking the costume racks under a bare bulb, a typed list in her hands.

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The ends of her long fair hair were rolled around into little snail curls and pinned down with crisscrossed bobby pins. Ellen Brady was on her knees before a cupboard, her head inside. Ma Leighty was sitting on the heavy bench at one end of the trailer—no ordinary chair could support her—setting small fast stitches in a flutter of tarlatan.

"Can I come in, Ma?"
Both girls turned, and Ellen dropped a small metal box. with a clang.
"Oh, Ellie, you've spilled the glitter. Here, let me scoop it up. " Tommy got down on his knees beside her. "Hand me a sheet of paper. Just so you don't get any that's been stuck to the floor, it's okay. " Carefully he brushed the red shiny stuff onto the paper, then funneled it back into the box.
Ellen was prettier than Little Ann, a quiet brown-eyed girl with dark braids lying forward on her shoulders. "I thought you'd forgotten all these little details. "
"In one winter? What kind of dumb bunny you think I am?"
"Where you been keeping yourself?" Ellen asked.
"Right out in plain sight, top of the flying rig, " Tommy retorted. "And if you don't see me, just turn your ear that way and listen for Papa Tony yelling!"
"How come you're not working here this year?" Ma Leighty asked. "I just got you trained to where you know where I keep everything, and this year you're in the show and you're too grown-up to work wardrobe anymore?"
"Heck, no, it's not that, Ma, " Tommy said uncomfortably. "I just got too much to do, that's all. I take care of all the flying costumes, and like that. "
Little Ann giggled. "You get it coming and going, don't you, Tommy? Oldest kid in spec always does all the costume checking in and out, and now you get in the flying act, and they make the youngest handle all the chores!"
Ma Leighty chuckled. "That way when he gets old and fat he'll still be some good to the show. "
"Flyers never get fat, " Little Ann said. "Old, maybe, but not fat. Look at Papa Tony. He must be seventy. " She laid her typed list on the table. "I'm finished here, Ma. That last muddy spell made a mess of everything, but I guess that's it. " She jumped down from the trailer, Tommy just behind her.
He asked, "Did you get the keys in your shoes fixed?" This year Little Ann was performing on a "golden whirl, " a rotating trapeze where she swung around and around by the feet. It was a simple trick, and not at all dangerous, because the performer's shoes were locked into the bar of the trapeze. But at the last performance Ann's shoes had become so locked that she'd had to struggle embarrassingly to free herself at the close of the act, and finally one of the rigging

men had had to climb up and unlock the shoes and take her down.
"Yes, Mother got Angelo to look at them. They're okay now; I tried them out this morning. " They went along the alley gradually taking shape in the empty cornfield, where the roustabouts were setting up concession stands. Little Ann took out a pair of dark glasses and put them on.
"Tommy, is Papa Tony so hard to get along with as they say?"

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"Oh, no. He's strict, and makes you watch yourself all the time, but his bark's a lot worse than his bite. Anyhow, he never bit me, not yet. "
Little Ann giggled, then turned grave. "Listen, did you hear from your dad? Is he going to be okay?"
"I guess so, " Tommy said. "Only his eye got infected, and they were afraid for a while he was going to lose it. They're trying something new on it—some kind of wonder drug. "
"If I was your father I'd never go near a cage again. "
"Me, neither, but I guess Dad doesn't feel that way. He got his arm half bit off when I was four years old, but he never worries about it. And remember the time you broke your arm, the year you were in the web act? You were back on the web three days after they took off the cast. Ann, I have to take some stuff in to the laundry—you want to ride in and keep me company?"
"Let me go tell Mother. "
She ran off. When she came back she had quickly combed out the pin curls and slipped into a full-skirted blue pinafore dress. "Mother says okay if you drive carefully. "
They walked along the line of trailers to the Santelli one. Each trailer had its allotted position so that wherever they played, whatever the shape of the lot, they were always six "doors" apart and everyone had the same neighbors every night. He knocked on the trailer door.
"Anybody here?"
"Come in, " said Mario irritably from inside. "What's the matter with you, Tom?"
"You decent? I got somebody with me. "
"Just a minute—" Then, muffled through a closed door, "Okay, come in. "
The cramped central room was empty. Tommy called, "I came to get the laundry. "
"Want me to go along? I can take time, I guess. "

"No, I asked Little Ann to ride in with me. "
Mario came out, buttoning his shirt. He was barefoot, his hair wet and tangled. He said "Hi" to Little Ann, and Tommy, watching her face change, thought, I bet half the girls in the show are nuts about Mario—that never occurred to me.
"Mario, you got any change for the laundry? If they have machines I'll need some dimes. "
Mario fished in his pocket and pulled out a handful of change, which he dumped, uncounted, into Tommy's cupped hands.
"Stop somewhere on the way back and get me some black shoelaces, okay?"
"Sure, anything else?"
"I guess not. Keep the change—buy yourselves a soda or something. "
Tommy was tying the laundry into a shirt. Little Ann wrinkled her nose, sniffing. "What's that nice smell? Like cloves?"
"Hair set. Glycerine. " Mario held up the squat jar. "My mother makes it for us; the stuff you can buy is all so greasy. " He set it down. "Ann, who's the new girl in the web act? The one on the end web, the one with long hair?"

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"Her name's Sue-Lynn. She's from back East somewhere. I forget her last name—Farris or Farley or something. Why?"
"She reminds me of somebody I used to know, that's all, " Mario said.
Tommy knew what he meant; the day he had seen the slender, dark-haired girl for the first time, he had thought, incredulous, Liss? Then she had come down from the web, and he had seen her, close at hand. It was not Liss; the eyes were not blue but dark brown, her mouth was wider and more sensuous, with somewhat crooked teeth. But she was like Liss, and something in the motion of the slender, almost breastless body reminded him indefinably of the way Liss Santelli moved. Even Angelo had mentioned it: "Matt, did you see the girl in the web act looks like Liss?"
"Maybe she is someone you used to know, " Little Ann said almost flirtatiously. "She asked who was the good-looking dark man in the flying act, and she asked if you had a girl. "
Mario was exasperated, but he was polite. "Matchmaking, at your age, Ann?"
"No. She said she worked a couple years in a flying act,

and she saw there was no girl in your act and wondered if you wanted one, that was all. If you were interested. "
Mario said, "I thought she looked kind of professional for a web act. "
"Oh, so you are interested?" Little Ann teased.
"No. Not really. "
"You're mean, Mario, " Little Ann said, giggling. "The best-looking man with the show, and you don't have a steady girl, or anything. "
Twisting his face into a purposely droll grimace, Mario teased, "Don't you know I'm waiting for you to grow up, sweetheart?"
"Oh, you!" Little Ann giggled, turning poppy-red.
Tommy hoisted the tied-up laundry and said brusquely, "We going to take this to town, or you want to stay here talking it up with Mario?"
"I want to stay here talking it up—" Abruptly Little Ann realized Tommy was not teasing. "Sure, I'm ready. Let's go. " She opened the door for Tommy to maneuver the bundle of laundry out. As they put it into the back seat of the Santelli car, she said, "Are you jealous, or something? Can't I kid around with Mario if I want to? He's old enough to be my father, almost!"
"Oh, nuts! I don't care who you kid around with. And he isn't either; he's only about twenty-three, that's all. " He got into the car, Belling down the window against the steamy heat, and backed the car around. He felt grumpy, and didn't know why. Watching Mario flirting with Little Ann—for that was what they had been doing, and he knew it—had somehow made him deeply uncomfortable.
"Oh, good, " said Little Ann as they turned into the gravel lot outside the sign washateria, "it's one of those new kind with automatic machines and dryers. They're kind of fun. "
Two hefty women in housedresses stared as the two youngsters came in. Tommy paid no attention; he was used to being stared at.
"Let me help, Tommy. "

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"Okay, if you want to. The towels go in one machine and the practice tights and stuff in the other one. And the robes have to be done in another machine all by themselves because the color will run—and set the water for cold, not hot. "
Little Ann giggled again. "Hey, I ought to be telling you all that—I'm the girl!"

They worked in silence, loading the machines. One of the women, staring at them curiously, asked, "You young people are new in town, aren't you? Are you with the oil-field people out at the edge of town?"
"No, ma'am, " said Little Ann politely, "we're with the circus. "
"Are you—do you take part in the performance?"
"Yes, we're both in different acts. "
"My, how interesting!" The woman withdrew, reluctantly, to tend her own machines, assuring them she would watch for them during the performance.
Tommy whispered, "These doggone hick towns. Look, she's still staring. "
"It's my darn hair, " said Little Ann, pouting. Her hair was, Tommy remembered from a couple of years ago, normally a rather mousy brown, but when she went into the act Margot had, as a matter of course, begun bleaching it until it was platinum blonde. "When I was in high school last year, you should've heard them. Nice girls don't bleach their hair, and all that; just the same, a lot of them started doing it, too. Mother says it makes people look at me. It sure does. "
"Let 'em look. I think it's pretty. " Tommy suddenly thought of Stella and wondered if her hair had been naturally blonde or if she bleached it, too.
"There's a soda machine over there. Want a bottle?"
They drank from the bottles, listening to the clothes slosh
ing in the machines. Tommy wondered what he had been
worrying about. This seemed perfectly natural, like the old
days. I
"Did you like California, Tommy?"
"Yeah, it was nice. Only it seemed funny to have palm trees around, and no snow even at Christmas. "
"Mother said, once, that Lucia Santelli was probably the finest woman flyer in the world. Is she one of the same family? Did you meet her?"
"Sure, she's Mario's mother, " Tommy said.
"I heard she broke her back. Is she awfully crippled?"
"No, you can hardly tell. Just sometimes she moves kind of slow, that's all. She helped Mario's brother Johnny with his act. " They started talking about the Santellis while they loaded the clothes into the dryers.

"Watch it and don't put the tights in, " Tommy warned. "They're wool, so they'll shrink. "
"There's a girl in the web act wears silk tights, like a ballet dancer. She says wool makes her break out in a rash. I think she just wants to show off her legs, " Little Ann said.

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"I guess wool makes a lot of people break out in a rash, " Tommy said.
"Mario's sister—Liss—wears silk tights, but she was a ballet dancer for a while. "
"She isn't in the act now?"
"No, she got married and had a baby, " Tommy said.
"Well, so did my mother. And yours, " Little Ann argued.
"But her husband isn't with the show, " Tommy said.
"I think circus people should only marry circus people. "
"Well, I guess they mostly do. " Tommy did not want to discuss it. "Listen, Angelo said I could take the car Sunday. If there's a good movie, want to go see it?"
"Love it, " Little Ann said. Then, suspiciously, "Did my mother ask you to ask me?"
"Heck, no! Why'd she do a thing like that?"
"Because I was saying just the other day how I never saw you anymore, and right away you ask me, and I don't need to have my mother fix up dates for me!"
"Nobody fixed it up. Angelo was bawling me out because he said the other kids in the show would be thinking I was stuck up, and then he said I could take the car if I wanted to take somebody out. "
"Okay, then, I'd love to go. Unless it's a Western—I don't like Westerns. Look, that dryer's stopped. Want me to help you fold the clothes?"
Sunday evening, just as it was beginning to get dark, Tommy called for Little Ann at the trailer. The faint quiet light around the lot. closed down for Sunday, made him uneasy; he was used to the brilliant lights of performances, and to the end of his life, dimness troubled and frightened him in a way he could never put into words.
Little Ann was wearing a pink dress with shiny white scrolls at the neck, and white wedge-heeled sandals. He held the car door open for her for the first time.
"You look cute, Little Ann. Watch your fingers, " he added automatically before slamming the door.
She still had babyish dimples when she smiled. "I wish

people would just call me Ann. There isn't any Big Ann with the show anymore, and it sounds goofy. "
"I'll try to remember. But I been calling you that since we were about six. Listen, the movie in town is a Western, but five, six miles out the highway there's one of those new drive-in places—where you sit in your car and watch the show on a big screen up front, and you get a speaker for your car. "
"I've seen them on the road, but I've never been to one, "
Ann said. "What's the movie?"
"Some kind of musical, I guess. Anyhow, it isn't a Western; I asked. Want to go there?"
"I guess that would be fun, " she said demurely, "but you're driving—it's up to you. "

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The drive-in was dimly lighted. After a while, as they waited for the picture to start, Tommy put his arm around Ann's shoulders. She moved a little closer but still sat straight.
"Want some popcorn?" he asked.
"Love it. " She sounded relieved.
He came back from the concession stand juggling a paper tray with two sacks of popcorn and two tall paper cups filled mostly with ice. "Here, " he said, "I remembered you didn't like Coca-Cola, so I got you Seven-Up. "
They drank the soda and ate the popcorn, watching the lights of the incoming cars as the darkness closed down.
"Seems funny to be in the audience, " Ann said.
"It would be funny to live in the same town all the time and go to the same movie. Look, the screen's starting to light up; I guess the show's going to start. "
In a burst of noise from the loudspeaker, Bugs Bunny came on the screen. Tommy finished his popcorn and crumpled up the bag, He settled down to watch the movie. After a while he laid a tentative hand on Ann's knee. She let it rest there for a minute without moving, then gave him her hand to hold. After a few minutes more he put his arm around her and she settled down comfortably against him. She smelled very clean, like soap and talcum powder and some light, fruity scent.
"You smell like strawberries, " he said.
"I guess it's my lipstick. It has kind of a cherry taste. "
After a minute more he kissed her cheek, tentatively, and she squeezed his hand in the darkness, but said gently, "Let's watch the movie, okay?"

"Okay. But it isn't that good a movie, is it?"
"I guess not, " she murmured, and in the dim light he saw her dimples again. After a minute he turned her face around to him and kissed her, this time on the mouth. She twisted quite soon, and said, a little breathlessly, "Hey, let's not get quite so passionate, huh?"
But she made no effort to move away to her own side of the seat, and he was confused. He had lost track of the movie, although the feature film had started and the screen was full of girls in ruffled Mexican skirts, swirling in some kind of Spanish dance. He was much too conscious of Little Ann's firm sun-tanned shoulders against his arm. Cautiously he put his free hand on her breast. He was still trying to keep part of his attention on the movie, but when Ann sighed and put up her face to be kissed, he forgot the screen. After several minutes he said huskily, "Your lipstick does taste like cherries. "
"Mmm-hm. "
Tommy felt a sudden, uncomfortable awareness; the diffuse, friendly pleasure of fondling and cuddling had, abruptly and distressingly, become sexual arousal. It dismayed him. Somehow it had just never occurred to him, even as a remote possibility, that he would be aroused by a girl. Any girl. Little Ann of all girls! At some deep level he was curiously pleased with himself, but mostly he was worried, not wanting her to find it out. But he couldn't seem to

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stop himself from pulling her against his body in such a way that she could not fail to be aware of it.
In an interlude between kisses she murmured, "I never knew anybody who kissed quite that way. "
Was there something different, revealing—queer?—about the way he kissed her? He raised his head and she said, "I didn't say I didn't like it, you dope, " and kissed him again of her own accord. She did not protest his hands on her breasts, though she did firmly push his fingers away from the button at the neck of her dress. "That's far enough, " she said gently. He didn't insist. It was exciting enough to feel their small tips hardening through the layers of dress and petticoat. It was almost a struggle, though she was not really struggling; it was not resistance but excitement squirming her slight body into his arms, close against his own. His hand slipped up her thin bare leg, under the fluff of petticoat. She was wearing silk panties with elastic at the edges; to his mo-

mentary surprise, the softness there was faintly damp. He hadn't really known that about girls. She had put her hands on him, shyly, a little unwillingly, touching him through his clothes. The ache of that was almost unendurable. He had grown used to release of this kind of tension (and as quickly and directly as possible), not to prolonging it or controlling it or passively enduring it.
She pushed his hand away quickly from the crotch of the panties. "Don't, " she said softly, "please, Tommy. I don't go that far. "
He took his hand away without protest. But she kissed him again dreamily, and he was confused again and almost angry. Did she or didn't she, and was it so different for girls anyway? And how could you tell? The tight ache across his loins was like a crimson spike driven into him. He pressed close to her, his hand flattened in the taut arch of her back. It soothed the ache a little. He whispered, "Can't you see how I am? Don't you get—get excited, too?"
"Y-yes. That's why it scares me. "
"But there isn't anything to be scared of. "
"But I am. Please, Tommy, it isn't smart to go so far we just can't stop. "
This confused him worse than ever. He was almost lying on top of her now, his hand drawn again, as if by a powerful magnet, between her thighs. "But why do we have to stop?" he whispered. "It seems sort of silly to want everything else except just that. Please, honey?"
"Oh, Tommy, don't, " she said, and for a minute he thought she was crying. "I never let any boy go even this far. I like you better than anybody else I know, but I just don't want to go all the way. "
He felt as if he had held his breath too long; he let it out, feeling the thudding ache behind his eyes. The girl's eyelashes tasted salt with tears as he kissed them. "Ann, don't cry. honey. Honest. I won't do anything you don't want me to—I never would. " Carefully he untangled himself from her.
"Are you mad at me, Tommy? I didn't mean to—to let you get all worked up. I know how it is with boys—I ought to have stopped quicker. "
Nervously he started clowning again. "It's that cherry-flavored lipstick. Just can't get enough of that cherry-flavored lipstick. It's like dynamite. "

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Her giggle seemed to release the tension in him, too. He said, "Hey, I'm thirsty. Want another cold drink?"
"Love it. You better wipe off the lipstick, though. "
He realized with relief that the most acute signs of his excitement had subsided, leaving only a dull ache. He slid toward the car door and opened it. He went toward the men's room; the extreme tension and erection had gone down, but the ache remained through his body, no longer localized. He went into the snack bar and got the drinks, and as he returned to the car he saw Ann coming back from the women's side of the concession stand. Does that happen to girls, too? I wish I could get up nerve enough to ask somebody. Not her. He sat juggling the paper cups unhandily on his lap while she smoothed her skirt over her knees. They had both hopelessly lost the thread of the movie and were relieved when it ended. They sat laughing like children at the Donald Duck cartoon, only more boisterously, their hands, cold from the icy paper cups, just lying in each other's.
Except for the single spot pole at the center, the lot was dark when they returned. He parked the car and walked with Ann to her trailer.
"Look, there's a light inside. Is Aunt Marge still up?"
"Maybe she left it so I could see to get undressed. "
"I'd like to see that, " he said audaciously.
She laid her hand on his wrist, a very light, hard little hand, callused across the palm and dry with resin, like his own. An aerialist's hand. She said very gravely, "Tom, I like you a lot better than any boy I know. If I was going to do that stuff with any boy at all, it would be you. And probably some girls would, just because you're so special, in the flying act and all, and they'd like to have you pay special attention to them. I think you're special, too. I always did. But— Tommy—some girls start letting boys do all that with them, and they can't stop, and pretty soon they're doing it all the time with everybody, even boys they don't really like a lot. " Her voice was shaking. "Even if it wasn't a mortal sin, and it is, I still wouldn't want to get so I was doing it in corners with all the boys in the show. "
Tommy looked down at the smudged little red mouth. He curled his hand around hers. It was so much like his own hand, callused from the bars. Like his own, or Mario's, or Stella's. "I guess I wouldn't want you to be like that, either, Ann. Not really. "

She whispered, "You want to kiss me good night?"
He leaned down and kissed her. Her lips felt soft and cool. He felt the congested ache again, diffused through his whole body—his chest, his head, his sex, the backs of his thigh.
"Thanks a lot, Tom. It was a wonderful movie. "
He laughed, a little soundless whisper. "What was it about, anyhow?"
The Santelli trailer was dark, silent except for Papa Tony's soft snores. Mario had made up Tommy's bed. He was sleeping on his back, an arm folded across his face. Tommy undressed in the dark, confused to the point of pain. He had thought he knew what he was, and he thought he had managed to come to

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terms with it: irrevocably queer, so much so that it was both bliss and torment. Yet tonight he had been roused by Little Ann, even more so because he had known there was no hope of satisfying it. He had known all along that Little Ann wasn't that kind of girl. The hard throb twisted in him again as he remembered, with a sharp and almost tactile image, the damp silk feel of her. Was he going to be one of these sex fiends you heard about, who couldn't touch anybody, man or woman, without getting all worked up?
Mario turned over sleepily.
"That you, Tom? Have a good time?"
Tommy came impulsively and fell on his knees beside Mario's bed. He kissed him, feeling the recoil pluck a thread of anguish and desire in his spine. Mario yawned and patted his shoulder sleepily.
"Take it easy, kid. Get some sleep. "
Tommy got into his own bed. The ache was no longer a physical thing at all. He just felt miserable. As always, last thing, Mario stretched out his hand between their beds, and after a moment Tommy gripped it. Mario whispered, "Buon" none, " and was instantly. fast asleep again.
Jeez, Tommy thought, how low can you get, anyway, Tom junior? He could still feel the taut misery, centered in his neck and forehead. He would have a headache tomorrow.
He lay grimly staring into the darkness for some time before he fell into an uneasy, dream-ridden sleep.

CHAPTER 17

it was early August when, as they were setting up one morning, Tommy saw a familiar long orange-and-gray trailer pull into line with the others and take the empty place next to Margot's. He was at the top of the rigging with Buck, checking the alignment of the brace wires with a level and steel tape, but as he saw it something turned a somersault inside him, and he had to shut his eyes for a minute to get back his control.
Angelo called him from the foot of the rigging, and Tommy swung down the ladder. "Your folks drove up just now, " Angelo said. "You saw? Go on, I'll finish up here. Go say hello to your mother and dad. "
Tommy handed Angelo the level and ran. The electrician was hooking up power cables to the house trailers from the generator truck, and there was all kinds of domesticity spilling out the doors: women stringing washlines and hanging clothes and children riding scooters and feeding dogs. Tommy burst in at the door of the orange trailer. His father appeared in the folding doors at the center, and Tommy, forgetting that he was past fifteen, flung himself against him and hugged his father like a small boy.
His father took him by the shoulders and held him off a little to look him over. Tom Zane looked older; there was more gray in the sandy hair, the eyelid of his right eye was shiny with scar tissue, and the eyebrow was gone, a thick grainy ridge running through it. Tommy felt his throat tighten with pain and a sick feeling that was not quite revulsion.
"You okay now, Dad?"

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"Sure, " his father said unsteadily. "How you getting along, Son? The Santellis been good to you? I thought for a while I was never going to see you again. "
Tommy said, almost choking, "Dad, that eye sure is a mess. Can you see out of it at all?"
"Some. Not an awful lot, but I can get along all right. Everything else healed up just fine. How about you, Son? Your mother told me you went on like a veteran, that night. "

Tommy swallowed. "I wouldn't have, only Mario sort of slapped me out of it and then I was okay. "
His father gave his shoulder a brief squeeze. "That happens. The thing is, you kept going. " He released him and said, "I've got to see how Cardiff's been treating my cats. I can't work them yet—have to have some more work done on my wrist. But I can get them used to me again. " He turned to the door. "Your mother went out hunting for you. I told her to stick around, you'd be here, but she went anyway, couldn't wait. That's her coming back now. " And the next minute Tommy was in his mother's arms.
"Oh, Tommy, Tommy—you're so thin, so much taller! You look all grown up—you're not my little boy anymore—"
No. I'm not. The final thread had snapped. It had thinned before, drawn almost to nothing, but in these last weeks, and the drastic upheavals that had descended on him, he had clung to one illusion: Mother and Dad will come back and I'll be like I was before; things will be the same. Now he knew that had been only a daydream. Nothing would ever be the way it was before. Some things remained: affection, admiration, love. Yes, and pain—a desperate anguish for the man with the terrible white scar over his eye, an aching pity for the woman smiling and weeping and hugging him so hard. But he knew the awful loneliness that stretched between generations. He didn't really belong here at all. They weren't just Mother and Dad, two people wholly centered on him, but Tom and Beth Zane, a couple whose lives had been complete before he came into it and would be complete even after he went out of it.
Controlled again, Beth Zane gave him a gentle, brisk tap on the arm. "You better go along and collect your things, " she said. "Did you get along with the Santellis all right? Were they nice to you?"
"Sure, fine, " he muttered, and went to fetch his clothes.
Mario was in the front room of the trailer, pulling sheets of their beds, bundling them up for the laundry. He said, "I'm going to look around town before the matinee, get me a pair of those cowboy boots. Want to come along?"
"I don't think I can. " He went to the built-in drawer where his undershorts and polo shirts were tumbled in beside Mario's, and started hunting out his own. "My folks just came back and I guess they're going to want me to stick around this afternoon. "

"Oh, yeah, sure, " Mario said. "They've probably been missing you. "

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Tommy looked up and stared, his last certainty broken. Mario looked at the boy's white face and said gently, "Tom, what's the matter?"
He said, dry-mouthed, "I forgot you might be glad to get rid of me. "
Mario put down the bundle of laundry and got up. He said, "Hey, hey, kid—" and came to put a hand on his head, gently tousling his curly hair. It was something he had done a lot when Tommy was younger, not so much lately. "Look, Lucky, you knew this was going to happen sooner or later. Come on, fella, I'll help you get your stuff together. "
"Don't bother. I been enough trouble already. "
Mario grabbed him by the arms. The desperation in Tommy's eyes made him brutal. "Now, you look here, Tom. We've been a lot luckier than we had any right to be. We got away with bluffing Angelo, but I'm not taking any chances on bluffing your father and mother. We've got to be a damn sight more careful. "
Tommy twisted away. "Yeah. It's always got to be just the way you say, doesn't it? When you think it's okay, when you want it—"
"Tom, damn it, keep your voice down, will you?" Mario sounded desperate, too, but Tommy completely mistook the reason for it. "That's all we need, for your mother or Papa Tony to walk in on us and get a load of that kind of talk!"
"Right now I don't give a damn, " Tommy said, and his voice caught, but he steadied it quickly. "Okay, okay, quit worrying, I'm not going to get you in any trouble. Go do your laundry before somebody comes around checking up on you. "
With his arms full of clothes, he walked out of the trailer. Mario said behind him, "Hey, listen, kid—" but he did not turn. When he went back for a second load, Mario was gone; Tommy did not see him again until the show. Tommy, buttoning up his jacket to go on with the men who held the webs for the aerial ballet, saw him walking across the backyard, tall and swaggering in the high-heeled cowboy boots and a brightly piped western shirt with pearl studs.
While he was laying out the flying costumes for the second half of the show, Mario came to the rigging truck. "You get settled all right?"

"Yeah, sure. " Tommy did not turn to look up at him.
Mario said in a low voice, "Look, I know you're sore at me. But we promised each other something. Remember?"
Whatever happens, let's never let it mess up our work again. Let's keep it off the platform. Tommy swallowed hard, looked up, and made himself smile.
"Okay, " he said, "don't worry. I remember, all right. "
"Good kid. " Mario would have said something more, but Angelo came in, kicking off his muddy shoes.
"You get your boots okay, Matt? Hey!" he said, picking one up admiringly. "You going to ride in the Wild West Show next year? What kind of money you have to pay for these?"
"Thirty-nine fifty. "
Angelo whistled. "You better not tell Papa Tony! He still thinks you can get a good pair of shoes for five bucks!"

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As he stood beside Mario later on the platform, listening to the applause that followed their duo routine, Tommy wondered what he had been worrying about. What did anything else matter, as long as they still had this?
"What are you staring at?" Mario muttered roughly. "Get going, ragazzo. "
Tommy took the bar, and swung out. He felt completely happy again.
After the night show, Margot Clane gave a midnight supper to welcome the Zanes back to the circus. It was a noisy, rowdy party, and it went on till four in the morning. Margot had brought sandwiches and cake, and Jim Lambeth and the bandmaster and the Santellis carried in a case of beer and another of assorted soda pop. Virtually everyone with the show dropped in. Tommy found himself monopolized between Little Ann and Ellen Brady, but he was aware, while he sat drinking soda pop and eating potato chips and talking with the girls, as if he had eyes in the back of his head, of Mario drinking beer with a cluster of girls from the show and later squeezing into a single chair with the new girl in the web act on his lap. She did look like Liss, he thought, and the resemblance was all the stronger next to Mario. She had the same silky-dark hair pulled back from her temples and curling just a little, the same kind of heart-shaped face. Liss had looked just so, small and frail in the curve of her brother's arm.
Later she made a joke about it, when Tommy came to join them, and her voice broke the illusion of resemblance. Liss's voice was light and feminine, soprano, high but not shrill,

while Sue-Lynn's voice was a husky drawl. The kind they call a sexy voice, Tommy thought.
"Tommy, this Mario he's the only man I ever knew compliments a girl by sayin' she looks like his sister!"
"Ah, " Tommy said, "but you ought to see his sister!" He felt somehow appeased; He's lonesome for Liss, is all. But when the party broke up and Tommy fell sleepily into his own now-unfamiliar bed, he was angry, and ashamed of his own misery, and tormented by the picture of Sue-Lynn in Mario's lap, their heads close together, the girl drinking from his glass. He had known from the beginning that in the very nature of this relationship there could be no promises or permanences, and now he was seeing the really thorny side of it.
Nor was it easy, after living with the Santellis, who combined rough discipline in working hours and almost total indifference to what he did outside them, to get used to his mother's total indifference to his work and her strictures on his personal activities. He was used to being his own boss except on the flying rig, and it bothered him.
There was one compensation. After a talk with Angelo, Tom Zane had given Tommy a set of keys to their family car and allowed him to drive it as much as he wanted to. His father's eyes were not up to much driving. Tommy got used to driving with the heavy trailer hitched on behind, and began to tolerate the slow speeds required for the trailer hitch. Sometimes Little Ann joined them in their car on the runs between towns. His mother had known Ann since she was a toddler and accepted her readily as Tommy's girl; she sometimes spoke

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of her that way, and Tommy too began to take it for granted. Between shows he and Ann went together to do the marketing for their respective families. In the towns near large cities, where the clowns and the big theatrical acts replenished their supplies of makeup and small expendable costume items, both Tommy and Ann, experienced in wardrobe and costume work, often found themselves charged with many commissions at theatrical-supply houses. On most of those August Sundays, he took her to movies on the Sunday layovers, but while he held her hand and enjoyed putting his arm around her firm bare shoulders, the terrible tension did not return; he kissed her good night at her door and felt only affection and goodwill.

The Lambeth Circus finished its swing through Arkansas

and began the return swing through Louisiana and Texas. Little Ann had her sixteenth birthday and Ellen Brady her fifteenth during the second week in August, and Beth Zane gave them a combined birthday party. It turned out to be a childish party to which all the performers' children came, including the three-year-olds, but Tommy enjoyed it anyway.

Before the night show they were sitting on the trailer steps, finishing up the cake. "Mother said next year I could have a grown-up party instead, " Little Ann said. "Will you come as my date, Tommy?"

"I don't even know if we'll be with Lambeth next year. "

"I keep forgetting you belong to the Santellis now, " Little Ann said. "Mother will probably stay with Lambeth now, but she said when I was eighteen I could try for one of the big shows. She really wants me to stay with Lambeth, though. She says the big shows are too rough for a young girl on her own. "

"I guess she's right, " Tommy said, thinking of Stella.

"What I'd really like to do is dance in the movies, only I guess there are ten thousand chorus girls who all have the same idea, " Little Ann confided. "I guess I'm better off where I am. " Ann finished the cake and threw the crumbs to a dog sniffing hungrily around the lot. "Let's go in and clean up all this stuff for Aunt Beth before we dress for the night show— Hey, what's going on over there?"

A little knot of men were gathered near the door of the Santelli trailer; the radio inside was turned up as high as it would go. Ann and Tommy ran to the trailer, and Ann asked Angelo, at the edge of the crowd, "What is it? What's happening?"

"Ssshh, " he said imperatively. "I think the war's over or something—"

"Not yet, " Tom Zane said, stepping down from the inside of the trailer, "only they just dropped some kind of super bomb on the Japs. An atom bomb or something, big enough to destroy a whole island or something like that. "

"Serves them right, " said one of the men in the crowd.

"Don't say that, " one of the women implored. "My son's in a Japanese prison camp! If they bomb him—"

Papa Tony came out of the trailer, shaking his head. He said, "It is a terrible thing. But listen, there is the signal for the show. I have to turn off the radio now and go do the night show, war or no war. " He strode off toward the rigging truck;

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behind him the others lingered. Mario came over to Little Ann and Tommy.
"Happy birthday, Ann. Nice party?"
"Very nice. Aunt Beth made a lovely cake, and I got some nice presents. How did you know I liked that English lavender soap?"
"Asked Margot, of course, how do you think?" But he looked distant and grim.
"What's the matter, Mario?"
"Too bad this had to happen on your birthday—the bomb and everything. I have a feeling it's going to be one of those dates everybody remembers, like Armistice Day. "
"Just for some old bomb on the Japs?" Little Ann said. "Come on, now!"
"This isn't just 'some old bomb, ' Little Ann. They dropped one bomb on one Japanese city, Nagasaki, and the whole city went up in flames. Just one bomb, and they think it killed almost a million people. That's more people than have seen Lambeth Circus since the show went on the road fifteen years ago. And they dropped one more bomb on another city— Hiroshima, I guess—and about a million more people died. Just two bombs. Can you imagine it?"
"Well, they bombed us. At Pearl Harbor. "
"Yes, but those two bombs killed more people than all our armies put together. Men and women and babies and old people, all together. There's nothing left of those cities. Nothing, just a burned hole in the ground. "
As Mario and Tommy went toward the rigging truck, Tommy asked, "You think this is the end of the war?"
"Got to be, " he said, and fell silent again. Just as they stepped into the rigging truck, he added, "Don't talk to Papa Tony about the war, huh? His attitude is sort of 'Wars come and wars go, but we've got a show to do. ' Okay?"
"Sure, " Tommy said before he climbed up and started getting into his tights.
Later, in the backyard, Jim Lambeth came up to them.
"Heard the news? About the bomb?"
"Who could help it?" Mario replied.
"What do you think?"
But Mario was not to be drawn. He said only, "Well, if the war ends right away, maybe we can get some new truck tires this season. "

"Yeah, " Lambeth said, "and somebody to work as rig men and roughnecks instead of teenage boys and old drunks!"
Mario watched him go, his face cold and set. Tommy, still hearing in his mind what Mario had said about the bombing, suddenly felt the whole reality of the war crash in on him. Before it had been something distant, something that meant ration books and no candy in the stores and shortages of gasoline for the car. "Mario, " he said, after a minute, "did it really kill two million people?"
His face turned away, Mario replied, "I don't reckon anybody went out and took a census. Come on, we've got a show to do. "
That night—and a few days later when Japan surrendered—Tommy went on thinking, It ought to mean something more than this. But in general, behind the scenes at Lambeth, most of the show people reacted in much the same

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manner as Lambeth himself: Sons, brothers, and fathers would be coming home, new tires were once again a remote possibility, and the concessionaires on the midway talked with hope about the end of sugar rationing. Mario did not speak about it again, and Tommy wished he would; he felt he would like to talk about it. But Mario had withdrawn again. He and Tommy saw each other twice a day during the show and worked side by side on riggings, but Mario might as well have been at the other end of the world.
One morning when they went out for rehearsal, Sue-Lynn Farris, doing limbering-up exercises with Margot near the net, broke away and ran to Mario, looking up at him excitedly and talking fast. Tommy could not hear what she said, but. Mario smiled good-naturedly and shook his head. "Come on, now, Matt, don't be mean!" "Sue-Lynn, you said yourself you haven't been on a flying rig in six months. Can't be done, is all. " He gave her a friendly pat on the arm and went on past.
As they were climbing the ladder, Tommy asked, "What's she want?"
""What do you think? Oh, damn, " Mario said, glancing back. Sue-Lynn was climbing after them. She stepped off on the platform with a mischievous grin. "Told you I wasn't going to take no for an answer!" "Look, Sue-Lynn, you want me to get in trouble with Papa Tony?"
The girl only laughed. "Come on, sourpuss. I learned to

swing when I was about ten years old. Let me try just once. "
"Guess it's the only way to get rid of her, " Mario said, resigned. "Give her the bar, Tommy. "
Sullenly Tommy pulled it in by the hook and passed it to her. It was the first time he had ever seen Mario give way when it was a matter of professional competence.
"She's got a lot of nerve, " he grumbled, but Mario was watching her swing out, his eyes narrowed, as she braced the bar behind her waist.
"Good muscles. Out of practice, of course, and not very good style. "
Sue-Lynn dropped off again, releasing the trapeze into Tommy's hand. "Told you, " she said, laughing.
"Yeah, not bad. Uh-oh, here comes trouble!" Mario muttered as Papa Tony came to the foot of the ladder, obviously breathing fire. He shouted to Mario in Italian, took a breath and shouted again. "Come down from there! All of you!"
Mario gestured elaborately to Sue-Lynn. "Ladies first. "
It was five solid minutes before Papa Tony paused for breath in his torrent of abuse. One of the solidest Santelli rules was that no outsider ever went on the flying rig without his personal permission.
Sue-Lynn said meekly, "It was my fault, Mister Santelli. Matt told me I couldn't come up and I just went up anyway. Really, I do know what I'm doing up there. My father is Pete Challoner—"
"I have never heard of him, " Papa Tony said icily. "Now, if you will excuse us, young woman, my troupe and I are in rehearsal. "

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Angelo had come up in time to hear the last of it. He poked Mario in the ribs. "Come on, Matt, you know better than to take your girl up on the rigging, not without asking Papa first!"
"I didn't take her up, " Mario protested.
Papa Tony, gazing thoughtfully at Sue-Lynn, who was walking away, said slowly, "So, Matty, I suppose it is only fair. After all, I allowed Angelo to teach Teresa to fly. Only another time, ask me first. Not after. "
Another morning, when no rehearsal was held, Mario, in jeans and the high-necked black sweater he wore to the ballet school, with Sue-Lynn in a flaring skirt, stopped by the Zane trailer.

"Didn't you say something one time about going skating with Little Ann? Sue-Lynn says there's a big rink in this town, and she's a whiz on skates. I'm not so bad myself. Go get Little Ann, why don't you, and we'll all go together. "
Before the warm, expectant grin on Mario's face, Tommy sensed, without really knowing, why Mario had arranged the foursome; he felt simultaneously warmed and exasperated. In the car the two girls sat together in the back seat Later he stood with Mario at the edge of the rink watching them bend over to fasten their skates, fair curls and dark braid side by side. Now that he knew Sue-Lynn better she did not look so much like Liss, unless, as now, he could see only the dark braid and the graceful bend of her waist from behind. Little Ann had told him she had been married and divorced. Beside her Little Ann looked almost unformed, her bleached hair frizzy and her dimpled, snub-nosed face round and babyish; Sue-Lynn called her "Sugar" and "Baby. " The gap between Sue-Lynn and Little Ann seemed to widen the gap between himself and Mario, until they were not a foursome but two widely separated couples with little in common, whirring noisily around the floor. Little Ann was a fair skater; they spun and crossed easily, taking the fast corners at a glide, bending and swooping like a pair of swallows. Tommy watched Mario holding Sue-Lynn's crossed hands, leaning toward her as they cut sharply in and out of the other skaters, whirling into the center in a fancy figure.
"Show-off, " Little Ann said. "She does the same thing on the web. Front and center all the time. "
Mario, Tommy thought, wasn't doing anything to stop her. Little Ann glanced at him again and said, "Mario's good on skates, isn't he? Is he a dancer?"
"Yeah, I guess so. He teaches in a dance school, winters. "
"I thought so. The way he holds his hands. I sometimes go to a ballet school in the winter. It's a good way to keep in training. "
The four came face to face at a corner, and Mario held cut his hands to Little Ann. "Change partners?" Stunned and blushing, Little Ann took them and moved off, looking almost clumsy, and very young, beside Mario's gracefulness. Tommy, feeling equally awkward and far too young, found himself left alone with a polite, bored Sue-Lynn, wheeling round and round in silent circles. He came home raw-

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edged, spoiling for a fight, cold inside and out as Mario went off with Sue-Lynn. Inside their trailer his mother was sitting on a kitchen chair mending the toes of his tights. Tommy felt all his bottled tension explode.
"Mother, for gosh sakes, I can look after my own costumes—do you mind?"
He almost grabbed them off her lap, but her hurt face, open-mouthed with amazement, stopped him.
"Why, Tom junior, " she said, blinking and startled, and he realized that he had really upset her.
"I'm sorry, Mom. I guess I sort of got used to doing my own work. You've got enough to do without looking after a big lug like me. "
"Now, Tommy, what do you think mothers are for?"
"Yeah, but I'm grown up now, " he said. "I learned how to look after my own stuff last winter. "
"What's the matter with you? Didn't you have fun skating? That's a nice girl of Mario's. They're going to make a lovely couple. I heard she's a flyer, too, one of the Challoners. Your father and I worked one summer with the Challoners; it was the year before you were born, before we came to Lambeth. Sue-Lynn was only a kid then. "
She held up the tights for his approval. "There, that ought to do. Until you and Little Ann get married and you have her to look after your mending and patching, you'll just have to make do with your mother. "
"Holy Moses, " Tommy yelled at her, turning red, "I go out skating with a girl and you've already got me married to her! Lay off, willya?"
She smiled, teasing. "Well, you certainly need somebody to look after your clothes. Everything you own is a mess. Anyone can see you've been doing your own mending. " Tommy, who had learned to stitch, mend, and repair very neatly during his work with Ma Leighty on costumes, was shocked and dismayed by this remark, not old enough to perceive the feminine pride behind it.
"What's got into you, Mother? You had me working with Ma Leighty on costumes almost before I could read. "
"That's different, " Beth Zane said obscurely. "I just don't like to see a man sewing, that's all. It doesn't seem manly somehow. "
"That's a lot of bullshit!" Tommy exploded at her, and

she sat staring at him, dull angry red spreading in her cheeks.
"How dare you talk to me that way? Is that what you learn from the Santellis?"
Tommy gulped, swallowed hard. He could imagine what Papa Tony would have said if anyone had spoken that way to Lucia. He bent his head and muttered, "I'm sorry, Mom, " biting his lip against the need to pour out all his rage and resentment. Dimly he realized that it was not his mother he was angry at anyhow.
He said, "I wish to heck I could live alone!" and banged out of the trailer.

CHAPTER 18

it would almost have been better, Tommy thought, if Mario had been deliberately avoiding him. Then I'd know. But they spent as much time as ever

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in one another's company— continually, casually—and that somehow made it worse. Tommy was troubled by vague anxieties, disturbing fantasies, the shame which Mario had been at pains to suppress. He knew the tension was building to explosion and was numbly carried along, not knowing how to check it.

One morning in September Margot called a rehearsal of the web act, and Tommy turned out with the other men who held the ropes for them. Afterward, he and Little Ann walked back together to her trailer for a cup of coffee.

"Sugar?'

"No, thanks, I got out of the habit during rationing. But I'd like some milk if there is any. "

"Just evaporated. "

"Ugh. I'll drink it black. "

"I like it. " Little Ann tilted the pierced metal can over her cup. "It tastes like cream. "

"It tastes like nothing to me, " Tommy said. "What were you and Christa giggling about?"

"Promise not to tell?"

"That stuff's for girls. Who'd I tell? And why?"

Little Ann glanced around cautiously to make sure no one was within earshot. She was wearing a checked pink gingham

playsuit, and her hair was pinned up inside a kerchief. One or two small snail-rolled curls stuck out, crisscrossed with bobby pins. He wondered why girls did that with their hair. Lately all he ever saw of Little Ann's hair was a couple of pincurls, except during the show.

"My mother would have conniptions if she knew I heard them talking this way. You know there are some people say Mario's a pansy—you know what that is, don't you?"

Tommy felt the familiar hard knot clamp tight under his breastbone. "Sure. What about it?"

"Well. Sue-Lynn Farris said she knew better than that, and Christa asked how did she know, and—well, Sue-Lynn told her. Just told her straight out. " Little Ann was pink, and she giggled uneasily. "Honest, I thought I'd sink right through the floor! I never heard a girl use words like that. Boys, some-times, but not in front of women. I thought a nice girl would die before she'd say something like that straight out in front of people. "

The clamping sickness under his breastbone had turned into a stunned cold, but the control he had learned did not desert him. "Heck, I could have told your dirty-minded little pals that. Mario's no more a pansy than I am. "

"An awful lot of people have said it. "

"If people don't have something to talk about, they'll make something up, " Tommy said coldly.

"You think Mario and Sue-Lynn will get married? She'd fit right into the Flying Santellis, too, wouldn't she? Dark, like she is, anybody'd think she's one of them, don't you think? And they make an awfully handsome couple. "

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"I get so sick of girls yammering, " Tommy blurted out. "It's all you ever think of—who's in love with who and who's going to get married to who—you make me sick!" He got up and stalked out.
Offended, Little Ann called after him, "Well, you asked me, " but he paid no attention.
Dressing for the matinee, Tommy had room for only one thought through the sick, cold knot under his breastbone.
Keep it off the platform. Whatever happens. This is work. However we fight about other things, don't let it affect that.
Mario was late. Angelo was smoothing his hair, and the place was full of the clove-laden scent of hair lotion. Papa Tony was playing solitaire on a checkerboard balanced on his lap, his head a little to one side, listening to the band, keeping

track of the pace of the show. They were "all ready when Mario came in and started to get out of his clothes.
Papa Tony said icily, "Buona sera, Signor Mario. You are favoring us with your presence at the matinee?"
"I've got plenty of time, " Mario said cheerfully, sliding into his tights. Tommy was sitting on a folding chair, filing a rough place from one of his nails; he clenched his fists, feeling the end of the nail file bite painfully into his palm. He could see, out of the corner of his eyes, the slender perfect body. It made him physically sick to think of Sue-Lynn slobbering over Mario.
"You're quiet today, Lucky, " Mario said, holding out his leather wristguard. "Here, lace this up for me, okay?"
"Sure. " Tommy found he could control his voice perfectly well. While he threaded the straps he asked, "Going for the triple today?"
"Guess so. " Mario tested the tension of the wrist straps. "Thanks. " He turned, fidgeted with the hem of his cape. "You forgot to brush this one, Tommy. What's that on the edge, horse manure?" He wrinkled a fastidious nose.
"You dragged it on the edge of the ring when you came out. You know as well as I do where the horses step when they go past there. "
"Well, it's your job to clean the damn thing!"
"You go dragging it in horse shit, you can clean it yourself, " Tommy flared. "I'm no ring boy to clean up shit after you!"
"Basta, you two!" Angelo turned around, his face taut. "You can't go in the ring like that. Here!" He flung the brash to Tommy. "Whatever it is, get it off!"
Enraged, Tommy bent and scrubbed at the dried stain. When Angelo and Papa Tony went out, Mario bent and took the brush from him. "Here, " he said "I'm sorry. I should've been more careful. I'll clean it afterward, okay? Turn around. "
Tommy turned as Mario dropped the heavy cape over his shoulders. Personal thoughts dropped away as he arranged the loop at his throat. He had learned to relax now, to enjoy the crowd noises as they crossed the ring. A flutter of the dusty wind pulled the ladder away from them, and Papa Tony turned and said briefly, "Wind's too high, Matt No triple. Finish with the two-and-a-half. "

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Mario, opened his mouth to protest, then shrugged. "Yes,

sir. " But he gave Tommy a tiny wink as they stepped off on the platform.
"It's not the wind that's too high, " he whispered. "It's me. "
After each performance, as they were dressing in the rigging truck, Papa Tony always brought up any faults he had noticed. Today he snapped, "Tommy, when Matt is flying, keep your wits about you! The audience is watching him, yes, and you must do nothing to distract their attention from him, but you are not invisible! You must not stand there and let your shoulders slump and your mind go away somewhere else!"
Tommy accepted the criticism meekly and went on hanging up costumes. The others went, but he stayed behind, spreading out Mario's cape, attacking the lingering stain with a bottle of dry-cleaning fluid.
In the mirror he saw Mario step back inside the truck.
"You shouldn't use that stuff with the door shut, Tommy— it's poisonous. Read what it says on the label: Use in well-ventilated place, "
"I didn't use that much. " Tommy did not look up as he folded the cape and put it into its assigned place. Mario closed the door again, then came and put his hands on Tommy's shoulders, turning him gently around. In spite of the familiar leap of excitement and anticipation inside him, Tommy pushed him away.
"What's the matter, Lucky? I wanted to talk. "
"Well, I don't, " Tommy said. "Save it for Sue-Lynn. You don't owe me any explanations. "
Mario laughed soundlessly. "My God, the girl didn't lose any time, did she?"
"Is it true, or isn't it?"
"Is what true? Sure, I screwed her—she's been chasing me from here to Halifax. " Mario sounded immensely amused.
"You mean you deliberately—" Words failed him. "You deliberately—"
"Damn right I deliberately, " Mario mocked his tone, still laughing. "I figured I could trust her to have it all over the lot before matinee. That was the easiest lay I ever had. "
"The way I heard it, you were practically engaged. "
Mario chuckled. "Nuts. Sue-Lynn just wants people to know the star flyer would give her a whirl. "
"But how could you—" Bitterly confused, Tommy fell silent.

"Listen, kid, " Mario said, his face darkening, "I don't know where you got the idea I have to account to you for every damn thing I do. "
Tommy took the folding chair and began to fold it flat. He said, "If you can't figure out where I got that idea, you're not very smart. "
"Seems to me you're the one who's not very smart. Damn it, kid, you're old enough to use your head about this kind of thing. All we need—I've told you this often enough—is for your folks to hear some of that talk—well, what Little Ann told you she'd heard about me. And you know and I know what that was. There's no harm in Susan; she's a nice girl, kind of dumb—"
"Like me, " Tommy said, all his bitterness surfacing.

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"Oh, Christ, Lucky—" Mario broke off. Summoning patience, he said, "Mainly, she talks too much. All we'd need would be for your father and mother to hear that stuff and get to thinking about it At worst, your father would shove me in jail—if he didn't feed me to the cats first—and put you in a reform school. At best—at very, very best—he'd get me fired, and it's for damn sure you'd never fly with the Santellis again. Is that what you want? Now, come on, " he coaxed, "quit acting like a stupid little kid! Now the girl's got something else to talk about, and now maybe that particular hunk of gossip will curl up its toes and die once and for all. "

Tommy said stiffly, "Yeah. You're a very noble, self-sacrificing character. I noticed. "

"Listen!" Mario's face congested with sudden wrath. "In your own words, if I want to take a girl out, or neck with her, or even screw her, I am damn well not going to get down on my knees and ask you for permission!"

"Fuck the whole circus if you want to, includin' the camels! See if I care!"

"You watch your language, " Mario said, his voice low and angry. "That kind of talk won't get you anything but a mouthful of loose teeth!"

"You watch the buttons on your goddamn pants and let me watch out for my own language, " Tommy snarled, beside himself with humiliation and rage.

Mario lifted his hand, poised to slap him; Tommy picked up the folding chair. Mario grabbed it and, after a short sharp struggle, wrenched it away. He put it behind him.

"All right, Tom, " he said, gently, "maybe I do have to

take that kind of talk from you. I guess you've got the right. But if you get in the habit of talking that way. someday you'll say something like that in front of Angelo or your dad. And when that happens, don't come crying to me when you start picking up your teeth. " He stopped and swallowed and put down the chair. "Look, you acted kind of funny before the show, so I wanted to come and see if there was something—but okay, if you want to take it this way, okay. Just don't you hang by your teeth waiting for me to come around and apologize again! Next time you'll be the one comes crawling!"

"Crawling, hell!" Tommy yelled at him. "You can kiss my ass!"

Mario retorted, with a wicked grin, "Not till you apologize. "

"You filthy—" Tommy sprang at him. Mario sidestepped, grabbed him by the shoulders, and held him away. Tommy tripped him, held him off balance, and they rolled to the floor together. Really angry now, Mario seized a handful of Tommy's hair and pushed his face into the dirt on the floor of the rigging truck.

"You want a mouthful of filth, I'll damn well give it to you! And not the way you want it, either!"

Tommy twisted loose. "I'll make you eat dirt for that, you sonofabitch!" They rolled together, kicking, punching, toward the door of the trailer.

The door burst inward and Angelo stood suddenly silhouetted against the evening sunlight. "Jesus, " he gasped, "what's with you two? I could hear you yelling all the way down to the bullpen!"

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Mario let go of Tommy quickly and said, "I was just working him over—he gave me some fresh talk. '"
Simultaneously Tommy said, "I sassed him and he was going to make me apologize, that's all. " He heard himself and was shocked at the instinct that made them spring to each other's defense.
"Get up. " Angelo prodded Mario with his foot, manhandled Tommy by his shirt collar. "Beating up on the kid, Matt!"
Tommy squirmed loose. "He wasn't beating me up, " he protested. "I got fresh with him and he told me not to butt in his business. "
"Yah!" Angelo grunted angry skepticism. "You two. Kiss

and scratch. Siamese twins one minute, goddamn dog and cat the next minute, worse than a pair of fairies from that damn fool ballet school of yours!" But he had said it offhand, not meaning it, and Tommy managed to breathe again. "I thought when we left Johnny behind we were through with this kind of stuff. Okay, you brats. Shake hands and make up. You going to behave like little kids, that's how I'll treat you. Shame on you both, " he grumbled, "knock-down-and-drag-outs at your age!"
Sheepishly Mario stuck out a hand. "I shouldn't have said what I said, Tom. Okay?"
Tommy said, just as stiffly, "I shoulda minded my own business like you told me to. "
Angelo surveyed them, frowning. "Damn kids, " he said. "Okay, Tom, get your work finished up and scram. Matt, your girl friend's waiting for you out by the grease joint. "
But he stood in the trailer door and watched them go off in opposite directions, still frowning a little.
The blistering heat of Texas gave way to the dry winds of Oklahoma. The season dragged on into its last few weeks. One evening in early September, it was too hot for immediate return to the trailers. The next day was a Sunday layover; the routine of the teardown had not yet begun. Tommy and Mario, mingling idly with the late stragglers on the midway, lingering for the evening cool and drinking iced orange pop, struck up a conversation with two girls who had recognized them as the flying team. He supposed they were eighteen, or so. pretty, vacuous-looking girls with frizzed hair standing out, too curly, around identically sharp, pale little faces, dresses much too tight for their rounding figures, and quick, demanding eyes.
It was by no means rare for admiring fans to come around after a performance, to ask foolish or intelligent questions, to try to scrape up acquaintance with the performers. Often there were girls, with shy or bold faces, sometimes with a brother or vaguely hostile escort hovering in the background; Tommy had learned how to banter with them, pleasantly, without antagonizing the background males.
This pair seemed a bit sillier than usual. Amazed, he saw that Mario was turning on the full blaze of his charm for the older of the girls. Taking his cue from Mario (things had been roughly patched up between them; not the old close-

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ness, but at least they were speaking again), Tommy answered the other girl's foolish questions and countered with offhand remarks. When, to his surprise, Mario touched him on the shoulder and said, "What about it, Tom? Let's get the car and go out on the town. I could use a beer and a sandwich. You?"
"I have to tell my folks. "
He told his mother that they were going to town with a couple of girls they had met; she listened vaguely while he put on a jacket and tie. Mario had the Santelli car at the gates. Tommy got into the back with one of the girls, while in the front seat the other slid close to Mario, making some inane remark about one-armed drivers.
"What's your name?" Tommy asked.
"Priscilla. My sister's Helen. " She did not volunteer their last name or ask his. She slid close and put her arm around his waist. "C'mon, let's get friendly. "
The girl beside Mario was giving directions. After a time they pulled up in front of a dingy place with an orange neon sign that flashed beer. Tommy felt some slight unease, remembering the last time he had been inside a bar, but as if in answer to some question Mario's girl said, "It's okay, they knew us here—they never ask questions, " and they went in.
It was noisy, crowded, and none too clean. They sat in a booth with oilcloth seats, eating hamburgers and drinking beer. Tommy drank his, not liking the taste, trying to keep up his end of the conversation. Priscilla was eighteen, she told "him; she and her sister worked in a mill and their father wouldn't let them make dates. "But we have our fun, you bet, " she snickered. "We never go out with anybody our father knows. "
After finishing his beer Tommy found himself talking more freely. Priscilla hung on his words, and he felt flattered, eager that she shouldn't compare him unfavorably with Mario. Mario looked handsome and flushed, his blue Western shirt open at the neck, his arm around Helen's shoulder. He was telling small anecdotes and stories in a way Tommy had never yet heard him talk to an outsider.
How would I know? I never saw him around outsiders. Not till now.
They sat over another round of beer and then left. Mario's girl told him where to drive, and Tommy was not entirely surprised when Mario stopped the car in a deserted lane.

Priscilla had been snuggling against him since they left the roadhouse; Tommy pulled her closer and kissed her, and she did not protest.
From the front seat he heard murmurs, soft giggles, creaks and rustles,, and muted laughter. Priscilla murmured, "Bashful, aren't you? I like bashful boys. Better than the wolf kind, anyhow. " In the car she seemed somehow warmer, prettier, soft under his hands and his exploring mouth; she did not stop his questing hands as Little Ann had done, merely laughed. The random sounds from the front of the car were mysteriously exciting. He realized, not forming it clearly into words, that he was standing at some kind of crossroads; a confusion of curiosity, resentment, and a kind of hidden spite drove him on.

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He knew that these were all the wrong reasons for what was happening, felt momentary doubts, then a kind of confused relief; at least he would not be shown up as inadequate or somehow abnormal. The girl giggled at a certain crucial moment and he felt sudden loathing, felt sick and filthy, hating her, hating himself for what he had done. If this was normal, he decided, to hell with it. What had he said? I wouldn't do it unless I liked somebody. Yeah. Famous last words.

He was silent while the girl straightened herself around, pulling her dress smooth where it had been tucked up under her body, dragging a comb through her hair with a sharp little upward toss of her head at the end of each stroke. He did a little straightening himself, hating the whole fumbling business. It wasn't worth it, damn it, it just wasn't worth it!

After a while Mario leaned over the back of the seat and asked, "You kids about ready to get going?"

"Yeah, sure, any time, " Tommy said, hating the smugness in Mario's voice, hearing it echoed in his own. Priscilla took Tommy's hand in hers and he endured the hot, dampish touch. The back of Helen's hair was tumbled all over her head. It had annoyed him when Priscilla combed her hair, but the other girl's uncombed sweaty neckline disgusted him worse. Her collar was not clean.

Mario started the car. Helen said something to the effect that they probably had a girl in every town.

"Two, " Mario replied cheerily.

"You better let us out around the corner, " Helen said as Mario turned onto the street where she had directed them. Mario complied, then seized Helen and kissed her, a pro-

longed kiss. Tommy, aware of the necessity and the convention, followed suit. But he could hardly conceal a sigh of relief as the two girls got out.

Mario drove down the street a little way and stopped. "Come up in front, why don't you?"

"Okay. " Tommy climbed over the seat back. Mario was smiling into the distance, and Tommy said sharply, "Real pleased with yourself, aren't you?"

"Why. not especially, " Mario said, with that maddening good nature. "I thought you might be, though. " Suddenly he mashed the accelerator to the floor and they took off down the dark street Like a bat out of hell, the motor racing and whining. "God damn them all, damn all the stupid broads in the world!"

Edgy, empty, sick, Tommy shut his eyes. Why, why, why? The rush of wind on his face did nothing to cool it. At last the wind abated a little; Mario had slowed the car. He said at last in an odd, empty voice, "You see, Tom? It doesn't mean a thing. Not a goddamn thing. Why make such a big deal out of it?" He drove another mile or so without a word. Then he said, not looking at Tommy, "Listen, it's after midnight. Your parents think you're with me. My folks think I'm out helling around. If they compare notes—which they won't — we'll think of something to tell them—say I got drunk and couldn't drive and

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we slept on the floor at the girls' house or something. Why not spend the night in a motel someplace, okay?"
Tommy felt something odd happening to the stiffness in his face. "You wouldn't even sit in a bar with me—said the barkeep had spotted us. Now you think we can stay in a motel without anybody getting wise?"
Mario stared at his hands. Tommy could still smell the girl's face powder. "Any motel that still has vacancies this time of night isn't going to be picky. And this car's got California plates. "
The small row of tourist cabins was dingy and dark, but a greenish neon sign still burned: vacancy. Mario left him in the car, but Tommy heard, through the open door of the little office, Mario's deep voice answering the night clerk's. He came out, stuffing change in his pocket, then slid under the wheel again and steered the car into place before the end cabin.
Inside it was small and stuffy. Mario switched on the over-

head light and the fan, looked briefly at Tommy and away again. Tommy sat down on the chenille spread, and Mario said, "The motel industry has made a million dollars out of the fact that a double comes cheaper than twin beds. "
Tommy stared at the floor. "You told me at rehearsal I wasn't ready for a double. "
"Hell, " Mario said, deadpan, "I'm going to make you sleep on the floor. What are you, queer or something?"
Undressing, Tommy realized that the smell of the girl was still on his skin. He stood in the shower, scrubbing himself fiercely with the midget cake of Lifebuoy soap, letting the hot torrent wash off his disgust. Mario came and edged into the stall beside him. He was very quiet, but at last, wiping soap from his face, he said, just loud enough to be heard over the drumming water, "Every damn time some female shit tells me I've got a good body I want to take a knife to it, or something. "
Tommy shivered under the hot water as Mario continued, still in that icy, rigid tone, "That was a lousy thing to do to you, Tom. I wanted you to be sickened, disgusted. To know it doesn't mean a damn thing. But I shouldn't have done it. It—it doesn't have to be like that. Not nasty. I've had girls and—and enjoyed it. No big charge, it isn't my style, but it can be a—kind of a nice thing. A—a friendly thing. I should have had the common decency not to spoil it for you. I'm a —I'm a low-down, filthy bastard!"
Tommy turned and put his arms around Mario. They were both wet and slippery with the strong soap. "Stop that!" he demanded. "God damn it, stop it! I can't stand it, that's all. Every goddamn time you start in callin' yourself names we end up havin' a big fight! Just stop it, that's all, just shut up!" Mario twitched in his arms, and for a moment Tommy thought he was laughing, but he wasn't. "I'm sorry,, kid. God, I'm so sorry. If I could make it up to you somehow—"
Tommy held him tighter, under the water that had suddenly turned icy cold. He said, shivering, "You don't have to. You have. Just by—by being here. "
His teeth began to chatter. Mario pulled him out of the shower, and they toweled each other dry, rubbing harshly, impersonally as they did after a

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performance. Shivering, Tommy crawled under the clammy sheet. Mario hunted in the bureau for an extra blanket, flung it over Tommy, then climbed in beside him and pulled him close.

"You smell so clean now, Tommy. "
"I feel clean. " He added after a minute, "Funny. A little while ago I was all excited. Now it's all gone. I just feel sleepy. "
"Go to sleep, then. kid. I just thought it would be nice to be with you—like this—without having to be so damn scared. "
"You bet. " They were silent, bare legs entwined, cheek against cheek. After a time Tommy said, "You've had— women? It can be—different than that?"
"Oh, hell, yes. "
"And the girl? Who was—"
"Private property, " Mario said gently, "keep off the grass. "
"Huh?"
"Every grown-up has a few secrets, kid. Mind if I don't talk about that?"
"Okay. " Tommy was silent again. Mario touched him in a way he knew—an invitation, a question—but Tommy did not move.
"Sore at me?"
"No, I guess not, " Tommy said, thinking about it. "More like sore at myself. It's like I been trying to prove something to myself. Or you. But I'm not about to do that anymore. "
They held each other gently, not talking. Mario murmured, "We should've ditched the bitches and come here first. "
"Yeah. " Tommy chuckled. "They do seem to have taken the edge off. As the egg said to the frying pan... "
"Okay, dammit, I'll play straight man: What did the egg say to the frying pan?"
"If you get hot before I get hard, remember I've just been laid. "
"Shut up, " Mario said, embarrassed. "What a way to talk!"
"Well, I told you it was a fresh egg. "
"Fresh is right. Shame on you!" It was something so new it really embarrassed them a little, being alone and really free from interruption. They fell asleep with their heads on the same pillow. Toward morning Mario woke out of a brief doze to feel Tommy's lips brush his face.
"Aren't you asleep, Lucky?"
"I didn't want to waste time sleeping, " Tommy said in a whisper, "it's going to be morning so soon. "
His voice, which had begun to change, sounded high in

the darkness, and Mario, deeply moved, murmured, "Someday I'll read you a poem that goes like that. Ah God, ah God, that day should come so soon... "
"Funny. I never think of you knowing about poetry. "
"I don't, really. I've been exposed to it, that's all, caught a light case. Like the measles. Typical pansy's interest, you know. Like ballet. " Mario reached up and touched the soft face bent over his. Something wet splashed on his cheek.

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"You crying?" he said in horror. "Lucky, come here, come here!" He sat up and cradled the boy against his bare chest, bending to caress the nape of Tommy's neck with his lips.
"Come on, come on, I don't want you to cry. You're such a little tough guy, I forget what a kid you really are. What's the matter, Lucky?"
"N-nothing. I don't know. We—we just have to be so—so bottled up and careful all the time, I just sort of come to pieces—"
Mario went on rocking him. His throat hurt. "Listen, kid, " he said at last, and put his hand under Tommy's chin, turning the boy's face up to his, "would it make it easier on you to—to cut out all this stuff, the sex stuff, and just be brothers again like we were?" He felt Tommy twitch in his arms, a start of denial, and held him tighter. "Look, Tommy, I'd love you just as much. I know how you feel, but honest to God, kid. you get so worked up it scares me. It scares the living hell out of me to see you all torn up like this. Crying. '" • "I'm sorry. I'll try—I know you hate it—"
"I don't hate it, kid. It scares me, is all. "
"You think I'll get all tore up and upset and tell on you or something? What the hell do you think I am?"
Mario stopped him with a hard squeeze. "No, no, kid, that's not it. I know I can trust you. Hell, I trust you with my life, every day, don't I? On the rig? It's not me; it's what it's doing to you! The only thing in the world I want is for you to be happy, and when I see you like this— Kid, it's killing me to think I'm doing this to you!"
"Look, if you want to call it all off—" Tommy began, but his voice caught in his throat and he began to cry again, with a weary hopelessness.
"I could try to keep my hands off you, if that would help, " Mario said, "but it's too late for that, and anyway it wouldn't change the way I feel. The only way to call it off now would be to quit the circus, and I swear I've wondered if that isn't

the only decent thing to do before I louse up your life for keeps!"
"I think I'd die if you did, " Tommy said, his voice shaking. "And it's not going to make me feel any better if you throw me over and go around screwing girls right under my nose!"
"I said I was sorry about that, Tommy, " Mario said, exhausted. "Is there anything I can do—anything at all—that will make you feel better about that? Lucky, you're chilled through, lying there like that. Come under the covers, let me warm you up. "
He wrapped Tommy in his arms. Tommy lay silent against him, limp and still. It was not the good drowsiness they both understood but, rather, a sort of hopeless quiet, a despair so total it approached complete calm. Finally he said, "Do you think we can just go on the way we are, then?"
"Do you want to, Tommy?"
"You were the one who taught me there's a big difference between what we want and what we can have. I'm sick of you asking me what I want. I'm asking what we can have. "

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"Fair enough. " He had armored the kid with toughness himself, why should it hurt so much? Mario had to wait, disciplining his voice, before he could speak. "All I can give you to hang on to is this: Next winter, if you still feel the same way, it's going to be easier. You'll be older. They won't watch you so close. "
"Next winter seems like a million years off, " Tommy said, and lay quiet, staring at the white shape of the pillow. "Like last winter. I never thought things would turn out this way. "
"Me, neither. I wanted you, sure—right from the first time we worked together—"
"Did you?" Tommy stared at him in amazement.
"Oh, sure. I thought you knew. But I knew that even if I never laid a hand on you, we meant something special to each other, we'd had each other in a funny kind of way—"
Tommy said, with a child's literalness, "You mean that time at the house, when you came in my room and—and pretended, afterward, nothing happened?"
"No, " Mario said, too involved in what he was saying even to be embarrassed, "not that. I mean the way we are together, flying, in our duo routines—there was that between us, anyhow. And that was almost a kind of lovemaking. "

"Awfully public lovemaking, " Tommy said, trying to be flippant.
"I didn't mean it that way. " His seriousness made Tommy's smile slide away. "But dancing is sexual, you know. Like the flight patterns of birds. " Mario raised himself on his elbow. "One of my ballet teachers once—when he was talking about levitation, adagio dancing—he got into talking about flight dreams. And then he turned to me and said, 'Matt Gardner knows what I'm talking about, because the flying trapeze has the same kind of appeal: It's the acting out of flight dreams. Which are sex dreams. ' "
"Angelo said something like that. The night we were all looking at Lucia's scrapbook. "
"Funny it should be Angelo. A lot of the finest aerial work is sexual—symbolic, anyhow—and trapeze work especially. It seems to me that a lot of it is sublimated homosexuality brought up to a fine art. But if you said that to Angelo, he'd laugh his head off, and if you convinced him, you'd ruin a fine flyer, because he'd get self-conscious about it. With him. what there is of it—and I think there's a lot, though if I said that to his face he'd either laugh himself sick or kick my teeth down my throat—it all goes into the flying he does, and the conscious part of him—well, hell, you know Angelo. And I never met a female flyer who was all girl. "
"Oh, come on, your own mother had four kids!"
"Yeah. That's what I mean. The family had Lu married off before she was old enough to think it out for herself, and being Catholic, she probably had four kids because it never occurred to her that there was anything she could do about it. But stop and think. You know Lucia. Do you think any self-respecting SPCA would give Lucia a kitten to raise? I wouldn't. Sure, living at home, she puts on a good act, pretending that all she cares about is whether the

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spaghetti's going to burn. You didn't know her, you weren't around, when I was a kid. Oh, hell, how did we get off on that? Anyhow, like I said, with Angelo it's all instinct—he never thinks it out-—and maybe that's the way it ought to be. Maybe I shouldn't stop and reason it all out like this. I don't mean it's all necessarily sex. Any more than dancing is all sex. I mean they all come from the same place in your guts, the thing that makes sex work. Your insides, your feelings. I think that's why you and I are so good together, and why,

when we're working hard, we don't have much left over even for—even for this stuff, " he said, touching Tommy gently.
Tommy thought about that. Then he said, "I thought the reason we were so good together was because—well, you taught me to fly, you sort of are flying where I'm concerned, and when I'm thinking about flying I'm thinking about you—"
"Then why aren't Angelo and I one of those perfect teams?" Mario demanded.
Tommy thought, You sort of are, on the triple, but he did not say it aloud as Mario went on:
"Angelo damn near raised me. He taught me everything I know. Don't get me wrong, I love Angelo a whole lot—it's like he was my own real father. He's a wonderful catcher, and patient—my God, do you have any idea what it's like to catch anybody my size and weight on a triple? But we never really lit up together the way you and I did right from the first. Right at the start, Papa Tony saw it: You and I together make something more than the sum of the parts. Papa said once, Tommy, that you were going to be something very, very special. And I'm afraid—oh, God, Tommy, I'm so afraid—I'm scared to death, " he said, burying his face in the pillow.
"Scared? Scared of what, Mario?"
"Scared of wrecking what's so special about you. Scared of getting you so hung up you can't work with anybody but me. "
Tommy put his arms around Mario, pressing his whole body against him. "I wouldn't want to. "
Mario turned over and pulled Tommy against him, hard.
"Oh, Jesus, Lucky, " he said, "that's what I was scared of, and if it's like that, if it's already happened—" Tommy heard him swallow, his voice too thick to speak. Finally he said, "Listen, Lucky. We'll probably go on just the way we always have. We're a great team, even if—because of the way we feel about each other. But this is the rest of it. These lousy fights we keep having, and—and having to be like this—the way we are together—" He couldn't go on. He wasn't crying, but he couldn't make his voice do what he wanted it to.
Tommy said fiercely, "Listen, we promised each other something. Remember? We promised we'd keep it off the platform, we'd never let it get into our work. "
Mario got control of his voice again. "Yeah, I know. And

you're better at it than I am. You're just a kid, but do you think I don't know that? But here's one other thing we could do. Now that we know about it, we

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could try and—and use it. Build it into our work, try and make ourselves so good together nobody's ever going to want to break us up. It could be dangerous. We might get so we couldn't work with anyone else, and then we might have to break up; one of us could get hurt or—or killed, we might have an awful fight, we might change, come to hate each other and we'd still be tied to each other by this—this—by whatever it is between us. "
"I want that, " Tommy whispered. His eyes overflowed again, but he didn't care. "Because then they could never break us up—"
Mario held him against the pillow, kissing him again and again, blindly. "Here's how much I want that. If we ever have to, Lucky, I'll quit flying and catch for you. If it's the only way we can stay together!"
"I wouldn't let you do that, Mario. "
"Let's hope it never comes to that But it's the only thing I can see ahead for us. To make ourselves into a team so perfect that nobody will ever dare break us up because they won't dare destroy the thing we are—"
Tommy choked. "Can I say—something awful?"
"Anything you want to, kid. Anything, right now. "
"I hate you, " Tommy said into his pillow. "I hate you sometimes. I wish I didn't love you, but I can't—can't stop— and it's all mixed up with how I feel about flying. I don't know—I wish—I wish—Damn it, " he burst out, gasping, "I wish I was a girl, then it wouldn't matter if I—I loved you—"
Mario's face twisted and contorted; he caught Tommy to him, anguished. "No, " he said, gasping, "no, no, no, Lucky, no—" He held him tight, cradling him, trying to shield them both from this unendurable knowledge. "No, no you don't— I know what you mean, Lucky, I swear I do. It would be easier, maybe, but you've just got to face it, ragazzo. We are what we are. I know it's rough on you—we're just going it blind, making up all our own rules for being the way we are. We can't do things other people can. But we've just got to work out what's right for us, I'll try, Lucky. I know I'm rotten to you. But if we love each other enough, and if—if we can keep from hating each other too much, then maybe —maybe we can make it, some way or another. "
Tommy turned up his face and kissed Mario, like a trusting

child, but then they were clinging together, in a kind of helpless, anguished need. For Tommy it was not really sexual, not now, just a kind of frenzy to come closer and closer, to merge not only his body but his very substance, his whole being, with Mario.
"Lucky—Lucky—fanciullo—caro, caro—don't cry—" ' "I can't ever get close enough to you, Mario—if I can't get closer to you I'll die—"
"There, there, then—here, baby, like this—here, feel my
heart beating, feel this—is this close enough, fanciullo?
There, there, don't cry, don't—okay? Okay. " *
He felt the sobbing slowly subside. Confused, exhausted, they lay in each other's arms, as if despair had blended into some kind of desperate sacrament that must bind them for all time. Tommy whispered, "I don't ever want to let you go. Don't let me go—"

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Mario choked on his answer: "I never will, Lucky. I never could. Whatever happens, whatever we do to each other, we're part of each other now. "

CHAPTER 19

September slipped away, and Tommy felt nearly desperate as the season drew to a close. After the brutal honesty of that night in the motel, Mario had withdrawn again, and Tommy, helplessly aware that the whole roots of his emotional life were committed to the whim of a difficult, high-strung, and temperamental man, could not find or create conditions to reveal his anxiety. He had been mauled into stoicism; now he took angry pride in matching Mario's taut control.

They had one more bitter, flaring quarrel, a stupid business about a sweater of Mario's that Tommy had worn without permission. Mario, who usually overlooked or even encouraged such liberties, had for some reason chosen to flare up about it. On the day of the last performance, they were barely on speaking terms. Tommy spent the interval between shows in the rigging truck, grimly packing the costumes into labeled cartons. While he was tying slippers into pairs by their colored strings, rolling worn-out tights so that the holes

showed uppermost, he found himself cherishing a dimming hope that Mario would seek him out here, take advantage of the unfamiliar solitude. Not till the early-falling October dusk heralded the approach of the night show did he give up and go to his family's trailer, late for supper.

After the show he lingered at the board they used for a dressing table, gathering up his personal oddments: comb and brush, a roll of tape, a half-used tube of sunburn cream. He put them into a shoebox. Papa Tony stopped behind him and said, "I talked this afternoon with your father, Tommy. Your pay for the season is banked for you; he has the details. Here is something extra from all of us, a little present for you, just for being such a good boy, nice to have with us. Buy yourself something nice with it. " He tucked a bill in Tommy's shirt pocket. "We will see you on the first of January. "

Tommy said shy thanks. Angelo came and clasped his shoulders between his two hands. "Get a good rest this fall, you rascal—I'm going to work the britches off you this spring. Don't you let them talk you into playing football;. you want to do anything to keep in shape, take up running or track. " He stopped and looked around. "Listen, Tom, I know Matt gave you a rough time this summer. He's not an easy guy to get along with. I want you to know we all appreciate the way you go out of your way to get along with him. You know—" He stopped, as if unsure what he ought to say or how he ought to say it. "For a while I was afraid he'd be a bad influence on you. He was a wild kid, you know. Did you know he had a police record?"

Tommy said, scrupulously truthful, "He told me he'd been in jail. "

"Yeah. I shouldn't kick, it kept him out of the Army, but still—well, anyhow, having you to look after, I think it steadied him down some. I want you to know we appreciate it. " Angelo hugged him, kissed him roughly on the cheek. "You be good, kid. Take care of yourself, now. See you this winter. Everything all set in here? Okay, let's lock up, " he said. "We're pulling out sometime

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tonight. " He tucked his makeup case under his arm and walked away, whistling.
Tommy hunted the backyard fruitlessly for Mario. At last, when the whole lot was dark and he knew his mother would be wondering why he did not come in, he started wearily back. There were already blank spaces in the line of trailers, where a few of the acts had left as soon as the night

show was done. As he was about to slip silently into the Zane trailer, he heard a low whistle and turned, to see Mario standing beneath a streetlight just outside the lot. He lifted one hand and beckoned. When Tommy reached him, Mario motioned him to silence and, taking him by One elbow, led him outside the circle of light. The highway leading past the lot was dark and silent, and a row of lights, like sparks or jewels, led away endlessly over the prairie in diminishing perspective. Tommy broke the silence at last: "Listen, Mario, my mother is going to wake up and look at the time and give me holy hell!"
Mario shrugged. "Well, it's the last time in a couple of month? you'll have to worry about me getting you in any kind of trouble. I just figured we could say good-bye without the whole show watching, that's all. "
The dry leaves of a cottonwood rustled over their heads, accentuating the fact that they were talking almost in whispers. "Angelo was getting on my back about being— being so rough on you, kid. Damn it, I had to, can't you see? I had to be rough on you, Tommy. If I wasn't—wasn't tough that way, I'd melt down and go soft all over and you'd find me lying in a puddle someplace. " His voice cracked.
"I don't care, " Tommy said. "You can be as rough on me as you want to, in front of people. Guess Angelo wasn't figuring on the kind of time you were giving me behind his back. "
First hesitantly, then unmistakably, Mario laughed. In the darkness he flung his arms around Tommy and hugged him, a brief, intense hug. "No hard feelings, okay, kid?"
Tommy chuckled and said, "I'm not going to answer that. "
Mario stared, caught the meanings, and snorted. "Watch your language, you fresh egg. " Then, for Tommy was shivering in the cutting wind, "Hey, listen, I shouldn't keep you standing around in the cold like this. Angelo's likely to think I've gone off to get drunk, or something, and come looking for me; we're supposed to be pulling out around three in the morning. We'd better say good-bye now. "
"Okay, " Tommy said tonelessly. "Goodbye. "
"Lucky, what's the matter?"
"What do you think?" Tommy found, to his dismay, that his voice was shaking. "Maybe you can just say good-bye

like this, for months, just like that, and—and not care. I can't. "
Mario spun him roughly around. His face was shadowed against the sudden murk of clouds over the moon. "Who the hell told you I didn't care? But— listen, kid, I know this is rough on you. I tried to figure out some way-—but some things are just like a fall in the net. You don't get used to it, and it

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doesn't get any easier, but all you can do is roll with it. And I can't take your falls for you. Sure I hate to say good-bye like this. Sure I'll miss you. But there are some things I can't make any easier than they are, and it's no use trying. Okay?"
"What the hell am I supposed to say to that?" Mario sighed. "In some ways it's a good thing we're breaking up for a while, " he said. "It will give you a chance to do some good hard thinking about all this. About the kind of thing we've been doing, about the kind of life you want. Someday you might come to see it the way other people would see it. Contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Or something worse. "
"You keep harping on that, " Tommy said, and heard his voice break into soprano again. "If I'm old enough to risk my goddamn neck forty feet up in the air, I sure as hell ought to be old enough to decide who I want to sleep with!" "Just the same. When you're a few thousand miles away, and you can think straight, you may start hating me. "
"Don't get off on that, Mario. It kills me when you start that. "
"Okay. Okay, kid. " Mario patted his arm. "But it won't hurt us to be apart a while. January's not so long. "
As if drawn by a magnet, they clasped four hands together. Tommy, still shaking, was braced and stiffened by the drawn, gaunt face above him. I can't take your falls for you. "So long, Mario. See you in January. "
"Don't say good-bye, kid. Just say good night. " His hands tightened on Tommy's, but although they were close enough for an embrace, he did not kiss him, and Tommy thought, bewildered, Why not? Angelo did. "I said it once, Tommy: Tu sei mi fortuna o sventura... Maybe bad luck's better than none. Maybe you know now why I said it. " He strode away, not looking back. Tommy turned and went blindly toward his trailer. The dull ache in him was worse than tears. He bumped blindly

into some piece of furniture inside, and heard his mother call out, "That you, Tommy? It's late—where were you?"
"Talking over the season with—with the Santellis. Forgot the time. "
"Well, get to bed—don't wake up your dad. " Tommy undressed in the dark and went to bed, too disciplined to cry, not even aware now that that was what he wanted to do. He heard the clock ticking away the hours, and some time before dawn he heard a car start up, the creaking as a trailer lumbered away. That would be the Santelli trailer, pulling out. Then he turned over, burying his face in his crumpled pillow, and felt all the despair and violence in him, beyond tears. He did not believe it was possible to live this way; it seemed as if even dying would not turn off the blind, despairing ache inside him. And yet through it all he knew that when morning came he would get up and go silently about the ordinary business of the day, like always. It was just part of being what he was. But already time had begun to count off, for him, in the rhythm of waiting which had now become his whole being. At just past fifteen Tommy had learned one of life's hardest lessons, lying in wait for the young and guileless: that despair, like love, leaves no visible signs, even to those who are supposed to know us best; and that despair, like love, exists in its own

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time, outside clocks and calendars, a ceaseless rhythm of waiting, of progression, and of pain. He felt he would not really exist again till January, when he could go home to California, to the Santellis, to Mario.
His father had wired the time his bus would arrive, but when Tommy got to the bus station there was no one to meet him. For a moment he wondered if the Santellis thought he was old enough, this year, to find his own way out to the house. Then, through the crowds of holiday travelers, he saw Mario, looking—as always in street clothes—dark, thin, slouched, untidy—wholly unlike himself.
"Hi, there. "
"Hello, Mario. "
"Let me take your suitcase. Good trip?"
"Fair. Kids crying all night. And a girl who wanted to flirt
or maybe just wanted a shoulder to sleep on. "
A grin flickered on Mario's face, and for the first time

Tommy recognized him. "You shouldn't be so damn attractive to girls. "
"Professional asset, my dad said. "
Mario had a new car: a used Cadillac, sleek, dark gray, only four or five years old.
"Hey—nice car!"
Mario opened the door and tossed Tommy's suitcase inside. "Had a bit of luck this fall and put all my spare cash in it. That old Chrysler fell apart on me, and I picked this one up cheap from a guy at the ballet school. "
"Eight cylinders, or one of those twelves?"
"I haven't the faintest idea. It runs good, though, and doesn't keep breaking down on me, and that's all I care about. You can look under the hood sometimes if you really care. Watch-your fingers, " he warned automatically before slamming the door. "Listen, Tom, I answered the phone when your father's wire was phoned in; I just happened to be there. I told Lucia you wouldn't be in till tomorrow, okay?"
"Why?"
Mario said, not looking at him, fussing with the gearshift, "Last year you wanted to see my place. I thought you'd like to come and stay overnight there. Look, if you don't want to, you can call the house and tell them it was a mix-up—"
Tommy felt as if a crushing weight had been lifted from his chest. "Don't be a dope. "
Mario lived in a huge, crumbling old house, cut up years ago into rooms and small apartments. His room was on the third floor, big and almost empty. The floor was bare wood and carefully polished, and a ballet barre had been fixed at one end of the room. Besides a table and a metal bed, there was no other furniture except a bookcase with a lot of thick books in it. Tommy knew Mario read a lot on the road, mostly pulp magazines, but he had never seen him with a book in his hand. He went to look at them while Mario hung his jacket in the closet, but most of them were about ballet. He picked up one with the title Athletics in the Ancient World and leafed through it. It was full of pictures

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that looked like something in a museum: old vases and dishes and statues, mostly of naked men running, throwing spears, jumping hurdles. He shrugged and put the book back.
"A lot of this stuff belongs to Eddie Keno, " Mario said. "He'll be in later. Sit down somewhere, why don't you?"
There were no chairs, so Tommy sat down on the bed.

Mario pulled out a small chenille rug from under it and sat down on the floor, kicking off his shoes as all the Santellis did indoors. •
"Who's this Keno, character?"
"Someone I met at the ballet school. Winters I live here, and he lives with his folks and hangs around with a gang of science fiction fans down in the city. He keeps some stuff here and I let him use the place if he wants to bring somebody here. Summers when I'm on the road he moves in here. It works out pretty good. We don't really see a lot of each other, but it means we get to keep the place and it's rent-controlled. It was pretty bad during the war, right down here in the blackout zone—" He gestured at the thick heavy curtains rolled up at the top of the windows. "Sometimes we got air-raid scares, but nothing ever happened. "
"We got that, too, the year we lived in Florida. There was all that talk about submarines, but all we ever got was blackout drills. You have a good fall?"
"Pretty good. Angelo and I took a six-week booking with an indoor circus up in Seattle. We had Liss working with us. "
"Liss? But I thought—"
"It's kind of a long story. Sorenson wanted a girl in the act, and Cleo Fortunati found us a kid called Linda Slade. But a week before we opened, she went to the net and broke her kneecap, and there wasn't time to get anybody else. Angelo sent a frantic wire to Liss. So she took the next train, dumped Davey with Lucia, worked three days with us, and when we opened, there she was. Dave Renzo raised hell, but we had a "show opening and there was nothing else to do. We had a marvelous time. There's nobody in the world like Liss. "
Tommy felt an odd, illogical jealousy, and was ashamed of it. Did he begrudge Mario a few weeks with his beloved sister? Mario fished out a clipping from his rubbed wallet and handed it over. It was a picture of the three of them, headed
FLYING SANTELLIS SMASH SUCCESS AT SORENSON SHOWS. He read aloud from the caption beneath the picture: " 'Star flyer Mario Santelli, his catcher, Angelo, and his sister, Elissa, exhibited a flying pass and other aerial maneuvers with charm, and poise. '"
"No triple?"
"After all that fuss getting Liss down to work with us, I didn't feel like pushing for it. " Mario folded the clipping and put it away again.

Inside the closet was an assortment of clothes quite unlike any he had seen Mario wear.
"How's the rest of the family?" Tommy asked.
"Fine, except Stel. She's still crawling around looking like a ghost. "

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"Stella? What happened to her?"
Mario hesitated; finally he said, "Okay, you're family, you've got a right to know. Johnny got the kid knocked up, and instead of buying her a wedding ring he took her to a doctor. A crooked one. "
"Oh, jeez... "
"Liss had Johnny's number, all right, " Mario said grimly, "and our dear respectable Grandpa Gardner!" Mario clenched his fist and struck the floor with it. "They were playing outdoor fairs and things up in the Washington state when Stel got caught. Jock went to Grandpa Gardner, and he financed the deal—the reason being, he said, so Johnny wouldn't ruin his life tying up with some little carnival tramp! Tramp!" Mario's eyes blazed. "Girls with the show run a lot more decent than the average town girl, you take it from me! Stel didn't knock herself up! Anyhow, the doctor was a crook, of course—decent ones don't have to risk their licenses On that kind of dirty stuff—and afterward Jock was scared to take her to a hospital till it looked like she was dying. By the time he finally got it through his head that it was life or death, she was so far gone that the hospital had to report it to the cops, and all things considered, it was the nastiest mess of the year. "
"Sounds like a pretty rotten thing to do, " Tommy said. He' wouldn't have believed it of Johnny.
"So guess who stepped in and helped?" Mario continued.
"Papa Tony?"
"Christ, no! He'd have horsewhipped the kid, and Johnny knew it. Uncle Angelo, that's who. He loaned them money— paid the hospital bill out of his own pocket—and then he sat down with Johnny in that hospital corridor and he put the fear of God into him. I mean that literally: He got him a priest, and they were married in the hospital. Then he brought them home, gave them his own room—you know that big corner room, the room he and Terry used to have—and never even told Lucia what a rotten heel her baby boy had turned out to be, just let them think the kids had been married all

season and Stel had a fall and lost the baby. So don't you tell, okay?"
"The poor kid, " Tommy whispered. "Is she okay now?"
"Well, sort of. I mean, she looks awful—she only weighs about eighty pounds. She had blood poisoning; they gave her some kind of new wonder drug or she wouldn't have made it at all. "
"Johnny ought to have married her first, or let her be, " Tommy said. "I don't care if he is your brother, it was a lousy, rotten thing to do!"
"Well, you won't get any arguments from me on that, but I feel sort of sorry for Jock, too. Angelo told me that when it really hit him—how sick Stel was—he just sat down and bawled like a baby. And you really can't blame him too much—I mean, the way Lu felt about having kids. I think maybe he thought he was doing Stel a favor or something, not making her have it like a good Catholic girl—"
Outside there were steps on the stairs, then somebody called, "Matt?"

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"That's Eddie now. " Mario opened the door, letting in a thickset boy in his early twenties, in tight blue jeans and a heavy red sweater. He had a full childish mouth and curly, almost kinky black hair cut close all over his head.
"So this is the famous Tommy, " he said in a sweet, high-pitched tenor, taking Tommy's hand and holding it. "How are you, Tommy? Matt's told me a lot about you. " He let Tommy go and said to Mario, nudging him, "Butch, but oh, so pretty! So this is what you've been keeping under wraps down here, Malt?"
"Cut out the comedy, Eddie. And keep off the grass—I mean it!"
"Oh, well, Tommy, we can anyway be friends, I hope, " said Eddie, and to Tommy's furious embarrassment, he batted his curly eyelashes at him, took his hand again, and gave it an enthusiastic little squeeze. Tommy stared in amazement and pulled his hand loose. Keno had the sort of exuberance Tommy associated with drunks, yet he appeared cold sober.
"Going to bring him around to meet the boys, Matt?"
"I very much doubt it, " Mario replied.
"How old are you, anyway, Tommy?" Keno asked.
"Sixteen, " Tommy said, anticipating by a few months.
Keno whistled, saying "Jailbait, and how! I didn't know you went for San Quentin chicken, Matt!"

"Look, damn it—"
"Anyhow, it gives you a good excuse for not bringing him around the bars. Man, would he be pickings for the first big cruising—"
"Knock it off, Eddie. I don't run with that gang myself much when I'm working. "
"You shouldn't allow your family to absorb you like that, " Eddie said seriously. "It's very bad for your psyche and your personality. My analyst told me—"
"Oh, screw your analyst!"
Keno murmured, "He really isn't my type, darling. "
"Anyhow, you let me worry about my own psyche and my own personality, okay, kid? I like my work and I love my family. "
"But do they like you? Or do they like the good-boy part you play for them?"
Mario said, with an irritable shrug, "Come on, knock it off, Eddie, I mean it. I've got no time for all that analytical crap. Do you tell your mother and your grandmother all that stuff?"
Keno crumpled his face disparagingly. He leaned over Tommy and said in a confidential tone, "Maybe you can get rid of a few of old Matt's inhibitions. You look like you've got what it takes. And if he doesn't appreciate it—" He put an insinuating arm around Tommy's shoulder.
Mario said, "Come off it, Eddie, it's wasted on the kid—he's not picking up your signals, he isn't on that wavelength at all. Sit down and tell us how things are going. Want a drink?"
"Got any gin? Or just that dago red wine you like?"
"Sorry. Dago red is all there is. You drank up all that was left of the gin last time you were here. "

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"Skip it; I'd rather drink red ink. " Eddie perched on the foot of the bed beside Tommy, nudging close to him. He used his hands, which were square and beautifully manicured, to illustrate every phrase. Despite the heavy masculine body, the heavy shadow of beard around his chin, he seemed to be trying to act—Tommy put it crudely to himself—as sissy as he could. It made Tommy nervous, with an old apprehension.
"Matt, I simply forgot to tell you, Bart Reeder finally got a good part!"
"Bart? Nightclub? Cabaret?"
"No, no, darling, an honest-to-God part in an honest-to-God movie. No walk-on, either—a good part opposite Louise Lanart. They say he had to sleep with Johnny Mac—you

know who I mean—to get it, but it's a fat part romancing Lanart—"
Mario whistled. "Bart playing the great lover? That ought to be something to watch!"
"Hell, the man's an actor, whatever you say about him. But you knew Reeder a hell of a lot better than I ever did. "
"Not all that well, " Mario said defensively. "He hung around the studio a lot, that's all. Not much of a dancer, but he got to be a damn fine acrobat. "
Keno whistled suggestively. "I can imagine. Bet he was a cutie in tights!"
"You'd better believe it, " agreed Mario, laughing.
"You ought to know. "
Mario laughed again, looking away. Then, looking straight back at Keno, he said, "Look, for your information, Bart hung around a lot with me because I was presentable. I didn't swish all over the place, and he could be seen with me without giving himself away in straight places. Christamighty, Eddie, you aren't jealous of me and Bart, are you?"
"Should I be?" Keno asked, and with a sudden flare of jealousy Tommy recognized the name. Bart Reeder. He had seen him in cowboy movies and adventure movies, playing villains and sidekicks. Well, he supposed that in this part of the world, being in the movies was nothing special.
Eddie sighed. "Oh, well, we can always say we knew him when. "
"How'd you hear about it, anyhow?" Mario asked.
"Dropped in at the Circle Square last night—it's all over the place, " Eddie said. "Bart was there celebrating. Asked about you. "
Mario shook his head. "You can have my share of Bart Reeder and welcome. I don't go for the rough stuff, and he had some pretty fancy ideas that turned me off. "
"Give me a hint, " Keno said.
Mario shook his head. "Not in front of the kid. But knowing you, I can tell you right now you wouldn't go for it. "
"Yeah, " Keno said, laughing strangely, "you do know what I like, don't you?"
Abruptly he jumped up off the bed, exclaiming with a sweeping motion, "Oh, my dears, I have an afternoon class I just can't cut again! Be seeing you, Tommy. " He grabbed up his sweater, and ran. "Have fun, kids—think of old Uncle Eddie tonight, " he called back as the door

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slammed, and Mario met Tommy's curious look with a shrug.
"Queer sort of character. I mean, peculiar. "
"If that was a question, " Mario said, " 'queer' will do. "
"He acts so—" Tommy gave up, not able to find a word, and Mario supplied it.
"He swishes. Yes, he does. It's an act, you know. No reason he couldn't act as—as masculine—as I do. He's just braver, and—maybe—a little more honest. "
"Yeah, but how'd you like it if I went around actin' like that?"
"I'd probably break your neck. If Angelo didn't break it first. Like him?"
"I guess so. Only he acts like he owns you. "
"And suppose he does?" Mario gave him a hard, level stare.
Tommy started to flare up; then his anger muted into stoical dignity. "That wasn't necessary. If you only wanted to bring me out here to show me your new boy friend—"
"Hell, no. Oh, Keno owned me—or sort of borrowed me —for a while, a couple, three years ago. It never did amount to much. He was just somebody I could talk to, somebody I didn't have to hide from or tell lies to. Keno's mostly talk, anyhow, and you know me. "
"Yeah. An' sometimes you make me wish I didn't. "
Mario went to the door and bolted it. Then he came back and held out his arms to Tommy. Shaking, Tommy went into them. Mario pulled up his head and kissed him and muttered against his mouth, "Say that again, Lucky. Say that again. "
And once again, out of the winter of despair and loneliness, Tommy felt that curious inner security boiling up and filling him, flowing into his emptiness, filling him from head to foot, the solid rock on which his life was built now. With Mario, he felt like himself again.
"Miss me?" he finally got confidence to ask.
"Hell, no, I've had the whole damn ballet corps in and out of here, haven't 'even had time to change the sheets— What the hell do you think, kid? Why do you think I didn't dare write you, not even a Christmas card?" Mario kissed him again, so hard it hurt. But he was smiling now, the tense, screwed-up tautness around his mouth relaxed. He ran his fingers over Tommy's chin.
"Well, what do you know about that! I bet you've started shaving. I feel better. Now I'm not

corrupting a beardless youth; you know what the Greeks had to say about that. "
Tommy said, his head still on Mario's shoulder, "All my life I've heard people say the Greeks had a word for something or other, but I never knew what it was they had a word for. "
Mario chuckled. "Believe it or not, this was what they had a word for, and they were about the only ones who ever did have a word for it that you could repeat in polite society. They were expected to have boy friends, and to love them— it was real respectable, everybody did it. "
"You're kidding!"

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"No, I'm not. I'll show you in a book sometime. They wrote love poems to their boy friends and everything, and nobody minded. People expected it. "
He got up and rummaged briefly in the bookcase, shrugged, leaned back, and quoted, smiling:
" 'Love and friendship are found in their purest form between men. In Sparta every boy of good character had a mature lover who was a teacher to him and a model of manhood. The feeling was that this would serve as an inspiration to virtue and bravery in every young man, so that he would wish to show courage and bravery before his lover. Both lover and youth would rather die than act in any dishonorable manner in one another's sight. ' " He smiled at Tommy and said, "Aristotle. Maybe you heard about him in history class in school, but I bet they didn't teach you that. "
Tommy shook his head. Something swelled in him that was almost pain. He had always known this, somewhere deep inside himself, that Mario brought out the best in him, inspired him to strength and courage, forced him to do just a little better than his best. He said in a whisper, "That's right. That's so right, Mario. "
"Yeah, it is, isn't it? Only that's not here and now. Tom, would you like a drink? It's off season, so it won't matter. It's just kind of a symbol thing; I'd like to—to have a drink with you. "
Tommy felt the familiar melting pliancy spreading inside him. "Sure, anything you say. "
Mario went to the corner shelf and took down a bottle. "Just red wine. Like Lu has for dinner. I never touch anything else. The only time I ever drank hard liquor, I wound up in jail. I'll tell you all about that, someday. " He took a

couple of clean small glasses off the shelf and ceremoniously poured a little wine in each. He handed one to Tommy and they stood looking at each other for a moment.
"Well, " Mario said at last, almost in a whisper, "have we got a toast? To us? To a good season? To what the Greeks had a word for?" He was kidding it, to hide emotion, but it was the old, gentle, familiar look in his eyes, and Tommy felt as if he were being, though gently, turned inside out.
He grinned and said, trying to break it, "I'll give you a toast, okay? How about, 'Keep it off the platform'?"
They drank, laughing at each other. Mario took Tommy's glass and put an arm around him.
"You know, I can't figure people out. Angelo, especially. Johnny and Stel get in trouble, and Stel nearly dies from it, and what's Angelo's first reaction? To rush them off to a priest and make arrangements for them to live happily ever after. Yet here we are, you and me, not making a bit of trouble for anybody, and happier than most people ever manage to be. and if Angelo found it out, he'd half kill us both and make sure I wound up in jail and you got sent to a reform school. Can you figure it out?"
"I'm not trying. " Tommy wrenched the glass out of Mario's hand and put it down on the bed, but it rolled off onto the floor. It rolled there silently, back and forth, and finally came to rest, unnoticed.

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CHAPTER 20

the halls of the Santelli house were quiet when Mario and Tommy arrived early the next afternoon. After Mario helped Tommy put his clothes away in the room that was to be his again this year, they went down to the practice room.

The familiar smell of the room—floor polish, metal polish, dust—struck Tommy with a curious sense of homecoming. The swinging trapezes made faint bright shadows on the floor. Angelo. standing at the foot of the aerial ladder, turned and gave them a quick wave. Tommy, kicking off his shoes, noticed that Angelo was holding the ropes of a mechanic. The ropes went up through a pulley to the ceiling, and down through the swiveled loops on the leather belt that Liss, on

the platform, was fastening around her waist. Dressed in faded and patched tights, her hair braided and thrown back, she was standing with one arm around the rope, frowning in concentration as she struggled one-handed with the buckles. Beside her was a short, dark woman in a close-fitting coverall. Tommy did not recognize her until she turned, but Mario stared, then shouted:

"Lucia, what are you up to now!"

She laughed. "I grow impatient! I am the old ring horse going through my paces... Did you get Tommy all right?"

"Sure, he's here with me, " Mario said. She spotted him and waved. Tommy, returning the wave, remembered with a shock that as far as the family were concerned, his bus had just come in, the night past did not exist. He thought, Dammit, why does it have to be like this? but here in the practice room, that thought just passed like a flicker through his mind and was gone.

Tommy looked around the room. At the catcher's end of the rigging he recognized Barbara, swinging back and forth in the catcher's trapeze. It had been reinforced with a "cradle, " the foot brace used by women catchers and beginners instead of the leg hold used by experienced men. Below her Johnny, barefoot, in old dungarees roughly hacked off above the knees, was counting as she swung.

"One, two, three—that's it, pick it up a little— Hey, is Liss ready?"

Liss jerked at the rope on the mechanic. "It's too tight. It hurts. Do I have to wear it?"

"Yes, " Angelo said harshly. "Your timing yesterday was rotten, and you know it. It used to fit you fine. What have you been doing, gobbling French fries? Or are you expecting again?"

"No, damn it, " Liss shouted, through Lucia's little cluck of reproof, "Johnny had it fixed to fit Barbara! I don't need it and I don't want it! Matt, you tell him I never wear one!"

Angelo leaned against the support pole of the aerial ladder and said, "Kitten, unless I'm catching you myself, you damn well put on that mechanic, and you wear it until I tell you to leave it off, or you come down off there. "

"Hear, hear!" cried Lucia, and turned Liss around with one capable hand, strapping the belt buckle tight.

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Mario laughed, and Liss yelled angrily, "It's fine for you to laugh! You never wear one!"

"Sweetie, " Mario said soothingly, "you want to keep your arms and legs pretty, not all messed up with rope burns like mine. "
Tommy went over to ask Johnny, "What's going on here?"
"What does it look like?" Johnny took his attention off Barbara's swing for a minute. "With any luck we might have an all-girl flying act in a season or two, if the girls will get down to business. Come on, Liss, " he shouted, "what you waiting for?"
Suddenly serious, Liss took the bar from Lucia. They were all very quiet. Liss went off the board, swinging neatly, taking the trapeze on the backswing beneath her bent knees, stretching her wrists to Barbara. Barbara made the catch, a little raggedly, and Johnny yelled, "Wait for her to take you off the bar next time, Liss—you're" still grabbing! Barbie, keep your elbows bent a little more, or something's going to happen to that shoulder! All right, Angelo, let her go. "
As Angelo lowered the ropes of the mechanic, letting Liss drop slowly into the net, somebody said behind Tommy, "Hey, aren't you speaking to me this year?"
He turned to see Stella looking up at him. He held out his hand, but she threw her arms around him and hugged him. She looked thinner, and there were little lines around her mouth that had not been there last year. She felt so frail Tommy was afraid to return her childish hug. He said awkwardly, "Mario told me you'd been sick. "
A shadow crossed her smile. "That's right, I fouled Johnny up right in the middle of the season. " She hesitated. "I guess maybe he told you we're married?"
Tommy nodded. You fouled Johnny up? he thought, incredulous. Like hell! Sounds to me more like he fouled you up, but good. But he didn't say so.
"You're okay now, aren't you. Stel?"
"I guess so. The doctor says I can go back to work, maybe next week, if I feel okay. "
Barbara touched his shoulder. She was taller than Tommy now, a squarely built girl, with curly brown hair, pink-faced with exertion. A towel was thrown over her leotard.
"Hi. Barbie. What you doing up there?"
"What's it look like? I fussed at Lulu about flying, until Johnny said he'd teach me to catch—so here I am. "
"Aren't you awfully light for a catcher?"
Johnny heard the question and turned to say, "That's

rubbish. Size doesn't matter—that's all baloney! That's an old fairy tale, that the catcher has to be the biggest man in the act! There's a trick to it, that's all. You never catch at the full stretch of your arms, and you take up when the flyer hits your wrists. Stel can catch me without hurting herself at all. I taught

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her for a stunt, because it looks so unexpected, a little thing like her catching someone my size. "
"Just the same, " Mario said, joining them, "I like having a catcher solid enough to take the weight. Sooner or later the strain is going to tell. The shoulders are always the weak link. Remember what happened to Barney Parrish? That fall he had wouldn't have laid him up more than a week, but when the shoulder muscle tore, that was it. " Mario made a chopping motion. "Finished. He never went on the rig again. And he was the best there was. "
"Oh, hell, " Johnny said, "I used to catch you, and you're taller than I am. "
"But not on any of the big tricks. Just when we were kids. I feel a whole hell of a lot safer with Angelo. "
"Look, the momentum of the bars—"
Tommy turned away. He had heard Johnny and Mario argue before, endless wrangles over technique which solved nothing and convinced neither of them. Stella, too, shrugged and said, "I better get back to work. "
"I thought you weren't working till next week. "
"Conditioning exercises, that's all. I was sick so long, all my muscles are out of shape. "
Angelo signaled to Tommy. "Go get dressed. Let's see how badly you're out of shape after the winter layoff. "
He went and scrambled into a pair of tights. When he climbed the ladder, Lucia was still on the platform, and Angelo had climbed to the catcher's trapeze. The girls had gone. Lucia said, "Now that the kids are out of the way, we can get down to business, " and he felt oddly complimented; she ranked even Liss among the amateurs, while giving him professional status. She passed him the bar neatly and expertly. "Slide your hands a little closer to the center. Look, try holding your thumbs over the bar, like this. "
Tommy tried it. "It feels awkward. "
"Yes, at first. But it balances better, and you never hang up getting off. Watch Matt—notice how he places his hands. "
Angelo called, "Ready?" from the far end of the rigging. Tommy swung several times, and at Angelo's insistence,

dropped and climbed to swing again. Finally Angelo dismissed him, saying, "Not bad; you didn't let yourself get out of shape at all. Nice work, kid. "
Tommy went into the change room, then backed out, embarrassed for inside he saw Stella, half dressed, sitting on a bench with her head in her hands. Liss, kneeling beside her, put her arms around her and said something Tommy couldn't hear, and Stella shook her head.
"No, I'm okay, I just get so mad. I just—I just shake. I can't trust myself, because every time I let go my arms get wobbly. Liss, it's been days—"
"I know, Stel, I know, " Liss comforted, hugging her. "Your muscles have gone soft, that's all. I know how awful it is—I went through it after Davey was born—but once you get your strength back, it will all come back, honest. You never lose it. Look at Lucia—she hasn't been on a bar for nearly ten years, but her timing is still perfect, you saw. Come on, honey, you come upstairs and take a nice hot bath and I'll rub your back. " She chuckled. "You're doing just

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fine. And at least Johnny takes it for granted if you're a little beat up when bedtime comes around. " They began to laugh together, and Tommy, abruptly realizing what they meant, backed the rest of the way out, his cheeks turning dull red. He went upstairs to get dressed, not even wanting to go in for his clothes lest the women realized they had been overheard.

Life quickly went into routine again. Tommy enrolled in school; he and Mario began their regular morning sessions, Johnny and Barbara joining them regularly, and sometimes Liss. Now that there were four flyers with Papa Tony, they began work on a double synchronized pass in midair to two catchers using the duo rigging that Tommy and Mario had used the season before. Johnny made jokes—out of Angelo's hearing—about confetti acts, but he was a good catcher, strong and secure. Mario was practicing the triple intensively again with Angelo. Johnny worked with Liss and Lucia and Barbara; Stella was still not strong enough to go up. But Papa Tony said nothing about which routines would go into this year's act, or even which of the family would go on tour with them. He seemed to be waiting for something.

Then, one afternoon, Lucia called him away to the telephone. When he came back he stood watching them for a

while, then asked, "Matteo, are you ready to let us see a triple?"

"Tomorrow, Papa, " Angelo said. "He's been working all day. "

"Tomorrow, then. Upstairs, all of you, and dress. " But he stopped Mario at the door. "Don't leave the house. I want to talk to you—all of you—after dinner, in the living room. "

Mario came into Tommy's room to dress, but he was quiet, frowning. Tommy asked, "What's up? What does Papa want?"

But Mario only said, "Let's wait and see, okay, kid?"

In the big shabby living room, Papa Tony stood with his back to the fire, watching them, as they gathered, with lively dark eyes. Lucia was erect and regal in her straight-backed chair, in a dark dress with a white ruffle at her throat, completely alien from the friendly woman on the platform. Mario was sprawled in an armchair, legs outstretched. Liss sat on the arm of his chair. Papa Tony let the suspense build for several minutes in the flickering firelight. Tommy went and sat beside Barbara on the stone hearth. Angelo, his wrist in a bandage, was lighting himself a cigarette. Even Johnny was silent, his arms wrapped around his knees. Finally Papa Tony said, "Jim Fortunati called me this afternoon from the winter quarters of the Starr Circus. Randy Starr wants a second flying act; Jim told me that Starr likes big acts, the bigger the better. He will see us ten days from now. We will have four flyers this year; Johnny, you will be second catcher. Elissa, since Stella is not yet strong enough to work, you will audition with us in her place. "

Lucia said, "Papa, is that smart? You know—-"

The old man shrugged impatiently. "To audition, it commits her to nothing. We need her while Stella is sick!"

Not for the first time, Tommy wondered how Liss had won David's consent. Or had she won it at all? But he had no time to think about it.

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"Gianni. "
"Sir—" Johnny began.
"Thank Angelo for this, not me. He convinced me you must have your chance again. "
"Uncle Angelo, I appreciate it, sure, but—"
"Just remember where you belong, " Angelo rapped. "Second catcher. Down somewhere between Tommy and

Liss. And no funny stuff. You're a Santelli, and don't you forget it. "
Johnny hardened his jaw, and in the firelight Tommy saw the small muscles move along his throat, but he only said, "Okay, okay. "
"Matt, we will feature you this year as star flyer. Do you want to show Fortunati your triple yet?"
"I'll abide by your decision, Papa. "
"No. It is for you and Angelo to say. "
"Show him, Matt, " Angelo said. "He's good enough to know how near you'll miss it, if you miss it. "
"Good enough. " Papa Tony nodded. "Elissa, you will work in the duo routines in the double flying pass, and do one or two pretty things to open—ask Lucia what will be prettiest. " She nodded meekly, and he added, fixing her with a stern glare, "We will have no trouble with David this time, you hear?"
Mario held his sister's hand and said, "I'll guarantee that. "
"Tommy, " Papa Tony said, seeking him out where he sat beside Barbara. All their eyes followed Papa Tony's to fix on Tommy, but for once he was not frightened; it was his turn, that was all.
"Your duo routines with Mario are the most spectacular thing we have, except for his triple. They are just unusual enough to make the difference. One thing: You are a Santelli; don't forget and give your name as Tommy Zane. I tell Fortunati who you are, but it is part of our buildup: three generations of Santellis. " His eyes moved on. "Has anyone anything to say?"
Lucia did. "Wardrobe. Liss and Johnny are wearing any old rags they could find downstairs. And, Matt, I want you staying in the house this week—no running around in Hollywood or wherever it is with that crew of ballet boys and university bums. I know it's still off season and your time is supposed to be your own, but I want you here. Understand?" "Look, Lu, I have a job. I can arrange to take off for the audition, sure, but it doesn't make any sense—"
"You drive back and forth every day anyhow, " Lucia said, "and if you're sleeping here, I can get hold of you when we want you, and make sure you get enough to eat, and enough sleep—"
"Lu, for God's sake, I'm not sixteen years old! I've been

on my own for six years! Anyhow, Tommy's in my room, and with Liss here and everybody doubling up—"
Angelo said, "Lu's right, Matt. You move in with one of the kids, Clay or Tommy. But you ought to be staying here. "
Mario shrugged. "You're the boss. Tommy, can you put up with having me move in on you for a week or so?"

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"If it's okay with you, " Tommy muttered, not daring to look up, "it's okay with me. "
The days became insanely hectic after that. The practice room was closed to everyone except the six who were actually working, and even Papa Tony, who was never out of trim, practiced with them.
Tommy had once thought that if he and Mario could share a room, and sleep together every night, it would be wonderful; however, it turned out to be quite perfunctory. They were too busy, and too tired, to take advantage of the arrangement.
Nevertheless, it meant a good deal to him—that in this wearying routine he could fall asleep every night with his head on Mario's pillow and wake up, once or twice in the night, to hear him breathing. It was no more than this. They had reverted to being no more than they had been years ago—partners, companions, brothers. And all the tension between. their bodies, never wholly absent, seemed to build, not to the moment when they moved into each other's arms at night, but to the moment when they threw themselves as one, from the fly bar. When they slid down the rope after each rehearsal, drenched in sweat, to snatch up their robes and drop down to rest (twice Mario fell asleep on the floor), Tommy felt weak and discharged, as if by the most violent lovemaking. At night they put their arms around one another before they slept, but it was the tired, friendly embrace of brothers. Tommy thought Mario had not fully realized this situation—or was it that he was cautiously aware of their position in the midst of the family?—but one morning, shaving, Mario muttered "God, haven't we been good boys?"
"Who's got the energy to be anything else?"
"When this is over, win or lose, I'll show you a thing or two. Promise?"
"Promise. " But Tommy turned away, afraid to reveal himself. It was better this way, not thinking of anything except their work.

On the weekend, David Renzo appeared, not entirely (Tommy guessed) to Liss's pleasure. A few minutes before he turned up, Liss had been practicing a new trick, and had fallen hard to the net. When David came in, she was rubbing her sweaty face with a towel, but when he put his arms around her, she winced and pulled away.
"Ouch!"
Lucia came and touched her arm. "Did you hurt yourself when you fell, Liss?"
Liss shook her head. Unselfconsciously she pulled off her sweater, standing before them in her brassiere. Angelo came, too, to look at the crisscross network of crimson welts across her back.
Lucia laughed. "That will teach you, ragazza!"
"Good God, " David Renzo gasped, "you look like you've been flogged with a cat-o'-nine-tails or something! What happened? Did you fall? I knew it, I knew I should never have let you—"
"Don't be silly, " Liss said. "I hit the net a little too hard,
that's all. You fall all the time, doing this. Don't fuss, David,
it's my own fault"

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"Look, Liss, you never told me— I thought you said you never got hurt—" he began.
She turned on him, in a flaming rage. "Are you going to start that again, David? You promised—"
"Am I supposed to stand around and watch you get killed?" He moved his eyes across the circle of Santellis around him, and Tommy realized they had all gathered and were watching David, the outsider.
Angelo said curtly, "Put your sweater back on, Liss. Don't stand around half naked like that; you'll catch a chill. And next time roll when you hit the net— you knew better than to come down like that when you were Barbie's age! Be sure you get a hot bath tonight, and have Lu or Johnny massage your back— you stiffen up by Saturday and I'll break your neck. " He turned and ordered, "Are we going to get back to work? Johnny, did you get that bar taped yet? Matt, Tommy, go on up for the duo routines. "
As Angelo strode away, without a word to Liss's husband, David Renzo looked angrily at Liss, then shook his head, his mouth tight, and walked out of the practice room, slamming the door. Behind him, Tommy heard Lucia say in a low, ur-

gent voice, "Liss. Go after him. Don't let him go away mad like that. "
"In God's name, " Liss shouted at her, her hands pressed against her temples, staring helplessly from her mother to the closed door where her husband had vanished, "what do you want of me, Lulu? What do you think I can do? Do you have to put me in the middle?"
"Elissa, he is your husband! You must not fight with him like that! Go after him, make it up with him—"
"What am I supposed to say to him?" Liss ran into the change room and slammed the door. Lucia hurried after her.
Angelo, frowning, snarled, "No, damn it, Matt, you keep out of this! You get back up there where you belong. Tommy, I'm waiting!"
When Tommy joined him at the top of the rigging, Mario was white and shaken, rubbing his wrist, troubled. Tommy said, "Mario—" but Mario turned his coldest, most withdrawn frown on the boy.
"Don't you start, damn it! Get going!"
That evening before the fire, Angelo said suddenly, "Dave, I want to tell you about my wife, Teresa. "
Tommy looked up from his geometry textbook. Angelo never spoke of Terry Santelli. Tommy had seen pictures of her in the family scrapbook, a lovely dark-haired young woman. Dark-eyed little Tessa, Lucia's pride and joy, came now and then for a weekend from her convent boarding school, and everyone spoiled her outrageously. Angelo went over to where David sat and dropped down beside him.
"I use to think sometimes, Dave, that Terry married me because she was in love with the—the glamour of flying. The danger of it. "
"Like Liss? Look, Angelo, you can skip the pep talk—"
"No, " said Angelo, "not like Liss at all. Terry was crazy about dangerous things, just because they were dangerous. Liss takes risks, but it's because she

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was brought up on it, it's just part of the day's work. Terry—well, I never wanted her to fly at all, but she was crazy to try it. I had to work with Liss and Matt anyhow, so I taught Terry along with them, and she was good. And she was absolutely fearless. She took crazy chances; I always expected she'd break her neck, but she really was good. Never even broke a finger. And then Tessa was born, and I put my foot down. That season, I forbade Terry to fly, forbade her to go near the flying rig. "

An ironic little twist came over Angelo's face. "Terry stormed and begged, but I was going to wear the pants in my family, and that was that. No more flying—she was going to settle down and raise my kid like a good wife ought to. "
"Look—Angelo—"
"No, you listen, Dave. So when Tessa was ten months old, Terry smashed herself to hell in my car, because she was crazy about speed and danger and excitement. Since I wouldn't let her fly with us, she got her kicks by driving my car ninety miles an hour on the freeway, where the other people in the act didn't give a damn about safety. " Angelo was staring into the fire. Tommy wondered what he saw in the flames. "Dave, kid, you can't protect anybody unless they feel like being protected. "
David didn't answer for a moment. His face was as rigid and set as Angelo's. He got up, turning his back on the fire. "Well, " he said at last, "it's something to think about. But damn it, I don't have to like it, do I?"
Angelo got up and put a hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle shake. "That's just the point, kid. I'm afraid you do. "
David said nothing more, but when he returned to San Francisco on Sunday night, he left Liss with them, with no further protest. The next day Tommy had his own first serious fall.
While he was learning, he had faulted and gone into the net hundreds of times. He had suffered, in consequence, all the bruises, rope burns, skinned knees, and sore muscles which were the common lot of young athletes; he took them as a matter of course, and was secretly proud of himself for ignoring them. But this was new, and horrifying.
He was doing a simple crossover, and had actually touched fingers with Johnny, when suddenly a black blur crossed his eyes and he felt himself plunge downward. He struggled with his last fragment of consciousness to roll into a ball, realized in a moment of horror that his muscles would not obey him, then he struck hard, the black blur exploded into a glare, and he knew nothing more.
He had no sense of elapsed time when he became aware of a sharp, bitter odor stinging the roots of his brain; he coughed, choked and opened his eyes. His face was cold and dripping wet, and Johnny, kneeling beside him, was holding an open bottle of household ammonia under his nostrils. The floor felt hard under his back. Mario's face, a blurred circle

over Johnny's shoulder, swung in dizzy waves as Tommy pushed away the ammonia and sat up.

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"What happened?" he mumbled.
"I guess you fainted, " Johnny said. "I thought you missed, then I saw you sprawl out instead of tucking up for a decent landing. God, you scared me—I thought you were coming right down on your face!"
Mario said, "Give me that washcloth, Liss, " and sponged Tommy's face again. "Come on, straighten up, Lucky. Hurt anywhere?"
Tommy moved experimentally. "I'm okay, I guess. I— ouch!—guess I pulled a muscle in my ribs, or hit it, or something. Otherwise I'm okay. " The knot of terror suddenly grabbed him again, a spasm, an actual cramp of pain low in his body. "Talk about a nightmare's nightmare!"
"You scared us all, " Angelo said, with an unusual, rough gentleness. "You could've broken your neck. I thought for a minute that you had. Guess Matt had the right idea when he called you Lucky. "
Tommy said shakily, "It happened so fast. I was fine, and suddenly everything went black. I tried to ball up and couldn't. "
"You owe Saint Michael a candle. " Liss touched his arm, shyly. "That's how flyers get killed—losing control that way. "
He realized how shaken they all looked. Had he really been in so much danger? Had they really been so worried about him? Just as it penetrated, however—the extra warmth of their solicitude, the unexpected display of affection and emotion—Angelo commanded roughly, "Okay, everybody, break it up. He's not hurt, we can't waste the whole day chewing over what might have happened. Liss, you're on, and will you please remember, I'm here to catch you? You're still grabbing. Just you get your wrists where they belong, and let me worry about taking them, huh?"
Liss started up the ladder. Mario motioned Tommy after her.
"You know the rule. If you miss, go up and do it over. "
Tommy shook his head dizzily. "I can't. I'm still shaking. "
"That's why. Right away, Lucky. "
"You're the boss. " Weak with reaction, Tommy scrambled to his feet and started toward the ladder. There was a bad taste in his mouth. Abruptly he said, "Look out—I'm going to throw up—" and had just time enough to get to the toilet

in the change room. Mario followed him and stood by, scowling; he threw him the wet washcloth to wipe his face with. Tommy felt as if his very insides were coming out. When he had finally finished, he clung to the counter, saying through a ringing emptiness, "Look, I'd better call it a day. If I go up now, I'm going to fall again. "
"And if you don't, you may never get up there again. " Mario's eyes were level and cold, and his hand on Tommy's elbow was no longer steadying, but compelling. "If you'd hit your head, I'd say okay, maybe you got a little concussion. But you didn't, so all the goddamn throwing up doesn't mean anything except you're scared shitless. Get out there, damn you, or I'll take you apart. " He gave him a rough shove, and suddenly Tommy understood. He had thought himself past fear. He had prided himself, secretly and greatly, because he had never suffered any of the usual panic "freezes" of young

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aerialists, had never clung to the bar in terror of the drop into the net, had never had a sudden attack of nerves and clung to the ropes like a drowning man. Now he realized he was not, after all, immune; his panic had simply taken a later, subtler form. There had been no virtue in his earlier courage; he simply hadn't been afraid, that was all. Now he was, and Mario could see it. Under Mario's sarcastic stare, stripped down to a naked rag of panic, he went shakily toward the ladder, his feet fumbling as he climbed.
"At last, " Liss said tartly as he reached the platform. "Good evening. " She waited for him to pass her the bar, then swung out and posed across this trapeze, letting Angelo take her by the ankles. Tommy caught the returning bar raggedly, trying to push away awareness of everything except the moment when Angelo released her for the return swing; he dropped the bar for her. Liss caught it, dropped off at his side, and he fumbled for the released trapeze as she stepped quickly out of the way.
"Get that bar away faster! Stop fumbling, " Mario shouted from the floor. "Okay, Tommy, your turn. "
Liss steadied the bar as he got his thumbs over it. Angelo called caustically, "Mind telling me which way you're coming?"
"Flyover, " Tommy answered. It was the only thing he could think of. Mario was counting for him as he hadn't done since

Tommy's early days. "... two, three—go!" Tommy felt the trapeze take him and toss him high, as if he had been packed up inside a corner of an unfamiliar set of muscles, and Mario's voice sounded a million miles away.
"Pull up—point your feet—hold it, hold it—okay, go!" Tommy flung his body forward over the bar and suddenly his hands were where they ought to be again; he felt Angelo take his outstretched wrists, felt the jolt and the pain deep under his ribs as they swung together. But he could feel the rhythm of the swing, clockwork, inside his brain again... as he turned for the return swing and their wrists unlocked. He let the swing carry him on, found the taped bar under his hands, and then, with relief, felt the platform solid under his feet again.
"Ragged, ragged!" Mario shouted. "Feet and elbows all over the place! Liss, get the bar away fast—don't shove it down at one edge that way! Let's see that again!"
After two more tries Angelo permitted Tommy to go down, calling Mario up for work on the triple. Tommy dropped on the floor beside Johnny, closing his eyes, glad of the tacit, polite convention that let him stretch out there and pretend to be asleep. He didn't want to face even Johnny's good-natured kidding. He felt bruised, sick, and aching. When Mario and Angelo called it a day, he sat up. Answering Mario's curt "Okay, Lucky?" with a brief nod, he started for the change room.
"Going to tell Lucia?" Angelo asked over his head.
Mario glared. "What for, Christ's sake? Do I tell Lu every time I take a spill?"
Angelo said quietly, "It's different and you know it. When anyone loses control in midair that way, there's the chance something's really wrong. He ought to be checked by a doctor, and you know it. "

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Tommy said, "I'm not goin' to any doctor!"
"You'll do what you're told, and let's not have any static about it, " Angelo said, adding to Mario, "There's a chance he's strained his heart, or gotten a minor concussion from some other fall. Another time he might not be so lucky. If he's not in top-notch condition, he's got no business flying, and you know it. "
"You talk like an old woman, Angelo, " Mario said, scowling. "One fall doesn't mean anything. Talking like this will do him more harm than a couple of knocks in the net. "

Johnny draped a towel around his shoulders. "Angelo, you're making a fuss over nothing. And with this audition with Starr's coming up—hell, you know doctors. He'd say play it safe, keep Tommy on the ground a couple weeks, even if he couldn't find anything wrong. "
"I'm fine, " Tommy said. "I guess I just blacked out from being overheated or something. "
"Sure, " Mario said. His hand descended on Tommy's shoulder, firm and reassuring. "Good Lord, Angelo, don't you remember how I used to do that when I was working on the triple that first season? Every damn time I started to go into that third turn my muscles would quit doing what I told them and my brain would go into a fog and I'd find myself in the net. A good night's sleep will do the kid more good than a whole hospital full of doctors. "
"Yeah, doctors, " Johnny said disgustedly. "Remember that jerk who fixed up Matt's bad wrist? Six weeks, he said, for a Colles fracture. He wouldn't believe it when Matt said it was all healed—he wouldn't believe his own X rays at first. I say anybody who knows enough about muscles and bones to be flying at all, knows whether he's in shape to work. If Tom says he's okay—and the way he did that last cross, he sure looked okay to me—then take his word for it and quit making a fuss!"
Angelo looked unconvinced, but finally shrugged. "Okay, have it your own way. "
Johnny watched Tommy gingerly working his arm into his sweater.
"Pull a muscle? Let's see it. " Johnny pushed him around, then moved his hands over Tommy's back, the hard fingers exploring each layer of muscle.
"Shoulder's all right, " he said and pulled up sweater and undershirt. "No bruises, either. Where's it hurt? Want me to rub it out?"
"Don't bother. It's okay. "
Mario said, "Let him have a shot at it, Tom. Johnny's pretty good at that. "
"Special service at no extra charge, " Johnny quipped, adding more gravely, "We don't want you getting a charley horse this week of all times. And I can fix it up—ask Liss. "
Angelo, kneeling to tie his shoes, laughed wryly. "Yeah, Tom, disregard a concussion if you want to, but for heaven's sake don't ignore a charley horse in your ribs!"
Mario was still in the shower, upstairs, when Johnny

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knocked at the door of the room Tommy and Mario shared. He came in, motioned to Tommy to pull off his undershirt and lie facedown on the bed, and sat down beside him. He began kneading the muscles in Tommy's back with that strong, searching touch. Tommy tensed up under it; he hated being pawed.

"Ease up, kid, you're stiff as a board. I can't do a damn thing unless you relax. " Johnny's fingertips dug into Tommy's neck with a heavy, rotary motion, trying to loosen the taut muscles. Tommy tried to force himself to go limp. The touch was not unpleasant; he had tightened against it because he was afraid of betraying some chance reaction. He was used to Johnny in tights, on the rigging, in the change room, working. But Johnny stripped to his shorts, fresh from the shower, his hair damp and smelling of clean sweat and soap—that was something different entirely. Tommy put his hot face in the pillow and wished hard that he were in Timbuctoo. Freak, he told himself with furious bitterness, you goddamn queer.

Mario came in, wrapped in a towel, and picked up his dungarees, which were hanging over the foot of the bed. "Kid picked up a sprain?"

"Hm-m, I don't think so. All the muscles seem to be all right. Here, that hurt?" Johnny pushed Tommy into a new position and went on prodding the middle of his back. Again he seemed to be reaching right down through the separate layers of muscles and picking out the sore spots.

"You go about that like a professional, " Mario commented, watching.

Johnny chuckled. "I am. I spent two winters working as a trainer in a health club—where d'you think I picked up all those tricks? An old masseur taught me a lot. Got any talcum powder? There—that feel better, Tom?" His hands kneaded the muscles soothingly. Tommy twitched and Johnny said, "Hey, what's the matter? You're jumpy as a cat. Ticklish?"

Mario chose that moment to bend over and touch Tommy's bare back with the tip of a finger. Tommy jumped and knocked them both away with -his elbow. "Cut it out!" he yipped, his voice cracking into falsetto.

Johnny said, "Scram, Matt. You make me nervous. " Mario picked up his clothes and went out, and Johnny straightened up.

"Sit up a minute, Tom. I want a cigarette, and I got some-

thing to say, and I figured you'd rather I didn't say it in front of Matt. Cigarette?" He held out the pack. . Tommy stared at the carpet and muttered, "No, thanks. "

"Suit yourself. Listen, kiddo, you're a mess of nerves. You think I can't tell what's eatin' on you? How old are you, anyhow? Fifteen?"

"Sixteen. "

A fleeting grin crossed Johnny's face. "I don't guess you led a very sheltered life around a circus lot, but there are a couple of things—I don't figure you ever spent much time around a steam bath or a big professional gym, did you? No, I figured you didn't. But I have. Maybe I ought to wise you up a little, about—oh, hell, I see you know what I'm talkin' about. "

Tommy dared not raise his eyes.

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"Listen here, kiddo, " Johnny said, putting out his cigarette, "if somebody could work you over like that, and you not feel anything inside"—he made a brief but obvious gesture—"you'd be just dead meat, that's all, dead meat. Now look, kid, this is straight. I'm not queer; I'm not the kind of guy gets his kicks by feeling up a nice-looking kid bare-ass. This is the work I got trained to do, and I'm good at it, and it doesn't mean a goddamn thing to me. Now, willya just please, for God's sake, relax and let me rub out the kinks?"
His face burning, Tommy rolled over and buried his face in his arms. He couldn't make out whether Johnny had not understood at all, or whether he understood entirely too well.
The night before they were to drive down to the winter quarters of Starr Circus, Papa Tony put them relentlessly through their paces. Afterward Lucia inspected them all from top to toe, walking round and round them, fidgeting. She whipped out scissors and snipped off the most protruding lock of Tommy's cowlick, frowned at the still-bleached lock in Johnny's hair and recombed it so that it did not show, confiscated Angelo's frayed wristbands and hunted him out another set, loosened a pretty curl at Liss's temple.
They had decided not to display their act in costume. Starr's, the unquestioned "Big Show" of the circus world, mounted its own acts lavishly, so the Santellis had decided to appear in their neat, uniform-ish practice clothes. The men dressed in black tights, worn just enough not to look too new, and T-shirts which Lucia had artfully blued to a high white-

ness; Liss wore a plain pink ballet-student's leotard and tights. The very unostentatiousness of this, Tommy vaguely realized, was in itself a high form of showmanship and strategy.
• No one ate much at supper. At the close of the meal, Papa Tony stood up for a moment and looked down the long table.
"I want to say to you, " he began, "whichever way things turn out tomorrow—thank you. This it is—to be a family again. Once we were so many, like this. Now I see we can all be together again, like always. Joe, Lucia—you have worked beyond—what is that thing they say in speeches?"—he hesitated for a moment, frowning—"above and beyond the call of duty. Clay, Barbara-—too young to be with us this time, but you see what someday you will be part of. I don't want to make a speech. I say only one thing: Tonight I am a happy man, a very happy man. Not in years have I been so happy, all my children around me tomorrow. All my children —my sons, my grandsons—yes, and granddaughters, too, Elissa, " he added gently. "Believe me, I know, in some ways it has been hardest of all for you. And you who are part of the family in a special way. Stella" he said, and his eyes rested with a special tenderness on the pale girl in her flame-colored dress, "I wish you could be with us tomorrow; I wish Cleo could see you. And you, Tommy. Because when I watch you, when I see how Mario has taught you, I can see how I taught my own sons, and I know there is going to be someone else to come after me, to pass on a—a tradition, to teach the ones who will fly when I am not here anymore. "

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Angelo said roughly, "That's a long, long time from now, Papa. You shouldn't talk that way. "
"No?" Papa Tony looked at Angelo and smiled. "Maybe you're right. But this is what I was saying. People—you and me, Angelo—we come and we go, but this—the act, the family—this goes on, bigger than you, bigger than me, more than all of us—right?" He raised the glass of wine in his hand and, ceremoniously, drank. Then he said, "Tomorrow, children. I am proud of you tonight; make me proud of you tomorrow. I don't mean the contract—maybe we get it, maybe we don't; part of that is luck, part of it is business. Either way, do your best, as you did tonight, and I will be proud of you, proud of all of you, cari figli, cari fanciulli"—Tommy saw him blink and swallow hard—"tutti, tutti—So, so, I don't want to make a speech, " he said hastily, and sat down again.

As they were getting ready for bed in their room, Mario said, "So what did you think of Papa Tony and his speech?" His voice was rough, but Tommy could hear, through it, what Mario really felt, and responded to it as he knew Mario was ashamed to do.
"It made me want to bawl. "
"Yeah, me too. This is what Papa's been living for. He could have stayed with the Fortunatis, you know, when Joe and Lu had their accident—he'd still be headlining with them. But he left Starr's and the center ring, just to bring us back as a family, touring with just Angelo and Terry, and then Liss and me, and then just me and Angelo after Liss got married, just working for a comeback. I hope to God we make it tomorrow. For his sake. "
"Starr's is an awfully big outfit, Mario. They could get any flying act in the world. "
"I know. But there's no harm in dreaming. " He climbed into bed and stretched sleepily. "Good thing he got us all tired out this afternoon, huh? Or I'd be too damn edgy to sleep. "
Tommy woke with a start the next morning when Johnny came in without knocking. Mario opened his eyes drowsily, but did not move.
"Who is it? Jock?"
"Right. Don't you two look cute!" Johnny was wearing an old, patched bathrobe. He had not shaved, but he was so blond that it was hardly noticeable.
Mario rubbed his eyes. "What time is it, anyhow?"
"Six-ish, I guess. I must be getting temperamental—I had some trouble gettin' to sleep, and I woke up about an hour ago. I forgot you had the kid in with you. " He sat down on the edge of the bed. "I was thinking about when we were all on the road. Remember?"
Mario chuckled. "Roll over by me, Lucky, " he said, and threw back the covers.
Johnny slid into bed beside them, saying, "I had forgot the kid. But I half expected to find Liss in here. She always did come and crawl in with you. "
Mario's jawline tightened slightly. "Liss is a big girl now. And married. "

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"Just the same, I bet she's got the jitters, too, poor kid. Remember how every time we had a big stand, or put a new trick in the act, you and I would both crawl in with Liss and

talk over every move we were going to make? It was okay when we were kids, but after we got into our teens Lucia started takin' kind of a dim view of it. All things considered, she probably had a point—I know I used to get all hot and bothered, sister or not. Liss is damn pretty. How about you, Matt?"
"Shut up, " Mario said. "That's a hell of a way to talk. Anyhow, what bothered Lu was that she said we were just nerving ourselves up, giving each other the jimjams. "
"Yah!" Johnny snorted skepticism. "I quit going to confession that year because I felt so damn foolish saying the same thing every time, that I was having evil thoughts about my own sister. But you were always the good boy, weren't you? I bet you still go to confession, don't you. Matt?"
"If you're going to talk like that, " Mario said roughly, "you can get the hell out of here. "
"Hey, hey, fella, " Johnny said quickly, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—hell, skip it. I wouldn't mind a nice shoulder to bawl on, or something. Or somebody to keep me company. I've been bunking on the daybed for a week now. Not that I blame Stel, exactly. "
Mario curled his lip and said with an odd inflection, "Keeping in training, Jock?"
They both began to laugh almost hysterically, and Tommy demanded, "What's so darn funny?"
Johnny said,. through snorts, "Just a kind of dirty family joke. It's a whole lot too complicated to explain. Oh, God, Matt, will you ever forget Terry's face?"
"Or Angelo's, either, " Mario snickered, and they were off again.
After a minute Johnny quieted down and said, "Yeah. But if I'd remembered it sooner, I wouldn't be in this damn mess. And Stel would be with us today. She's better than Liss, and you know it. And that could make the difference. Randy Starr is real big on women in an act. "
"Look, Jock"—Mario reached for his brother's hand— "this is no way to talk before an audition. Relax. "
"Yeah. But it's sort of getting to me. Just in general. I've wondered which is worse, anyhow. The whole idea seems to be that screwing around takes it out of you. But, I dunno, behaving myself seems to take it out of me worse. "
Mario was silent, and Johnny added, quickly on the de-

fensive, " 'Course, we all know you're the model athlete— don't drink, smoke, or screw. "
"I was only trying to think it out, Jock. I guess the trick is what Angelo's always preaching—dirty jokes aside—common sense. Sure, you can waste a lot of energy chasing women. On the other hand, if you get so edgy you can't sleep right or think straight, I'd say it was better to get it off your mind so you can relax and keep your mind on what you're doing. Instead of going around all hot and bothered tryin' for uplifting thoughts. "

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Johnny laughed nervously and said, "Yeah. But I wish Stel would see it that way. Maybe I ought to get you to give her a pep talk. "
Mario laughed and shook his head. "That's your job, kid brother. Include me out. "
"If the Fortunatis don't like us, though, it will all fall through, " Johnny said gloomily. "I heard they already signed the Flying Barrys, and the Rienzis. Are we ever going to have competition! Damn it, Liss just isn't good enough for Starr's!"
Mario said gently, "Even if that was true—and I don't believe it—there are other shows, Jock. And we're all of us young. It's not like this was the only chance we were ever going to have at the big time. "
"God damn it, you don't even care, do you, Matt?"
"Oh, I care. But I'm not going to eat my heart out if we don't make it this season. Like I say, there's other shows and other seasons. Lambeth is a nice outfit to work for. And they're always short of men, so they'd be glad to have you with us, and Stel. too—she can work again this summer, can't she?"
"Yeah. I guess so. Dammit, " Johnny said again, despondently, "that's the hell of it. My own goddamn fault. "
Mario chuckled. "Watch your language, kid brother. Lu hears you talking like that, she'll have kittens. "
"Oh, Christ. Matt, I'm grown up. And don't you think I got something to swear about? Sure, the doctor said Stel can work again this summer, but he said something else, too. "
"What is it, Jock?" Mario asked.
Johnny, defensively drawing away from his offered sympathy, shot back, "You just tell me not to get fussed about things before an audition. Keep my mind on my catching, and all that. "
"Come on, come on, " Mario said, putting his arm around

his brother. "Get it off your mind, if it's like that. What's the matter, kid?"
Johnny blurted out, "The doctor just told Stel she wouldn't have any more kids. Not ever. That goddamn filthy stinking crook, he messed her up so bad—" He pressed his face into the pillow and said, "God damn it to hell, our timing got off that one time, just that one time, and that's it. Show's over, folks. Not that I give a damn, but Stel's taking it hard. So damn hard, Matt, so damn hard I could bawl myself!"
"Jesus!" Mario whispered. "What can I say, fella? I didn't know. "
"All that stuff Papa said last night about carrying on the family tradition when he isn't here anymore. You can imagine how that went down with Stel—" He swallowed hard and said blurrily, "Listen to me. Like a goddamn bawl-baby—"
"Easy, Jock, easy. Take it easy. One thing at a time, kid. I know it's hell, and I know nothing's going to make it any better. But you've got to pull yourself together today. "
"Sure. I know. We got a show to do. " Johnny blew his nose on the bedsheet, lifted his head, and stared, dry-eyed and defiant, at Tommy. "Listen, Matt, if

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this thing with Starr's falls through today, you going to take that triple of yours back on the damn mud-show circuit? If you do, you're nuts!"
"I don't know. That's up to Papa. "
"You'll wind up carrying the whole family!"
"Something wrong with that? Papa Tony carried us all long enough. And Angelo. You know what kind of hell I gave him working on the triple? First time I really got up the momentum for the third turn, I knocked him right out of the trap—could have killed him. We fell on the edge of the net -—could have been Joe and Lucia all over again, two Santellis finished right there. He rolled around me, broke my fall—I knocked out two of his front teeth, and he didn't even tell Papa Tony about it. If he had, Papa would probably have stopped me working on it for another year. You think I'd run out on the family, work with somebody else, after that?"
Johnny laughed. He was his cocky self again. "You going to get a thing about Tommy, too?"
Mario was lying on his side, his tense face making him look like an angry Pierrot. "Got one already, Jock. You and I could have done duo routines, but you were too much of

an individualist. " He made it sound like a dirty word. "Seven o'clock, Jock. We better get up and shave and get ourselves together before all the girls crowd into the bathrooms. " He sat up, tossing back the covers.
"Seven o'clock, kids, " Angelo announced, flinging the door open. He saw Johnny and laughed.
"Well, I could've figured on that. I remember when you kids were all on the road—night before a big show, if I found one of you, I got you all. Wonder where I'll find Liss this morning. In bed with Lucia, maybe? Oh, well, I guess you are grown up—anyhow, I didn't find her in here for once!"

CHAPTER 21

they had borrowed Joe's station wagon to drive down to the winter quarters of the Starr Circus, about fifty miles south. Papa Tony inquired at the gate for the Fortunatis, and they were directed to a large fixed rehearsal top near the center of the area. Inside, a group of aerial riggings had been mounted. High above their heads a number of small, brightly colored figures were flying back and forth.
They stood gathered together, watching. Mario pointed.
"That's Jim on the board, " he murmured, "and Lionel in the catch trap, and—look, there's Cleo making the pass. "
Liss gasped aloud as the woman whirled into a delicate pirouette before grasping the bar. She said shakily, "And we've got to show them what we can do?"
"Easy, easy" Angelo put an arm around her waist. "Matt's no slouch, either. We're okay. "
The woman on the fly bar had worked up into a high swing, pushing the trapeze high above the rigging, until she nearly touched, with her flying feet, the canvas above her head. At the topmost limit before the ropes buckled she flipped away from the bar, spun backward, and made two perfect somersaults

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down into the net. She made a neat turn to the floor, picked up a short white robe that lay nearby, and came over to them, knotting it loosely around her waist. Papa Tony took her hand with a courtly bow. "Cleo, my dear. "
Cleo Fortunati was tiny, smaller even than Tommy, with

flaming hair, pulled away from her face, and warm lively eyes, "Nice to see you again, Tony. I'll even admit I was showing off for you, just a little. "
The two men were climbing down from the rigging. They walked over to the grouped Santellis, and the taller of the two took Papa Tony's hand in a firm grip. "How goes it, Uncle Tony? Starr will be along later; Lionel and I thought you might like some time to get used to the light and the rigs and so forth, if you've been working outdoor shows and fairs. I know you can work anywhere, but you told me the kids haven't been under canvas at all. "
"That was thoughtful of you, Jim. It's true, we've been working in small outdoor shows, parks, fairs; none of the kids but Angelo have worked under canvas for years. "
Jim Fortunati was an inch or two taller than Papa Tony, but he wasn't tall. He had the lean, well-muscled body of a flyer, and his hair, thick and iron-gray, was winged dramatically with white at the temples. He was, Tommy thought, about forty-five. His brother, Lionel, was younger, and darker, with broad burly shoulders and a neat little curly mustache. He shook hands with Angelo, asking, "Are these all family?"
'That's right, " Angelo said, and Tommy thought, It's true. They really meant it when they said it. The depression that had settled down on him this morning, watching Mario with Johnny, suddenly lifted. He was a Santelli, too, in a special way. I don't have to be jealous of Johnny, or anybody.
Cleo asked, in her warm, rich voice, "Why didn't Lucia ride along with you, Tony? I'm dying to see her. "
"I know she'd have loved to see you, Cleo, " Papa Tony said after a minute, "but I think she felt the children might be nervous if she was along, watching them. She sent you her love. Surely Jim told you I have three of her kids in the act?"
Cleo's face—triangular, snub-nosed, almost gnomelike— was bewitching when she smiled. "Now, let me see if I remember. Matt junior, of course—you were the dark-haired one. And Mark—no, that's right, he didn't fly, did he? Eyes, or something? Johnny, right? And, of course, my girl. " She put her arms around Liss and hugged her with enthusiasm. "Remember me, sweetie?"
Liss nodded. It was strange to see the vivacious Liss completely dumb for once, looking almost tall beside Cleo.
"But you've gotten so tall, you're all grown up—good God,

in one of Lu's letters she mentioned that you were married and even had a baby. How old is he?"
"Two and a half, " Liss said shyly, Cleo hugged her again and released her. "I'd love to see him sometime. You should have brought him down with you—there are plenty of people around to keep an eye on him. Or are you like Lu, always looking for a good excuse to park the kid with somebody else?"

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Mario said, "Hullo, Cleo. You look just exactly the same. " "You certainly don't, " she said, smiling up at him. "Aren't you pretty tall for a flyer?"
"Everybody says that, " Mario replied with a grin. "But I manage. "
'I know. Lucia sent me some clippings. " She glanced at Tommy. "And this must be the protégé she wrote me about. " "Oh. sorry. " Liss said, flustered. "Cleo, Tommy Zane. We call him Tommy Santelli in the act. "
Cleo gave Tommy her hand. It felt very strong and firm. "Nice to see you. We know anyone who comes here with the Santellis will be worth meeting, don't we, Jim?"
Jim Fortunati frowned faintly as he took Tommy's hand, not in an unfriendly way, but as if something puzzled him. "How old are you. Tom?"
Tommy glanced at Papa Tony, who nodded permission. "Sixteen, Mr. Fortunati. " Quite suddenly, overwhelmed, he realized that these were in fact the Flying Fortunatis, whose pictures he had clipped from magazines since he was five or six years old. He swallowed, abruptly losing his voice.
"Too young." Jim Fortunati said. "Has he ever actually worked in the-ring. Uncle Tony?"
"He was with us all last season, in the act," Mario said. "With Lambeth. He's a trouper."
"Lambeth. I see." Jim Fortunati was still frowning. "Well, Uncle Tony, I'll take you up to meet Randy Starr. You never met him, did you?"
"No. just the old man—Luciano. Randy, he was just a kid."
"Well, he's running the show now, and there have been some changes. But he's a good guy—you'll like him. Cleo, Lionel, you look after them. Send a propman around for their stuff, and show them where to get dressed."
Cleo put her arm around Liss again. "You come with me, honey bun. You can change in our trailer; the women's

dressing tent is always a shambles. Lionel, you look after the men."
Tommy and the others went with Lionel to the big men's dressing tent, where he left them to change into their tights. Angelo did stretching exercises to work out the kinks of the drive. As they gathered at the entrance to the big rehearsal top again, Johnny asked, "Is there anything so special, or different, about working under canvas?"
"Hotter." Angelo said, "but you don't have to worry about the wind, or the sun getting in your eyes."
Liss came back and rejoined them, and Johnny grinned at her. "Hobnobbing with royalty, Sis? The queen and the peasant girl?"
"She knew I was nervous and wouldn't want to be alone in a strange place. She was always good to me, and I've always loved her, you know that."
"Just don't let her give you stage fright, kitten," Angelo said.
"No, indeed," Liss replied with dignity. "She just makes me want to do a little better than my best."
Angelo made them go up and get their bearings, had each of them take a couple of swings to limber up and familiarize themselves with the strange lights. Finally Papa Tony signaled that they were ready. Tommy could see the

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Fortunatis gathered below, shriveled by distance to doll figures in tights, Cleo's blazing hair a spot of brightness even from this height. Practice on the other riggings had been suspended; a dozen or so strangers were grouped at the edge of the ring, watching them, with a dark, heavyset man who could only be the famous Randy Starr.

"You, Elissa, first," Papa Tony whispered, and they began.

Tommy had never seen Liss work outside the practice room, where she always seemed nervous and tense, and he was surprised at the poise and skill with which she took the bar and swung out. She made the cross perfectly, returning with a graceful half twist. Then it was Tommy's turn, a simple single. Papa Tony went over in a perfect double forward, and Tommy remembered what Mario had said once: There are plenty of people who still say the double forward somersault is as hard as the triple back.

Then Johnny joined Angelo on the second catch bar, and Tommy stood beside Mario on the platform, shoulders just touching, clocking off the pendulum stroke of the two

catchers swinging. Far below, in the unfamiliar tawny light of the sun through canvas, Tommy could see the thin line of the net. Almost as if reading his mind, Mario whispered, "If you miss, Lucky, count three before you turn. That net's a long way down ..."

"Go!"

They went through the routine perfectly, but when they had returned, Tommy sensed that while it was a good day and their timing perfect, still the precision movements that made this trick spectacular on the low outdoor rigging of the Lambeth Circus were less impressive on the higher rigging, across three rings. Then they were regrouping for the double midair pass. Papa Tony and Mario swinging off together, Tommy waiting beside Liss on the platform. Johnny called this a confetti act. Air full of flying bodies. Tommy felt a mad desire to giggle, lost it as they caught the bar on the backswing, Liss's hands smacking square and solid beside his own. She slid her hands a fractional inch closer to his.

They swung out, the momentum of the heavy trapeze pulling them higher and higher; then, at the height of the swing, they let go simultaneously. For an instant the four bodies flew past one another in midair like birds; then Tommy felt his wrists mesh with Johnny's. Then they were flying back to the platform, and the bar Mario had dropped for them . . . always, always, the same split-second lurch of fear, exhilaration, relief. ...

But he and Liss were not timed to the precision of himself and Mario. If I was managing it, I'd have me and Papa go first—we're the same size—then Liss and Mario. It would look better and balance better . . . He turned off the thought, incredulous. It was the first time he had even thought of criticizing Papa Tony's management.

Papa Tony gave them the flick of a nervous smile while the second catcher's bar was being pulled up out of the way again.

"Sta been, children. . . . Well, Matteo, this is it—it's all yours."

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Mario looked tense, his slanted eyebrows drawn together. He wiped his palms with a handkerchief. Tommy moved aside; no one but Papa Tony was ever allowed to drop the bar for Mario's return on the triple. Liss and Tommy maneuvered carefully around him, knowing that for Papa Tony they might as well have been in China. Angelo was picking

up his swing, higher, farther, faster. Mario took the bar. Liss whispered suddenly, "I can't watch—" and turned away, throwing her free arm over her eyes. Tommy patted her shoulder, but couldn't take his eyes off Mario.
Mario swung out, driving his swing higher and higher, till for a moment it seemed to Tommy that he would strike the canvas and fly upward through the top of the tent. He flew off the bar, spun into the back somersault, the second—oh, God— the third spin, and straightened directly into Angelo's outstretched hands. Liss gasped harshly and crossed herself. Papa Tony muttered something in Italian. Then Mario was back beside them again. He looked taut, and Tommy saw that he was shaking with tension.
One by one, Papa Tony motioned them to somersault into the net. When they were all on the ground again, Cleo ran to Mario and flung her arms around him. Jim Fortunati leaped over a guy rope to take his hand. "Good Lord!" he said. "Good Lord, Tonio, you mean this kid's been doing that on the mud-show circuit? Hell, I do triples myself, but I haven't seen form like that since—since Barney Parrish got grounded! Hey," he demanded, "how long have you been doing that, Matt?"
Mario smiled, the relaxed, deprecating smile of sheer relief. "I can't do it every time. I just felt lucky today."
Randy Starr came up to them. He was a small, bald, moon-faced youngish man, completely deadpan. "Jim, I want to see Tonio, and the big boy who did that last trick, over at the silver wagon," he said. He looked all of them over one at a time, and Tommy felt he was memorizing them all, taking in Liss's braided hair, Johnny's bleached curls, the frayed wristbands Angelo had found somewhere again instead of the new pair. "All Santellis? Let me see if I have it right." He moved a stubby finger back and forth. "Tonio. Angelo. Mario. Gianni. Tommy. Elissa." He touched his forehead briefly. "Good, I will remember," he said, and Tommy knew, with a curious small frisson, that he would remember, that if he met any one of them, five or fifteen or thirty years from now, he would remember name, face, circumstances as • clearly as he did this moment.
"Lucia Santelli. Fine flyer. Did a double pirouette. Splendid woman, too, great beauty. No trouble, either, no temperament. Girl looks a little like her. Your mother, Elissa? Thought so. Give her my best. Thank you, kids, thank you.

Lionel, why don't you show the kids around the lot after they get dressed?" It was a clear dismissal; he walked away with Papa Tony and Jim Fortunati, Mario trailing diffidently behind.
None of them talked much while they were dressing, though Angelo did say, as he knotted his tie, "Matt sure made an impression. Not much question about that."

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Johnny muttered, "But we sure didn't. Not much question about that, either, is there?"
Out of courtesy to Lionel, who was showing them around the lot, introducing them to some of the great names of the Big Show, they refrained from discussing possible verdicts. Tommy met people who had been only names to him, faces clipped' into his scrapbook. Dimly he knew that at any other time he would have been excited by this, but now all he could think of was Mario, talking to Randy Starr and Jim Fountain, discussing the fate of the Flying Santellis. When they returned to the Fortunati trailer, Cleo, now chic and pretty in street clothes, made coffee for them and sandwiches. Tommy was hungry, but the sandwiches tasted like sawdust. How long was it going to take them to decide? They were all fidgeting. The inside of the trailer was hung with snapshots and pictures of circus stars, past and present; Liss got up and began to wander around.
"Tommy, are these our parents?" she asked.
Tommy joined her, looking at the small picture of his mother and father posed with old Lucifer. He had seen the picture before, in his mother's scrapbook; it had been taken before he was born. This one had his mother's familiar handwriting scrawled across it: To Cleo, with love, Tom and Beth Zane. He told her yes, and Cleo stared at him.
"That Zane. I should have known! You're the image of Beth, the red hair and all those freckles. Beth was working cats with Starr when I joined the show—one of the really good woman cat trainers. There weren't many of them then. Actually, there aren't many now. And you're her son?"
Tommy went on looking at the photographs taped to the corkboard. One caught his eye. "Did you know Barney Parrish?"
It was pure awe in his voice, the legend, the great Irish aerialist, the "Flying Demon" who had first made the triple famous. But Cleo's voice was laughing, matter-of-fact. "Goodness, yes. He taught me to fly."

Liss said jealously, "I thought Lucia taught you to fly."
"No, sweetie, though she did encourage me to learn," Cleo said. "I grew up in Texas, and I never even saw a circus when I was a kid. My mother was an old-time strict Baptist, and she thought any lady who showed her legs with the circus was bound straight for hell fire, right then and there. But my daddy was a business manager for old Luciano Starr—Lucky, they called him—and when I was about sixteen, I visited the show and sort of fell in love with it."
"You should have seen her," Lionel Fortunati said. "A little bit of a thing—not half your size, Elissa—wandering around the lot, wanting to try everything, and everything she tried she was good at. Natural aerialist. Web act, aerial ballet, balancing traps, even the old iron-jaw act."
Cleo nodded. "And when the show went on the road, first of May, I went with it. Mother was sure I was bound straight for the fire and brimstone, but I was sixteen and Daddy said I could, and that was that. Ma never did get resigned to it, though when the circus played Abilene I showed her the car where the girls slept—three to a bunk, and we had to sign in and out to leave the lot even with our own fathers—so she did get over thinking the show was some kind of

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traveling cathouse. Anyway, instead of going to nursing school, I traveled with Starr's and did everything: aerial ballet, web— your brother, Joe, used to be like that, Angelo; he could fill in with the tumblers, ride a rosinback if he had to, even paint his face and flip around with the clowns. He could do a little of everything."
Angelo said, "Johnny's wife, Stella, is a little like that, I think. Done everything, good at everything."
"I didn't know you were married, Johnny. Isn't she with you?"
Johnny cleared his throat. "She's not well. She had a— miscarriage last fall. But she can do almost everything: tumbling, single traps, double traps, Risley juggling, flying—she used to fill in anywhere, with Freres and Stratton, if anybody got sick or wanted a day off."
"I'd like to meet her," Cleo said.
"Well, if this thing goes through, she'll be traveling with us," Johnny said. "She's a better flyer than Liss ever was."
"Now look, John—" Angelo protested sharply.
Through the strained silence Liss said hastily, "Cleo, you were going to tell us about Barney Parrish."

"Oh, yes. Well, toward the end of the season, Lucia came to see me in the big dressing top. You've got to remember, she was the headliner with the Flying Santellis, and I was just a kid in my first season. She traveled by private car and had her private dressing top, and I was crowded into one-half of an upper and had my trunk in the women's dressing tent with two hundred other girls. So when she came to see me, I was so stunned I could hardly speak to her. She asked if I'd ever thought about learning to fly. She sad I had the figure for it—"
"Meaning," Lionel chaffed, "that you had none at all."
"Right," Cleo said with a rueful grin, "but you've got to remember, back then it was fashionable to be flatchested. Anyway, Lucia said she was going to be in California over the winter, and Barney would be at winter quarters. She said she'd talk to him about teaching me, and she did. So I spent that winter with Barney and his wife, Eileen Leeds— she was killed in the ring about five years after that, but then she was a big-timer—learning to fly."
Tommy asked shyly, "What was Barney Parrish like?" He was still trying to reconcile the knowledge that this friendly, bubbly, young-looking woman was the great star of the Flying Forrunatis, the woman whose picture, together with her husband and his brother, had been on his bedroom wall ever since he was a very small boy. Had Barney Parrish, too, the legend of the Big Show, been like her, just—he fumbled for a way to put it into words to himself—a friendly, ordinary man, someone you could know and talk to.
"Barney? Oh he was the sweetest man you ever met," Cleo said definitely. "Irish—I couldn't begin to give you an idea of his accent, and at that time I was still talking pure Texas, so sometimes we could hardly understand each other. He and Eileen treated me like their own kid. Eileen used to sneak me chocolates, saying that the poor baby—that was me—needed to keep my strength up, and Barney would take them away from me, saying he didn't want me to get fat. And then he'd give them to me if I'd share them with him

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and not tell Eileen, because she didn't want him to go off his diet I remember him saying once"—her eyes were distant, wistful—"it only took one thing to make a flyer, and that was an open mind about breaking your neck."
Tommy remembered that Mario had said something like that once. Where was Mario? He shifted impatiently in his

chair. At any other time, this gossip about the Big Show, about men and women who were legends, would have fascinated him; vaguely he resented that he couldn't enjoy it, waiting like this.
"More cookies, Tommy? Liss?"
"No, thank you," he said, remembering his manners, "but they're very nice. Did you bake them?"
"Good Lord, no!" Cleo laughed. "I can't boil water without burning it. Career women don't cook."
Tommy felt confused, remembering how proud Beth Zane was of her competent housekeeping, her excellent cooking and baking. But, then, she didn't work in the ring anymore. Why not?
Angelo asked, "Cleo, where is Barney now?"
Cleo's vibrant face suddenly went pinched and pale; for a moment she looked almost as old as she was. "I don't know," she said in a sad, faraway voice. "Nobody knows. And God knows, we've tried everything. I keep thinking, if he was still alive, he'd get in touch with me. I mean, I was like his own sister. He gave me away, when I married Jim. When I broke my arm in the ring, he came and sat up with me all night when I couldn't sleep, and read out loud to me from a book of Irish fairy tales he had. And then he had his fall, and he went off with that awful Elsa person—and he just disappeared."
Tommy blurted, in shock, "I thought he was dead." It had never occurred to him that the great Irish aerialist, lamed in a fall during Tommy's childhood, might still be alive.
"It would even be a relief to know that," Lionel said. "He just disappeared, overnight. Randy Starr had the Pinkertons on it for a year, and when they gave up, Jim and I hired a detective, they traced him to the Mexican border, and then the trail went cold. Nobody's heard a word since."
A dark and somber shadow, compounded of ghosts, suddenly haunted the room. The great Irish aerialist, Mario's idol, both legs smashed in a fall, vanished into the limbo of crippled aerialists, smashed successes. Tommy thought of Lucia, her graceful gestures masking the pain and awkwardness she could not help but betray, sometimes; of Joe, his hair prematurely white, who had once been able to do "a little of everything." He thought of his own father, of the scar over Tom Zane's eye, the thick ugly whiteness, the red strings hanging down that night from the clawed suit—

"That's the way it goes in this business," Angelo said soberly. "One minute on top of the world. The next minute —where are you?"
Johnny shivered and said, "Come on, let's get out of the morgue! Talking that way doesn't do anybody any good! Can I have some more coffee, Cleo?"

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While she was pouring it, Papa Tony and Mario came into the trailer with Jim Fortunati, and Cleo fussed around with more sandwiches, more coffee, a fresh bag of cookies. The trailer was crowded now with the Fortunatis and the Santellis. Liss and Cleo squeezed together on a single chair. Tommy yielded his chair to Papa Tony and sat on the floor beside Mario. They all fell silent.
Papa Tony said, "No, no more coffee, Cleo, thank you. I won't keep you in suspense, children. Starr liked us, but he can't use us this season."
Tommy looked at Mario, but his face was buried in a blue coffee mug. Liss looked disappointed, but not especially surprised. Johnny clenched his fist and hit the floor with it
"He had a proposition, Uncle Tony—" Jim began.
Mario interrupted: "No, Jim, I said—"
Jim Fortunati gestured him to silence. "He offered to headline Matt center ring, with Cleo and Lionel. He said he'd take on Tony with him, as manager of the aerial division. He said he couldn't use either of the catchers. The little girl —I don't want to hurt your feelings, Liss, but what he said was 'I've got a dozen just as good, and almost as pretty.' And the kid—Tommy?—the kid looks promising, but it would be five years before Starr's could sign him. We play the big eastern states, and they have very stiff child-labor laws about minors in aerial acts. A few performers' kids dress up for the spec, or ride around the ring, but our policy is very stiff: nobody under twenty-one in the air. If he was eighteen we'd try to fake it, but sixteen, no."
Tonic Santelli gave a wry laugh. "That would have been hard on you and me, Jim, huh?"
Fortunati laughed. "You bet, Uncle Tony. I was top-mounter in a tumbling act when I was eight years old, and went on the wire when I was thirteen."
Johnny asked, "What goes, Jim? Liss and Matt both worked with Lu in the ring, and Liss wasn't even fourteen, was she?"

Jim said, "I know. But that was before the war. About three years ago we had some trouble in Chicago—girl in a cloud-swing act fell and broke her back. It was one of those big family acts, Gonsalvo or Gonzalez, I forget—"
"Gonzalez," Cleo said, "Consuelo Gonzalez."
Lionel nodded. "So many men were being drafted into the Army, we were using a lot of Mexican acts where the men weren't citizens and couldn't be nabbed by the local draft board. So when Consuelo fell and got hurt, it turned out she was only about fifteen. The local Child Labor people got hold of the story and made a big stink, and some sob sister spread it all over the newspapers. When it all died down, we had to tighten up our regulations about minors working in aerial acts."
"I had all of these flying before they were fifteen," Papa Tony said with a hard laugh. "I would not want to train anyone whose bones and muscles had hardened with age. It is like the ballet; a child must begin while he is still young and flexible. Laws like that will be the end of the circus."
"The laws aren't so tough in the Midwest and down on the Mexican border," Jim explained. "But in the big cities they really check up on us all the time. We have the Child Labor people breathing down our necks every month or so."

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Papa Tony sounded really angry now. "Do these people really think a father cannot judge what is best for his own children? Is it for this we fought a war for freedom, that in this free country they can come into a family and tell a father what he cannot do in training his own sons and daughters?"
Jim said placatingly, "I know how you feel, Uncle Tony, but it's Starr's policy: nobody under twenty in an aerial act. Anyway," he went on over Papa Tony's irritable snort, "they've signed the Barrys, but they can make a spot for Matt."
Cleo came over and kissed Mario, French fashion, on both cheeks. "I knew Randy Starr would want you when he saw you, Matt—did I tell you how wonderful you are? And now that Jim is grounded—"
"I didn't know that," Angelo interrupted, and intuitively, Tommy sensed he was doing it to take everyone's eyes off Mario, to give him time to think. "What happened, Jim?"
Jim shrugged. "Too many triples, I guess. My shoulder's

been giving me hell. If I was younger, I might try that new operation they have, but I'm getting to the slowdown point anyhow, and I'd rather manage the act on the ground. Cleo's enough of a headliner on her own—we don't need two in one act. But if we have Matt with us, the act will be the same as always."
"You will, won't you?" Cleo coaxed. "I worked with the Santellis before. You'll work with us, won't you, Matt?"
Mario stared at the floor of the trailer. Cleo's words had drawn everyone's attention back to Mario, and Tommy felt a painful tightness in his chest again. Mario would go on, alone, to heights where he could not follow ...
He promised we'd stay together. Didn't he mean it? Was it just the kind of thing you say? . . . He stared at the floor.
"I'm sorry, Jim," Mario said, raising his eyes, "but what I said to Randy Starr in the office, that still goes. I want to stay with the family."
Papa Tony said, "I tell him, 'Matty, take it if you want to, headline with the Fortunatis, that is nothing to turn down,' I said, 'Matt}", you go ahead if you want to.' "
Mario clasped his thin hands and twisted them. "Cleo, I'm sorry. Honest, I've got nothing against you and Lionel, but I don't want to go off as a star in some other act. I want the family with me, I want to be—to be in the flying Santellis. I never worked with anyone outside the family. I don't want to."
Jim said, "Family? For God's sake, kid, Uncle Tony married my father's sister; Lu and Angelo and Joe are my first cousins!"
He looked angry and offended, and Mario said quickly, "Jim, that's not what I mean. Really. It isn't. But—I want to stick with Angelo, and—he's my catcher—and—I'm a Santelli. Not—not one of the Flying Fortunatis. Look, don't get mad—"
"Hey, hey, kid, I'm not mad, that's not it. Only Randy's going to think you're just holding him up for more money. He really wants that triple of yours."
••And that's another thing," Mario said seriously. "I don't think I'm ready to headline with the triple yet. Not till I can get it most of the time when I need

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to, not just when I'm feeling lucky or really good. And even then, I want to do it as—as the Flying Santellis."

Johnny interrupted. "Matt, if you turn down a chance to headline with the Fortunatis, you're crazy!"
"So I'm crazy, then," Mario said. "I'm turning it down."
"Crazy as they come." But Jim Fortunati smiled. "Okay, son, I do understand. Cleo and Lionel—and me, too—we'd like to have you with us. I know how you feel. But if anything happens to change your mind, you come back here, okay?" He looked at Papa Tony, who looked simultaneously troubled and very, very pleased.
"Tony, I hope you're as proud of all these kids as they deserve."
Papa Tony stood up and went to Mario. He laid a hand on his shoulder, and Tommy could feel, even before he saw, the glow that rose and spilled over in the old man's overflowing smile.
"Proud? Proud doesn't start saying it, Jim. I wouldn't trade today for the center ring of the Big Show, and I don't care who knows it!"

CHAPTER 22

during the following days the inevitable reaction set in; the hectic suspense and tension of the audition took their toll. Even on the drive home, Johnny's sullen face had flung storm warnings at them, and he had muttered, where he sat between Liss and Angelo, "If Stel had been with us, it might have turned out different!"
Liss turned on him, angry and hurt. "It's not my fault she's not working!"
Papa Tony pleaded, "Children! Children!"
They were all feeling the letdown. Ordinary winter routine seemed tedious. Liss went home and spent two weeks in San Francisco with David, returning pale and strained, falling into abrupt brooding silences. Stella began rehearsing with them again, shakily at first, but quickly recovering her old skill and strength.
Tommy was to graduate from high school in the spring, but he knew that by the time graduation day came he would have been a month on the road, and would have to make

do with an equivalency certificate. He couldn't take much interest in the flurry of senior doings.
He usually walked to and from school with Barbara. It was pleasant to be looked up to and admired, like an older brother. He took positive pleasure in helping her into her coat, in adding the heaviest of her schoolbooks to his load, and once, making her stand still while he untangled a fallen leaf from her bright hair, he felt a touch of unmixed tenderness. Barbara had never been on tour with the circus and was endlessly fascinated with what he could tell her of life on the road, but one day she confided her greatest secret. Though she liked flying, and had learned the family business as a matter of course, her real ambition was not to fly but to dance. Not the classical ballet Mario loved— which Barbara had been studying since she was seven years

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old—but in the big movie musicals. She had already taken part in many dance recitals and had begged her father to let her apply for a studio audition.
"But" she concluded miserably, "California's just crawling with pretty girls dying to get into the movies, all prettier than me."
Tommy looked at her gravely for a few minutes, and she pouted, for he withheld the expected compliment. Then he said, "But you're not just a pretty girl, Barbie. You're a ballet dancer, a good one, not just from one of those places that rush girls into the stage or into the movies. And you have acrobatic training, too."
"How many movies need girl acrobats?"
I'd think there's some. But I mean, you're more than just a pretty face. You can do things, so if you do get into the movies, you won't be just one of the crowd-—you'd be special"
On Saturday's they went to the movies together. While Clay disappeared into a horde of small boys, Tommy sat with her in the balcony, and once or twice during each show Barbara laid her warm, flexible little hand in his; once during a love scene she moved within the circle of his arm, seeking some unfocused comfort she was not aware enough to look for consciously. Tommy took a remote pleasure in this, but was never tempted to retain her hand, to kiss her or think of it, and once, when his hand brushed the fuzzy wool of her plaid skirt over her hard young thighs, he took it

away as if it had been burned. Once he thought, I love Barbie a lot, only it's like Mario loves Liss. She's my sister. They sat every night side by side in the big living room, doing their homework, and once Grandmother Santelli came out of her vagueness to watch them all during one evening; when Lucia came to take the demented old lady to bed, she chirped, "Buon' note, Matteo, Elissa."
Tommy practiced with Barbara, and once, after soberly asking permission of Papa Tony, appeared with her in a school talent show, wearing crimson tights and running through a complex tumbling routine. Once—only once, and only after repeated pestering from Barbara—Mario put a Chopin record on the record player and danced, with Barbara, a complicated pas de Deux. Tommy felt something turn over and twist inside him, painfully familiar, as he watched. Barbara was lovely, with her bright brown curls and graceful tarlatan skirts, but Tommy's attention was focused on Mario: blade-slender, steel-strong, with a compelling tension Tommy never saw in him, even in the triple. Dancing, he had some of the intense, over spilling force which radiated from Cleo, the unmistakable mark of the star. When they poised at the climax, Barbara lifted to Mario's shoulder, Tommy felt grateful for the dimness in the room. Such beauty was too intense to be endured, and he could not understand why the others were unmoved, merely complimenting Barbara prettily on her dancing. Mario was quiet for the rest of the evening, lying on the rug with his head resting on a cushion at Lucia's feet. Tommy thought he had gone home, but late that evening, Mario came into his room.
"Lu said I might as well stay over. You don't mind, do you?"

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Later, Tommy tried to say incoherently something of what the dance had meant to him, but Mario only sighed.
"It's not like flying. In ballet you're never really good enough. Men are never really good enough, there. Not even the Nijinsky's. It's a woman's art. Maybe Barbie will be good enough someday."
Tommy said in a quick flash of insight, "You really wanted to dance, didn't you? Not fly."
"I thought so, for a while," Mario said. "I even got upset, one year, when I had to turn down an offer from a dance

troupe in order to go on the road with the show. Angelo would have fought for my right to stay in college, if I'd wanted to, even after—well, I won't get into that right now. But dancing, that was different. So I went back on the road, and I'm really not sorry; that was the year he started working with me on the triple. But in the winter, hanging around the ballet school, I still wonder if I did the right thing. And I'm really not any good as a dancer now. Maybe I could have been. I'll never know, not now."
"You looked great to me, only I don't know anything about it. I'd think you'd dance for the family, though."
"Hell, no. They say all the wrong things. And Angelo hates it. Oh, he doesn't mind my doing it just to help Barbie show off, but he hates it when I really get into it. Liss and I used to dance a lot, and it gave him fits. I quit that a long time ago."
"Just the same, I'm glad I saw you once. Dancing, you're" —Tommy hesitated, then said shyly—"you're beautiful."
"Fighting words." Mario chuckled and gave him a playful punch, but Tommy felt Mario understood. As always, when surrounded by the family and working hard, they had reverted to the old status of brothers, companions. With time and commonplace living together, inevitably some of the early intensity had worn off, and even their lovemaking had become almost taken for granted, habit, a brief embrace, silent, before they slept. But tonight, when Mario put his arms around Tommy, the boy felt all the old emotion surging up inside him. He said nothing—he had been taught to say nothing—but il left him shaken, near to tears again, as it had not for some time.
Shortly after Easter, Tommy came home from school with Barbara to hear voices behind the closed door of the living room. While he was hanging up his sweater, Joe Santelli came out and beckoned them in.
"We were waiting for you."
It was barely dusk, for the days were lengthening with the spring, but the curtains had been drawn and the fire lighted. They were all there, formally assembled, and Tommy wondered, What is going on? As Tommy and Barbara came in, Papa Tony, standing before the fire, said, "Good, now we are all here, I can tell you what you older ones must have

guessed. We have been offered a season contract with Woods-Wayland Circus."

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Will Mother and Dad let me stay with the Santellis if we're not with Lambeth? It flashed through Tommy's mind, and as if speaking directly to him, Papa Tony said, "Lambeth has an option on our services, but I can break it if I notify them before April first. James Woods has asked me to form my own troupe; he did not specify size. Barbara," he said, "Lucia tells me that if you work hard, you are ready to go with us this year. Tommy was your age when he began."

The girl swallowed, folding a pleat in her skirt.

"What did Daddy say, Papa Tony?" She looked up at Joe.

"In this family," Joe said gently, "if you are old enough to fly you are old enough to decide it for yourself. The question is, do you want to go, Barbara?"

Barbara bent her head and said, "Papa Tony, I—I don't want to. I want to stay in school and—and finish with my class, and go on with my dancing."

The old man's heavy eyebrows went up. Lucia looked away, into the fire. Finally Papa Tony said, "So, it is your right. I am not a tyrant. Tommy, what have you to say? We have not yet decided whether to stay with Lambeth or take this new contract. What is your opinion?"

Tommy swallowed. Was he actually being consulted? "Well, I'm under contract to you, Papa Tony. Wherever you say I go, I go, and you always told me a performer does what he's told without arguing about it."

The old man smiled. "In rehearsal and in performance, that is true. But the rule in this family has always been, before we make any big decision, everybody has to be heard, from the youngest to the oldest, so that we who make the decisions have heard everyone and we know."

Johnny whispered, "That means we all speak our piece and then he makes up his mind the way he meant to all along."

Papa Tony gave him a sharp glance, but only said, "Tommy?"

"Well, I knew Mother and Dad expected us back with Lambeth."

"Yes, your parents must be considered and told. Gianni?"

"Woods-Wayland is a rough outfit," Johnny said. "They work hell out of everybody. It's a step up for me and Stel,

of course, but they sure aren't going to give us star treatment like you got with Lambeth. We'll all have a lot of extra jobs to do. On the other hand, they're one of the biggest rail circuses still on the road. They're about as good as we can do, short of Starr's, and Matt especially has reached a point where he needs showing off and exploiting a little, or he'll spend his life being a big frog in little puddles like Lambeth. I think, myself, he should have taken up Randy Starr's offer, but that's all water under the bridge. I say take it." Papa Tony nodded noncommittally. "Stella?" "Oh, I don't have anything to say about it, do I?" "If you travel with us, you do. Even if you do not fly with us, wives of performers are always given a place in the performance."

"She goes with us," Johnny said, "or I don't go." Papa Tony beamed. Stella murmured, "Well, I can fill in almost anywhere; there aren't many acts I haven't tried. I'd like to fly, but I can do almost anything, and I'd sort of like being with a regular circus."

"Good girl," Papa Tony said. "You are with us, then. Matt?"

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Mario shrugged. "Johnny seems to have spoken for me. All I've got to say is this: Jim Woods is a good guy, I know his rep. The Waylands are a pair of grafters, sharpies. That's personal. Professionally, I guess Jock's right; it's time to move on up, see if we can be a big frog in the big puddles, too."
"Elissa?"
She shut her eyes and turned abruptly away from Mario's expectant face. Then she drew a deep breath and, said, "Count me out. I'm not going. The rest of you do what you think best."
Mario said, shocked, "Sweetie, you told me—" and Papa Tony's eyes flamed with sudden wrath.
"Che—? Ragazza—"
"Here, here, kitten," Angelo said, "what's all this about?"
Elissa got to her feet and stood there, twisting the end of her long braid. "I'm not going," she said. "I can't take Davey on the road: Lu took us on the road and look at us! Anyway, David wouldn't let me go—he'd probably divorce me first. And you wouldn't like that, would you, Lulu?" she said. turning on her mother. "There has never been a divorced

woman in the family, has there? And anyway—anyway, I'm—I'm—I'm going to have another baby," she said, and gulped, turning viciously on Lucia. 'Now are you satisfied? Damn it, now are you satisfied, Lulu?"
"Lisa—cara—Liss, that isn't fair! I told you it was your free choice—" Lucia began, but Liss stopped her with a gesture.
"You told me this, you told me that, you told me so many damn things I don't know whether I'm coming or going! Now it's settled. I don't know if I wanted it this way or not, but anyway it's settled, it's out of my hands, and I'm glad—I'm glad that now I don't have to worry about it anymore, or listen to you telling me all about it both ways anymore—" Her voice cracked. She burst into wild sobbing, flung up her two hands in front of her face, and ran out of the room, slamming the door.
"Oh, my God—" Stella gasped, and got up to follow her. Lucia caught her arm. "No," she said. "No, Stel, let her go—"
Mario was on his feet, but Lucia stepped in front of him. "No. Sit down, Matt. Stella, you too. Sit down, I said!" Lucia's face was deathly white.
"Lucia, Lucia cara," Joe said gently. "Elissa didn't mean —she was only—"
Lucia cut off his words with an imperative gesture. She said something in Italian, then, "I know. I'll go and talk to her."
'Talk to her!" Mario said savagely. "Gesu e Maria, you've done enough talking! Can't you let her alone, even now? Haven't you done enough?"
Papa Tony snarled something at him in Italian. Mario's face flamed, but he sat down, lowering his head, staring at his knees. Tommy saw his mouth move; he was swearing under his breath. But he did not move as Lucia went out of the room, quietly closing the door behind her. There was a long, shaky silence.
At last Papa Tony said with a heavy shrug, "So. Elissa has chosen. She should have spoken to me in private, not like this. Let us continue. Angelo?"

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Angelo stood up, clasping his big hands behind his back. He looked shaken, and Tommy had the distinct impression that it was an effort for him to speak at all. But when he finally spoke, it was as if the interruption had never happened.

"Touring with a rail show isn't as comfortable as traveling in our own private trailer. The kids wouldn't remember, but I remember all too well and I'm not sure I want to go back to it."
"I remember pretty well," Mario said, raising his head, and Tommy had the feeling that he, too, wanted to pretend there had been no interruption, "and I'm all for it. No cooking, no housekeeping, no driving between towns at night."
"No privacy, no family life, no freedom," Angelo said. "I've got used to living in the trailer. I had it in my head I might get married again. I'm not exactly crazy about the idea of going back to a lower berth in a car filled up with sixty men. However"—he shrugged—"like Johnny said, Woods-Wayland is as good as we can do, outside of Starr's, and I don't see how we can possibly turn it down. So this whole discussion is boring as hell—excuse me, Stella—and I don't see why we keep hashing it over."
"I would not go as far as that," Papa Tony said, "but it would be difficult to turn down an offer as good as this. Has anyone else anything to say?"
Mario got up and stood with his back to the fire. "Of course, Liss just threw us one hell of a curve—" he started.
"Can you honestly say you didn't know?" Johnny exploded. "We all know Liss tells you every damn thing—you probably knew it before she told Dave! You were sitting it out, waiting till the last minute, weren't you, hoping Stel and I would get sick of hanging around and go off on our own, so you and Liss could have it all your own way—•"
"Johnny, don't—" Stella begged, pulling on his arm, but he ignored her.
Angelo cut in.
"Shut your trap, Johnny. Matt didn't know any more about it than you did! And I'll bet my month's pay that Liss wasn't just keeping quiet about it on the off chance something would happen to her kid, either, or sneaking off and looking for a doctor on the sly—"
"Listen, you bastard—" Johnny sprang up, clenching his fists.
Stella begged, "Johnny, Johnny, please—"
"Basta! Enough!" Papa Tony snarled. "Not another word, either of you! That is past! Past, you hear me? We are now discussing the season to come, not what has gone before. Sit down, both of you!"
Johnny sank back on the hearth, and after a moment

Tommy saw him groping for Stella's hand. "Sorry, babe," he muttered.
"Sorry, Angelo. But that was kind of below the belt. Fact is, I guess Liss just threw us one hell of a big curve too."
Papa Tony waited till they were all silent. "Anything more?"

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"I didn't finish," Mario said. "With a small show like Lambeth we could go on working, improving. With a big one, the way we start the season, that's the way we finish it."
"Still," Papa Tony said, "I think it is time for this step. Listen, children. This will be my last season."
"Why, Papa," Joe said, speaking for the first time since Lucia had left them, "Pierre Regny was still doing doubles at seventy, and Gerard Might did a perch-pole act at eighty-two!"
Papa Tony chuckled. "I have no ambition to be billed as the oldest aerialist in the world. Fifty-two years ago, my brother Rico and I, we had been doing a casting act with my papa—you remember the old casting act, two stationary catchers on fixed bars, a flyer between them? After we watched the Spanish team doing their first flying-return act in Vienna, we looked at each other and we said, 'Well, well, we need some new rigging anyway.' We made our own flying net by hand, that winter." He rubbed his knuckles, reminiscently. "And that was the beginning of the Flying Santellis. Two years after, we came to America with Starr's. Fifty years, it is enough. When the old knees get knobby, when every town looks just like every other town and you can tell what state you are in only by the color of the mud, then it is time to stay home by the fire. All I want now is to see you youngsters established, get what you deserve. This year, yes, I go along, I look after you, but you don't need me. I look at you now, I see Matt is going to be the best there is, and Tommy and Stella right behind him, maybe not behind him at all. I see you, Angelo, so sober, so conscientious, all ready to look after the family when I'm not with you anymore. And you too, Johnny—we fight, we can't get along, but you fight for what you want, and that's good, too, when you learn to watch that temper of yours, when you learn to fight for the family and not just for yourself. Elissa, I don't know—she's got her life, I don't want to interfere, not if it's like that."
For a moment, he looked sad. Then he sighed and smiled. "So, I've done all one man can do. I've made the

Flying Santellis again. If the Lord lets me live, I see you all in center ring someday, but after this I am only the old man by the fire. For one lifetime, I've had all one man can have before the devil gets jealous." He stood in the firelight, his dark eyes glinting with his rare, beautiful smile. "How many men, I wonder, can say so much?"

CHAPTER 23

the Woods-Wayland three-ring Railroad Circus was a bewildering new world to Tommy. After the privacy and intimacy of the Lambeth Circus, he was as bewildered and lost as any performer in his first season.
In the dormitory car of the unmarried male performers, Tommy and Mario shared a tiny compartment in a corridor of two dozen such compartments. Angelo and Papa Tony had one nest door. Stella and Johnny shared another in the adjacent car reserved for married couples. The Santellis were not getting the star treatment of the three or four major headliners with the show, who had private cars or spacious staterooms. On the other hand, though, as important performers featured on the bill they were not herded

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into the three-deep bunk-bed cars of the miscellaneous clowns, riders, jugglers. and minor performers.

Angelo said once that he was glad Liss and Barbara had not traveled with them this season. As unmarried female performers they would have had to share a tiny space in the "convent car"' which held all the single girls with the show; he had heard that there were ninety girls crowded into it this year.

It felt strange to eat in the enormous "cook top" crammed elbow-by-elbow with two hundred and twenty performers and three hundred workhands; the food was good and the service excellent, but it was not anything like home cooking. It was strange to fall asleep after the show with the train pulling out, the rails clicking off noisily under their heads and the motion of the swaying train beneath them, rather than going to bed quietly in the family trailer. However, he got used to it. He enjoyed waking on the gray morning sidings in strange towns; he got used to the

close quarters of the aerialists' dressing tent which he shared with two dozen other men, rather than each act dressing in the privacy of its own living quarters; he learned to sleep through the protest sounds of animals being loaded or unloaded in gray dawn or black night. Every able-bodied man with the show, even a featured performer, was expected to join the workhands in the business of setting up canvas and rigging. Tommy, working with the riggers, learned the fast split-second rhythm of the show: the drum beat pounding of the stakemen, the chant of the rope caller as the guying-out crew worked around the Big Top, taking up the slack in the canvas, and the soft basso-profundo of the colored canvas-men, with the melancholy jazz rhythm of their chant, Take it, shake it, weave it, make it, mo-ove along!

As Johnny had predicted, they were all handed plenty of additional duties. They were, of course, expected to ride in the spec, and because as acrobats they could presumably handle and balance themselves without difficulty, Tommy and Johnny found themselves in the highest rigging of a clipper-ship float, wearing loincloths and turbans and very little else. Angelo rode, caftaned and turbaned, in a group of janissaries on horseback; Papa Tony, in rajah costume, drove a chariot, surrounded by four lovely young girls from the aerial ballet. Stella had drawn the traditional task of a really experienced female acrobat, and perched on the neck of an elephant, while Mario, to his eloquent disgust—he protested, but it didn't get him anywhere—had somehow drawn the most hated task in any circus: riding a camel.

In addition, after a conference with Coe Wayland, the aerial manager, Tommy found himself performing in a tumbling act in one of the end rings, filling in while a famous troupe of Spanish acrobats held center ring. The tumbling act, comprised of Coe Wayland, Johnny, Tommy, Mario, and Stella, was billed as "The Gardners." With all these changes and extra tasks, Tommy found every show a new race against dust, tangled tights, knotted shoelaces, and time. He was always breathless.

And yet, for him, the early months of this season were one of those intervals of calm which come into every life, a plateau of rest and contentment. After

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the storms of his fifteenth summer he was naively amazed at the peace of it, and felt, at sixteen, that it was because he had grown up.
Despite the crowding and the lack of privacy, he and

Mario did not build up nearly so much tension or frustration. They went everywhere together, and it never occurred to anyone with the show that they were not, in simple fact, brothers. All evidence supported the assumption: the way Angelo ordered them both around at rehearsals and in the dressing tent; Tommy's instant and childish obedience to Papa Tony's lightest word; the very openness of their affection, which made it seem more artless than it was. He was named in the contract as Thomas LeRoy Zone, Jr., performing as Tommy Santelli, just as Mario and Johnny were named as Matthew Gardner and John B. Gardner, performing as Mario Santelli and Johnny Santelli. But even circus people who had known Papa Tony for decades believed Tommy was just another of the Santelli grandsons. The card tacked on their door read Mario and Tommy Santelli, The Flying Santellis, exactly as the one on the compartment next door read Tonio and Angelo Santelli, and Mario never spoke of Tommy anywhere around the show except as "my kid brother." Closed away in their tiny compartment, they talked during the long night runs when they should have been sleeping. As often as not, they would fall asleep in each other's arms in the lower berth, Mario's head resting on Tommy's shoulder and the clatter of the rails wiping away counties and whole states beneath them. Only now and then, when the old shadow slid across Mario's face in the darkness, did Tommy feel any hint of the old alienation, and even then it was fleeting.
"What do the train whistles say to you, ragazzo?"
Tommy thought about that. "They say, 'I'm lo-onely, lonely:' "
"Well, tell 'em they're lying—I'm here," Mario said, and put his arms around Tommy, and the shadow was gone.
Only once, on a long night run while they lay awake with rain splashing down tie black window, Mario tense and restless because that afternoon he had attempted the triple and faulted and fallen (he hated doing this in the ring, though a hundred falls at rehearsal left him cheerful), did he speak of the past.
"Train whistles always make me feel like a little kid. I grew up on a circus train, you know."
"I know. Lucia told me."
"Liss and I used to say that the train whistles were saying, 'Andiamo, me vo, ma non so dove ...' "

Tommy knew enough Italian now to translate: Let's go, I'm going, but I don't know where.
"It used to scare me. To go to bed and not know where we'd wake up, Liss used to try to tell me it didn't matter because wherever we were going, we were all on the train and all together anyhow, but I used to get scared. I used to wake up at night and think everybody else in the world was asleep, just me and the train whistles not knowing where we were going. And I'd climb down

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and wake her up just so I wouldn't be all alone in the world with the train whistles—"
Tommy said hesitantly, for Mario had not mentioned it since the contract was signed, "It's too bad Liss couldn't have been with us this year."
Mario only stared bleakly at the rain washing down the window and said, "Well, Stella's doing okay," in a voice that closed the subject, tied it up, sealed it, and dumped it into an unbridged river.
Tommy grew his final half inch this season—he would never be tall—and gained four pounds before July first. Papa Tony allowed him to do a one-and-a-half in the ring and to attempt a back double in rehearsal, and there he stopped him.
"When you're eighteen," he said, "you can try anything you want to. For now it's enough."
Tommy had been taught not to argue, but Papa Tony saw the flash of rebellion in his eyes and said, "Go on, say it."
"Papa Tony, I want to work on a couple of the big tricks. Just practice them, in rehearsal. Mario was doing a two-and-a-half when he was seventeen, and I'll be that old next season."
"Yes," said the old man slowly, "but if I had known what I know now, I would never have allowed it. I let him accomplish too much while he was still too young, and there was no place left for him to go; he had to break his heart, and try to break his neck, on that accursed triple."
"You didn't want him to do it?" This seemed incredible to Tommy. It was the triple that would make the Santellis famous again, and that was what Papa Tony seemed to care about most.
Slowly the old man shook his head. "No, I didn't want him to. I didn't know why he had to; I just knew he had to and I couldn't stop him. There was 'a reason they called that triple the salto mortale—that's, let me think, in English that's 'the

leap of death,' 'the fatal leap,' but I think for him it is more than that, maybe—" Again he stopped and thought for a moment. "I think for him maybe it meant the leap of fate. Does that mean anything to you, Tommy?"
It did. Tommy stood tongue-tied, looking at the old man. It had never occurred to him that harsh, practical Antonio Santelli ever thought about things like this.
"Save something for yourself to accomplish, Tommy. For Matt, I think, it became the only thing fate had left for him to do. It's a long Me when you reach the top too soon and there's no place left to go but down. And then if you don't break your neck you will break your heart—" He stopped, laughing the short laugh he gave when he was embarrassed. "So, so," he said, "again the old man is making speeches." He reached out and patted Tommy's shoulder. "And what business have you working on the big tricks when you fling your arms around you like a baby camel in the net?"
As they worked across the country and began to settle into the new life with its orderly pattern of nights and days, they began to have some leisure to understand what was going on around them. Tommy, who, with Lambeth and

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in the Santelli household, had begun to divide people clannishly into a few he knew very well and the faceless thousands beyond the lights of the ring, found himself, in this larger area, more sociable. He struck up a friendship with twin brothers his own age from a family of French equestrians, and soon picked up enough French to talk to them easily. An old clown taught him more about makeup, between a matinee and a night show, than he had learned in three years with Lambeth. The clown had once been a well-known stage magician, with the bad luck to lose two fingers in a firecracker accident. There were flurries, emergencies. The oldest brother of a family of British cycle riders steered his cycle an inch too close to the edge of the balance stage and five piled-up riders fell in a shower of falling bodies, lighting miraculously without injuries except for the youngest top-mounter, little Isabella Byrd, who had knocked out two teeth and was carried out of the ring tearless and amazed. Her big sister Sally, on whose head she had knocked out the teeth, remarked that thank goodness they were only baby teeth and would grow back eventually, and put Isabella to bed cheerfully anticipating a shilling for each of them—at eight, Isabella still did

not understand American money. One of the girl flyers in the other end ring went into the net and broke her wrist, and Stella, who had started the season riding in the spec and working in the tumbling act—there was no room for a woman in the flying act as the Santellis had designed it for Woods-Wayland—took her place. And Mario had somehow taken it into his head that he would like to learn to cross a tight wire, and to everyone's amazement, in less than a month of practice, he had learned to cross without a balance pole— which, since the wirewalkers performed without a safety net, sent Papa Tony into his fiercest tantrum of the season.

Tommy had had only random and occasional word from his family; he had expected no more. In the months he had spent with the Santellis, his mother had sent him only a dozen brief notes, with hastily scribbled messages of love and admonitions to be a good boy and keep well. He kept track of the route of Lambeth Circus, more from curiosity than homesickness.

One Saturday afternoon, with a few minutes to rest before getting ready for the flying act in the second half of the show, he was walking along "Clown Alley." The clowns had the long edge of the dressing top sidewall reserved for them; because of their enormous amounts of makeup and their many costumes, they were each allotted twice the dressing-tent space of any other performer. Making his way through the precisely lined-up trunks to the spot where the Santellis had their permanent location in the tent, he passed that of Coe Wayland, the aerial manager, who worked in the tumbling act with them in the first half of the show. Wayland was dressing to go out front for the second half, where he took charge of the box office. As Tommy went past, Wayland slammed down the lid of his trunk, but not before Tommy had seen the square bottle and the glass he hurriedly thrust under his discarded tights. Tommy stared without meaning to. Drinking on the lot, officially forbidden, was winked at if the performers were sober during the show, but acrobats and aerialists were normally abstemious men, fearing that even an occasional

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drink would damage their coordination. Papa Tony had once bawled out Angelo for pouring himself an extra glass of wine, and that was on Sunday, when there wasn't any show. Even a workhand or canvasman could be fired without notice for being drunk in public. But the few who did drink,

did so openly; the idea of secretly drinking was something completely new to Tommy.
Wayland looked up and demanded, "What you staring at, Red?"
What the heck, Tommy thought, his part in the show's over. You don't need to be sober to count the gate money. He said the first thing that popped into his head. "You got the new Billboard? I saw Eddie the Gimp driving on the lot with the truck, right before the matinee, and I didn't have time to pick it up. Can I see it?"
"Yeah, I'm through reading it," Coe Wayland said, and chuckled. He was a thickset bullnecked man, handsome in a coarse way. "What you want with Billboard, kid?" he asked with heavy-handed humor. "Looking for a new job, maybe, where you'll get center ring in a solo spot?"
"I want to look up the routes, find out where Lambeth Shows is playing this week," Tommy improvised.
"Come on, Red," Wayland said, still jocular, "what you want with that two-bit mud show? You're doing all right here with us, aren't you? Somebody on the lot not nice to you, kid? You come and tell old Uncle Coe, I'll fix his wagon!"
"I grew up with that two-bit mud show," Tommy said. "I want to see where my folks are playing."
"That's right, you're not a Santelli, are you? I remember seeing you had another name on the contract," Wayland said. "How'd you come to get flying with the Santellis? They make such a big show of being all family, their nice tight little clique, I thought you either had to marry into them or be born into them. Was it you or your parents?"
"Neither." Tommy said. "The Santellis were working with Lambeth and Mario taught me to fly."
"You don't look a lot like them, and that's a fact," Wayland said. 'They're Eye-talians or something, aren't they? For all Johnny's so blond. What they do, Red, pick you for your good looks, so they'd have one blond, one brunette, and one redhead, huh?" He was close to Tommy; Tommy could smell the whiskey on his breath, and it made him uneasy. Wayland asked, "Your folks flyers too?"
Tommy shook his head. "No, my dad's a cat trainer with Lambeth. Tom Zane. I wanted to see where they're playing this week."
Coe Wayland's jaw dropped. He stood staring at Tommy.

"Christamighty," he said, "you're that Zane? You're their kid?"
"Something wrong with that?" Tommy demanded. "Hey, why are you staring at me like that—has my face turned green or something?"
"Old Tony—he's your legal guardian, then?"
"I guess so," Tommy said. "Why?"

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"Good thing you were here, wasn't it? Or—oh, my God," Wayland said, and abruptly turned away from him, taking up his jacket, knotting his tie. "Scram, kid. Run along. I got to get out front."
What the heck? Tommy was completely baffled. Is he drunk? "Can I take the Billboard? You said you were through with it."
"Well, I'm not. I haven't got it," Coe Wayland said, his back turned to Tommy. "Run along, scram, go talk to Tony Santelli. G'wan!" And as Tommy, frowning, turned away, Wayland called after him, with drunken intensity, "Hey, Tommy—take it easy, kid, okay?"
Either that guy is nuts, or drunk. Tommy came to the place where the Santelli trunks were lined up; his own was opened, his costume for the flying act laid out on top of the tray. Mario was standing on one foot, half naked, getting into his tights. "You're late," he said. "You better start getting ready."
Tommy hauled down the black tights he wore for the tumbling act.
"Cheapskate!" he said disgustedly.
"Who? Me?" Mario demanded, amused.
"That dumb creep Wayland," Tommy said. "He's always bumming copies of Billboard off other people, like it would break his bankroll to buy his own copy, but he's got the new one, and when I asked could I see it a minute to check the route for Lambeth's, he lied about it—he said he didn't have it, and I could see it laying right there on his trunk. How chintzy can you get?"
"That one," said Papa Tony, combing his hair before the mirror on the board between his trunk and Angelo's that made a kind of temporary dressing table, "he is too fond of his bottle."
Angelo shrugged. "What can you do? He's the boss's brother. Anybody else would be booted off the lot."
Mario said, muffled, his head just emerging from his cos-

tume top, "I heard he was flying up to this year and his partner went and quit on him."
"You blame him?" Tommy asked. He knotted the laces of his tights, then bent to slide his feet into his flying slippers. "Anybody as cheap as that, he probably made him use secondhand adhesive tape on the bars, or something. He's so damn cheap he washes and irons his toilet paper!"
"Come, come," Papa Tony reproved, "this is no time for gossiping! Where is Johnny?" he demanded, looking at Johnny's trunk beside theirs.
"He's already dressed," Mario said. "I guess he went to get a drink of water or something. Here he is, coming back—" Tommy raised his head and saw Johnny coming toward them; Tommy noticed he had a new Billboard under his arm. Johnny laid it on his trunk and Tommy grabbed it up, but Mario caught him by the arm. He said, suddenly harsh, "You got other things to do than sit around reading Billboard,' Go on, ragazzo, get outside. We're going to be late!"
"You crazy or something? We got five minutes," Tommy protested, but Mario shoved him on, and Tommy went, fuming. Most of the time, he and Mario were friendly, casual equals; then suddenly, over nothing, Mario would pull rank on him and start ordering him around like he was a little kid! "I just

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wanted to see where my folks were playing this week," he said, but Mario ignored him.
What the heck is wrong, anyway? What's going on? But then they were in the back door, the performers' entrance, and he forgot, as he had been trained to put aside all small personal problems and preoccupations. Between shows, Mario unexpectedly asked him if he was tired of cookhouse food, and took him out to a Chinese restaurant in the city. It was rare for Mario to take him anywhere alone, but they had spent so long now as Santelli grandsons on the lot of the Woods-Wayland Circus that neither of them was self-conscious about it. Mario was unusually gentle and companionable, almost lover like. The bus out to the circus lot, when they returned for the night show, was almost empty, and Mario surreptitiously slipped his hand into Tommy's and held it.
"What did you get in your fortune cookie?" Tommy asked. He unfolded the tiny slip of paper and reread it; "You will receive some unexpected news."

Mario twisted his mouth into his exaggerated, clown's grin, and Tommy winced; normally Mario did that only when he was upset. "Mine says, Help! I am a prisoner in a fortune-cookie factory!"
"Ah, come on," Tommy said, digested, "I heard that one when I was six years old!"
Mario crumpled the tiny scrap of paper and threw it Out the bus window. "It's all a lot of crap anyhow," he said. The bus pulled into the circus lot and Mario jumped down. "Come on, let's hurry. We cut it kind of fine, and if we're late Papa won't let us do this kind of thing anymore."
Papa Tony was sitting on his trunk, dressed, going through some papers. Tommy saw a square yellow form, and as they walked out for the tumbling act, he asked, "Hey, Mario, has Liss had her baby?"
"I hope not," Mario said. "It's not due till September."
"Well, Papa Tony had a telegram, and that was all I could think of. Everything's okay, isn't it, Mario?" he asked, suddenly fearful. The strange way Coe Wayland had acted, Mario being so unexpectedly kind to him.
Mario said harshly, "If it's any of your business, Papa will tell you when the time comes. So he had a telegram. Don't be so damn nosy!" For a moment Tommy relaxed—Mario was back to normal—but then he grew frightened all over again. When Stella joined them for the tumbling act, she looked at him quickly and away again. At the top of the rigging he could put it all aside, as he had been taught to put everything aside. Up there nothing matters, absolutely nothing, except whether I get off the bar straight. But he came back, after the flying act, in numb, growing apprehension. What was happening? What weren't they telling him?
Around them the workhands were stripping the dressing tent; the flying act was the last part of the show, and already the other performers' trunks had gone and most of the tent was bare around them, already carted off to the circus train. Papa Tony put his hand on Tommy's shoulder, and suddenly his fear spilled over.

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"What's going on? What's wrong? What is it you're not telling me? Why are you all looking at me like that? It's like somebody's dead—"
Angelo put an arm around him. "Come and sit down, Tommy," he said gently, "we got something to tell you—"

but Tommy lunged, grabbing the copy of Billboard on Papa Tony's trunk.
"No!" Mario said urgently. "Grab it, Johnny, don't—" But Tommy was already turning through the pages, quickly, afraid, stopping at the headline: couple perish at railroad crossing. He read it, quickly, in snatches.
Tom Zane, animal trainer with Lambeth Circus . . . car and trailer instantly demolished . . . Beth Zane, his wife . . .
"Oh, God," he said numbly. "And I didn't even know. I should have been there, I should have been with them—"
Angelo said, his arm tight around Tommy, his voice rough and gentle, "No, kid. No. If they knew anything at all, probably the last thing they thought about was to be glad you weren't with them, that you were okay."
His mother. His father.
"Don't cry," Mario said, looking down at him, white and shaken. "I'm not going to be able to take it if you cry, Tommy—"
"You knew. You knew all evening! You knew and you didn't tell me—" It was a monstrous betrayal. Mario's kindness, just to get him away from the lot, just to keep him from asking questions.
"Don't blame him," Angelo said. "It was me said we ought to tell you after the show, when things quieted down a little, when we had time to—time to be with you—"
"Hey, Santellis! Hurry it up there, we got to strike this top!" One of the colored workhands came up. "You through with these trunks, they ready to go?"
"Sure, take them," Angelo said, laying his own coat around Tommy's shoulders. "Come on, kid, take it easy . . ."
That was what Coe Wayland was talking about. He just realized who I was and that I didn't know yet. . . .
Papa Tony put his arm around Tommy as they went out of the tent. He said, "This is not the time, either; maybe there is no right time. Ragazzo, I know it is no comfort to you now, but you must remember. You are not all alone. You have all of us; you have a family still. Now you are really my son."
Tommy put his head down for a moment on Papa Tony's shoulder, feeling the coarse gray wool of the man's sweater, the rough hands patting his back. But he did not cry. He was, aware, vaguely, that they climbed on the shuttle bus

from the lot out to the circus train. When the mists cleared he was alone in their compartment with Mario.
"You knew. You knew and you didn't tell me—"
"It was the hardest thing I ever had to do, Tommy," Mario said hoarsely. "I didn't want to do it like that. Only there wasn't any other way to handle it. Not with two shows coming right up."

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"I know. That's okay." Tommy fumbled with his shoelaces.
"Here. Let me help." In the end Mario almost undressed him; then he held him gently until he slept.
Once Tommy said, shaking, "Now you really got to be my brother. Now you're all I got."
Mario's voice in the dark sounded high, shaken. "That fortune in the cookie I wouldn't show you. It said, You must resign yourself to an unpleasant duty. And there I was sitting on this. I could've killed Angelo. Fanciullo . . . can you ever forgive me?"
"Sure," said Tommy, almost in a whisper, "you had to. The damn fortune cookies are all crap anyhow, like you said."
The whistle sounded, long and mournful, as the circus train jolted into motion beneath them, the noise of the wheels harsh and clanking for a moment, then faster and faster, blending into a rumble. The long steam-whistle screech came again, and Tommy, looking out the window at the unknown town, realized he did not even know where they were, or where the news had reached him. He would never know.
Again the sound of the train whistle screamed into the strange night
Andiamo, me vo, ma non so dove. ...
"I'm going," he muttered, "but I don't know where . . ."
Mario's arms closed around him. "It doesn't matter," he said gently, "you're here with me. Does it matter where you are or where we're going? So long as we go together?"
Oh, God, what kind of a creep am I? I always want him to be like this with me, and then when he is, it has to be for something like this . . . and guilt overwhelmed him, that even in a time like this, he could only think of Mario's unexpected tenderness.
The season moved on, and the circus completed its first run through the West and headed toward the East Coast. The first week in August, Mario finally allowed the Waylands to announce his triple as a regular part of the act, and during

the first six days he did it twice a day, and missed only once. Paul Mainwaring, the equestrian director, shifted the Santellis into the center ring on the strength of it, and if Mario was not now the acknowledged star of the circus (he had keen competition from the star of the French equestrian family, who did twisting somersaults from horse to horse at full gallop), at least he was the star of the aerial division.
Papa Tony took all this with stoical sharp words, and his usual sarcasm, but Tommy sensed that beneath it he was bursting with pride. Tommy himself was so overwhelmed that it scared him. He once heard Angelo say good-naturedly to Coe Wayland, "Tommy? Oh, the kid worships the ground Mario walks on." Though this had embarrassed Tommy so much that he picked a quarrel with Mario in the dressing tent, and in retaliation Mario pushed his head into a water bucket, on some corner of his thoughts Tommy realized, It's true, I do—and God damn it, why shouldn't I?

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Johnny addressed his brother ironically as Signor Mario, but Tommy knew that he, too, enjoyed, the reflected glory Mario had brought to them all. Mario said little, gave Angelo most of the credit, and behaved with an unassuming modesty which, irrationally, irked the other flyers. Coe Wayland once burst out, "Hell, the guy's putting on one hell of a good act, that's all! It ain't human, not to strut a little! That modesty stuff is supposed to impress you more than a normal amount of pride!" And Tommy, about to speak up angrily in Mario's defense, and controlling himself with a bitten lip, felt a guilty sting of doubt; after all, wasn't Mario self-deprecating modesty more impressive than the cocky posing of other stars?

Only in one place did Mario's pride and pleasure over-flow; that was above the crowd, high on the pedestal, as he returned to the board. With one arm raised in salute to the applause, his slanting eyebrows made him look like some inhumanly exultant otherworldly being, released for a little while on earth to stun the earthbound. He was, at once, bowstring-tense and as relaxed as a cat. It never lasted more than the few minutes it took him to get to the dressing tent, where he would begin to shiver with the release of the inhuman tension and go into fits of absurd hilarity or angry depression. Moody and mercurial as he was, this was one time at which neither Angelo nor Papa Tony ever took occasion to call him down, and even Johnny kept his distance.

Mario said once to Tommy as they dressed, "You know, kid, it's damn near worth risking my neck, just to have them let me alone for a while afterward," and Tommy felt a twinge of that painful inner knowledge. Mario, who never complained or rebelled under the harsh family discipline, perhaps chafed under it more deeply than anyone else.

There were minor tragedies, and one or two major ones. A woman in the aerial ballet, for no apparent reason, lost her grip and fell forty feet; she was picked up and carried out of the ring, dying minutes later in the dressing tent. One of the Liberty horses suddenly bolted from the ring and plunged into the grandstand; there was a storm of panicky screams and spectators diving this way and that. The horse was recaptured, bruised but unhurt, a few minutes later, but a woman in the stands had fallen ten feet to the ground and was taken away on a stretcher. A careless cage boy somehow provoked an elephant, and was picked up twenty feet away with a concussion, after a mildly reproving tap from the elephant's trunk.

Late in July, Tommy was making his routine check of the net, testing its tension by jumping up and down in it, nearby Mario had taken advantage of a spare minute to practice on the wire under Jake Davis's critical eye. As he descended the ladder, laughing, he gave Tommy, coming out of the net, a playful push.

"Jake says I'm ready for a two high. You're still small enough for a top-mounter; want to try it?"

"Heck, no," Tommy retorted. "Wirewalking is something like working the cats; you've got to be slightly nuts to try it. Ask Stella—she'll try any idiot stunt anybody asks her to!"

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"I just might," Mario said, laughing. "She's skinnier than you are, and easier to carry."
"Well, don't let Johnny hear you ask her," Tommy said. Then, seeing that Johnny had climbed to the catch trap, he set his feet on the aerial ladder. One of the propmen was standing near the flying rig. He was not their regular rigger, but Tommy thought he looked, somehow, vaguely familiar. He was a small, oldish man, with a creased sunburned face and a pronounced dragging limp—though he seemed nimble enough. His hair was a faded ginger color, but looked as if it might once have been as red as Tommy's own.
"Beg pardon," he said as Tommy began to ascend the lad-

der, "but would you be the young man they call Mario Santelli?"
Tommy shook his head. "No, that's Mario over there, talking to Jake Davis."
"I am sorry, I rarely have the chance to watch the flying acts," the man said. Though he was shabbily dressed in a worn T-shirt and faded dungarees, his accent was that of an educated man. In fact, it had a precise lilt which reminded Tommy faintly of Betsy Gentry or of Isabella Byrd's father; it wasn't quite American. Well, among the workhands and propmen, Tommy knew, there were any number of men who had dropped out of sight from some other life. You never got curious about anyone's past.
"I have been hearing that one of the young flyers was doing a triple nowadays, so I traded work with Sandy for this morning so I might perhaps have a chance to see him rehearsing," the little man said, and Mario, hearing him, raised slanted eyebrows at him.
"Want to see it? Okay, stick around a while." Mario started climbing, calling to Johnny, at the far end of the rigging, "Isn't Angelo out yet?"
""He split a seam down the rear end of his tights. Had to hunt up a new pair," Johnny called. "He'll be along. Why?"
"Because I want to try a triple, that's why. Okay, pick it up—you've been tellin' me all along that anything Angelo can do, you can do better. Let's prove it," Mario called. He was laughing recklessly, and Tommy glanced at him, frowning, as Johnny leaned back to lower himself into catching position.
"You think it's okay?" Tommy murmured.
"Relax, Lucky. When Jock is good, he's very, very good. You think you can handle the bar on the return?"
Tommy looked at him skeptically. Normally, only Papa Tony was trusted for this, or, at home in the practice room, Lucia. "I'll do my damnedest."
"Pick it up a little, Johnny. Okay, that ought to do it." Mario wiped his hands carefully on the resin-soaked handkerchief.
Tommy demanded sharply, "To impress one of the work-hands?"
Mario grinned. "Kid, where do you think you find the real circus fans? Of all the millions of places there are in this world to drop out of sight, why would anybody pick the cir-

cus unless it meant one hell of a lot to him? I bet that little gimp down there knows more about flying than any of the folks who pay six bucks for reserved seats."

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Tommy fingered the small metal medal pinned inside his neckline, tensely watching Johnny's clockwork swing. Yes, he's got the timing okay. Mario's grin slid off. He took the bar, swung out, back, up again, higher and higher. As always, Tommy drew in his breath and held it as man and trapeze fell apart and. Mario spun back into the first somersault, the second, the rushing third turn, then broke out and with a fast, locking grip, he and Johnny were swinging together. Tommy let the bar drop, but even as he did it, he knew it was too early; Mario knew it, too, and dropped from Johnny's wrists directly into the net. Tommy pulled the bar in again on its hook, fastened it up out of the way, and somersaulted to the ground.
The little man was still standing there, smiling vaguely.
"May I congratulate you on a beautiful performance? Or are you superstitious about such things?"
"Not at all," Mario said, startled.
"Would you mind telling me how old you are, my boy?"
"Twenty-three."
"So young? How long have you been doing that?"
"Started trying when I was about nineteen, I still can't do it consistently."
"No one can," said the little man. "Eight out of ten is still, I believe, a record."
"Yeah, and nobody but Parrish and Fortunati ever got up to that," Mario said.
"I do it more like six out of ten, if I feel right"
"What made you decide to try it?" the little man asked suddenly.
"God knows," Mario said with a shrug. "Proving something, maybe."
The man nodded slowly. "What would life be, if there wasn't something impossible to contemplate? Someday, perhaps, when you're old, if you live so long, you will stand where I am standing now and watch some young fellow working to perfect four somersaults."
"Impossible," Mario said with a grimace. "Can't be done; it's a physical impossibility. Not unless you put more space between the bars, and then the momentum wouldn't keep you up."

The small sandy-haired man shrugged. "And yet, you know, I never have believed in limiting factors," he said. "I believe that someday some athlete will manage to run a four-minute mile, and yet they say that is a physical impossibility. And someday some man will climb Mount Everest, in Tibet. And some man will do four somersaults to a catcher's hands."
Mario snorted laughter. "You might just as well say some day man will go to the Moon!"
"Even that should not be impossible," mused the ginger-haired man. "I do not know why it should be impossible. If you do not believe in the impossible, why did you attempt the triple?"
Mario laughed. "You got me. But I knew it wasn't impossible; I saw Jim Fortunati do it when I was a kid, and I knew a couple of other guys had done it before him."
"And yet, you know," the little man said, in his soft accented voice, "the triple was long believed to be impossible, something flesh and blood was never meant to do. The first time it was done, it was by accident, pure accident.

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Gerard Might did it, and he was dreadfully amazed when he lived through it; I heard him say so. He never tried it again; he would cross himself when he spoke of it. And circus managers used to give all kinds of impressive facts to prove the triple was physically impossible. One of them quoted all kinds of medical data about how the brain lost control after two and a half turns and would give up on the muscles. There was a flyer, once, don't you know, who insisted on trying a triple, and this manager gave him a Christmas present intended to discourage him. They were in winter quarters in Houston then, and the manager drew up a long list of all those flyers who had tried to do a triple somersault—the solto mortale, he called it—either from a trapeze or from a springboard, and as a result were taking up lodgings in their respective cemeteries. The manager typed out this list, and he folded it up small, and he put it inside a deed to a cemetery lot, and he gave it to the flyer for Christmas. And yet. my lad, I have just watched you do a triple, and do it quite creditably, and who knows, perhaps some little fellow who watches you do that when he is just a child will grow up to believe that nothing is impossible, and will try to perfect a quadruple somersault to a catcher's hands. Or climb Mount Everest or, who knows, manage to fly a spaceship to the moon. No, nothing is impossible, lad. Not while there

are still youngsters with open minds about breaking their silly necks."
Mario chuckled. "I think you've been reading too many Buck Rogers comic strips," he said. "Anyhow, my mind's quite closed on that subject: I have a distinct objection to breaking my neck."
The man's ginger head bobbed up and down in agreement. "Some people invent tricks and some people perfect them. I am sure Jim Fortunati in his heyday, though I have seen him do the triple a great many times, never did one as beautifully as you have just done. I am sure—"
"Hey, Lefty," someone yelled. "You got work to do, not just stand there batting the breeze with the performers! Come on, man, get with it!"
The man crinkled his face in a smile and said, "I am neglecting some duty, I fear. A great pleasure, my boy. May it be many, many years before you inherit that cemetery lot." He turned and hobbled slowly away.
Tommy and Mario stared at one another. Tommy finally said, "Gruesome little creep!"
"Dunno," Mario said. "He knows a lot about the circus; I remember Cleo telling me that story about Parrish when Liss and I were just kids. About old Luciana Starr giving Barney Parrish a cemetery lot for Christmas one year. Maybe he used to be a flyer, who knows? I don't think he's quite all there." He looked up at the rigging. "Quadruple somersault. No, not nohow. But I suppose somebody could do a three-and-a-half, someday—"
"You get it right out of your mind," Tommy said angrily. "Don't even start thinking about it!"
Mario laughed again and shook his head. "Hell, no. Like the gimp said, there are the guys who invent tricks, and the ones who perfect them, and I'm not the one who invents them. I'll leave the three-and-a-half to somebody else. He's got to be nuts anyhow. Four-minute mile—it's been proved that's a

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physiological impossibility; the human heart couldn't take it. And how in hell would you get a spaceship to the moon, anyhow? And there's not supposed to be any air there. I mean, even if you used one of Buck Rogers' rocket ships, what the hell would the rocket push against? No, he's nuts." But again he looked up at the trapeze, as if trying to imagine a flyer somersaulting an impossible four times to a catcher, and Tommy felt himself shiver.

I wonder if that little guy was one of those who got hurt bad trying to do the triple. They say there were lots of them. He knew a lot about flying.
All that talk about doing the impossible. Is that really what Mario wants?
On a long daylight run through the Northwest, Tommy sat with Papa Tony one afternoon. Mario and Angelo were playing cards with Stella in the privilege car; Johnny was doodling with a pad and pencil in the next seat. Papa Tony and Tommy were playing checkers on a pocket-size peg-board which the old man had given him for his birthday, when suddenly Tonio Santelli raised his head from studying the king he had just crowned.
"Tommy." he said, "you work hard, you seem happy. Are you happy?"
Tommy felt, as always, embarrassed and confused by the solicitude. "Sure. Why shouldn't I be happy?"
"You boys!" Papa Tony shook his head. "You think being happy is so common like that? Sure, sure, I know you're not miserable—you don't have toothache, you don't cry yourself to sleep—but happy? Happy so life is better every day, so life looks good to you?"
Tommy said in a low voice, his eyes on the checkerboard, "I never thought about it."
"Young people don't" Papa Tony scowled and moved one of his men. "I ought to teach you chess; it trains your brain to think ahead."
"I can't remember the moves. They're too complicated. Anyhow. I'm not that smart. You have to be a brain to play chess, don't you?"
'You don't think you're that smart, and you don't know if you're happy?"
After a minute, studying the pattern of the checkers and not looking up, Tommy said, "Yes, Papa Tony, I'm happy. I'm—I'm doin' what I like best."
Tonio Santelli bent to jump one of Tommy's men and remove it from the board. "You see? Even in checkers, you got to think ahead. And Matt? You get along all right? I don't know, maybe he's too tough on you, maybe—you're just a kid: maybe I ought—" He broke off and bent over the board again. Tommy, studying the trap Papa Tony had laid between two kings, and making the forced move which would lose him still another man, suddenly realized

that the words had more than their face value. Somehow, some way or other, Papa Tony knew. His mind raced. How? We've been so careful. But Tommy realized that the old man knew; he would never say so, but here, over a checkerboard and casually, Tommy's whole future hinged on how he answered now.
What can I say? He probably thinks it's something terrible. Mario warned me ...

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"You're real good at setting traps," he said disgustedly, watching as Papa Tony made his move and removed the man he had endangered. Then, carefully, slowly, he spoke.
"I like Mario, Papa Tony. We get along all right," he said, and finally he found the words for his clumsy search, neither too obviously offhand, nor too openly worshipful. "That— that tough stuff is mostly an act, you know; he's really swell to me." Suddenly he crowed, pouncing on a handy jump, moving his man into the king row. "Crown him!"
"Um!" The old man's hand hovered over the checkerboard, carefully avoiding Tommy's king-baited trap. He raised inquisitive, noncommittal eyes.
Tommy, examining the board to see if the casual move had in reality laid some deeper trap for his man, suddenly risked everything. "Mario isn't so tough, Papa Tony. You know, I—I really love the guy." He added, almost probing, his hand hovering between the deceptive opening near the king, or the indifferent move which might lead him into an unforeseen trap, "If our scrapping bothers you, maybe we can tone it down a little. Like I say, it's mostly an act."
Pap Tony smiled and blandly jumped Tommy's newly crowned king. "Good. I thought maybe so, only I want to hear it from you, that you were happy. You two, you know, you'll make a good team. You'll be together a long time, maybe all your lives, you work like that together. And maybe you can work with somebody you don't like, don't trust, don't love. I wouldn't know; I never tried. Angelo and me, we get along better than most fathers and sons; we have to, otherwise we couldn't work together. Oh, we argue sometimes, like any father and any son, but not where it counts. Down where it counts we know we can trust each other all the way; we never even have to think about it. I trust him like that, so I don't even have to think about loving him. I love Johnny, but I don't trust him, not quite like that, not yet. Tradition. Something we have, Angelo and me, something

we hold on to together. Self-confidence? No, that's not it, either. Sympathy? I don't know. You and Matt, I see that in you. Even when you're scrapping like naughty kids, you have that something extra. You're young, you're not even brothers, but you have something—you belong to each other. I see it, I know it. I don't know what to call it, but there it is."
Tommy looked at the backs of his hands, afraid to raise his eyes, deeply moved but afraid of what he would betray if he looked up or spoke. One part of him wanted to tell Papa Tony what to call it, but he held himself silent by an effort. Papa Tony did not want to know. Somehow Tommy understood that. If he knew, if he was told in so many words, he would have to do the conventional thing, he would have to express the conventional shock and horror. But knowing without analyzing, knowing in a place that went deeper than words, he could see it, know it, accept it.
Papa Tony said, in that same brooding voice, "Matt—he's way out in a lonely place, Tommy. You understand such a lot of things: do you understand that, too? How hard it is that he's so much better than I am, so much better than the same people who taught him. He wants to respect them, to admire them,

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and instead he finds himself way out in front, looking back to where they are, and it makes him shake inside. You see that? You saw how Fortunati treated him, and how it got Matt all shook up and scared? If it was Johnny, I wouldn't worry. Johnny, he'd strut, he'd get cocky and somebody would knock him back into place, but meanwhile he'd enjoy getting all the fuss and all the applause. Matt, he's so different—I don't know, Tommy, I just don't know," he repeated. "Way out in a lonely place. None of us can reach him anymore."
Tommy blinked, swallowing hard, unwilling to let Papa Tony see that his eyes were filling with tears.
"Except you, maybe," Papa Tony said. "I don't know why. Tommy, but he lets you inside, he lets you get to him. It hurts me," the old man said. "It hurts so bad, to see him so lost, so lonesome." Tommy, his personal embarrassment forgotten, looked up to see the naked pain in the grandfathers eyes. "I'm so proud of him, so proud I could die of it. It was worth what I did to Lucia, what I did to all of them." Tommy knew Tonio Santelli had forgotten he spoke to a child, that he spoke out of innermost heart, out of his love for his grandson. "I wanted him to get where he

is, but now he's there, I can't follow him. I have to let him go—there's nothing I can do for him anymore. Even when I know how bad he needs somebody. And maybe you're the one he needs, because he lets you inside that—that wall he has around himself."
Tommy couldn't speak. At last Papa Tony came out of his silence to smile up at him. "Our family, it's a funny one," he said. "It eats people up alive, and you're pretty young to be chewed up and swallowed."
"I'm—I'm really happy about being a Santelli, Papa Tony. Honest. And about—about everything."
Papa Tony's rare luminous smile lighted his face. He patted Tommy's shoulder arid said, "I thought maybe so. You know, I was always happy, doing the work I wanted to do. I talk too much—look where you got my man." As Tommy bent and jumped his last man, he added, "You got too good for me at checkers, Tommy. I think maybe I better teach you to play chess. Train you to think ahead, and not to let people know what you're doing." He grinned, slid the checkers into his pocket, opened the compartment in the side of the board, and started setting up the chessmen.
"In chess, you never lose your king. This is the king," he began, and Tommy frowned, turning his attention to the game knowing that the old man was saying something very important without saying it at all.

CHAPTER 24

the Woods-Wayland Circus moved into Cincinnati on a steamy, muggy afternoon halfway through August. The morning sun on the tight canvas made the top of the tent into a blistering inferno. Papa Tony, at the top of the rigging beside Tommy, checking the alignment of the bars with a spirit level, wiped his face with a handkerchief.
"Strange, is it not? Cold weather slows the body, but so does heat like this." He thrust the handkerchief back through his belt. "Tommy, the tape on the fly bar is sticky; take it down and have it rewound."

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Tommy did as he was told, swarming down the ropes like a monkey. He delivered the tape to a rigger. When-he

climbed back up with the rewound bar, he noticed Papa Tony still seated motionless on the platform.
"Papa Tony, is something wrong?"
"No, the heat. . . come un forgo." The old man mopped his forehead again, and Tommy gauged his distress by the language; Papa Tony knew Tommy did not understand Italian well and was always careful to speak English to him.
"And it will be worse this afternoon. Once on a day like this when we were with Starr's, Rico took up a thermometer to the catch trap and hung it there, and at the end of the act it read a hundred and thirty-five degrees. I worry about crystallization in the metal when it is so hot like this. When Joe and Lucia had their fall, it was because a metal ring crystallized on their trapeze guy wire."
Now Tommy was really scared. Papa Tony had an iron-bound taboo against talking about accidents anywhere near the rigging; it was his only superstition. "Papa Tony, I'm afraid you're not well. Can I help you get down?"
'"When I need help in descending a ladder, ragazzo, you can take me away and get me ready for the undertaker," Papa Tony said with asperity, his mustache bristling. He wiped his forehead and hands again. "Never mind, I know you mean well, my boy. I will go down and get myself something cold to drink." He raised himself, poised as for a swan dive, and went off neatly into the net.
But Tommy was not reassured. In the cookhouse at noon be hunted up Angelo, and said, "Listen, can you talk Papa Tony into staying down this afternoon? This morning up on the rigging, I thought he was going to faint."
Angelo laughed "You had a faulting spell and we chased you right up again."
"I know. But it's awful hot." Angelo hadn't been up there, hadn't seen the pinched look, or heard the old man gasp for breath in the killing heat of the tent top. Angelo looked at Tommy, and must have seen how troubled he was. I'll try, kid, but you know Papa."
When Tommy joined them in the dressing tent, Angelo looted grim, and Papa Tony's set face and bright, hard look kept him silent He turned away, went to scramble into his black tights for the tumbling act which opened the show.
The flying act opened the second half of the show. When they climbed the rigging after the intermission, the top of the teat, baking under the August sun for hours and heated

further by the rising breath of the packed audience, was a blistering hell. It smote Tommy like an opened furnace door as they stepped off on the pedestal; even the music of the band seemed to surge and fade out again through the thick, muffling heat. Mario whispered, "Good God," as he rubbed his hands with resin.
When Tommy swung for his first trick, he felt that the tape on the bar was sticky again with the heat. His hands were clammy and damp despite their

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thick coating of resin, and as they slid on Johnny's wrists, he heard Johnny growl, "Hell of a business we're in," between his teeth, before letting go. Even the applause sounded a million miles away.

To give Mario an extra moment to ready himself for the triple, their next-to-last trick was Papa Tony's forward double, which some experts still considered harder than the backward two-and-a-half. Tommy stepped nimbly around the guy to the outside of the board, passing Papa Tony the bar. Papa Tony muttered something in Italian, fingering the resin bag again, and Tommy whispered suddenly, "Papa Tony, you look awful. Please don't, not today." Since their talk over the checkerboard, he had begun to see Papa Tony not as a looming giant of authority and discipline, but as a real person, like himself, with feelings and even weaknesses. "Let me do a cross instead; that'll give Mario time to get set."

"No, no, ragazzo," Papa Tony muttered, "Graz' tango—" and Tommy was really scared.

"Mario—" Tommy said urgently, but Mario was already above them on the high platform, and Papa Tony already had the bar in his hands, and there was no way to stop him now without an unseemly struggle. The slim, knife-straight body, still moving like a young man's, arched out with the bar, into two fast, whipping somersaults; then his hands were locked firmly around Angelo's wrists.

Tommy, watching them swing together, catching the trapeze on the backswing and readying himself for Mario's call to throw it out again for the return, heard Mario above him, whispering, "Thank God. It's okay, Tom. One, two—"

Then slowly, slowly, dreadfully in slow motion, Tommy saw the gripped hands and wrists slide on each other, loosen, slip. Angelo's face changed, turned to blank horror as Papa Tony let go and dropped from his hands. He dropped like dead weight, without turning or rolling, struck the net still

upright with knees crumpling as he hit, flopped downward on his face, and lay without moving in the net.

Tommy heard the hushed, deep gasp from the stands. The announcer, already booming out the opening words of Mario's introduction, suddenly broke into a fast patter about the other flyers in the end ring. The band music changed abruptly to the "March of the Toys"—the Woods-Wayland's in-the-ring distress-signal alert—and the standby act, a group of rambling clowns, came flipping along the hippodrome track, clustering in front of the center ring.

Tommy acted almost without conscious thought; be dropped the trapeze, letting it swing loose from the center bar, and slid down the outside rope of the aerial ladder, then swung his legs over into the net. Mario slid down after him. He said in a quick, strained voice, "Can we get him down, or do we have to lower the net? Good thing you had the brains not to jump down into the net, if he's lying there with his neck broken . . ." .Mario broke off as Johnny and Angelo came running over from the other end of the rigging.

Johnny said, "Here, hoist me up—" but already the trained nurse who traveled with the show was beside the net. She said, low and fast, "No, don't

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drag him around—if his back or neck should be hurt, you could make it worse. Lift me up, Mr. Santelli."
Angelo seemed to be in a daze. He ignored the nurse, saying, "He must have fainted. He just went dead weight and I couldn't hold him, and he fell that way—"
Mario got behind the nurse, put his hands around her waist, and lifted her effortlessly to the net. She floundered for a moment, then got down beside Papa Tony, and Tommy heard her soft, shocked "Oh!" Then she beckoned, and Mario, his face white, put his hands up and scrambled up beside her.
"Get the propmen. Here, Tommy, help me lift him—"
Is he okay? Hey, Papa, Papa—" Angelo knelt beside his father as Mario and the propman lowered him to the ground, but the propman was already folding the small form in gold tights. looking very gray and shrunken, into a blanket.
The nurse said gently, "He's dead, Mr. Santelli."
'On, God, no—ah, Dio—"
For a moment Tommy thought Angelo would pitch for
ward on his face, and grabbed him by the arm. "Angelo, you
okay?"

Johnny, on the other side, took Angelo in a firm grip. "C'mon, Uncle Angelo," he said in a low voice. "Steady there. Let's get out of here first, huh?"
Angelo ignored them, saying in a reasonable voice, "He can't be dead, don't be silly. A fall like that wouldn't hurt him much. He's had a lot of worse falls than that."
"Yeah, I know," Johnny said, shaking his read in dismay. "But come on, fella, let's get out of here, huh?"
The grotesqueness of it struck Tommy, with shock, as they walked, tightly clustered, out of the performers' entrance. Angelo still looked dazed, but he walked between them, docile, without protest, until they were outside; then he broke away from Tommy's arm and ran after the nurse and the men who were carrying the limp body in its blanket. "He can't be dead," he said, his voice breaking. "A fall like that couldn't kill him, could it? It couldn't kill anybody!"
The woman laid a firm hand on his shoulder. "It wasn't the fall, Mr. Santelli. He must have been dead before he struck the net, probably before he let go of your hands. His heart simply stopped in midair."
Angelo's face went gray. "He died in my hands," he said, stretching out his palms and staring at them in horror. "He died in my hands and I couldn't hold him."
The three hours that followed were terrible. Papa Tony's body was instantly and quietly hurried off the lot to the morgue. Johnny, hustling a coat over his tights, accompanied the body. The callous but necessary law of the circus demanded that the ill, the injured, the dying, and the dead be carted off the lot without delay; there was simply no way to handle them there. Angelo sat in the men's dressing tent, folded up on his trunk, shaken with heavy sobs. Men from other acts glanced furtively at him, then, with the only tact possible in

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those circumstances, gave him the courtesy of going on about their business and seeming not to see. Mario, weeping himself without shame, bent over him, an arm around his shoulders, imploring Angelo in whispers not to carry on so.
"He just let go," Angelo repeated;, almost hysterically. "He just let go and I couldn't hold him. I couldn't hold him. He just let go."
"Angelo, don't, don't. He must have been dead already— he was dead before he hit the net. It wasn't your fault, you couldn't have done anything."

"He died in my hands. In my hands." Angelo spread his hands again and stared at them in dazed, dark-eyed horror, then began to cry again. He was shivering. He seemed not even to hear Mario's voice.
Finally, embarrassed, Jake Davis came over and said, low-voiced, to Mario, "Look, I don't want to butt in, but I don't think he's just carrying on, Matt. I think he's in shock. You better get a drink into him, or something, or get the nurse back here."
"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea—"
"Coe Wayland always has a bottle of whiskey in his trunk." Jake said, and after a moment he came back with it. Mario poured some of the whiskey into a paper cup and put his hands firmly on Angelo's shoulders.
"Drink up. Come on, Uncle Angelo, orders."
"I don't want it." Angelo pushed his hand away.
"You drink this, or I'll hold your nose and pour it down your throat." Mario commanded. "And then get yourself dressed. We got a hell of a lot to do before the night show!"
Angelo swallowed, choked painfully, and coughed. He still looked dazed, but now awareness was coming through. He took the glass in his own hand and swallowed the rest of it with a grimace. His hands were still shaking, but his voice steadied. “All right." he said, coughing, "I'm all right. Thanks, Matt. I—"
He swallowed, hard, but he said, "I'll get dressed. There are arrangements; I better go make them."
"Oh, Lord," Tommy said suddenly. "Stella. Nobody told Stella. And Johnny went to—went with Papa Tony." Then, looking at the shaken Angelo, clinging to Mario's arm, he knew he had to volunteer.
'I'll go tell Stella."
Walking across the grounds to the women's dressing tent, he realized that the performance was still going on, the band and the applause as loud as ever. Were the people in the audience all ghouls? Could they see something like that and not care? Could they watch a bunch of clowns flipping around and laugh as loud as ever?
He found Stella near the entrance of the women's dressing tent, and even then a flicker of relief struck him that she had saved him the necessity to speak to the matron and ask her to pass the word for Stella Gardner; even if she had been his own
wife, he could not have entered the women's tent. She was a childish, vulnerable little figure, all alone at the en-

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trance, an old gray corduroy coat pulled over her dress; but somehow the fact that she alone had had the presence of mind to dress fully, when Johnny and Tommy had only pulled on pants and shoes over their tights, was a hardening, bracing thing.

She ran to him and caught his hand, holding it hard. "Tommy," she whispered, "is he okay? What happened? Is his neck broken? Johnny couldn't wait and tell me—one of the girls told me he went in the ambulance. What is it?"

There was no way for Tommy to soften it, and he didn't try. "He's dead, Stel. He was already dead when he hit the net."

"Oh, no!" Stella blurted, and crossed herself. "Oh, God, how awful for Angelo—"

"He's taking it bad, Stella," Tommy said, and put his arms around the girl, holding her tight. They clung together, once again aliens flung together on the outside of their strange world.

Then, quickly straightening herself with an odd, grownup little gesture, Stella said quietly, "Mario's got to stay with Angelo, then, and Johnny went with the—went with Papa Tony. But Joe and Lucia have to be told, and we ought to send them a wire right away before somebody hears it on the radio or something. Or—look, Tommy, it would be awful for Lucia just to get a telegram. Have you got any money? I'll call her long distance, and—and try to break it to her kind of easy."

For the first time Tommy realized the hard steel core of this young girl. He reached into his pockets; there were only a few coins.

"Not enough to call California with. You better call collect, or ask the boss for some money to phone." "Is there anybody else I ought to call?" "Liss," Tommy said. "I can get her number out of Mario's address book. She lives in San Francisco—"

"No," Stella said, shaking her head. "Liss is going to have a baby, and a telegram or me calling would upset her too much. I'll tell Lucia and let Lucia break it to her. I'll have to go off the lot to find a pay phone—no, wait, I bet Woody would let me use the phone hookup in the office—"

"For something like this? Sure. You want me to come with you, Stel?"

She shook her head gravely. "No, you better go back and stay with Mario and Angelo."

He watched her walk away toward the office, looking like a child in the shabby old coat. Then he went back to the men's tent, bracing himself for what lay ahead.

It was like a nightmare that went on and on. There was the quiet, painfully present curiosity and sympathy of all the men in the tent. There was the necessity for Angelo to talk to the police, even to sign a paper authorizing an autopsy so it could be officially determined whether Papa Tony had died of injuries from the fall, or from heart failure or heat stroke. "No, no, I will not do it," Angelo insisted. "It is not decent or right he should be cut up and mutilated after he is dead!" Only after a Catholic priest, a police chaplain, had

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come to speak with him did he, reluctantly, sign the consent form. Tommy found a moment to whisper to Mario that Stella had telephoned the family. Supper time came and went, but none of the Santellis had time or wish to go to the cookhouse. There were papers to sign; the police chaplain stayed to help Angelo through the dreadful formalities. The police came back and asked Angelo a few more questions—this time, mercifully, in the office, away from the eyes and ears of the dressing tent. To Tommy, this questioning added the final grotesque, almost indecent note, hearing plain-clothes detectives ask them all if Angelo had been on good terms with his father. Finally, in a bullying way, they asked Angelo himself:

"How about it, Santelli? Were you and the old man on good terms, huh? You fight a lot?"

Angelo's face still looked gray and pinched. "No, Papa and me, we always got along fine." And then, delayed, the shock registered in his face.

“Dio mio! You mean you think I could have hurt him? I, his son?"

"It does happen," the cop said flatly. "We get plenty of cases where a son wants to be rid of his old man. And it looks like you might have had a good chance, an old guy like that in a dangerous act."

Angelo stared and crossed himself. "Dio! Have you people no decency?" he exploded, and Tommy was afraid he would burst into tears again. But he managed to control himself.

I loved my father," he said at last, when he could steady his voice. "All my life I worked with him—how long? Since

I was a little boy twelve years old. And ever since my brother, Joe, fell in the ring with my sister, I have been his catcher, all these years—all these years—" he repeated. "So many years I am catching him in the act, and you think, you dare to think I could hurt Papa—"

Tommy had never heard even a trace of accent in Angelo's rough voice before this, but now it came through, almost as strong as Papa Tony's. "God forgive you for that wicked thought, as he may strike me here today! It is hard enough to know—to know Papa died here—in these hands —without that, too—" He covered his face with his hands and was silent.

The priest, standing behind him, bent and said something in Italian to Angelo, and Angelo replied in the same language. The detective, growing restless, muttered, "Can't he speak English? He was speaking it okay a few minutes ago. What did he say, padre?"

The priest frowned at the detective.

"What he said, sir, was only Try and tell them how willingly I would have had God take me instead."

The detective shifted from foot to heavy foot. "I been talking to some of the other folks on the lot. They said the old man rode you all pretty hard." He looked around the small, bare office, out the window at the cluster of tents and dressing tops, the rides on the midway rising beyond them, the cluttered backyard. Tommy could see the contempt, the alienation in his face. The police officer despised them, despised them all. They were an alien race, foreign, wandering, at opposite ends of the world from the respectable solid

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citizens of the town; they were capable of anything. At last the detective shrugged.
"Just doing my duty, Mr. Santelli. Could have been an accident at that; no proof either way." With that, he left the office.
Later James Woods came to them in the dressing tent, where the men of the show were getting ready for the night's performance. He looked at Angelo's bleary face. "Look, are you sure you can go on tonight, Angelo? I can cancel the Santellis this one night, if you want to."
They all knew what he was thinking. A local boy with a press camera had caught the ghastly crumpled sprawl of Papa Tony's body in the net and raced off to his local paper in time for an evening headline: circus star falls to

death from son's hands. Someone, unthinking, had brought a copy into the tent.
But Angelo said firmly, "No, I'm okay. I'll go on."
Young as he was, Tommy knew that after a circus tragedy there was always a certain proportion of the audience which reappeared to stare at the act that had met with misfortune. Part of the tradition was to confound this curiosity by going on precisely as usual, revealing nothing.
"Look, Angelo, I know how you old troupers are. But I don't know as how I'm so crazy about putting you out there to be stared at, even if there are a few ghouls would come just to stare. Let me cancel the Santellis just this one evening."
Johnny and Mario looked at one another and moved a little closer together, behind Angelo. With an outstretched hand they drew Tommy into their tight circle, and Johnny said, "Cancel be damned!"
Mario's voice held quiet arrogance. "It's good of you, Woody. But this is all we can do for Papa Tony, don't you see?" And Angelo, raising his head, his eyes glinting, abruptly rose to his feet as if held upright by some inner reserve of pride and tradition. Tommy could almost hear Papa Tony say, the night Angelo had been clawed in the ring:
The Santellis are always ready.
Heat still blanketed the city, rising thickly from the ground, but a faint, cool breeze stirred under the stars as they walked toward the performers' entrance. As they crossed the ring under the lights, Mario and Angelo walked together side by side, then- capes swinging rhythmically. They parted two and two at the foot of the ladder as if this was the usual pattern of their act. With one foot on the ladder, it seemed to Tommy that he could still see the confusion on James Woods's face, and a strange, bleak pride braced him through the sick emptiness in his chest. When he reached the pedestal, turning to step out of the way for Mario, he found himself moving to make room for Papa Tony at his side, and shuddered. He touched the small medal pinned inside his shirt collar, without really knowing he was doing it.
Because of the backstage death, which had caused disruption in the routine between shows, James Woods had passed the word for a "quick show," each act cut to its essentials. The show would run only two hours and a quarter instead of the usual three hours. The triple had been canceled—Mario

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had conceded that—and as he finished the act with the two-and-a-half he normally did in its place, Tommy, watching Angelo closely, saw split-second panic crossing his face as Mario went whirling into his hands. Their wrists locked, slipped slightly before they gripped again. Later, when they were dressing, he saw on Mario's wrists a pair of dark, matched bruises. Mario saw the direction of his glance, but said nothing.

The merciless velocity of the teardown could not wait for death or tragedy; the evening performance was over by ten-thirty, and by midnight the circus train was ready to pull out. Before going to his own car, Johnny stopped in the compartment Angelo had shared with his father—Stella, of course, even chaperoned by her husband, could not enter the sleeping car reserved for single men—to ask, "Anything I can do here?"

Angelo shook his head. His face looked numb and swollen. He was sitting in the lower berth of the compartment, Mario and Tommy on the trunk that almost filled the rest of it. "No, everything's all taken care of, I guess. You know, the backyard's a pretty callous place. I remember how we had to leave Joe and Lucia in the hospital that night, not even sure whether Lu was alive or dead. Even Liss couldn't stay. And all we can do now is to leave Papa Tony in a strange funeral home, with nobody but a strange priest to make sure he gets sent home decent."

Johnny sat on the bunk beside Angelo and put an arm around him. Earlier, all through the teardown, people had kept coming up to them, offering sympathy, a warm handclasp, asking, "How can we help?" and shyly saying, with obvious sincerity and even a few wet eyes, how much everyone had liked Tonio Santelli. Kindly meant as it was, that had been an ordeal. But now they were left alone, and though all the men in the sleeping car had known and liked Papa Tony, they were giving the family the only thing they could: a thin closed door, a brisk, noisy going-about-their-own-business, to give a frail illusion of privacy for their private griefs.

Johnny said, "Uncle Angelo, want me to stay with you tonight?"

He shook his head. "And leave Stel all alone? No, Jock, you stay with her. I'm all right, and anyhow, Matt and Tommy are right next door if I need anything."

Another long silence. Finally Johnny said, "I was thinking about the night Joe and Lucia got hurt, too. We had that big private car on the Starr's train, and before it pulled out, Cleo came and tucked us kids into bed. By the time Papa Tony came in, we were all bawling again. Poor little Liss—remember how she tried to mother us that night? Mark was the worst, crying and carrying on. Big as he was, Liss had him on her lap, trying to rock him."

"Yeah, I remember," Angelo said hoarsely. "The lot of you in those striped red flannel nightgowns all you kids used to wear. I couldn't do nothing for you, but Papa Tony came in and sat down on Liss's bed and took one look at you kids and said—remember, Matt?—he said, 'Here, here, this is no time to hold a wake, and better to pray for your mother than cry for her.' And he put his hand under Liss's pillow, where she kept her rosary, and started in to say a

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Hail Mary, and all you kids stopped crying, one by one, and started saying it with him." He put his face in his hands again.
"Yeah," Johnny said softly, "but he had the right idea, you know.",
"E vero." Angelo fumbled on the shelf, took out a string of small blackened beads, and began murmuring in Italian. Johnny and Mario bent their heads and started repeating along with him in English.
The Apostles' Creed was not familiar to Tommy, but when Angelo began the Our Father, he recognized the Lord's Prayer and joined in. However, when they began the Hail Marys, he covered his face, and behind his closed eyes he felt the ache of tears. He felt that he ought to be praying, too, but about the best he could do was to repeat to himself, over and over, intensely, "Oh God, be good to him, please," and it didn't feel right; it felt as if he was play-acting, dramatizing something that was real and awful. The repetitions over and over surprised him, and he was also embarrassed, like most Protestants, before the openness of Catholic prayers. Angelo was saying them in Italian, but Mario, next to him, was praying in English, and Tommy, listening to the repeated Hail Marys, found himself confused and distressed; they had all gone very far away and he felt that they all had some comfort he could not share. Mario, his face behind his hands, his eyes shut, was murmuring:
"Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. Blessed art Thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of Thy

womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death. Amen. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee ..."
Tommy sat silently beside him, feeling his throat tighten as the prayer came round, again and again, to the softly repeated now and in the hour of our death. In the hour of our death. In the hour of Papa Tony's death. He was desperately afraid that he would cry. It seemed a very long time before they finished and Angelo tucked the rosary away again. He looked calmer, and his voice was steady. Tommy felt that the family really wanted to be alone. He said a muted good night to Angelo. The man put an arm around his waist and hugged him.
"You know, Tom, he loved you, too. Just like one of us."
"I loved him, too, Angelo," Tommy said, and knew that his eyes blurred with tears, "like he'd been my own grandfather."
"I know, kid." Angelo pulled him close and kissed him. "Good night, figlio. God bless you."
Tommy went to his own compartment, shucked his clothes, and got into the upper berth. He did not sleep, listening to the rails clunking and rattling, and now and then the haunting wail of the train whistle sending its eternal cry into the night.
Who's lonely? I'm lo-o-onely.
He no longer knew if the wetness on his face was for Papa Tony or for the sadness of that cry. After a long time he saw dim light from the corridor and Mario came in, sat on the edge of the lower bunk, and began to undress.
Tommy bent over the edge of his bunk and whispered, "How's Angelo?"

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"Out. The nurse gave me some pills for him, and after a while, I managed to get him to take them. They must have been powerful stuff; he went out like a light. You poor kid, aren't you asleep, either? Come on down, if you want to."
Tommy clambered down and got in beside Mario.
"This thing's hit Angelo so bad, none of the rest of us have had a chance to feel it yet," Mario said,
"They were awfully close."
"I know. Joe and Lucia drifted away—not their fault, of course—and Angelo was all he really had." Mario was silent for a moment. "You know, though, I'd like to go that

way. He never had to be old, or sick, or crippled. And he lived to see us on the way up again."
"He never got to retire and stay home and take life easy, though."
"He'd never have retired, Tommy. He loved to fly. And he died just having finished a big trick, hearing applause, knowing— I ought to be horrified knowing he died suddenly, without having a chance to make his peace with God—"
"What did he have to make his peace with God about?" Tommy asked. "He was a good man!"
"I keep forgetting you weren't brought up Catholic. It's supposed to be awful to die without a priest, and a chance to confess any sins you still had on your conscience. But" —he swallowed—"I can't help being glad he died on the rig. Doing what he wanted to do. I'd hate to think God wouldn't understand."
Tommy said fiercely, "I wouldn't think much of a God who wouldn't" Papa Tony had emphasized to him how merciful, how quick, the death of his own parents had been.
And I didn't know. I wasn't even there when they died.
Then, with a maturity tragically beyond his years, he realized that he really belonged here with Mario.
“I loved him so much, Tommy," Mario said. "He was all the father I ever had. I don't remember my real father at all."
"Mario, he was so proud of you. He knew you were going to put the Santellis right up on top again."
I’m glad I could even do that much for him. I failed him so often."
In the dark, Tommy hunted for Mario's hand and held it, suddenly knowing the right thing to say. "Listen, Mario. Papa Tony knew about—about you and me, you know."
"Che—what makes you think so?",
Tommy related their talk over the checkerboard, and Mario drew a long shaky sigh.
"I respected, a time or so, that he knew. Then I'd break art in a cold sweat all over." He raised himself on one elbow. "He trusted me with you, Tommy. Even after the—the trouble I got into, that time. I told you about that."
"You never," Tommy said.

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"Oh, sure I did. I told you I got in trouble, got thrown out of college—"
"You just told me you'd been in jail," Tommy muttered.

"You said a couple of times you'd tell me about it someday. But you never did."
Silence, and the long scream of the train whistle at a grade crossing. Red and winking yard lights flickered outside the black square of window, then were darkened again as the train slid through the town, leaving it behind.
"I was awfully young," Mario said at last. "Seventeen. And awfully drunk. I ran into this kid I knew at the ballet school. We were really just sort of fooling around. Only we picked the wrong time and the wrong place, and a cop practically fell over us. When they asked about it in court, the other kid panicked and changed his story and said I had—well, he said it was all my idea. So I got booked for contributing to the delinquency of a minor, and a couple of other things. I was so dumb, and so drunk, when the cop picked us up I was afraid I'd get in trouble for being in a bar while I was still under age, so I told them, I swore up and down I was over twenty-one, so they booked me as an adult, and adult sex offenders don't get treated too good." His voice faded. "They finally got around to telling me I could make a phone call, but I was too scared to call Joe or Angelo, and I couldn't get hold of Bart." Tommy wondered if he meant Bart Reeder, but would not interrupt him. "But when I didn't come home for three days, Lucia started calling hospitals and finally got around to the police. Papa came down and bailed me out, and of course the first thing he did was tell them my age, so I got transferred to the Juvenile Authority. But by that time I was pretty well in shock; I'd been held in county jail three days." His face was grim, gone away into bitter memory.
After a long time Tommy asked in a whisper, "What happened? Did they send you to prison?"
Mario shook his head. "No. They heard me as a juvenile, and the judge gave me a hell of a lecture, told me to lay off drinking—I've never touched hard stuff since—and said he couldn't see much sense in sending me to reform school, where I'd just get to do the same thing all over again. So he paroled me in Papa Tony's custody."
"What did Papa Tony do?"
"Well, he brought me home, but they all lit into me at once—Lucia crying, Angelo wanting to beat me senseless, Joe wondering if they ought to send me to a psychiatrist or call a priest. Papa just waded in—you know how he does—

how he did? He yelled that this was his family and his grandson and by God he'd handle it all himself, and I thought he was going to horsewhip me at least! Instead he took me out to a quiet little bar and bought me a drink—and, my God, I needed it by then—I was coming apart at the seams. You know he never drinks—only vino at dinner—but he bought me a shot of whiskey and made me drink it, and then he said, 'Now, Matt, you tell me what all this is about. From Angelo I only hear how you disgrace us.'
"Well, I could hardly say a word, I was so upset, but I finally got it out, kind of, and he looked at me like a hawk, and he said, 'Matty, look me in the eye and

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tell me: This other boy, did he want to do what you were doing?' And thank God I could look him straight in the eye and say yes, he did. Then Papa Tony asked me if this was the first time I did that with a fellow, and since he'd been so decent to me I figured I'd tell the truth if he killed me for it, and so I said no, that was the way I'd always been.

"He just drank up his wine, real quiet, and then he said— I never forgot a word of it—he said, 'Well, maybe I bring you up all wrong. But if I fall dead this minute, Matty, I can't see you done anything so bad as they say. I can't say I like it, I can't say I understand it, but if it's the way you want your life, you're not a little kid, you're grown up, I got no right to make you change it.' Then he looked at me real sober and said, 'But just for me, you promise me something, Matty: You promise me not to get drunk again, or get in trouble with the law. You're a man, not a little kid, and you got a right to have your life the way you want it, but if you get in trouble, it hurts us all, hurts all the family.' "

Mario's voice was ragged. "I expected a lecture about sin," he said, "I mean, I expected it. He was always so religious. But he only said, 'Matty, the way a man lives, that don't matter. It's the way he treats other people, that's what matters.' And then, the last thing, he put his hands over mine, and honest to God, Tom, I started to cry like a baby, and he said not to cry, it didn't matter what people called me, so long as I was decent and good to people, and as long as— this was the thing that made me bawl—as long as the people I loved, whether they were men or women, as long as they were better off for loving me and not worse off. And then he took me home, and I found out later he told Angelo to lay off me—oh, Tommy, Tommy, I swear I'd have thrown myself

off the rigging before I made trouble for him again! And he trusted me with you, and I felt so rotten about that, because I felt like I'd failed him--"

Tommy turned to him in the darkness and hugged him fiercely.

"You never did, Mario. You never did. He knew, and he didn't mind. All he wanted to know was, was I happy—" "And you're still glad and not sorry, piccino?" "You know I am," Tommy said, still holding him, aware all over again of that inner sense of Tightness about it, the confused knowledge that Mario brought out everything in him that was best. He could feel, against his face, that Mario's cheeks were wet.

"Then—then all we have to do is make each other happy, instead of unhappy ..."

"You do," Tommy whispered. "We do." Mario's sobbing quieted at last; his head lay heavy on Tommy's arm. After a time Tommy slipped his hand gently, exploringly, into the front of Mario's pajamas. Mario pushed him away.

"Don't! Not now, for God's sake—haven't you any decency? With him not even buried yet—"

Tommy drew a sharp breath of shock and dismay, less from the rebuff than from the thought that he might somehow seem to offer disrespect to the old man he had loved. His voice shook.

"What kind of superstitious bastard are you? If he didn't mind when he was alive, what makes you think—" He couldn't go on. It was the first time he had found the courage to make such a specific sexual gesture, and the pain of the

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rebuff was agonizing. "I don't get you, talking about decency! You make it sound like—if you think we could show respect by not doing anything—"
"Oh, God," Mario said, shakily, pulling him close, "I didn't mean it that way—it's just—"
"You just said what he wanted was for us to make each other happy—" Tommy kissed Mario's wet face and pulled him closer, his hands going out tenderly to him. "Come on," he said softly, "let me. You need some sleep, and it will make you sleep better, that's all." But he knew it was more than that. For him, at least, it was a way of reaffirming the bond between them, of reassuring himself that this was where he belonged, of closing the dreadful gap that had seemed,

tonight, while the Santellis were praying, to have opened between them and himself.
He said, entreatingly, "We belong together. Papa Tony knew it. And this is the best way I can think of to—to prove it to you."
Mario folded Tommy in his arms. He murmured, "You don't have to prove anything to me, kid. I know we belong together. We always will."
The train whistle screamed through the barren night. Angelo slept, drugged, twitching with unquiet dreams. Stella Gardner lay awake, slowly blinking back the tears she could not shed, Johnny's head heavy on her shoulder, where he had dropped asleep in a kind of stunned grief. In San Francisco, Elissa Renzo, heavy with child, cried herself to sleep, refusing any comfort David could offer. Lucia sat in the dark in the old Santelli house, her rosary in her hands, trying to pray, her mind obstinately returning to the night of another ring accident ten years ago, while old Isabella di Santalis slept fitfully, not having taken it in, fully, that another of her sons had been killed, or why. Even Mario and Tommy slept at last, comforted, in one another's arms. And Antonio Abelard Santelli lay in calm anonymous peace, alone, watched only by a strange priest in a strange town, who knew nothing except that he was a soul gone to God, and needed to know nothing more.

CHAPTER 25

the communal cookhouse tent, and its tacit ban on shoptalk at meals, robbed the Santellis of any time for leisurely talk at breakfast, which, when they were traveling with Lambeth in their own trailer, had always been the time for family discussions. It was late morning before Angelo could get them all together in a corner of the grandstand, rigging men setting up in the rings below them. Angelo looked steady, if rather pale.
"The first thing we have to do is to settle our routine. If we just yank the tricks Papa Tony was in, we won't have a lot left. Tommy, I've seen you do a back double in rehearsal.

Matt, what do you think? Could he do it regular in the show?"
Mario hesitated, glanced at Tommy, and said, "Have him try it once or twice at rehearsal, and if it goes good, put it in the show. But we need someone to handle the bars when we're doing the duo routines. We set up the act for

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three flyers and two catchers. I suppose we could ask the Waylands to put on another man—"
"What's wrong with Stella?" Johnny asked. "Anything Tommy's been doing she can do better."
"You know how Papa Tony felt about women in a straight flying-return act—" Johnny cut Mario off.
"I know how you feel," Johnny said, "but he had Liss audition with us for Starr's. Are you trying to say Stella isn't good enough for Woods-Wayland?"
Stella protested, "Hey, Johnny, look, Angelo didn't—"
"I never said that," Mario pointed out. "As far as that goes, she's probably a better flyer than Liss—"
"So you finally admitted it!"
Mario frowned at his brother. "I never denied it. But there is a difference and it's a big difference. Liss did straight flying; you trained Stella to do all the fancy stuff, and I don't know how well it would fit."
"Damn it, we could use a little something new!"
Angelo shook his head violently, and gestured Johnny to silence. "For cryin' out loud, Jock, let's not get into all that now! Anyway, Stel's holding down a pretty heavy routine in the show as it is. Let's let her work out with us for a day or two in practice, handling the bars for the duo routines—she's got great timing for anything like that—and making a couple of simple crosses. Stella, how about it? You want to try?"
She glanced at Johnny and said, "Sure. If it's okay with the boss."
"One thing I want to settle," Johnny said. "Angelo, I suppose you're head of the act now—"
A look of pain crossed Angelo's face. "I can't see anything to be gained by wrangling about it. Let's let things ride for a while. Next season—"
"I'm not going to wait all season," Johnny said.
"Look, Jock," Mario appealed, "not today. Let's talk this all over later, when we've had some kind of chance to settle down."
"No, damn it," Johnny said. "I just want to know if An-

gelo's going to expect us all to jump when he whistles, or whether we can finally have a little democratic procedure around here!"
Angelo said quietly, "A car with two drivers never gets very far. And a two-headed monkey belongs in the sideshow."
Mario, cracking his knuckles nervously, said, "I don't mind if Angelo wants to keep on running things."
Angelo grimaced. "Thanks, Matt. Thanks for nothing at all." He glared at Tommy. "You going to get into the act?"
"Nope, you're the boss, Angelo."
Johnny snapped, "Oh, you and Matt have Tommy seat-broken like a tame cat! Snap the whip and he jumps right through the hoop' God knows, I loved Papa Tony. He was an old man. he always did things this way, and I didn't mind letting him give orders—what the hell? But it's one thing to let Papa order me around, and it's something else to have Angelo shoving his weight around!"

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Look. I'm not trying to shove my weight around, Jock. But our contract does say that in case of illness, or any other unavoidable defaults-—and sudden death comes under that —I'm in charge of keeping the performance and the performers up to acceptable standards. And I am the most experienced man in the act. If you want to change the routines, I'm perfectly willing to talk it over. But not now. For God's sake, give us all some breathing space. This afternoon's show is going to be rough enough, any way you slice it!"
"Angelo—" Tommy began.
"Jesus Christ," Angelo shouted at him, "now are you going to start?"
Tommy said, indignant and shaken, "I just wanted to ask about my contract. I was under contract personally to Papa Tony, and he was my legal guardian. I just want to know how I stand now. Legally, that is."
“Oh, God, I forgot all about that. Your contract's in Papa Tony's safe-deposit box in the bank at home. I'll wire Joe to look it over. I might have to sign some papers taking over the contract. You mind having me appointed your guardian?"
Mario said, "I hardly think that's necessary, Angelo. Tommy's sixteen; isn't he old enough to get regular working papers and sign his own contract?"
"I'll have to find out about that," Angelo said. "I think California law says he either has to go to school or have a

guardian till he's eighteen. Maybe Woody's lawyers can tell me."
"I don't mind having Angelo appointed my guardian," Tommy said.
"What'd I say?" Johnny muttered. "Tame cat!"
"Oh, shut up!" Mario exploded. "If Tommy doesn't even know how his contract will hold up, and he can keep from putting up a big squawk, why in hell are you crowding Angelo this way?"
Stella, like a small fierce kitten, showed claws. "You'll all take it out on Johnny, and all he wants is to run things like it's the twentieth century, not some kind of old-world dictatorship ! We got rid of Hitler, didn't we?"
"Matt—Stella—please!" Angelo sounded exhausted. "Call it off till after the show, willya both? Things are bad enough without a family row. Papa Tony's hardly cold in his grave, and already we're fighting over who's going to run things! Stella, if you want to go on with us this afternoon, I don't mind—it isn't worth arguing over. I'll go to Woody myself and get an okay on it. That suit you, Johnny?"
That shamed Johnny into silence. But as they were dressing for the matinee, Angelo came around the aisle formed by the lined-up trunks, where Tommy and Mario were sharing a mirror.
"Matt, leave out the triple today, okay? Finish with a double-and-twist or something."
"Angelo, I didn't do it three days now. Woody's going to have kittens.'"
"Let him, damn it. It's in your contract that you've got discretion on it."
"It's also in my contract that I will perform to the best of my ability, Angelo, and he shifted us into the center ring on the strength of it. He's going to get sore."
"So he'll get sore, and to hell with him!"

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Mario brushed flesh-colored powder over the tape on his cheek where he had cut himself shaving. "Hey, hey, Angelo, what's with you? Having a premonition?"
"No, but accidents run in threes. And—oh, hell," he burst out, "I just don't think I can hold you on it!"
Mario said gently, puzzled, "Okay, Angelo. You're the boss. But Johnny's done it a couple of times. Want him to cover it?"
"No," Angelo said harshly. "Just skip it for today."

Mario said, "Sure, pal, whatever you say," but as Angelo went to take down the capes from where they were pinned by their loops against the canvas sidewall, he wondered aloud, "What the hell is biting him?"
The next day Angelo did not protest when Mario put the triple back into the act, but a few days later, as the train puffed out of a siding somewhere in Indiana, Angelo rapped on the thin wall between their compartments.
"Tommy, Matt, will you come in here, please?"
Tommy had undressed; he slid his pants and shoes on again, and they went into the next compartment. Angelo was smoking restlessly, the floor beside the bunk strewn with ashes. He offered Mario a cigarette. Mario shook his head.
"Tom?"
"No, thanks."
"Sit down, won't you? Listen," Angelo said, "I'm not going to beat around the bush. I'll tell Johnny later, but I thought I'd put it up to you two first. I want to quit.'"
"Quit?" Mario stared at him. "Quit what?"
"Quit flying. No, give me a minute, Matt. Even the most fantastic luck runs out. I've been flying since I was twelve, thirteen years old. That's a quarter of a century, twenty-five goddamn years in the catch trap. The Santellis have never had a really bad accident before; even Joe and Lucia lived through theirs. Statistically the odds are getting thinner every day. I want to quit before my turn comes."
Mario stared at him, his jaw dropping.
"You must be crazy," he said at last. "What would we do without you? You're the head of the Flying Santellis!"
"Yah!" Angelo grunted skepticism. "Ask Johnny about that!"
"I'll break Johnny's goddamn neck!"
"No. That's another thing, Matt. I'm not cut out to be padrone. I can take orders, but I'm no damn good at running things. You could manage the act okay, if you'd make up your mind to it, but you won't do it with me around."
"But Johnny won't take orders from me," Mario said, stunned.
Angelo shook ash from his cigarette. "You'll have to fight that out with him for yourself. I'm sorry to do this to you, Matt, I swear I am, but I keep thinking about Tessa. I've never really known her, and now I had it rubbed into me that something could go wrong, any day, and I'd never have

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the chance. I'm through, Matt. I'm going back to California and take Tessa out of that goddamn boarding school. I'm a family man and this is no kind of life for me. Say I've lost my nerve, if you want to."
"But what will you do?" Mario asked, and Angelo shrugged.
"Damned if I know. I'll find something. Stunt work, maybe."
"That's more dangerous than flying."
"Then I'll wait till I lose my nerve on that, and quit that, too! All I know is, I'm through flying. I handed in my notice to Woody tonight. He offered me a raise, and Coe Wayland as an assistant, and I turned him down flat."
"Angelo, look," Mario said, after a minute, "I'll talk to Johnny. If I can handle him—"
"That would be the easy way, Matt," Angelo said. "I could blame it all on the kid. But I won't con you. Even if this thing with Johnny had never come up, I still think I'd feel the same way. I've just lost whatever it was. I dunno, I can't seem to—to manage it. Every time I catch you, it's like you were going to do like Papa Tony, let go and fall and I can't hold you. I lay awake last night for hours, in a cold sweat, just thinking about that fall Lucia took. Every time you come off the fly bar, or Tommy, or Stel, I can damn near see them picking' you up off the ground." His face looked pinched and gray. "I can't take it no more, Matt."
"Oh, Jesus, Angelo," Mario muttered. "Look, this week has been rough. Real rough. Lay off a day or two, let Jock fill in, get a rest. Pull yourself together, and see how you feel then, okay? But don't do anything like this in a hurry. Look, Angelo, I know how you feel—"
"Do you? I wonder," Angelo said. "I don't think so."
"You really mean this, Angelo? You're going to do this to all of. us? Not just me, but the—the whole family?" Mario swallowed hard. "How the hell can you do this? What are we going to do? What about Tommy's contract? What about the Flying Santellis?"
"I hate to say this, Matt, but I really don't give a damn," Angelo said, and lit another cigarette. "It's not like you were all teenagers. You don't need anybody to hold your hands. Even the kid's old enough to look after himself." He gave Tommy a curious, hard, hostile glance. "Listen, Matt, I spent

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my whole life worrying about the goddamn family. I want to think of myself for a change, and Tessa. My family."
"Angelo, for God's sake!" Mario pleaded, and Tommy felt that he was near tears. 'Don't do this to me—don't do this to all of us! Look, you're my-—my catcher, the only one I ever worked with. How can I do triples without you, or— or anything? I always said, you're the anchorman for the Santellis, you're the one keeps the whole show on the road—"
"Matt—kid," Angelo said, holding out his hand, gripping Mario's. "It's not like I want to hurt you, kid. Not any of you, but specially not you. Johnny and Stel—sure, I know they'll get along. But you will, too, some way or other. And I'm not going to spend the rest of my life trying to fight Johnny and hold

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things together. I thought I could, but I'm just not cut out for it, and I'm not going to try!"
Mario stared at him, bitterly, hurt and betrayal in his voice. "Papa Tony spent his whole life trying to bring back the Flying Santellis. He built us up again from nothing, and before he's even cold in his grave, you run out on it, on everything he stood for! You lousy—" But he didn't finish, just sat staring at Angelo, his face drawn with pain and dismay.
"I might have known you'd throw that up at me," Angelo retorted, and ground out his cigarette under his heel.
"Okay, Matt," he said at last, "I never thought I'd tell anybody this. I thought I wouldn't say it to the priest in confession. Come to think of it, I never did. But something's happened to me since they picked my father up off the tanbark dead. Damn it, I never wanted to fly in the first place."
"What the hell are you talking about?" Mario demanded.
"Just what I said. I never wanted to fly. It's why—why I couldn't ever really—really understand Terry. Papa Tony never so much as asked me. He just said, when I was about twelve years old, 'Well, Angelo, you're getting to be a big, strong boy; we teach you to fly.' I just did what I was told. It was the family business, just like we'd been fixing shoes or selling macaroni. And then when I was starting to get pretty good— You wouldn't remember; Lu hasn't said much about it. When Lucia knew Liss was on the way, maybe they told you, she threw a fit. She's so quiet now, you wouldn't believe it. She raved and screamed and cried and stormed half the night—it took Papa and Joe and Matthew more than six hours to get her calmed down even a little. Next day at

the flyers' table in the cookhouse, Papa said to old Luciano, 'Lucia's going to be out of the act for eight, nine months. What we going to do to replace her?' And old Lucky Starr, he said Cleo could take over Lucia's spot in the show, and then he said. That boy of yours, that Angelo, he can move into Cleo's spot.' Okay, I didn't argue. Things were bad enough, with Lucia making all kinds of crazy threats—we were all scared she'd run off and do something—something desperate. She said she'd throw herself under the train. That kind of thing. Nonna was traveling with us then, and she couldn't do anything with Lucia. And Cleo was just seventeen and scared to death about moving into the star spot So I didn't want to make things any worse, and Matt had his hands full handling Lucia."
Tommy wondered, not for the first time, what kind of man the elder Matthew Gardner had been, to be so shady, to let himself be so wholly absorbed into his wife's family. Papa Tony had said once, Our family eats people up alive. Had Matthew, senior, been weak, as are many men who marry strong and domineering women?
Maybe that explains why Johnny felt the way he did about Stella, when she got pregnant. Like he was doing her a favor, letting her not have it. Angelo was still talking with tense, concentrated bitterness, twisting an unlighted cigarette between his fingers.
"So a few years later, after Matt died—and they went through this with Lucia every year or so, you realize—well, they needed another catcher. So I was it.

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And when Joe and Lucia had their accident and Lucia broke her back, we all thought the act would break up. I told Papa Tony then I wanted to quit, get into some other line of work. And Papa said I was all he had left, was I going to run out on him, too? He simply couldn't take it in, that there was anyone alive who wouldn't rather fly than eat."
Mario said slowly, "Yeah. It was you kept Lu and Papa from beating Mark into shape."
"That's right. The only real bad fight I ever had with Lucia. I decided you kids were going to grow up the way you wanted to. and Lu wasn't going to put the screws on you kids the way she and Papa put them on me. It was me arranged for Mark to stay in Frisco with Grandpa Gardner, and go to school there, and it was me talked Papa Tony into letting you go to college, only you queered that deal yourself," Angelo

said, and his mouth twisted in an odd grimace. "The best goddamn brain we had in the family and you wanted to knock it out doing triples!"
"Angelo, for God's sake—" ,
"Okay, okay. But anyhow, all you kids are grown up now, and this is my last chance—maybe the only chance I'll ever have to get started in some other line of work, before I'm too old to be anything but a bum when I finally get smashed up and grounded."
Mario sat staring at him. "You felt like that all along, and yet you went through all that hell teaching me the triple, knowing I could have broken both our necks—"
"I didn't teach you the triple, you rascal," Angelo said, and his hand went out affectionately to cover Mario's, "I just put up with you while you taught it to yourself. Yeah, I know, ragazzo, you love flying, and Tommy's got the bug just like you. So okay, okay, it's a free country. 'If that's what you want to do you keep right on doin' it till hell freezes over. But you count me out, okay?"
Johnny and Stella, of course, had to be told, and Angelo broke it to them the next day after the matinee. They both looked badly stunned, guilty.
"Angelo, is this because of that fight we had?" Johnny demanded. "I knew I ought to keep my big mouth shut—"
Angelo shook his head., "No, Jock, that wasn't a fight, just an honest difference of opinion. Maybe it helped me make up my mind a little, though. If I stayed on we'd just have more rows.'"
"But—Uncle Angelo—won't you even stay till the end of the season?"
"No. I thought of that. But Woody says he'll put Coe Wayland on as relief catcher—Wayland wants to get back into flying."
"Uncle Angelo—look—would it make any difference if I promised, if I guaranteed you wouldn't hear one damn word of static out of me, or Stel, for the rest of the season?"
"No, it wouldn't. Don't blame yourself, John," he said, not unkindly. "I just decided I've had enough flying. Not -many people get a chance to start over when they're my age."

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To Johnny he refused to elaborate, and they finished out the week in a more or less hostile silence. In Kansas City, in a blinding rainstorm, Angelo played his last show, packed his

trunk, and left, causing a ripple of curiosity in the whole circus, but he refused to have the slightest fuss made over his departure,
"What are you going to say to Lucia?" Mario wanted to know. He and Tommy accompanied Angelo to the bus station, where they stood waiting for the California bus, staring out into the pouring rain. Angelo shrugged, hoisting his suitcase—his trunk would be shipped on by rail express.
"I'm a big boy now. Lucia can like it, or she can do the next best thing." His face was closed and bleak. He held out his hand. "No hard feelings, Matt?"
Mario hesitated, and he looked angry and grim. Finally he drew a deep breath and sighed. "Okay, Angelo. No hard feelings." They clasped hands.
"Thanks." Angelo saw the bus driver climb up inside the coach and turn on the lighted sign that said Los Angeles express. He turned briefly to Tommy. "Good luck, kid."
Tommy, still bruised and wrathful, stared sullenly at the older man. How could Angelo do this to all of them, especially Mario? But finally, as Mario had done, he stuck out his hand. "Good luck, Angelo."
"See you both in October." Angelo drew Mario roughly to him and kissed his cheek. "Take care of yourself, Matt, and don't you take no lip from Johnny."
He patted him on the shoulder, grabbed his suitcase, and sprinted for the bus.
Mario stood watching him climb aboard, but Tommy was watching Mario's face, cold, withdrawn, angry.
How the hell could Angelo do this to Mario? I can see he wouldn't have any special feeling about Johnny, the way Johnny's been acting. But, my God, the way Mario feels about him . . . Tommy felt, in confused anger, that he could have killed Angelo without a moment of regret. The bus jerked, swayed, and pulled away from the station. Mario watched it go, his mouth pressed tight.
"Well," he said at last, "we got a show to do."
"You want to catch the bus over there for the circus lot?"
"Hell, no. Stand around in this rain and catch pneumonia? We'll get a taxi."
But he did not move; he was staring at the entrance of a bar across the street from the bus station. "Maybe I'll have a beer first."
"Don't be a dope," Tommy said. "You got a show this afternoon."
Mario sighed, then chuckled. "Okay, kid. Okay. Let's call

a cab and go on out to the lot. Though if it keeps on raining like this, there won't be any show worth mentioning anyhow." The rain had cleared by the matinee, but they stood together in a little knot beneath the performers' entrance, trying to keep their flying slippers out of the mud. It was Mario who voiced the thought in all their minds. "Well, we're on our own."
Johnny said, "It just occurred to me. With Angelo gone, there's not a single Santelli in the Flying Santellis anymore. Not one. Three Gardners, a Wayland, and a Zane."

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"Well, kids, that's show business," Coe Wayland said with his rough laugh.
"Just the way the breaks run in this business." Tommy noted that the big man's shock of ginger hair was ill-combed, that his green tights seemed not quite to fit him. He forced himself not to criticize—After all, he thought, with a charity he did not realize was snobbish, he isn't really one of us.
Mario said, "I don't know about you, Jock, but I'm still a Santelli. And Papa said Tommy had a right to use the name." He glowered, a strange, dispassionate, almost hostile stare, at Stella, tiny and pert beside Johnny, her fair hair pulled back into a tiara studded with green rhinestones. Tommy found himself wondering, Where did they get a Santelli costume for Stella? Did Lucia send it when they moved Stel into the act?
Johnny scowled. "You mean Stella and I don't have a right to call ourselves Santellis?"
Mario shrugged. "I didn't say that. It was you made that crack about there not being any Santellis left in the act." Tommy thought he sounded as if he wanted Johnny to argue, but Johnny didn't,
"Wayland, you know the routine—"
"Sure, sure," Coe Wayland said impatiently, jerking at the muslin strapping on his wrists with strong teeth, "I was catching when all you kids were in rompers."
"I was going to say," Mario said coldly, "that we haven't had a chance to practice the triple. Do you think you can hold me on it?'
Wayland put his hands on his hips. He ran his eyes insolently up and down Mario's full height. "Sure, big fella," he said at last, with an offensive grin, "you ain't as hefty as all that."
Stella giggled; Johnny gave her a dig in the ribs with his

elbow. "Listen, you big jerk—" Tommy began, but Mario gave him just the eyelash-flicker of a repressive frown and he subsided. Mario said, "I was thinking about you, Wayland. I'll end the show today with a double-and-twist if you'd rather."
"Don't you worry about me," Wayland said. "Of course, if you don't think you can do the triple without your"—he hesitated—"your husky boy friend to catch for you—"
Mario seemed about to explode, but he mastered himself and said, "You don't know our signals yet. I usually signaled to Angelo at the last minute which one I was going to finish up with, depending on a lot of things—the light, how I felt about it, and so on. I don't like having to make up my mind to it ahead of time. Today I'll finish up with the double-and-twist, and tomorrow we can work on signals, okay?"
Coe Wayland shrugged. "Any way you say. You want to do your triple, go ahead."
"I want to get used to working with you, first. If you catch me off center you're likely to rip your shoulder out, and if you tear mine, I'll break your goddamn neck."

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Wayland looked bored. He said, "Cut the comedy routine, pretty boy. You call the catches, I'll catch them—it's just as simple as that. You watch the fancy tricks and let me worry about my end of the rigging, okay?'
Mario bit his lip and turned away. Angelo's cape was not quite long enough for Coe Wayland, and looked awkward. As the band crashed into their entrance music, Mario put his arm through Tommy's as if seeking some kind of reassurance, and Tommy squeezed it.
"And in the center ring—The—Flying—-Santellis!"
"Take it easy, Mario," Tommy whispered. "Andiamo."
Mario drew a long breath, then grinned down at him. "Okay," he said under his breath, "we're still here."

CHAPTER 26

Kansas City. St. Louis. Oklahoma City. Dallas. Houston. Tommy was carefully scraping an accumulation of mud from the troupe's flying slippers one morning in the men's dressing tent, and remembering what Papa Tony had said at the be-

ginning of the season, that you can tell what state you are in only by the color of the mud . . .
"It's true," he said out loud to Mario, who was sitting on his trunk in the dressing tent, reading a pulp magazine, "Look how that yucky gray stuff from Missouri sticks to everything. And this mud from Oklahoma's red, real red like bricks—is it what they make bricks out of, Mario?"
"Damned if I know," Mario said, his face still buried in Planet Stories. "Could be, I suppose. Who cares?"
Tommy finished his work, laying out the costumes for the show that afternoon, and wandered out into the backyard. What state were they in? Muggy heat lay like a pall over the city, and he smelled sharp, acrid chemical stink like an oil refinery somewhere. He was tired of the long season, tired of the circus train, the lack of privacy. The small lame dwarf who had the Woods-Wayland concession for Billboard accosted him, and Tommy bought a copy, flipping by automatic habit to the route lists to see where Lambeth was playing. Then he remembered.
I wonder if Jeff Cardiff took over the cats. He always wanted to. He paged slowly through the newspaper, looking for any item of interest. The Fortunatis were doing a special indoor show in Boston. Must be nice and cool up north there. He drank a glass of some sugary concoction, more ice than drink, from the grease wagon, and walked back to the tent, chewing the ice. It was the slack morning hour; all around the tent, performers were reading, mending costumes, writing letters. A card game was going on in one corner. Tommy passed Coe Wayland's trunk and the burly catcher slammed down a trunk lid, jogging Tommy's memory.
Oh-oh, that's not good. I thought he'd quit drinking when they put him on to catch for us.
I better ask— He curtailed the thought; he could no longer speak to Angelo about it. Anyway, he said to himself fiercely, it's none of my business. It's a long time till the show; he's got a right to do what he wants to on his own time.

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Mario was still absorbed in his magazine. This one showed a man being strangled alive in purple flowers like an enormous Venus's-flytrap. Startling Stories. Well, the cover looked like it. He couldn't imagine what Mario got out of that stuff, but he read it every chance he got. Tommy sat down on his trunk to read Billboard.
Mario put the magazine down and came up behind him.

"Lambeth Shows is playing in Lawton, Oklahoma," he read over Tommy's shoulder. "Seems like there's something I ought to remember about that town, but I can't think what it is." He gave Tommy a quick, secret smile that made Tommy feel simultaneously delighted and ready to drop through the floor.
Tommy said, realizing that Johnny was kneeling beside his open trunk, watching them, "Yeah. There was a tornado there, or something, wasn't there?"
"Something like that, I guess." Tommy knew his face was reddening, and he turned to put the Billboard into his trunk as Mario went on, slowly and deliberately, "Seems like I remember a couple of other towns in Oklahoma. It's a great state, isn't it? Couple of pretty nice things happened there."
Damn him, I wish he'd quit teasing me in front of other people!
"Oklahoma," Johnny said, "you can have it. Texas, too. They can wrap up Texas and Oklahoma and all those Bible Belt states and throw 'em down in the Grand Canyon for all I care. Anything else in Billboard, Tommy?"
"Good picture of the Fortunatis. Cleo and Lionel are flying with an indoor show in Boston."
"Wish to hell we were," Johnny said. "This heat's beginning to get to me. When you finish with Billboard, can I have it, Tom? Stel clips out every picture of Cleo Fortunati she can find for her scrapbook. She's got a crush on her, I think— she still gets sore when she remembers that Liss got to meet her and she didn't. Listen, I've got to go and have a word with Coe Wayland, damn him. I'm getting fed up with that bastard."
"What's he done now?" Mario inquired, while Tommy pricked up his ears.
"Stinking jerk," Johnny said, "I asked him what kind of pigpen he was brought up in, that he didn't wash his tights now and then. This heat, he smells like an old billy goat, and when I can smell him even on the rig it's too damn much! So, like I say, I asked him to wash his goddamn tights and take a bath sometimes, and the bastard asked me if I was a fag or something, that I couldn't put up with the smell of a little sweat!"
Mario shrugged. "He calls everybody a fag whenever he's sore at them. It doesn't mean anything."
Johnny laughed. "I told him he could ask Stel about that

You think I don't know what kind of guy is all the time calling other people queer? Anyhow, I'm going to buy him a cake of Lifebuoy soap and tell him if he doesn't use it I'll throw him in the horse trough! Damn cheap grift show! Larry Wayland probably has the first damn nickel he ever made—why do you think he put Coe on with our act instead of hiring another catcher? Probably

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saved him a hundred dollars a week!" He went off between the line of trunks, and Tommy thought, Coe Wayland's a pain in the neck, sure. But having him to gripe about keeps Johnny and Mario off each other's backs.
Mario bent over Tommy where he was kneeling by his trunk and murmured softly, just loud enough for Tommy to hear, "Bet you didn't know I had such a good memory, did you, ragazzo?"
"What you want me to say to that?"
"Told you I was kind of a sentimental bastard," Mario murmured. "Hey, how come your ears are turning red? You blushing, or something?"
"Come on" Tommy muttered, agonized, "cut it out, Mario!" No one in the dressing tent was looking at them, yet he was painfully conscious- of the presence of the other men.
Mario laughed and straightened up. "We'll talk about that later." he said, and walked out, remarking, "The cookhouse flag is up. Guess I'll go eat."
Tommy remained, kneeling beside his trunk. Part of himself was pleased that Mario had remembered, too, reviving some of the enormous excitement and intensity of their first season together; in another part of his mind he was angry that Mario would tease him like that in front of bystanders, when he could make no reply that would not betray them or be too revealing.
What the hell did he expect me to say?
But between matinee and night show he made a discovery that wiped away anger and embarrassment alike. He said nothing in the dressing tent, nor while the circus train was bang loaded after the show. When they were locked in their compartment and the train was pulling out, Mario put out the light and said in a voice Tommy could hardly hear over the noise of the rails under them, "Come down into my bunk, Tommy. Seems like you had something to tell me about Lawton, Oklahoma, huh?"
""Sure," Tommy said, sliding down, "but something else I

got to tell you first, Mario. Listen, you know Coe Wayland's a drunk? He keeps a bottle of whiskey in his trunk—"
"I know. He gave Angelo some. He's not the only one— Lucia used to have some, in case somebody got a toothache or a cold or something."
"I've seen him drunk," Tommy said stubbornly. "A couple of times. Not staggering drunk, but drunk. Smelled it on him, too. Last Sunday—"
"Who cares what he does with his Sundays? If every performer who got drunk on Sunday was laid off, they'd have to close the show."
Tommy said stubbornly, "He was drinking tonight. Just before we went on the rig."
Mario sat bolt upright in his bunk. "Hey, wait a minute," he said. "I know you don't like the guy. I can hardly stand the sight of him myself. But is this straight, Tom? You're not making it up or exaggerating because Wayland was nasty to you?"
"What the hell do you think I am?" Tommy demanded in a rage. "I wouldn't do that to anybody!"

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Mario frowned. "Sorry, kid. But this is important. You can't just say things like that about any flyer. Either you back that up right now, or you drop it right away, for good."
"I said, he was drinking tonight. Just before we went on the rig. You know I went back to the tent just before the second half—"
"I thought you were going to the donniker to take a leak."
"I did," Tommy said, "and I guess somebody threw up in there, 'cause the place stank, and I slipped in it and got some crud on my slippers. So I found some hay to wipe it, but it was on my socks, too, so I went back to the dressing tent to get a clean pair, and he was there drinking. He slammed his trunk shut and went out right away, the way he does, but he left the glass on the floor by his trunk, and I smelled it, and goddamn it, Mario, I know whiskey when I smell it!"
Mario sat staring at him. He said, "You mean before he went up on the rig? Right before we started flying?"
"Yeah."
Mario's face had slowly drained of color. "Why didn't you tell me right then?"
"I didn't know what to do," Tommy said. "I didn't want to get you shook up on the rig. I was scared, but I—by the time I got back we were ready to make our entrance and I didn't

know which would've been worse: to tell you or not to tell you."
"You should've told me," Mario said. "I would have refused to go on with him." He frowned and started pulling on his pants. "Get dressed, Tom."
"You going to go and talk to Wayland?"
Mario shook his head. As Tommy skinned into dungarees and sneakers. Mario said, "Go along to the married couples' car and ask Johnny and Stella if they want to come back to the privilege car and have a sandwich, or if we can go along to their compartment—Stel can't come up here, to the men's car, but we can go there, I think. Ask which they'd rather. I want to talk,"
Tommy pulled on his denim jacket; the late-August heat gave way to a chilly wind after sunset. It was drafty between cars, and he shivered. In the married couples' car he looked along the closed doors for the card that read JOHNNY and
STELLA GARDNER, THE FLYING SANTELLIS.
He knocked hesitantly. Stella, wrapped to the chin in a pink chenille housecoat, opened it, and said in surprise, "Tommy!"
He relayed Mario's message, and she said, "It's okay for you to come here. I'd rather not get dressed again."
"Besides." Johnny said behind her, "you try to talk anything over in the privilege car, you got two dozen guys listening in. If this is private family talk we better do it here."
They gathered in the tiny compartment. Johnny vacated the bunk for Mario's long legs and curled up in a tiny folding chair. Stella and Tommy sat on the rug that was part of their traveling furniture; it went down in their compartment every night, and Stella spread it, she had told him once, in front of her trunk in the dressing room. It was an old rug, fuzzy and shedding its

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nap, but looking at the rug, the folding chair, the embroidered scarf she had spread on top of her trunk, he thought, She's made this into a kind of home. Like my folks trailer with Lambeth. He wondered if it was only women who thought of doing this kind of thing.
Johnny offered cigarettes. Mario gave Stella a box of candy he had picked up somewhere, which she promptly passed around, and they sat eating crackers and cheese from little jars while they talked for a while about the performance and the long overnight run to Denver.

"I hate Denver," Johnny said. "Goddamn jinx town. That was where Joe and Lucia—"
"Yeah," Mario said, "and Tommy's father got his arm clawed to ribbons there last year. Angelo got messed up, too."
Stella crossed herself. "Don't talk about those things!"
"Well, it's for damn sure I'm not going to try a triple there," Mario said. "Jinxes aside, the altitude or something does lousy things to my breath."
"That's fine with me," Johnny said. "I get rotten headaches all the time we're up there, always did."
"Speaking of jinxes," Mario said, "what do you think of Coe Wayland?"
"Between you, me, and the lamppost," Johnny said, "I can't stand the bastard. But what the hell you going to do about it? He's the boss's brother and we're stuck with him."
"Frankly, I'm nervous as hell about working with him."
"Well, Matt, like I say, he isn't winning any popularity contests with me, either. But I don't see how we can do one damn thing about it."
"Well, that's helpful," Mario said, "real helpful. We might as well have stayed in our own compartment. Jock, don't be like that!"
"Well, look, Matt, we can reshuffle the act so I catch you on the triple, if you want to. I'm not nuts about the idea— you're a pretty hefty armful. But the only other thing to do would be to lay off a few days and restyle -the act—not that it couldn't use some restyling."
"That's no good," Mario said. "We need two catchers in the act; the duo routines are in our contract. We've got six weeks to go on the season, and Wayland's a rotten, slipshod, dangerous performer, and a drunk."
They both turned to stare at him. Stella said, on a rising inflection, "A drunk?"
Johnny snapped, "Don't be a damn fool, Matt. Flyers don't drink and live as long as Coe Wayland. So what if he liked a belt of whiskey now and then? So do I. We can't all be total abstainers like you two! You think this ought to be a Sunday-school show?"
"I said drunk and I mean it," Mario insisted and glared at Johnny.
Johnny returned the glare. "Listen, Matt, damn it, I'm no Wayland fan, either. But that kind of talk getting around

—he's working with the Santellis. You prove that, and we'll do something about it. Otherwise I want it dropped, right now."

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Stella said quietly, "I've heard something like that, Johnny. He went off on a three-day drunk once and Woody socked him with a fifty-dollar fine."
Johnny still sounded belligerent. "That doesn't prove anything. Except, maybe, that he's got sense enough to do his drinking a good long way off the lot."
"Tommy," Mario said, "tell them what you told me tonight."
Tommy repeated what he had seen, and Johnny frowned.
"Not good enough. If we could catch him in the act—but we'd need a lot more than that to take to Woody. I got a better idea. I been wanting to talk about restyling the act anyhow."
Mario looked grim. "Shoot."
"Don't fly off the handle, big brother. You're the star, and you deserve it—nobody's saying you don't. But without cutting in on your publicity—"
"That's below the belt, Johnny."
"Let me finish, willya? We could dress up the act a little, make it showier, without hurting anybody. Our routine looks so simple."
"That's the artistry of it," Mario said quietly, "to make the almost impossible look simple and easy. We don't need showmanship; people who can appreciate the fine points of flying know what we're doing."
"Oh, Christ, you and your talk about pure art! This is a circus, Matt, not the goddamn Ballet Russe! Whether you like it or not, we're in show business. I've been thinking about Stella. She's pretty spectacular. We could do something really great with her."
"Look, Jock, this is a straight flying-trapeze act. It's classic. If you want the fancy stuff, why don't you try and talk Woody into a specialty solo for her? Julie Lee's getting to where she shows, and she's going to be laying off fairly soon. Maybe Woody could work Stel into that spot."
Johnny flared, "You're trying to say she's not good enough for a center-ring act with the family name! You never made a fuss about Liss—"
"Now, that's enough of that!" Mario said, springing to his feet. "Let me tell you one thing, Jock: Liss is a flyer, not a

showgirl! She did the duo routines with us, and a couple of simple picture tricks to pretty up the act a little, and left it at that. She didn't have a glamour complex, or try to work the fancy special stuff into a straight flying-return act—"
Stella opened her mouth and shut it again. Johnny blazed, "The Santellis built this act around a female star for years, and you know it!"
"And Stel isn't Lucia, either!"
"Hell, Lu never was so much! She never did any of the big tricks! It was just showmanship, that same showmanship you say you despise, built her up to a star! What's the matter, you think it would cut you down, having two stars in the family?"
"Now, look, Jock—" Mario began, took a deep breath and let it out, and started over. "Look, I don't need to worry about that kind of thing. What I do, I don't think there's anybody else could cut me out, showmanship or no

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showmanship. But there's stuff that belongs in a straight flying-return act and stuff that doesn't."
"Balls!" Johnny said. "You could use some showmanship yourself, if it came to that! I heard somebody say the other day, when you were doing a pirouette, 'Why doesn't he do something hard?' "
Mario's grin widened. "Shows how dumb they are. A pirouette's about the hardest thing I do in the act."
"Yes, but goddamn it," Johnny argued, "you make it look so damn easy, nobody even notices! We could style it so people would really be sittin' on the edge of their chairs—"
"I don't need that kind of showmanship. Fake stuff, all of it!"
Johnny slammed his hand down on the trunk. "Matt, I get so fed up, so goddamn fed up, with that modest and humble act of yours! It's an act, and you know it as well as I do! Will you cut the crap for a while?" "Now, you look here—-"
Someone knocked, a peremptory sound, on the door of the compartment. Stella said, "Oh-oh, now you've done it," and went to the door.
An apologetic voice complained, "Stella, dear, could you people please be a little quieter in there? I just got Bucky off to sleep, and now he's crying again."
"Sure," Stella whispered. "I'm sorry, Vicky." She turned,

her eyes blazing. "Vicky Davis," she said, "she's got a teething baby. So will you please, both of you, get the hell out of here? And, Johnny, not one word out of you tonight—not one goddamn word! Hear me?"
"Yes ma'am!" Johnny said, laughing.
Mario whistled softly. "Hey, Stella, I'm sorry—"
"And don't waste time apologizing, either! Just get right out, right now!" She closed the door behind them with a perceptible bang, and Tommy and Mario looked at each other, behind amusement and chagrin.
"Hey, who knows," Mario muttered, "maybe we do have another Lucia in the family after all!"
But by the time they were back in their own compartment, Mario had stopped laughing, and looked grimmer than ever. "We got started on Coe Wayland," he said, staring angrily into the darkness beyond the window, "but all Johnny could think of to do with it, was to use it as a lever to bully me into getting Stella's specialties into the act." He climbed into his bunk and lay there staring at the window, his arms behind his head. "Now what the hell are we going to do?" But it wasn't a question. Tommy climbed into his upper berth and lay there without trying to answer. There were times when he could coax Mario out of a bad mood—but this wasn't one of them.
Tommy went to Johnny the next day, and brought up Wayland again, but Johnny only scowled at him. He said, "Get me some proof. Something we can take to Woody. Then maybe we can do something. Until then, there's nothing we can do about it."
Tommy kept his eye on Wayland, watching him until he was afraid the man would notice, but there was nothing definite, nothing he could prove. Then,

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on the third day of the Denver layover, something happened that drove it completely out of his head.
They were in the dressing tent. Tommy had decided to send out the laundry, and the truck had just delivered the package marked Santelli. He was sorting out his own socks and dungarees and T-shirts from Mario's and laying them into the bottom of his wardrobe trunk. Mario was kneeling in front of his own trunk, polishing his best shoes.
"While I've got the polish out, want me to give yours a shine, too? No sense getting polish all over your hands while

you're working on the laundry," Mario said. "Just throw them over here, will you?"
"Sure." Tommy handed Mario his good brown shoes. Jake Davis came down between the rows of trunks, and Mario lifted his eyebrows.
"What's up, Jake?"
"I'm collecting for the Fortunatis. Most of the aerialists are giving something."
"My God!" Mario sat back on his heels. He was naked to the waist, his hair standing up all over his head. "What happened, Jake?"
"You haven't heard? Woody got a phone call last night, and I called my brother—he's working in Boston where they were."
"Jake, what happened? We've had our own troubles, and we haven't heard anything!"
"Cleo," said Jake. "She missed the net in a double, and they think her back's broken. They don't know for sure that she's going to live."
"Jesus Christ," Mario whispered, and the brown shoe-polish brush fell unheeded on his pile of clean white T-shirts. Tommy bent to retrieve it, feeling numb. Cleo! he thought, in horror.
"That's right," Jake said. "You know them. Personally, that is. I never met them."
"Jim Fortunati is my cousin," Mario said, "and Cleo was with the Santellis for years." He sounded dazed. "She's hurt bad?"
"That's what I heard. Nothing official-—you know what rumors are. But she is in the hospital, and you know how insurance is for flyers, like not at all, so we're taking up a collection to help Jim with the hospital." This was routine for aerialists. Mario dug into his pants pocket and pulled out a couple of bills.
"That's for me and Tom. Johnny and Stel will probably want to give something separate."
"Coe Wayland gave me two bucks," Jake said, lowering his voice. "Last of the big spenders, huh?" He glanced at the corner of the bill Mario had handed him, said, "Hey— thanks!" and hurried away.
Mario sat on his trunk, shoes forgotten, staring straight ahead. He did not seem to hear when Tommy spoke, and Tommy didn't blame him. He picked up the shoe brush and finished them himself, put a gloss on Mario's riding boots,

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and put them all away in the trunk. Cleo Fortunati, who had laughed, and petted Liss, and told them stories about Barney Parrish; Cleo, lying in a hospital with her back broken. He told himself fiercely, It happens. What was it Barney Parrish said? You've got to have an open mind about breaking your neck. But that made him think of Cleo, too, telling that story in the Fortunati trailer. He blinked hard, swallowing again and again. Papa had been with them then. And Angelo. His own parents had been alive. Cleo had known his mother. You're the image of Beth. His eyes were stinging.

Mario was still motionless on his trunk.

"Mario, the cookhouse flag is up. You want to go eat now?"

"I'm not hungry, Lucky. You go ahead if you want to."

"I'll stay here if there's anything—"

Mario scowled at him. "Damn it, no! Go get your dinner, kid. Just leave me alone, willya?"

Wretched, Tommy went off to the cookhouse. The only seat at the flyers' table was beside Coe Wayland, which didn't suit him at all. The waiter put a plateful of meat and potatoes in front of him, and he ate mechanically, without tasting.

"Hey," Wayland said, "Where's Fancy Dan?"

"Huh?" Sunk in misery, he had hardly heard.

"Your big brother. The boss man. Where is he? Dieting for his handsome waistline, maybe?"

"Lay off," Tommy said. "He just heard about the Fortunatis. Cleo's an old friend of his mother. He's upset about it."

Wayland's coarse handsome face was suddenly serious. "That's a bad thing, yeah," he said. "I don't know the Fortunatis myself, but it's real tough luck. It may not be so bad as they say, though, Red. These things, they always get exaggerated."

Tommy realized against his will that the burly man was trying to be friendly. He's actually trying to cheer me up. He found himself resenting it. He didn't want to think better of Coe Wayland. He didn't want to admit that the man was human. But against his will he found himself thinking, Sure, he's a flyer, too. When any aerialist gets hurt or killed. every flyer is going to get upset, even him; it makes you realize it could happen to anybody, any time.

Mario had managed to pull himself together by the matinee. With ironclad Santelli discipline, he did not mention

the Fortunatis, but as they climbed the rigging, Stella at their side, Tommy saw the tenseness around Mario's jawline and realized that he was tight as a guy wire. Normally, at the top of the rigging, Mario was filled with exuberance. Against his will, Tommy remembered that day at winter quarters of the Starr Circus, when they had gone through their act for the Fortunatis. Then, resolutely adjusting his hands meticulously to balance Mario's on the bar for their duo routine, he pushed it all away again.

When you're flying, nothing matters. Nothing. Nothing except, did I get off the bar straight?

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Side by side they swung, but with the clock inside himself, Tommy knew, It's not right—we're ragged. . . . They managed to make the double catch, to get back without losing momentum, but as they dropped off on the platform again, he lost balance and fell heavily against Stella. Mario snarled at him, "Watch what you're doing, ragazzo!"
Then Mario was readying himself for the triple.
That day in the rehearsal tent at Starr's, Cleo ran to Mario, hugged and congratulated him. Papa Tony was so proud. And now Papa Tony is dead and Cleo, perhaps, dying . . . Tommy saw the momentary flicker of dread and horror across Mario's face. He wanted to cry out and beg him not to do the triple today, not today . . .
Mario took the bar in his hands, swung out, flipped off the bar, whirled over into the first somersault—Oh, God, he's going to miss!-—made a ragged grab, missed Coe Wayland's hands, and went down, horribly limp. There was a hushed moan of dismay and horror from the stands. Mario managed to roll over on his back, but it was a clumsy fall and a clumsy landing. Instead of climbing again for the second try always allotted him for a missed triple, he shook his head and signaled them down. Tommy, swinging out for the elaborate somersault into the net which ended the act, felt the ache of sympathy and grief for Mario; he hated missing a trick in the ring. He shouldn't have tried it, not today.
He whispered through the applause, as they left the ring, "You okay, Mario?"
"Yeah. Came down on that bad wrist of mine, is all," Mario replied, his face drawn and gray.
"I'll have Johnny look at it when we get back to the tent,"

Tommy said. "He's good at that stuff." It was all he could do.
Johnny came and worked for a long time, trying to loosen the muscles in Mario's tight shoulders and strapping his wrist into a bandage, and for once he did not make bad jokes. Mario shivered with reaction, sitting with a blanket around his shoulders; he had been badly shaken by his fall. Tommy went out to the grease wagon to get him some coffee, and brought him back a sandwich, too. Mario stared at it with loathing. "I'm not hungry,"
"You didn't eat any dinner, either," Tommy protested, almost in tears. "You've got to eat, Mario."
Johnny laced Mario's wristguard over the bandage. He said, "Come on, Signor Mario, 'don't throw us a fit of temperament now, huh? What the hell would Angelo say if you started acting that way?"
Mario drew a long shuddering breath, and took a gulp of coffee. He picked up the sandwich in his uninjured hand; suddenly he grinned, only the shadow of his usual grin.
"Okay, okay, kids," he said, and bit into it. By the time of the night show he seemed reasonably normal, and although he did not attempt the triple, his wrist still giving him considerable pain, he did a double-and-twist and accepted the applause with his usual gaiety and verve. But after the show, on the train, he lapsed again into bitter, brooding silence. Tommy longed to

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climb down into his bunk and comfort him, but something in Mario's withdrawn, cold face kept him from attempting it.
He lay awake for a long time, listening to Mario's breathing—He isn't asleep, either—and thinking, This season sure has gone to hell all of a sudden. Finally he could no longer endure the taut, watchful silence from below, and he leaned over the edge of the bunk and whispered, "Mario, you asleep?"
"Leave me alone, Lucky," Mario said, not irritably but as if he were at the final edge of endurance. "Just leave me alone, will you?"
Rebuked, Tommy lay down again in his bunk. For a moment he was angry—All right, God damn it, if that's the way he feels, the hell with him!
Then, suddenly, he was desperately worried.
What was wrong with Mario?
What's happened to him?

CHAPTER 27

Tommy did not sleep till daylight was coming in the windows, and he woke again when the train came to a stop on a deserted siding, hearing animal sounds of protest and the chuffing of a switch engine along the tracks in the railroad yard. He crawled down. Mario was sunk in exhausted sleep, so dead to the world that he did not even stir when Tommy, dressing in the confined space, banged into his bunk. He turned up late in the cookhouse, too, waving away his usual breakfast and drinking cup after cup of black coffee. The waiters were clearing the food away from the tables when one of them came and handed Mario a yellow envelope.
A telegram. What now? Apprehensive, they clustered around Mario as he tore it open. He sighed with relief and tossed it to Johnny.
"Good news for a change."
Stella and Tommy craned their necks to read over Johnny's shoulder!
daughter born to Elissa SAN FRANCISCO
5:45 A.M. BAPTIZED CLEO MARIA RENZO. BOTH DOING FINE. LOVE JOE.
"Marvelous," Stella murmured. "Liss told me she wanted a little girl. We'll have to send her some flowers, Johnny."
"Sure, babe. Anything you want," Johnny said. "Cleo Maria, huh? That figures, the way Liss always felt about Cleo. Hey, when you send flowers to Liss, send some to Cleo, too, why don't you?"
"Send a message along with the flowers," Tommy suggested. "It might cheer Cleo up, knowing Liss named the baby after her."
Mario took the telegram again and sat staring at it. "At least that's over."
"Over for this year," Johnny said sarcastically. "She'll probably have six or eight before she's through, considering that stupid jerk she married. Well, if that's what Liss wants out of life, I hope she enjoys it, that's all!"
Mario stood up, knocking his chair over backward, and strode away from the table. He did not return.

Later, Tommy went to town with Johnny and Stella. They arranged for flowers to be sent to Liss, and to Cleo in Boston, with loving messages from all of them; Tommy insisted that Mario's name must be signed, too. Then he had

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work to do. checking riggings, which kept him busy until the noon flag went up on the cookhouse. He finished his dinner early —Mario had not appeared at all—and went to the dressing tent. At this hour it was usually empty, but today Mario was already there. He had taken the capes out of the wardrobe trunk and was pinning them up to the canvas sidewall. As Tommy came up to him in the deserted tent—for most of the men were still in the cookhouse at dinner—Mario turned around, took Tommy in his arms, and pulled him close in a tight hug.
"Hey," he said softly against Tommy's ear, "we kinda got off the subject of Lawton, Oklahoma, didn't we?"
For a moment Tommy was pleased; then, abruptly, dismayed. He pulled gently loose.
"There'll be plenty of time for that," he said, "but right now we got to get ready for the matinee."
"We got time." Mario drew him closer, with a teasing caress.
"You crazy or something?" Tommy's voice shook. "Look, any minute there's going to be three, four dozen men walking in on us."
"Relax. They're all in the cookhouse or out checking rigs. We got time enough for a quick—" He put his mouth against Tommy's ear and whispered, and Tommy pulled away, shocked and angry.
"You're out of your mind! Listen, you told me often enough, there's a time and a place for everything, and you know this, right here, isn't the time or the place, stupid!"
Mario stared at him, his mouth tight with anger.
"You've become real careful all of a sudden, haven't you?"
"Somebody's got to be," Tommy said. "Come on, Mario, cut out the funny business. We been getting away with murder this year, but you know and I know there's just so much we can get away with, and that kind of risk isn't worth it."
"Who the hell do you think you're trying to impress? Or did you get religion all of a sudden?"
"Mario, what the hell has gotten into you? Get off my back, willya?" Tommy was really angry now. "So you're all

upset about something, God knows what it is this time, why the hell do you have to take it out on me, anyhow? Every time, every goddamn time you work yourself up into a rotten mood you take it out on me by picking a big fight, and I'm good and sick of being your doormat!"
"I got a better word for you than doormat." Deliberately, sneering. Mario spoke an epithet Tommy had never even heard before. Tommy stared in shock and outrage, and Mario laughed, unpleasantly.
"You don't like dirty words, do you? The word bothers you, doesn't it? But it never bothered you to be a—" He said it again.
Tommy flinched as if Mario had struck him; in a way, he felt, Mario had struck him a blow that was worse than physical. He said, trying desperately to steady his voice, "Look, there's a big difference between what goes on in our compartment on the train with the door locked, and starting up this kinda

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stuff in the dressing tent with the whole damn show about to walk in on us! What's got into you, anyway? It was you who told me, often enough, how careful—" His voice faltered, died.
"I knew you'd throw that up to me someday, you little bastard!" Mario said. He grabbed Tommy's arm and twisted it cruelly behind his back. Tommy yelped and tried to pull loose, but Mario inexorably forced him down toward the floor of the tent. Silently, savagely, Tommy struggled, but Mario shoved his face to the floor, kneeling on his back, holding his arm twisted behind him so that Tommy could not move.
"Say it! Don't be so damn scared of it! You're no goddamn better than I am! Say what you are, damn you!"
"What the devil—" Jake Davis and one of the clowns were standing in the door of the tent.
Mario snarled, "Butt out. This is a private fight!" and twisted Tommy's arm so that he could not move a fraction of an inch without imminent danger of dislocating his shoulder.
"Say it," Mario demanded under his breath, so low that the men standing in the doorway could not hear the words. "Say it, you goddamn self-righteous little queer, say it!"
"I'll kill you," Tommy gasped.
Imperceptibly Mario tightened the pressure. Tommy, feeling sweat starting on his hairline, pain ripping through his arm, heard voices beyond them, through a reddening haze.

To say it, he thought in confusion, would be to make something sick, something filthy of everything they had been to each other. He heard Johnny say, "Come on, Matt, beating up the kid again? Let go before you bust his shoulder!"
"Why, sure," Mario said, with that intense, insane cheerfulness which came at the center of his rages, "soon as he says what I told him to."
White with pain and humiliation. Tommy could just see the ring of staring faces—most of them looked amused. They seemed to think, from Mario's laughter, that it was some kind of joke. Coe Wayland said with his high, harsh laugh, "Come on, Tommy, say uncle, tell him you'll be a good boy."
Johnny advanced uneasily toward them and said, "For God's sake, you two cut out the comic routines. Let go the kid, Matt, you'll really hurt him."
Mario did not move. Finally, with a convulsive gasp of pain, Tommy gave in. He whispered, "Mario—let me go. Please."
Mario muttered, "Say it, or I'll break your arm."
Tommy whispered, "Cocksucker," and fell on his face in the dirt, almost sobbing, as Mario let go of his arm. Haw could he? What got into him? It's like there was something inside him gets a kick out of hurting me.
Or is it really me he wants to hurt?
Mario was laughing out loud. The loose flaps of the tent, stirred by the light wind, let in a curious filtered sunlight, coming and going on the handsome, rakish face above him. Tommy squeezed his eyes shut. Why, why, why? Mario

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had been sporadically cruel before, but never with this concentrated, sadistic intensity.
Like that night we picked up the two girls. Something gets into him. Suddenly, in despair, remembering how this had started, he thought, I'd rather they'd come in and found us really doing it. At least that would've been honest!
"What's with you, big brother?" Johnny demanded. "I just heard the signal for spec. Come on, Tommy, get dressed— don't you know better than to get into fights just before a show?"
Shaken, Tommy got up. He took out the board which, spread between his trunk and Mario's, made the act's dressing table, and set up the mirror on it. His shoulder felt as if it had been beaten with a hammer. He moved it cautiously, then more freely. He sat down on his trunk and started to

take off his shoes. Mario went past him and Tommy hissed, "You son of a bitch!"
Mario sat down, glowering. He threw Tommy the muslin-wrapped bundle marked t. santelli, which contained his spec costume. Mario unrolled his own, took out the flowing robe he wore in the spec, and began to button it over his street clothes.
Johnny turned. "Hey, you better get into your tights, Matt, That won't leave you much time to change for the tumbling act."
Mario did not turn his head. "You worry about your own goddamn costume and let me worry about mine."
"Look, Matt, I only said—"
"Why don't you ride that fuckin' camel yourself, if you're so worried about it!" Mario snarled.
Johnny stripped off his pants, twisted the loincloth of his costume over his briefs, and began winding on his turban. "Okay, Signor Mario, but if they soak us all with a fine for missing a cue because you're not dressed, it's going to come out of your pay. Ready, Tom?"
As they were climbing into the top of the float, in the hurly-burly of assembling animals, floats, and scantily clad girls, Johnny muttered out of the side of his mouth, "What the hell was that all about anyway, Tom?"
Tommy, crooking an arm around the wobbly mast, muttered, for once too shaken for caution, "I guess he was just in a bad mood and needed somebody to take it out on."
Johnny whistled in dismay. "Damn it, Angelo's the only person I know could straighten Matt out when he goes off on one of these jags. But listen, Tom, you don't have to take that stuff. I'll put a flea in Signor Mario's ear myself."
Though his shoulder hurt and he felt bruised and despairing, Tommy was not ready for that. "I don't need you to fight my battles for me, Johnny."
"Lucky, you're only about half his size," Johnny said, with unusual gentleness, "and you have to live with the guy, Damned if I'll stand around and watch him beatin' up on you."
"Willya just lay off and mind your own business?"
Nettled, Johnny retorted, "Okay, you cocky little jerk. But don't you come cryin' to me if he breaks your neck sometime."

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In spite of himself Tommy laughed, and Johnny demanded, "What's so damn funny?"
"You and Mario," Tommy said. "Right out of the same mold. Two of a kind."
Johnny grinned. "Sure, I know that. Why you think we can't get along?"
But as the float lurched into motion along the hippodrome track, Tommy felt the laughter recede. He was both frightened and furious, his year-long security vanishing as if he had swung out and discovered the net was not in place. It made him think of a bad dream he had once had, and could not remember.
He was fighting to steady himself. Keep it off the platform. Whatever happens. However we fight. Mario had never done anything like this just before a show, and Tommy was wondering how he could possibly climb to the rigging as if nothing had happened. Their float lurched out of the entrance after making the circle around the three rings, and he dropped off, pulling his turban loose as he ran.
He had quieted a little by the time they ran into the end ring for the rumbling act. He turned handstands and vaulted, seizing Stella's wrists and balancing her on his hands, throwing her to Johnny's shoulders, wincing only a little as he wheeled over, the weight coming on his injured shoulder. When they were gathered in the dressing tent getting ready for the flying act, he felt the shaking quiet down into a curious, steady calm. Mario was strapping up his wrist, fiddling with the tape. Tommy walked over directly in front of him. He said in a clear, audible voice, "Here. Lace this up far me, will you?"
Mario bent over Tommy's wrist and fiddled with the leather strap on the wristguard. Suddenly he looked up and met Tammy's eyes. They glared at each other, hard, implacable, with an emotion so intense that Tommy did not know, for a moment, whether it was passion or hate. Simultaneously, they nodded at each other, and, without a word, they knew it was as if they had spoken their old pledge.
Keep it off the platform.
Quiet, impersonal. Mario got up and took Tommy's shoulder in his hands, moving the joint carefully back and forth. "It's all right," he said, and Tommy nodded.
It wasn't even a truce. It was simply a cessation of everything except, simply, being what they were. He still felt the

faint twinge of pain in his shoulder, but for the moment he had literally forgotten how he had gotten it; he was simply wondering how it would serve him during the act.
Johnny came and dropped the cape over Tommy's shoulders.
"Wayland," Mario called sharply, "you with us?"
"Right away." The man got to his feet, stumbling over his water bucket.
Tommy, watching him with narrowed eyes, thought, I still can't prove anything. He's a clumsy bastard on the ground, for all he's so good on the rigging.

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Stella joined them at the performers' entrance, like a small pert bird in her green cape. Johnny said quickly to Mario, as they separated for the catchers to go to their end of the rigging, "I arranged something with the bandmaster for Stella," and then they began climbing.

The duo routines between Mario and Tommy went off perfectly; they got off the bar together, and the old precision timing seemed to be working again. Tommy began to breathe more easily while the second catcher's trapeze was being pulled up out of the way, but Mario frowned, shading his eyes to watch the far end of the rigging. Normally Coe Wayland remained in the trap, but this time Johnny stayed there, and the ringmaster called out Stella's name. Mario started with amazement, but did not alter the smooth routine with which he stepped around her, passing the bar. According to the timing of the show, Mario usually told her which of the several tricks in the routine she should attempt, but when he spoke to her this time, she shook her head slightly.

"Johnny and I worked something out. Just watch the bar for the routine—don't drop it too soon," she said, and swung out. Swinging on the bar, she turned over it, spun into a fast somersault, made another quick half turn, and threw her outstretched ankles into Johnny's hands. She swung there, posturing, arms flung out. Then Mario, holding the bar ready to drop it, remained as if stopped in midair, for Johnny and Stella had begun, skimming back and forth on the long bar, a series of balance variations, taken—so Tommy realized— from their old double-trapeze routine. The crowd, braced for the tension of the return, hesitated, silent, then burst into spontaneous applause. Finally, at Johnny's signal, Mario dropped the bar and Stella made a return.

As she dropped off, Mario grasped her arms as if he were only supporting her arabesque pose, arms flung out for the

applause, but Tommy heard him hiss out of the side of his mouth, "You little bitch, what goes on here? Who told you to do that?"

"Johnny did," Stella said, smiling and waving at the audience as if no one had challenged her. "Take it up with him."

Mario was white with rage. "In this family," he said as the bandmaster swung into the drumroll that set the stage for the triple, "we arrange our tricks before we get on the platform, not afterward. Spring anything like that again, Stella cara, and I'll break your neck!"

"Johnny—"

"Johnny doesn't give the orders for this act."

Stella shrugged and said indifferently, "I take my orders from Johnny. You're on, Mario," she added, moving aside for him. Tommy realized that Johnny had left the catch trap and Coe Wayland had moved into place, was picking up his swing for the triple.

Tommy whispered, "Don't try it today, Mario. Do a double-and-twist—"

"Now are you going to start, damn it," Mario said impatiently.

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The ringmaster was already booming out, ". . . hand-to-hand triple somersault to the hands of his catcher—most dangerous of all aerial feats. Please remain quiet while Mario Santelli is in the air .. ."
Tommy gripped at the St. Michael's medal pinned inside his shirt as Mario, his body arched into a bow-taut line, swung out. He spun once, twice—Oh, God he's missed it again!—twisted, plunged, and struck the net heavily. There was the harsh, drawn gasp from the stands. Mario kept his composure, managing to smile, bow, and wave jauntily to the stands, but just as he was about to climb for the permitted second try, the ringmaster blew his whistle sharply and the Liberty-horse act pranced into the ring.
Tommy seized the trapeze, swung, and swan-dived, landing beside Mario in the net. Mario, his face white and drawn with fury, was staring at the ringmaster.
"What in the hell—"
"I signaled to blow the whistle," Coe Wayland said, urging them toward the back door, the performers' entrance. "I could see you weren't in any shape to do it, Matt."
Mario whirled on him and said, "Who in hell told you you could call the shots for this act? You goddamn drunken fool,

bitching up everything! Any beginner could swing higher and faster than that—"
"Easy, easy, Matt," Johnny said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You've missed triples plenty of times with Angelo in the trap; don't take it out on Wayland. Hurt?" He lifted Mario's elbow and said, "Jeez, you got another nasty burn on there. Come on, let's go get something on it, big brother."
Mario pushed him away. "And while we're talking about bitching up the act, who in hell told Stella to do a trick I hadn't okayed?"
Johnny shrugged. "I told her to try it out. There's room in this act for something special there."
"So now you're calling the tricks for the act?"
"Oh, for God's sake," said Johnny, completely out of patience, "why must every damn detail be the same every performance? It looked all right, didn't it?"
"No, it didn't!" Mario yelled. "That wasn't flying—that was a bastard single-trap show routine, and it had no more place in a straight flying act than a couple of clowns!"
"Balls!" Johnny said. "Looked fine to me, and the crowd cheered it, didn't they?"
Mario said coldly, "You know the rule in the Flying Santellis: No one does a trick in performance without clearing it first at rehearsal. I know Jock put you up to this, Stel, but just the same I'm going to ground you for three days, and if they sock us with a fine you pay it."
•"Now, wait a minute," Stella said.
"Who in hell gave you the authority—" Johnny began.
Tommy drew a deep breath and said, "Mario's the senior man in the act, Johnny, and you know it as well as I do. There's a right and a wrong way to get

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a new trick in the act, and you picked the wrong one." Yes, he thought, and •what a hell of a day you picked for it, with Mario on the rampage already!
"And for God's sake, do we have to air this right in the back door?"
"Yeah, they'll be hearing us out front," Coe Wayland said. "And come off your high horse, Matt. I okayed it."
"You keep out of this, Wayland," Mario rapped. "This is a family affair; don't you stick your nose in!"
Coe Wayland's manner never pleased Tommy much. But not even Papa Tony would have administered such a slap to anyone who was actually a member of the troupe, family or not. He had always yelled plenty at Tommy and Stella in re-

hearsal, but in performance he had always been scrupulously polite.
Wayland's mouth twisted. "Yes, boss," he muttered and walked off toward the dressing tent.
Johnny put a hand on Stella's shoulder. "Go get dressed, babe. Then come back and we'll settle this once and for all."
"It's settled," Mario said.
Johnny turned to face him. "Look, you been throwing your weight around like hell today, but it's time you got one thing straight, Matt. You can beat up on the kid if he feels like letting you, and I can take care of myself, as you'll find out if you ever lay a hand on me. But you listen, and listen good. I learned some lipreading with the carny, and if you shoot off your dirty mouth at Stella one more time, Matt, you'll be talking through a mouthful of loose teeth."
"Jock, what are you trying to prove? You want her to have the star spot? You want me to step down? You want to take over?"
"Oh, for Christ's sake, let's not have a lot of temperament!" Johnny turned his back. "I'm standing here in my sweaty clothes getting pneumonia, and the altitude's giving me a splitting headache. Let's not hash this all over here and now, okay?"
Tommy turned into the dressing tent. Coe Wayland, naked, was climbing into his trousers, and he gave Tommy a surly glare as he came in. Tommy stepped out of his tights and measured water from his bucket. As he started dipping his sponge into the icy water, he realized he was shaking and weak with reaction. He wished—oh, God, how he wished— they were in the privacy of a family trailer so that they could dress and bathe and talk—and, if necessary, fight—without two or three dozen other performers standing around, going in and out, changing clothes. Tommy did not look around as Mario came in, but when he had finished dressing he became aware that Mario had dropped down on his trunk, still in costume, and sat there without moving.
"Mario," he said quietly, leaning over him so the others would not hear, "is it going to help anything for you to sit here in your sweaty tights and catch cold? You told me, often enough."
Mario raised a drawn face and swore. "Will you let me alone, Tom—just for Christ's sake let me alone?" he shouted.
Tommy, shivering and furious, drew a sweater from his

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trunk, pulled it over his shirt and stormed off toward the cook tent. To hell with him! To hell with him, anyway!

Shortly before the evening performance, Johnny slammed down a newspaper, folded to an inside section, in front of Mario.

"Look at this, damn it! You think this kind of publicity's going to do us any good?"

Tommy leaned over to see, and read: CIRCUS BRAWL STOPS SHOW AT WOODS-WAYLAND.

"Listen to this," Johnny said in disgust. " 'Stormy Santellis fight while flying. Spectators seated near the performers' entrance at the Woods-Wayland Circus grounds this afternoon were treated to an earful when the well-known circus family started a fight on the aerial rigging. Angry words were exchanged, audible even in the stands, as glamorous female flyer Stella Gardner and the act's star, Mario Santelli, quarreled noisily. As a result of this wrangle, male star Mario missed his much-ballyhooed triple somersault and gave such a display of bad temper that the ringmaster blew the whistle on the act. When the troupe had exited, a wild row exploded just outside, which may or may not have come to blows, but certainly gave the audience an extra free show.' "

Mario slammed his hand on the paper. His small mirror turned over and slid to the floor. "Where did you get this garbage?" He turned to Coe Wayland, who was sitting in front of his trunk. "Did you peddle this yarn? I don't expect you to act like a Santelli, but you should have brains enough not to air our dirty linen in public!"

Wayland jerked up his head. "Aaah, quit your bitching! You think I got nothing to do but talk about you bastards? If you want to know, pretty boy, the whole town could hear you yelling. You act like I'm dirt under your feet, Mister Fancy Dan, but I've been trouping long enough to know better than to fight on the rig, and for all your great family tradition, mister, it looks like you don't!"

Mario shut up with a gulp as if Coe had slapped him— as, Tommy reflected soberly, he had.

"There's more," Johnny said in disgust. "Just listen. "The Santelli troupe has been rumored on the edge of a breakup since their manager, veteran circus performer Tonio Santelli, fell to his death in Cincinnati and their catcher quit in a squabble over management—' "

"Where did they get all this stuff?" Tommy asked.

Coe Wayland said, "It's .all over the lot. Somebody talked to a reporter, that's all. Most of the people with the show won't talk to townies, but there's always some roustabout or propman hard up for a buck, who'll spill anything." He looked angry and disgusted.

That night's performance was the worst in memory. In the tumbling act, Mario's timing was off so badly that before they left the ring Johnny was white and raging. In the dressing tent, skinning out of the black tights he wore in that act and getting into his green flying costume, he hissed over his

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shoulder to Mario, "You goddamn well better pull yourself together, Matt, before somebody gets hurt."
"I'll be okay, Jock. Lay off."
"You'll get us fired, you keep this up!"
"Then I'll get us fired. God damn it!"
"Listen," Johnny said, swinging around to face him, the anger sliding off his face, "Matt—fella—I don't know what's eatin' on you, big brother, but whatever it is, willya please take it easy till after the show, before somebody gets killed?" He hesitated, real worry in his voice. "The way you been acting—Matt, you want to lay off tonight? We'll cover for you, tell the boss you're sick."
Mario took a deep, shuddering breath. "I'll be okay. Just—just give me a minute, willya?"
"Suit yourself, confound it!" Johnny jerked his cape around his shoulders and muttered, "Stubborn bastard!" as he walked out.
Tommy went over to Mario. Whatever Mario had done, this kind of torture was more than he could take. Why does he do this to himself?
"Mario—" he said, but Mario shook off the imploring touch on his arm and left the tent without a backward glance.
Tommy stood, irresolute, in the little aisle between the trunks. Coe Wayland quickly slammed down the lid on his. "Go on, kid, get going," he said harshly. "I'll be along in plenty of time. You check up on the others—don't you try it on me."
Tommy moved outside but flattened himself against the sidewall, watching. When Wayland had gone out, Tommy slipped back into the tent. Outside, Mario drew himself up,

biting his lip, as Stella, dressed for the flying act, walked toward the men.
"Stel." he said. "I said you're off for three days, and I meant it. You're not going on with us tonight."
"Oh, yes, she is," Johnny said, "or I'm not."
"That's the stuff," Wayland said, laying his meaty hand on Johnny's shoulder. "You tell him—fella's got to look after his own wife. You talk back to sissy-face here. What the hell does he care? Pretty girls, that's what the crowd wants. I'd rather catch a pretty girl any day than Fancy Dan here!" He gave Mario an insulting stare. Mario ignored him.
"Jock, if Stel goes on, I'm not."
"Suit yourself and get fired, Matt. You are the star flyer, but you are not managing the damn act, and don't you try!"
"I am the senior man in the act," Mario said icily, "and the senior flyer always has the authority—"
"Oh, nuts!" Johnny cut in. "Who says? That was all over the day Angelo quit the act, and you can damn well stop trying to throw your weight around."
"Come on, you two," said Wayland genially, "take it easy, we got a cue coming up. After the show we can all go talk to the boss and straighten out who's bossing the damn act. Of course, if pretty boy here gets jealous because the crowd thinks Stella's prettier than he is—"

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"Shut up," said Mario, tensely, and even Wayland seemed to realize that he had gone too far this time. "You're drunk, damn you!"
Tommy had been standing a little way off, just inside the tent, listening. He stepped out and said, "I found it this time. On his dressing table. Smell it." He handed Mario a tooth-glass which still held a few amber drops. Mario sniffed and stared at Wayland, appalled.
"You drunken bum!"
Johnny took the glass and said in angry disgust, "So that's how you warm up for the show! I didn't believe it when they told me!"
"Easy, fellas," Coe Wayland said, rocking back on his heels and smiling. Even in this confusion it struck Tommy that he was handsome, standing there, strongly muscled, good-looking in tights, his ruddy face flushed with that affable smile. In his own way he had the same grace as Johnny and Mario. At this most inappropriate of moments the thought flashed through Tommy's head—A lot of the

best flying is sublimated homosexuality—and he cut to off, in horror.
"Look, Matt," Wayland said, "I been in this business a long time, I know what I can handle. I work better with a couple of shots inside me. It relaxes me. Trust me. Hell, I been doing it all season, you ought to know by now that I can handle it."
Johnny and Mario looked at one another, their personal quarrel forgotten. Johnny said, "Listen, this is nothing to mess around with. Go back to the tent, Wayland. We'll cover for you with the boss tonight, but this is the end. Nobody who drinks goes on with us. Right, Matt?"
"Right," Mario said.
Johnny took charge. "Look, we'll skin the duo routines tonight. Stella, scoot and tell one of the girls to slip the word to the bandmaster." Even now Tommy had to admire Johnny's talent for quick thinking in any crisis. "Listen, Matt, you and Tommy start with two crosses apiece—say a plange and a half twist for him, and you do a forward flyover and return pirouette and then a back double. Then let Stel do her fancy passes, the ones she did today, and you and Tom finish up with the midair pass—we're all too shook for the triple. Got it?"
"Sure," Mario said quickly. "Got it, Tom?" Quickly he ran through the list again. The band crashed into their entrance music, and the brothers stretched out their hands and shook quickly.
"Okay, big brother, forget it," Johnny said.
Coe Wayland was standing, arms akimbo, surveying them. He grinned wickedly. "Ain't you fellas forgetting something? Think you can keep me off that rig? After all that ruckus today, all you folks need is another row, and your name is going to be mud."
"Use your head, Coe," Johnny said. "Go sleep it off or something. We'll talk about it tomorrow. We're on!"
Coe turned on them, raging. "You know-it-all bastards think you can keep me off that rig?" He forced his way between Mario and Johnny. ""I'm going on, unless you want a fight right out in Center Ring! Think you can stop me, Fancy Dan?"

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Mario's face paled. Without warning he drew back his hand and chopped hard at Coe Wayland's neck. The man gave one startled grunt and fell.
"Whew!" Johnny whistled,

but he caught the sagging form and shoved him at a startled workhand while the ring announcer blared out:
"And in the Cen-ter Ring—Lay-deez and—Gen-tle-men —The Flying Santellis!"
. .
"Andiamo," said Johnny with a devilish grin, and tucked his arm into Mario's, Mario held out his free arm to Tommy, and, three abreast, they walked into the center spotlight, pausing there for Stella to join them as she came from the bandstand. Tommy, his hand tucked through Mario's arm, realized that whatever had done it—the need to lock ranks against the outsider—Mario was himself again.
Alone in their compartment, hours later, Mario sat in-the lower berth, his head in his hands. He looked pale and ravaged, but he raised his head and broke into shaky laughter as Tommy came in from the corridor.
"Did Coe Wayland get on the train okay?"
"Sure," said Tommy, "but he's sore as a rogue elephant on a rampage. Jeez, Mario, he's all set to murder somebody!"
Mario gave a wry, short laugh. "First he'd have to admit he was drunk as a skunk, and I can't see him doing that. Hasn't this just been one hell of a day?" He stood up, put his hands on Tommy's shoulders-, and gently turned him around. "Lucky . .." he said, pleading.
Tommy pushed him away. "You go to hell. What do you think I'm made of, anyway?"
"You want me to get on my knees to you?" Mario seized him by the shoulders, and Tommy flinched, afraid of the violence in voice and hands. Mario saw it, and let him go. He muttered something in Italian, slumping into his bunk.
Tommy said, shaking, "This year we've been getting away with murder. I thought we had it pretty good. And then you start that stuff up in the dressing top—and damn near break my shoulder—" Afraid he would cry with the remembered humiliation and pain, he turned away: "Sometimes I think you must be crazy!"
"I act like it, don't I? Lucky, does it help to know I'm so ashamed I could die?" It didn't. If anything, it made it worse. "You always are," Tommy said, without turning around. Then he begged, his voice cracking, "Mario, what are we going to do about it? Have we just been getting on each other's nerves? You want to split up a while, bunk with somebody else?"

"No!" Mario said in a hoarse, terrible voice, and pulled Tommy into a violent embrace. They stood close together in the swaying compartment, strained and immobile, and it flashed through Tommy's mind that an explosion of violence was almost a relief from the agony of so much emotion. Then, without warning, the tension went out of Mario's face and he leaned forward and laid his mouth against Tommy's.

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"Next time, damn it, you kick my teeth in first, before I get in that state." He looked exhausted, but the inhuman misery was gone.
When he says, "Leave me alone," he's begging me for help, and I didn't have the brains to know it.
Mario turned him gently around. "How's the shoulder?"
"Sore as hell."
"You better let me rub out the kinks. Or you want me to ask Johnny to come in and work it over?"
Tommy shook his head. Johnny sees too much. He pulled off his shirt and lay down in Mario's bunk. Mario, sitting down beside him, began massaging the sore muscles, his hands impersonal and hard.
"That better?"
"Yeah, fine now."
Mario went on rubbing the muscle; gradually, the touch merged into a caress. Then he took Tommy's shoulders between his hands and gently turned him over. Smiling, he bent over him.
"We got some unfinished business," he murmured, "something we started in Lawton, Oklahoma—remember? And we're not in the dressing tent now." He was in the bunk now, stretched full length, his body covering Tommy, his hands resting on the pillow on either side of Tommy's head. At that moment Tommy felt that all the pain and despair of the day, all the misery and the humiliation, were worth it for moments like this. Mario's lips closed slowly over his, and Tommy shut his eyes, giving way to it.
Then, frozen, aghast, Mario jerked his head up, staring white-faced at the open door of the compartment.
"Don't let me interrupt anything," Coe Wayland said. Tommy thought he had never seen such naked hate on a human face. "You bastards, I came here to crawl if I had to, beg you for another chance. You been going around like I was dirt under your feet, you rotten queers. Yeah, Fancy Dan here and his lover-boy, I came to beg you on my knees,

to take the pledge. I got out of line, and I was going to come and apologize. But I see you're too busy!"
The compartment door slammed. Tommy, who had fallen weakly against the wall, too stunned and shocked even to take in fully what had happened, heard Mario break into bitter, ringing laughter.
"In the words of a very famous clown," Mario said at last, his voice only a ragged thread of exhaustion, " 'La commedia e finita'!"
The train rattled and swayed beneath them. Mario, still gasping exhausted, hysterical laughter, lurched to slide the bolt shut on the door. "Talk about locking stable doors after the horse—come here, piccino. Come on—"
"Look, Mario—" Tommy knelt beside him, frightened.
"Oh, hell, come on, what difference does it make now?" Mario said, with that terrible bitter laugh. "As far as we're concerned, the season's over. Wait and see."
He reached up and his arms closed around Tommy's neck with a strangling grip. Tommy, letting Mario pull him down, sensing the desperation of the lost

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behind the laughter, wondered suddenly if this—this very disaster, this very exposure—was what Mario had been courting through the whole dreadful day.

Intermission
1947-1952

CHAPTER I
March 1947

the winter quarters of the Starr Circus had not changed. There was the same familiar disorder of rehearsal tops, tractors, power lines snaking everywhere, animals being led across the lot, and the curious empty look of any circus when there is not actually a performance going on: a look of being simultaneously deserted and jammed with mysterious hidden life somewhere behind the scenes.

Mario walked slowly across the trampled dry grass toward the aerialists' rehearsal top where, just a year ago, they had auditioned for the Fortunatis. Just under the billowing flap, a thickset man looked out and called, "Be right with you!" "Hello, Lionel." They shook hands.

"Come on up to the office." Lionel led the way through the tent and toward a small boxlike wagon, painted red. Inside there were a couple of crowded desks, two huge filing cabinets, a safe in the corner, and a couple of straight chairs. Lionel pulled out one of the chairs and motioned Mario to the other.

"How's it going? How's the family?"

"About as usual. How is Cleo?"

Lionel frowned slightly. "She's walking again without crutches, and that's miracle enough for us all. She's finished flying, of course. Between ourselves, and not meaning any thing ungallant, Cleo's not so young anymore. Though, heaven knows, she doesn't look a day older than she did when I started catching for her and Jim."

Mario asked, "How's she taking it, Lionel?"

Lionel glanced away. "She doesn't say much. She's coaching a couple of the girls from the show, and she seems to enjoy it. But you never can tell. Well, Matt, what have you all been doing this winter?"

"You know we left Woods-Wayland before the season ended—"

"Yeah, I heard."

"Along in October, we all went down to Mexico—Angelo was managing" a show down there for a couple of months."

"Has he really quit flying, Matt?"

"He says so, and he hasn't worked out this spring at all. He was working for a while for a Mexican film company, as a—a—damn, I can't think of the name for it—the guy who keeps all the horses in order while the stuntmen are falling on and off them. Anyhow, the horse boss. Then, after New Year's, my brother Johnny and his wife went to the East Coast for a spring tour with a group that plays fairs, auditoriums, and so forth, and Tommy and I went to

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San Francisco for a couple of weeks to see if we could get work with some group Clint Redmann's sending out. We got an offer from Freres and Stratton, but we haven't come down that low. Not yet."
"I should hope not!" Lionel said. "But you're still looking for a summer booking? Look, the reason I called you down here wasn't just to ask about the family. Now that both Cleo and Jim are through flying, I'm looking for a steady partner. And I saw you last year."
Mario nodded thoughtfully. "You know the shape the Santellis are in. Tommy and I can't carry it alone. We don't even have a steady catcher. We thought, for a while, we could team up with Johnny and Stella, but they decided to work on their own this year."
Lionel leaned his chin on his big hands, reflectively. "I know what your work is like, of course. We wanted you last year. But there's a hitch. The kid, Tommy. What about him?"
Mario shrugged. "You saw him work last year, and he's getting better all the time. We've spent three years developing those duo routines we do. We're a team. We'll give you top billing if you want it—Lionel Fortunati and the Flying Santellis—but we go together, Tom and me."
Lionel shook his head. "I'm sorry, Matt. Can't be done."
"What's wrong with it? The standard act is two flyers and a catcher—"
Lionel put his hands on the desk and straightened up.
."Matt. No offense, but I've got to say it. Grapevine has it that you spent those three years—how am I going to say this?—teaching the kid some duo routines you couldn't do in public. Know what I mean? I mean, I heard why they fired you from Woods-Wayland."
Mario did not move, but there was a quick wariness in his eyes. "They fired me from Woods-Wayland because I

socked the boss's brother when I caught him drunk in the ring."
"Go ahead. You tell it your way."
"First I'd like to know which version of the story you heard. I've heard it four different ways this winter."
Lionel looked uneasily at the grilles on the window. "Way I heard it, you beat hell out of Coe Wayland because he walked into your compartment on the train without knocking, and found you and the kid in there—and you weren't playing double solitaire."
Mario locked his fingers together, struggling for composure. "Papa Tony wouldn't have let Coe Wayland on a swinging ladder. He was a rotten catcher, and he was a drunk. Everybody with the show knew it and nobody could prove it, but one day Tommy caught him swilling down whiskey five minutes before we went on the rig. He got rambunctious and insisted on going on with us anyhow, so I decked him and put him down for the count. So we got on his shit list, and he snooped around listening at doors till he thought he had something on us. The next day he came around and tried to blackmail me into putting him back in the act. Instead I socked him on the chin and knocked out a couple of his teeth and told him to go peddle his goddamn dirt. So he went and peddled it to the boss, and I was out of a job."

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"But he did actually have something on you?"
"Lionel, I only go to confession on Good Friday."
Lionel chuckled, then, abruptly, sobered. "If you—you personally, Matt—will give me your word of honor that Coe Wayland was just peddling smutty lies to get even with you, I'll do my best to kill the story."
"I don't know what kind of dirt Wayland's been spreading," Mario said bleakly. "Like I said, I heard four different versions so far this year, and God knows how many others are floating around on the grapevine. I can't chase them all down and deny all of them. Hell, you know the grapevine had it Cleo broke her back, not just a couple of bones in her hip."
Lionel sighed. "Matt," he said, "I'm almost twice your age. I've been around. I don't shock easy. But let me give you some advice, as an old friend. You and the kid ought to split up before that story gets hung around your neck for good and you can't get rid of it. Each of you, find yourselves

new partners. I'll take you on, and we'll find another flyer or two—maybe a girl."
"Maybe you'd like me to marry one, and hush the story up for good?" Mario said, and his slanting eyebrows flared in disdain.
"Well, that couldn't hurt," Lionel said.
"And just ditch the kid? The hell with that, Lionel. Tom and I are a team."
"Not with me you're not. I won't take the two of you, that's out. Look, I got nothing against the kid—what was his name? Zane? As I remember, he was a nice youngster, and Jim said he was the most promising kid he'd seen in years."
"He is. You know he's going to be damn good. You know enough about flying to know that, Lionel."
"But not with a story like that dogging him all his life."
Mario knotted his fingers together. Finally he said, "Let's suppose, just for a minute, that Coe made up the whole story out of that filthy sewer he calls his mind. That whatever he said he saw, never happened. Look at it from my side, and Tom's. I taught the kid to fly when he was just a little chap. We took him right into the family. Lucia, Angelo—they think the world of him. Now, wouldn't it be a dirty trick to ditch him after all these years because Wayland likes to peddle filthy talk? If we break up now, wouldn't it be damn near admitting the story is true, and getting it hung around his neck anyway?"
"You've got a point," Lionel admitted, and stood up.
"On the line, Matt? No offense? This wasn't the first time I heard this particular story." Mario started to speak, and Lionel gestured. "Let me finish,, huh? Matt, your private morals are none of my business. I'm no small-town prig. But I'm no crusader, either. I've got two things to make a living with: a set of freak reflexes and the Fortunati name—and the the prestige that goes with it. And I'm not going to risk that by tying it up with a couple of—" He hesitated, searching for a way to say it without giving offense.
"The word you're looking for is queers," Mario said, with an ironic curl of his lip, and Lionel shook his head, distressed.

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"With a couple of kids who got themselves blacklisted by what must have been some awful damn foolishness, whether or not Wayland saw what it was he says he saw. So maybe you and the kid were practicing judo holds or washing each

other's backs—I couldn't care less. What bothers me is that you couldn't be bothered to protect your reputation, and the Santelli family name. That you left yourself wide open for Wayland to spread such a story in the first place. Got blacklisted."

Mario dropped his face in his hands. Lionel had put his finger on his own guilt. "Is that straight, Lionel? Blacklisted?"

Lionel nodded. "The word's gone out. Look, I'm willing to help you fight it, Matt, even if it's just for Uncle Tony's sake. I loved the old guy. But you've got to do something to help, too. If you ditch the kid now, we can probably kill it before it goes any further. But if you two insist on sticking together—hell, you know as well as I do. Wayland has a damn big mouth, and if you two are still together by the time he's used it for a year or so, the name Santelli is going to stink from here to Sarasota."

He added urgently, "Think of the kid, too. He's a nice youngster. You want to kill off his career before it even starts? I've got a boy myself, about that age."

Mario's mouth twisted. "And you're willing to expose your son to my supposed depravity?"

Lionel started to laugh, but it didn't come out that way.

"Don't be like that, Matt. You're decent—nobody Tony raised could be anything else. But if you're fond of the kid, if you care what happens to him, you owe it to him to split up, give him a chance to get clear of the blacklist, too."

"You're assuming everybody would treat the story the way Woody did."

"A lot would, Matt. Starr's would, but I could talk Randy into taking a chance on you. And if you ditch the kid now, everybody will just assume Wayland is a liar with a mind as dirty as his mouth."

Mario looked at Lionel, and for a moment his face was completely naked. "I—I promised the kid I'd stand by him. He trusts me."

Lionel sounded as troubled as his young cousin. "Be reasonable, Matt. I couldn't sign the kid anyway; Starr's policy is real tight: nobody under twenty-one in an aerial act. If the kid cares a damn what happens to you, he won't want to hold you back. Matt, go home, talk to the boy, try and make him understand you're doing what's best for both of you. I want you with me, I need a steady partner; I can't stand to see you wreck your life this way. And for Uncle Tony's sake, I

want to see the Santelli name come out of this without too much mud sticking to it."

Mario sat perfectly still for -several minutes. Behind the impassive face he maintained, he could hear another voice, forever silenced now:

Promise me something, Matty. Promise me not to get drunk again, not to get in trouble, because this hurts all of us, all the family. He had not been drunk,

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this time, but he might as well have been. He had brought all this on himself, driven by some lashing agony beyond his own comprehension; he had flung away all their careful structure of caution.
"Think it over, Matt," Lionel urged. He was watching the younger man with something painfully akin to pity. "Talk it over with the kid. Call me in a day or two. But don't wait too long. Randy wants to have all the acts signed by April first, and we ought to work together a while if you're going to put the triple in the act this year."
But Mario was seeing something else. Tommy, humiliated, his face in the dirt of the dressing tent, whispering the filthy word that betrayed everything that had been between them. Violated. Worse than whatever anyone might have said about seducing him in the first place.
And I could do that to him!
"Wait," he said, suddenly, raising his head to Lionel, "I don't need to think it over at all."

CHAPTER 2

the stairs of the rooming house were dark and cluttered. Tommy fumbled for his key, shoved a garbage bag aside with his foot, then rapped on the door.
"It's not locked," Mario called from inside. "Come in."
Inside it was tidy and bare, coffee cups still cluttered on the table from the late breakfast. Outside the day was fading, but Mario had not turned on the light.
"You got back early," Tommy said, pulling the string on the light fixture. "I didn't expect you till late tonight, but I saw the car outside."
"Did you call the house this morning?"
"Talked to Lucia. Sure, I told her you drove down to win-

ter quarters to talk to Lionel about a job this spring—that was okay, wasn't it? She wanted us to come out to the house for dinner, and I said I'd have to see if you had anything set up." He hung his jacket in the narrow closet. "I ran into Keno in the coffee shop. He gave me a ride home."
"What did he have to say?"
"Nothing much. Asked why you hadn't been around. All the usual stuff. Oh, he talked a lot, but he didn't say anything, you know what I mean."
"Why didn't he come in, say hello?"
"I wasn't sure you were home," Tommy said, "and he and I got nothing to say to each other."
"You don't like Eddie, do you?"
"He's okay. I like him better than most of that crew of phonies hanging around the place," Tommy said. "At least he doesn't try to make me."
"You get your sneakers?"
"Uh huh. Paid three-fifty for them—that okay?"
"Sure, if they fit you okay. You get black or blue ones?"
"Black." Tommy stuck his foot out. "Same size as the last two pairs I got. I guess I've really quit growing."
"Good thing, too; you're tall enough for a flyer," Mario said. "Listen, that crowd down there really been giving you trouble, Tommy?"

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"Hell, no, I can handle myself."
"I told you what you'd get into if you hung around with me."
Tommy swung around and said, "I can take care of myself. Anyhow, they know when I say no thanks, I mean no thanks. But your friends don't like me much and I don't like them much, and I think the smartest thing you ever did was lay off running all over town with that crew of—of—"
"Why are you so afraid of the word, Tommy?"
Tommy said harshly, "Okay, queers, if you want me to say it. If you get some kind of kick out of hearing me say it."
"I just don't want you kidding yourself. If you don't mind being"—he used the word again, deliberately—"queer, then I don't want you kidding either of us by being scared to say it. Or admit it."
Tommy stood with his hands on his hips, belligerent. "Okay, okay, dammit, I'm queer. But I don't have any more in common with those bastards than you do."

"I've got more than you think, Tommy."
"Well, I don't. Except," he added scrupulously, "that we all happen to be queer. And I'm not making a career of it the way they are."
"You're pretty intolerant, aren't you, kid?"
"Yeah, people who live in glass houses shouldn't go around heaving rocks and all that stuff. Sure, I'm queer, but that's my private life and I don't go around shoving it in everybody's face, either."
Mario swung his legs to the floor and sat up. "Maybe they can't help being what they are, any more than we can help being what we are."
"You'd think they could try," Tommy said, with the intolerance of the very young. "And I get sick of watching them make passes at every new boy comes around, too."
Mario laughed and put an arm around him. "Your own fault, kid. You shouldn't be so damn good-looking. Sexy freckles and all that."
Tommy chuckled. "Lay off the crap, okay? Tell me how it went with Lionel." Then, as the laughter slid off Mario's face, he said quickly, "Bad, huh?"
Mario sat down on the edge of the bed. "I've been putting it off. Come and sit here by me, Lucky." After a minute Mario said, "Here's the thing, kid. Lionel made me an offer —a damn good one. But he won't take us as a team."
"Jesus, that again?" He was, of course, expecting Mario to repeat what he had said last year: that they went as a team, a family, the Flying Santellis, or not at all.
But Mario was silent for a long time, and then said, "Look, Tom, I could string you along, tell you it's because Starr's has this policy about nobody under twenty-one in the air. But it's more than that."
"Hell, Starr's isn't the only show on the road!"
Mario filled his lungs with air, then let it out again in a long breath. "They just might be, at that, as far as we're concerned. Tom, I found out why Sorenson dropped us after just one week, and why we couldn't even get in to see Clint Redmann, and why Braden told us he didn't have any spots and then signed the Russos the next week. Kid—" He hesitated again, not knowing how to say

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it, knowing it was his fault and not Tommy's at all, sick with the enormous weight of guilt. "Kid, did you know we're blacklisted?"
"Blacklisted? What for?"

"Use your head." Mario's voice was harsh. "Coe Wayland talked."
"Oh, murder," Tommy said in a whisper. "Murder." "Yeah, murder. And—listen, Tom—" Mario took his hand, and held it, hard. "Suicide, as long as we stick together. Lionel laid it on the line for me. He'll try to fight the blacklist for me, and at your age, nobody's going to give a damn. I wanted to tell Lionel to go piss up a rope. But if that's how things stand, we're washed up, and you know it —washed up as a team. We just might get by, in a family act. But there's no family act anymore. Lionel's sticking his neck way, way out for me. I'm going to have to take second billing as it is—Fortunati and Santelli, maybe even Flying Fortunatis—for a year or two, if Starr is still itchy about the blacklist. There's no way we can fight it, kid. No way. Not together."
Tommy shut his eyes for a moment. He looked younger than he was, vulnerable, and, to Mario, painfully like the child he had first known. Then he got up off the bed, pulling his hand away from Mario's, and stood at the window, looking down at the crumbling houses across the street. Mario went after him, but Tommy threw off his hand.
"You an' your big talk! About how we'd stick together no matter what!"
"I didn't know about the blacklist then, Lucky." "You want to get rid of me, why the hell didn't you say so? Why give me the big con job? Just come right out and say you got yourself another boy!"
"For God's sake," Mario said. "You don't think Lionel—" Tommy swallowed.
"Might be a relief for you at that," he said. "Play it nice and safe. Get yourself a partner you don't have to worry about!"
Mario shut his eyes. "That's a hell of a long way below the belt, kid."
"You think what you just said wasn't?"
"Oh, Christ," Mario said, and sagged on the bed again.
"You think I don't know how you feel? You think I don't realize—kid, I know you could have saved yourself with Woods-Wayland, real easy. All you had to do was go to Coe Wayland and tell the boss you didn't have the faintest notion what I was trying to do with you, and you'd have been lily-white and I'd have been up to my neck in mud. You could even have had me put in jail."

"What the hell do you think I am?"
"You're my kid," said Mario, trying to smile at him.
"And a lot of good it did me!" Tommy flung at him. "But when I thought we could stick together, I—I didn't care. Only now—" That was all he could say.
"All you can talk about is the goddamn blacklist—"
Mario's voice suddenly went hard. "Damn it, Tom, let's stop playing games. There's just one way we can beat this thing. But if you want to rub it in that you lost your job by sticking by me, and now I've got to turn around and stick by you—"

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"Look—Mario—I didn't say—"
"You shut up," Mario said roughly. "I'm telling you what chance we've got to beat this thing. I can go with Lionel, and we find you something else. The other—no, damn it, you listen; you had your say and now it's my turn—I'll do. it if you say so. We change our names, walk out on the family, and hide out in some dirty little mud show down South, the kind that'll hire any lamster they can get, playing to hear the band and driving trucks and taking tickets on the midway between shows. Maybe you think you could take that, after flying in center ring with the Santellis, but I don't. But I'll do it if you rub it in that I have to stick with you. Because that's the only goddamn way we can stick together."
Tommy put his head down on his folded arms and leaned against the cold glass of the window while Mario went on behind him, his voice harsh with pain: "If we stick together, we'll end up by quitting flying for good, because the only places that can ignore the blacklist and hire us as a team will be shows too small to carry a flying act. Lionel's got a big enough name to fight the blacklist, and he's doing it—not for me, just because it's his family, too. And—I don't know about you, kid—I want to fly."
He reached a hand toward the boy, but at the look on Tommy's face he dropped it again. When Tommy finally spoke, his voice was dull and toneless.
"Okay, Mario. I see what you mean. There's nothing else you can do."
"I feel like I'm knifing you in the back, kid. But, honest to God, I don't see what else we can do. And it won't be long. One, two seasons—just till the talk dies down. Now, doesn't it make sense?"

"Sure," Tommy said, still in that dead voice, "makes a lot of sense."
"I'll see that you don't lose anything by it. They're paying me as much as the whole team got with Woods-Wayland—"
"If you offer me money, Mario, I'll kill you," Tommy said without raising his voice.
"It's always been share and share alike with the Santellis, as far as I'm concerned."
"But I'm no Santelli. Johnny warned me a long time ago that I shouldn't forget that. Anyhow, you just got through saying the Santellis. are all washed up. Okay, tell Lionel he's got himself a boy."
He went to the closet and dragged out his battered suitcase. While Mario watched, stunned, he began folding his clothes into it. Mario finally demanded, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"
"Packing. In case it's any of your business. Which it ain't, anymore."
"Have you gone crazy?" Mario grabbed and shook him. "Are you walking out on me?"
"That's a good one," Tommy said with a bitter grin. "Listen, take your hands off me. I mean it. Let's not end this up with a big fight."
"Fight?"
"I mean, like a couple of loose teeth." Tommy knocked him away. "I mean it, damn it, take your hands off me. Unless"—his mouth twisted—"unless it

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would give you some kind of kick to break my arm or put my shoulder out of joint as a kind of good-bye present."
Mario let him go and collapsed on the bed. "I guess I deserve all that. But will you tell me what else you think I could've done?"
"Not a damn thing." Tommy jerked open a drawer and started to sort out a tangle of tights. "I don't know which of these are mine—I'll just take the first two pairs I can get untangled, okay?"
"Take anything you want, Lucky. But you don't have to walk out like this. Can't we talk?"
"What's to talk about? You said how it had to be."
"Look, I'll ask Lionel to find you something—"
"Don't do my any favors."
"Maybe it would be a good idea for you to go home for

a while. Lucia never did like you to stay out here with me. Angelo knows everybody in the business—"
"Will you cut out that crap? Home? Who are you kidding?"
"It is your home, Lucky. You know that as well as I do. Angelo thinks the world of you. He'll break his neck to get you a good spot for the season. Just ask him."
"And have him gloating because we split up? Fat chance!" Tommy slammed the drawer shut, threw a pair of sneakers in the top of the suitcase, and began to fasten it.
"Lucky—" Mario begged, "look at me. Won't you sit down and listen to me, have a drink, just talk about it?"
"For Christ's sake!" Tommy yelled, and to Mario it sounded like a shriek, like the shriek when Mario had slammed the door on his hand. "How much more of this do you think I can take?"
Mario fell back on the bed and put his face in his hands. He said between them, "Someday you'll thank me for this, Tom."
"Anyway, you'd like to think so." Tommy snapped the suitcase lock shut and shoved his arms into his denim jacket. He gave the room a single cold, clinical glance. "Well—see you around, I guess, sometime."
"Tom—you're not going, just like that?"
"You taught me not to have much use for tender farewells."
Mario got up and said, "Tom, promise me you'll—"
"Hell with that!" Tommy said. "No goddamn promises. I wouldn't keep them any better than you did."
"You bullheaded brat!" Mario's voice broke. "You're doing this on purpose. I tried to explain why it had to be this way." His voice wobbled, then broke in anguish. "At least tell me what you're going— Don't make me— Dammit, Tommy, you're still—still my kid."
At the edge of endurance, Tommy said, "Listen, you. You told me once—you said it was for my own good—you couldn't take my falls for me. So who's asking you to? Let's make it quick and clean. No slush. No postmortems. And for Christ's sake, no kisses an' tears!"
"Christ! You use a knife, don't you?"

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"Got to. Not big enough to break your arm."
"You really want it this way?"

"What the hell does it matter what I want? It's the only way I can take it."
Mario said at last, "All right. Have it your own way." He pulled out his wallet.
"I said don't offer me money, Mario, or I'll kill you."
"I'm not going to let you walk out of here without a god-damn cent in your pocket. I got a job. You can't even draw your back pay," Mario said, and Tommy finally shrugged.
"You want me off your conscience, too? Do what you damn please. You will anyway."
Mario handed him several bills, not counting them, and Tommy stuffed them into his jeans without looking at them. Hesitantly, Mario held out his hand. Tommy put down the suitcase and they clasped four hands for a moment, neither daring to speak or look at the other. Mario finally muttered, releasing Tommy from an invisible cord, "So long, Lucky."
"Mostly bad luck, I guess." Their hands fell apart; Tommy hoisted the suitcase and went out of the room and down the stairs.
Mario sat on the bed, his hands over his face, holding himself where he was only by the iron discipline of years. It had been all he could do to keep from grabbing the kid in the old, anguished embrace, promising—promising what?
No goddamn promises. I wouldn't keep them any better than you did.
No, it's better this way. Let the kid go. He'll hurt for a •while, but everything you said is right, and he knows it.
He went to the window and stood there. He watched Tommy come out the house door, stand motionless for a moment, then walk away down the street without looking back.
He was heading toward the bus stop. He'll go home. He'll sit around and sulk for a while, then he'll go up to the house, and they'll look after him. Angelo will take good care of him, especially if he knows I'm out of the picture. I'll give him a few days to get over it. The family are all going to be on his side; he won't have any trouble getting a good booking for this season ...
This season. He tried to imagine a season without Tommy and found he could not manage it. Lionel had asked him to report to winter quarters next week, so he'd have to turn the place over to Eddie Keno again.
Once he's over his mad, he'll want to know all about it.

Yet it might be best to go without seeing Tommy again, without another scene, another fight, . . .
Though he closed his eyes, all he could see was Tommy's freckled face, turned cold and hostile, quivering with the tears he was too angry to shed.
Vulnerable, suddenly adult, withdrawn. He turned deliberately back into the room, letting the window curtain fall, fighting the shocking premonition that he would never see Tommy again.

BOOK TWO
The Catcher

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1952-1953

CHAPTER 1

the amusement park was big and garish, calliope music from the carousel drifting in gusts through the crowd like the hot wind. Tommy Zane moved through the midway crowd, through tired mothers pulling along whining children, sailors on leave in pairs or threes or arm in arm with some young girl with short skirts and tightly curled hair. His experienced eyes picked out the undistinguished small shack where he knew he could get his questions answered.

"Is Joe Santelli anywhere around?"

Sharp eyes rested on him. "He might be. What you want with him?"

Tommy was used to this, the suspicion of the outsider. "I used to work with his family. He asked me to look him up when I got out of the Army."

"You been out long?"

"Couple of months. I been on the East Coast."

The man turned and shouted, "Hey, Giuseppe! There's a guy out here asking for you!"

After a minute Joe Santelli appeared at the back of the shack, short, stout, wearing a striped shirt with sleeves rolled to his elbows, his white hair curling all over his head. He looks like Papa Tony.

"Joe? You remember me?"

Joe Santelli stared, blinked, then thrust out his hand. He grinned. 'Tommy! Good to see you, kid! Where the heck you been, anyway? Army? Navy?"

"Army," Tommy said. "I spent a couple, three years in Germany. How's everything?"

"Fine—sure, fine," Joe said. "Hey, I was just going to knock off a while and eat. You want some chow?"

"Okay, sure, thanks."

Over trays of fried shrimp and French fries loaded with ketchup, they sat at a table in front of the shack and ate. Joe suddenly exploded, through the noise of the calliope, "Where the hell did you disappear to, kid? We like to went crazy, all of us, worrying about you! Angelo was damn near out of his mind!"

Tommy stared at the ketchup soaking his plate. "Matt and I had a fight. I walked out, worked a carny to the East Coast, and then joined up—I knew the draft board would get me sooner or later anyhow. I did put Angelo down as my guardian, only I guess they never checked."

"We did get some kind of notice," Joe said, "only that was later. It was Matt I was worried about. He told us you had a fight because Lionel wouldn't sign you on with Starr's. I never saw him in such a state, not even the time Papa Tony had to go and bail him out of jail for something he done when he was a kid. He came up to the house wanting to talk to you—that was the night we found out about it—and Lucia said she hadn't seen you in a week, she figured you were still with Matt down at his place. And when Matt said you'd had a fight and walked out and he hadn't seen you in days—then the shit really hit the fan, kid. Nobody at the house had seen you. We reported you to Missing

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Persons, but they said that you were old enough nobody could find you unless you wanted to be found, that millions of teenage kids drop out of sight every year. We checked the police and the hospitals all over the city, but then there wasn't anything else we could do. That was a hell of a thing to do to the folks, Tommy. Lucia like to went crazy."
Tommy picked up a fried shrimp by the tail and fiddled with it, dipping it into the ketchup, staring at it reflectively, dipping it again, finally dropping it back on the paper plate, untouched. He said, "Yeah, I know. I'm not very proud of that, I was a dumb little snot of a kid."
"Well, hell, we blamed ourselves, letting you hang around with Matt," Joe said. "Nobody outside the family ought to have to put up with that lousy temper of his. Only you two always did get along so good. And then something like that blowing up. Angelo, especially. He blamed himself. He took it real serious, being your guardian and all that."
"I know," Tommy mumbled. "I feel rotten about it. I did send Lucia a Christmas card—I figured I ought to tell her I was okay. By that time I was in boot camp."
"Well, it's all water under the bridge now anyway," Joe said. "What you doing out here, Tommy?"
Tommy picked up the forgotten shrimp and bit into it. Finally he said, "I figured I'd ask where Mario—where Matt's working. I'd kind of like to see him again. I sort of owe him an apology, too."

"My God, you don't know?" Joe asked, then said, "No. You wouldn't. Being in the Army, overseas, no reason you'd keep in touch with the circus news ..."
Tommy felt the old, familiar knot of dread clamp down under his breastbone. "He—he's okay, isn't he? Not—not killed or anything?"
Joe's words seemed to come through a ringing in his ears, very far away. "No, he's alive, so far as we know. Only we don't know, that's the thing. Haven't you seen Billboard?"
"I haven't seen a copy since I joined up."
"Wait just a sec." Joe got up, went across a narrow alley, disappeared behind a concession flap, and finally came back with a copy of Billboard in his hand. He opened it, handed it to Tommy with a page folded open, pointing with a finger at a small ad.
"Lucia's had that ad in there four years now. Not that it's done a damn bit of good."
He pointed with a stubby finger at the Personals column, and Tommy read, his eyes going oddly in and out of focus:
Matthew Gardner, Jr. AKA Mario Santelli. Anyone knowing whereabouts contact Lucia Santelli Gardner.
And the familiar address.
"She put that in four years ago," Joe said, "after Matt had that bad fall. It was the same year Nonna died, that spring, around Easter—"
"Wait," Tommy said, "let me catch up. He was headlining with Starr's. I did know that. I saw him and Lionel in the ring once. I had just got out of boot camp, and the show was playing ten, twenty miles away."

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He had watched, his hands clamping in the darkness as Mario turned in split-second perfection to Lionel's hands, a perfect triple. He had almost gone around to speak to Mario afterward, finding his way unnoticed through the unfamiliar backyard. There were visitors in uniform all over the lot. Only the sight of Mario and Lionel, briefly arm in arm as they left the ring, had stopped him. Leave it at that. It's gone, over.
"Yeah, he was with Starr's two years," Joe said. "No, year and a half. You want another beer, Tommy? No? Anyhow, early in the second season, he and the girl in their act, Matt's, wife—"

"He got married?" This was unbelievable.
"Oh sure," Joe said, "his first season with Starr's. They spent the winter with us. Their baby was born that winter. Nice girl, too; we all liked her. She looked a lot like a Santelli—Lucia said she looked just like Liss. Susan Something. No Sue Ann . . . Susan—" He frowned.
"Sue-Lynn?" Tommy felt as if he had stepped into a nightmare.
"Sue-Lynn, that was it—I knew it was one of those double names like you get down South. Lucia always called her Susan, though. Pete Challoner's girl; she grew up in one of those Sarasota flying acts. Anyhow, after the baby, she was working with Matt and Lionel in the act when it happened. They had a bad fall. Lionel tore his shoulder out—you know what that means for a flyer. Susan got her nose broken and some skin torn off her face, but she wasn't hurt bad."
"And Mario?"
Joe shrugged. "He smashed up his bad wrist, the one he always had trouble with. And he had some concussion, only they figured he'd be all right. The last time anyone saw him, Susan went to the hospital to talk about their divorce. They were getting a divorce—I don't know what it was all about; they always seemed to be pretty good friends—and she said he talked to her very sensible, wrote her a check to carry her and Suzy—that was the baby; she was a few months old then. Lucia had a fit when she heard about the divorce, but that's neither here nor there. Anyhow, she said he was friendly, calm, just like always, only that night the hospital called, said he'd checked out without consulting his doctor, and that was the last anybody heard of him. Just like he walked off the face of the earth. No word, nothing, from that day to this."
"Couldn't the police—"
"We tried. Only he was a grown man, so there was nothing they could do. Only if Sue-Lynn had wanted to swear out a complaint, have him arrested for not paying child support. She was staying with us—she hadn't been working, and she was broke. They asked did she want him arrested, only she said he was no good to her sitting in jail, and he could go straight to hell. She's on the road with Starr's now. You could write to her and see if she's heard anything. Only I think if she had, she'd tell Lucia. She comes and stays here for a week or two with the baby sometimes. In the off season. Suzy must

be something like four now. She looks a lot like Liss's kid— no, you never saw little Cleo, did you?"

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Tommy shook his head. "And you don't know where Mario is? No idea at all?"
"Not the slightest. But he isn't flying anywhere under his own name, or the family name, and that's all I know. He could be anyplace. Working in a carnival. Hoofing, or something—he used to dance a lot, wanted to get into show business when he was a kid. He could be in the Navy—could be in China! God only knows. We've about given up on him. We'd probably know if he was dead. I never thought I'd thank God for his having a police record, but it means if he was killed, they could identify him and somebody could get in touch with his family."
Tommy shuddered, and Joe gave him a kindly look. "Yeah, you and he were real good pals, weren't you? Partners."
"More like brothers."
"I know. We all thought the world of you, Tom. Angelo, especially. He still talks about you sometimes. Listen"—he pushed away from the bench with both hands and stood up— "I'd like to sit around and chew the rag, but I got to get back to work. Where you staying?"
"Noplace," Tommy said. "Just passing through."
"Hang around a while and come on back home with me. Lu would love to see you, and there's plenty of room for you to stay. And my kids—you and Barbie used to pal around a lot when you were in school, I remember."
"Barbie was a good kid. What's she doing?"
"Dancing," Joe said. "She's been in a couple of movies, dancing in one of those harem-girl things. You could see her for ten minutes or so, in the background. And she doubled for some girl, flying, in a circus movie. She's not much of an actress, I guess, but she's a good dancer and one heck of a fine acrobat. She works as an extra at the studios, and does some stunt work; too. She'd want to see you, I know. I get off at ten; I'll take you out there—"
Tommy shook his head. "I got my car outside."
"Well, hell, kid, you know the way home. You're not a stranger. You can take the new freeway to within a couple blocks of the house—doesn't take forever to get home anymore!"
Somebody yelled, "Hey, boss—"

Joe turned, giving Tommy a hasty handshake. "See you later, kid, okay? Look, don't go away—I'll talk to you later, at the house?"
Tommy walked slowly off the lot and out to his car.
His mind was in tumult. Mario, married, with a daughter. Mario gone, vanished, disappeared. He stared at the Billboard still in his hand.
Lucia's had that ad in there four years now. Not that it's done a damn bit of good.
Mario gone, vanished . . . like Barney Parrish. The thought crossed his mind and he shivered. The great aerialist lost, gone, vanished into the limbo of smashed successes, broken dreams. And Mario after him, gone, sunk out of sight without a trace. . . .
He put the Billboard on the seat and started the car, taking the familiar route. The Santelli house, at the end of the drive, looked smaller, shabbier, in need of a coat of paint. He pulled his car to a stop before driving through the gates,

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and sat there, staring from a distance, remembering the first time he had seen the house. How bewildered he had been! He visualized himself pulling up the familiar drive, walking across the porch, ringing the bell. Who would answer the door? What would they say?

The door opened, a shadowy space into the unknown familiar interior, and a woman stepped out on the porch. Tommy did not recognize her. Nonna? No, Joe said Nonna died the year of Mario's fall. God rest her, Tommy thought. She was a sweet old lady even if she never did figure out just who I was. She must've been in her nineties. Lucia? Some cleaning woman? Suddenly he fancied the unknown woman's eyes were focused on the strange car standing outside the drive, and he felt apprehensive, unable to face it. Quickly he put his car in gear and drove away.

CHAPTER 2

A hot, dry September wind was blowing along the streets of Abilene, Texas, blowing brown, crackling leaves from the pecan trees. Tommy Zane drew his car up to the curb, examined the circus poster on the wall, then turned the motor off and checked the copy of Billboard on the seat.

The big circuses, of course, were out of the question. If Mario had been working with any of them, someone would have known. And although he had stopped and made cursory inquiry at every carnival he had passed or seen listed in Billboard, Tommy knew reasonably that if Mario was hiding himself on a carnival midway he would never be found unless he chose. The task of finding a needle in a stack of hay would be simple by contrast.

But the small circuses—that was a possibility. Even there, it would be chance, and good luck; and Tommy faced the very definite possibility that if Mario had chosen this way to hide, he might very well not want to be found.

Damn it, I don't want anything from him. I just want to know he's all right. He knew, too, that the search was a luxury, a self-indulgence he could not pursue for long.

But in Wichita Falls, the day before, making his cursory inquiry on the midway of a small traveling show, he had been told of some flyers working with a small circus which had been through there the week before. And looking at one of their leftover posters—a twin to the one before him here in Abilene—he had seen, near the bottom, the legend

REDDICK AND GARDNER FABULOUS FEATS ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE!

It had seemed worth a single day out of his direct route. Direct route, hell. I'm not going anywhere.

Again he studied the poster. REDDICK AND GARDNER. But, he thought, it might, possibly, be Johnny. He couldn't remember Stella's maiden name, but he remembered that Johnny had billed their double-trap act as Gardner and Something. Gardner isn't as unusual a name as all that. Could be anybody. Probably is. But, on the off chance it was Johnny, it would be good to see him. He hadn't asked Joe where Johnny was. And it was obvious that wherever Johnny was, he wasn't with any of the bigger circuses, or Tommy, in his attentive study of every route, every listing, every act mentioned in that

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professional Bible of circus and carnival people, would certainly have seen him mentioned, either as Santelli or Gardner.
But this show was not even listed in Billboard. It was sponsored by some local fraternal lodge and set up on the edge of town. It was an outdoor show like Lambeth, the fly-

ing rig and a tall perch-pole rigging rising above the low outline of houses at the edge of town. Tommy parked his car in the vacant lot next to the empty rodeo ground and went in. He handed over a dollar to the ticket taker, hearing the band beyond the boarding.
The curiously familiar smell and surroundings, the small well-known noises, tugged something deep inside him, something he had nearly forgotten. Had tried to forget. He felt a moment's temptation to walk around through the backyard, but shoved it firmly aside and climbed up to a seat in the rodeo bleachers.
The show had already begun. Overhead a blazing Texas sun, dimmed a little with brown dust, glared on the rows of splintery, warped bleacher seats. A single ring had been set up, and a small square platform, beside which a group of unicycles were being stacked by a propman. A workhand was polishing a set of horizontal bars with a flannel rag. At the far end was a twenty-six-foot flying rig, smaller than Lambeth had carried. Pitchmen were going through the slowly filling grandstand, selling popcorn, straw hats, ice cream bars. A clown in policeman's burlesque uniform, with a foot-wide tin star on his chest, was working through the lower rows of the grandstand, shaking hands with giggling children. In the opening walkaround there was nobody who looked even remotely like Johnny, though he saw one or two fair-baked young women who might possibly have been Stella, grown older, and under the feather headdresses of Indian chiefs on a float he saw one or two tall dark men who reminded him, very faintly, of Mario.
The Blanding Circus and Equestrian Exhibition was little more than a traveling rodeo with a few circus acts added Featured acts were mostly exhibitions of trick western riding and performing horses. Tommy knew nothing of riding and cared less, and had no interest in performing animals. He sat through most of the show in boredom, periodically wondering why he did not get up and leave. There was a small cycle balance act, a pair of performing chimpanzees who rode a tandem bicycle, and three teenage boys who performed on the parallel bars in a way Tommy could have seen bettered in any large high-school gym. But when the loudspeaker blare announced the aerialists, Tommy sat up quickly from a brief sun-stunned doze and watched them

coming through the performers' entrance at the far end of the arena.
And it wasn't Johnny. It wasn't Johnny at all. It was Mario.
He looked thinner and older. He was wearing sun-faded reddish tights, and he was bare to the waist. His face was a dark inexpressive mask. He didn't glance at the stands or at the squealing children. Tommy realized that his mouth was dry as Mario climbed the aerial ladder with style that made his

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two partners look clumsy. Tommy turned his face away from the ring, signaled to one of the pitchmen working in the bleachers, and handed him thirty cents for a cup filled with ice and some watery, faintly orange-flavored stuff. He sipped at it briefly, then put it down, promptly forgetting it again.
The others in the aerial act were a squat catcher with the arm muscles of a gorilla, and a small, hard-faced woman with tightly curled bleached blonde hair, in a red leotard , with tawdry spangles. The girl made a few amateurish crosses, and then Mario threw a double somersault that made Tommy stare—until he realized it was the catcher's ineptitude which made it look clumsy. Then, on the return, Mario suddenly spun into a fast, elegant pirouette that made Tommy's breath catch. But what, he thought, what is he doing here?
The kids Were squealing and applauding as Mario turned, with a flash of his old fierce grin, and swept a swaggering bow.
As the flyers disappeared through the exit gate, Tommy saw the catcher look up briefly at Mario; for a brief moment Mario's hand rested on his shoulder. Was that why? That clumsy, impossible novice . . . had Mario followed him into this miserable two-bit dog-and-pony show? Tommy hardened his jaw. He was tempted to walk straight to his car and drive away without stopping to speak.
Instead he lingered till the squealing kids had cleared the midway. Then he walked slowly around to the backyard, among the snaked power cables, the parked trailers. A frowsy clown, dressed in street clothes but still in makeup, was sitting on the steps of a panel truck, petting a large dog with a ruff around its neck. Tommy stopped beside him.
"Where can I find the flyer? Gardner, that is?"
The clown's painted grimace twisted into exaggerated concern. "I'm sure sorry, mister, but you just missed him. I just

saw him leave for town; he probably went to get something to eat"
"But—" Tommy began, then suddenly laughed, realizing the clown had made a natural mistake: He had thought Tommy was a civilian, one of the audience.
"Don't give me the iggy, greaseball. He wouldn't hardly be out of his tights, unless he's started filling in for a box jumper in the sideshow!"
Startled, the clown looked up at him, then laughed. "Reckon you're right. But he'll come gunning for me if you turn out to be a bill collector—or a process server."
"Not collecting anything," Tommy said. "I worked with him under canvas, a few years ago, in another show. Just dropped around to say hello."
The clown pointed. "That's his trailer over there. The green one."
The green trailer was small—too small for a family—and looked battered and sun-faded, probably a prewar model. Tommy stumbled over the power cable as he stepped up and knocked on the door.
Inside he heard a familiar deep voice, a voice so unexpectedly casual that something twisted, deep inside him.
"See who that is, Jack, will you?"
Tommy thought, If that catcher answers the door, I say I made a mistake and disappear damn fast. Instead the door was opened by a boy of fourteen or

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fifteen, in blue jeans, dark hair falling in a heavy forelock over his eyes. He looked suspiciously at Tommy and demanded, "What you want?"
"I'm looking for Matt Gardner," Tommy said. Then, on an impulse, he added, "Tell him his brother's here."
"Never knew he had one." The boy turned around, raising his voice. "Matt, there's a guy out here says he's your brother. You got a brother?"
"Got a couple of them," said the well-known voice, and then, very simply, without preparation or fanfare, Mario came and stood in the doorway. He was still bare to the waist. He had on crumpled paint-spattered corduroy pants. "But I don't know what either of them would be doing—" He broke off and stood squinting into the sun; then, abruptly, his eyes focused. He blinked a couple of times and said, "Tommy?"
"Hello, Mario."

Mario didn't move. He went on staring. "I—I almost didn't recognize you."
The teenager was looking at them curiously. "He is your brother, then, Matt? It's okay?"
"Yes, sure, it's okay. Come on in, Tom."
Tommy stood diffidently on the single step. "Oh, I hate to barge in—"
Mario shook his head. "Nobody here, just me. I live alone. The Reddicks have their trailer over yonder." He glanced at the boy. "Tommy, this is Jack Chandler—his father rides with the roping act. Listen, Jack, do you mind? I haven't seen the kid in—good God, five years? Take off, will you, kiddo?"
"Sure." The boy gave Tommy an uneasy grin, said, "Glad to have met you," and went. For the first time since he had appeared in the doorway, Mario moved; he seized Tommy's hand and held it, hard. "Now that fool kid will have it all over the yard inside ten minutes, that the lone wolf turned out to have a brother after all."
"Well," said Tommy, "you could always disown me."
Mario was still holding his hand. He seemed suddenly aware of that, and let it go, with a small, nervous laugh. "Where have you been anyway, Lucky? How did you get here?"
"Oh, around. In the Army, mostly."
Mario seemed smaller somehow, and thinner. There were little creases around his eyes, and his callused hands felt dry and cracked. He was tanned almost to Indian brownness. He was older, and though still handsome, he looked wary, and guarded.
"Yeah, Angelo told me, last time I was home.'"
"Joe told me you'd been married and had a kid."
Mario's mouth hardened. "That was all over a long time ago. Never mind that now. Did you see the show?"
Tommy could think of only one thing to say. "You didn't do the triple."
"With Paul Reddick catching?" Mario shook his head. "Come inside, won't you?"
The trailer was a cramped, shabby, one-room affair with-a sink and small stove at one end, a couch that opened up to a bed at the other. On the table was an opened sack of fruit; a half-eaten orange lay on the checked tablecloth.

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The crimson tights Mario had worn in the show were carefully hung up inside a plastic bag to keep out dust.

"Sit down." Mario picked up the orange and removed a section. He offered Tommy the bag. "Have an orange?"
Tommy laughed. "It used to be chocolate bars," he said. He took one and started to peel it.
"I have to watch my weight now. I don't eat candy much anymore. Tom, where'd you come from, anyway?"
Tommy found anger boiling up inside him. "That's a hell of a question to be asking me! Last I heard, you were headlining with the Fortunatis, not bumming around in a two-bit mud show!"
"I only worked two seasons with Lionel. Then I had a fall and we had to split up." Mario threw the orange peel on the table and demanded, "Where in hell did you go, that night? My God, Tommy, Lucia was out of her mind worrying—where did you go?"
Tommy stared at the floor. It had been carefully swept clean of dust and dirt. The place had the familiar smell: coffee, cloves, resin, sweat. Mario had flung himself down astride a chair and was glaring at him. He was still bare to the waist, and Tommy remembered remotely, like something in another life, that there had been a time when Mario would not show his upper body, scarred by the rope burns and net burns he had gotten while working on the triple. His arms and shoulders were a mass of old scars, whitish against the suntan.
"Let's save the postmortems a while, okay, Mario? I thought we might go somewhere and have a bite to eat. I'd kind of like to talk to you.'" And then another thought, born of his sudden flaring resentment of the catcher he had glimpsed, of the obviously worshipful teenager:
"Unless somebody's waiting for you."
"No, kid, I'm the same standoffish bastard I always was," Mario said with something like the old grin cracking through. "Sit down. Let me get on some clothes."
He turned away. Tommy peeled the orange and ate it. Mario came back, in black slacks and a black high-necked sweater that was either the old one from the ballet school or its identical twin. He was dragging a comb through his hair, and Tommy could just see the faint salting of gray in the dark curls. Angelo had started to go gray early, too, he remembered.
They walked across the backyard to the parking lot. Tommy's was the only car left there now. Once Mario put his

hand briefly on Tommy's arm, then took it away again. Tommy, looking sidewise, saw that Mario's face looked pinched and pale, and the old, aching tenderness pulled at something deep inside him. It had taken all his determination not to put his arms around Mario. How could he? That was all past, years ago, the break final. Mario had changed, been married; Tommy himself had set the tone of their reunion, saying, Tell him his brother's here. Mario had accepted him that way, and it was more than he deserved.
"This is my car."

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Mario whistled rudely. "What bank did you rob?"
"My own piggy bank. I spent what piled up while I was in the Army. You can't spend much in the Army unless you gamble, or go for the frauleins."
Mario opened the car door. "What—no frauleins?"
Tommy set his mouth and withheld the answer Mario was probing for. "Never learned their language. Watch your fingers." He slammed the door and got in. As he thrust the key into the ignition, Mario reached out and caught his wrist, turning the hand over to look at the palm.
"No calluses?"
"I haven't been on a flying rig since we split up. Where can we get something to eat around here?"
"There's a cafe down the street. The folks with the show say the food isn't bad. Of course, Abilene's not what you'd call a gourmet town."
For the first time Tommy heard a touch of the old whimsical irony. He kept his own voice carefully flippant. "After Army chow it's bound to taste great."
The cafe was small and smoky with the suspended grease of frying hamburgers. Tommy ordered a sandwich, but Mario said, "Just coffee. I've got a show in a couple of hours." When the food came, he asked, "Is Army chow all that bad? I remember back during the war, we heard all the time how well fed they were, even while meat and sugar and all that stuff were rationed."
Tommy shrugged. "Maybe they thought that we were supposed to get so tough we wouldn't care what we ate. Army cooking was just one more way to make life tough for us while we were in training." He bit into his sandwich. "Sure you don't want something? Ice cream, milk shake?"
The booth was small, scarred, the table bare wood. Someone had put a nickel in the jukebox, and the loudspeaker

blared the mournful sound of a blues guitar, accompanying a nasal, hollow voice:
I'm a rolling stone,
all alone and lost; For a life of sin
I have paid the cost! When I walk by,
all the people say, Just another guy
on the Lost Highway.
"Damn hillbilly crap!"
Tommy shrugged. "Nice guitar."
"Tom, where you heading? You'll stick around a while, won't you?"
"I'm sort of on the bum." Tommy knew he would never mention to Mario that he had been looking for him. "I didn't figure on finding you here."
Mario's mouth quirked up at one edge in the old grin.
"I didn't really figure on finding myself here." He glanced at Tommy's wrists. "You look like you've kept in shape,"
"Like a damn fool, when they asked me my civilian occupation, I said acrobat, and they stuck me into the physical training program. I spent my first two years watching rookies do push-ups. Made tech sergeant. Then I put in for

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overseas duty and went to Berlin." He grinned. "I tried to get into the MPs. They allowed as how I was tough enough but not tall enough."
"You like the Army?"
"Not much. I got sick of being called Shorty." Tommy found he didn't want to talk about the Army. It was a blur of too many male bodies, crowding, too much noise, rough talk, and unwelcome discipline accepted with iron self-control because he had no choice—not the kind of discipline he had known with the Santellis, willingly undertaken because it was a way to accomplish something he wanted. Army discipline was meaningless, a way of warehousing men without trouble. It struck him suddenly that for years he had been a puppet blindly going through the motions, hardly alive. Now he was going somewhere again, even if it was only the Lost Highway that fellow on the jukebox had been caterwauling about.
"I'd rather not talk about the Army, do you mind? Tell

me about you, okay? I talked to Joe in California. He said you hadn't been home in years. What are you doing with a show like this?"
Mario picked up his cup and tasted the cold, bitter black coffee. He made a face. "I was out of flying for a long time. Maybe you heard, Lionel tore his shoulder up, and I smashed that bad wrist of mine again, the one that always gave me trouble. I worked a carnival, wound up in Mexico, spent a year there— Look, kid, I'll tell you all about it sometimes, but not now, okay? I got a show to do."
"Sure, anything you say."
"You talked to Joe in California? How are all the folks?"
"Okay, I guess. I didn't see anybody else." I sat out there in the car like a damn fool. Couldn't get up nerve enough go ring the doorbell....
Back in the lot at the edge of town, Mario said, "Put your car in the backyard; some of that crew of grifters go through the cars in the parking lot. And you better put your stuff in my trailer; there's guys with this show would steal a blind man's dog."
Tommy obeyed, frowning in surprise. In his experience, circus people were honest, especially with colleagues.
He didn't go out front to watch the show during the evening performance, though he did stand in the back entrance for a few minutes to watch the flying act. He was more puzzled than ever. When the show was over and Mario dressed, Mario said, "Lots of times the Reddicks and I have supper together, but with your car here, they'll know I've got company and they won't bother dropping in. I'm glad this is a four-day stand; our next run is day after tomorrow, over to Odessa. Want some supper? Still like bacon and eggs?"
"Sure, fine. Let me help, okay?" They were both glad to have something to occupy their hands. When they finished, they cleared away the dishes, but finally Tommy came out with what was on his mind.
"Mario, I can't figure all this out. I thought you had it made. That's why I left—so you could go with Starr's, Center Ring. On top of the world. What happened? Why did it all go for nothing? Where's your wife, your kid? And—

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and" —the important part tumbled out last—"how in hell could you let yourself go like this? Papa Tony would be turning over in his grave!"
The old Mario glinted, for a moment, in the set eyes.

"What does it matter? The family was broken up for good. All I had left was you, and when you walked out—"
Tommy raised his head and threw five years of bottled anguish at him. "What the hell do you mean, I walked out? You mean when you threw me out!"
"That's not fair, Tom. I begged you not to go. I only wanted to split up till the talk died down a little—"
"What was I supposed to do? Hang around your neck like some goddamn albatross while you were on your way to the top? Sit around and be your kept boy? Anyway, you got married—"
Mario said, with a snort of laughter, "That didn't last long. Everything sort of fell to pieces, all at once. Me, Lionel, Susan—you remember Sue-Lynn Farris?"
"Sort of. A dark girl, kind of looked like Liss."
"I never could see it, myself, but Angelo and Lucia thought so. Anyhow, it only lasted about a year. Then she filed for divorce, and we had a hell of a spill. Lionel wrecked his shoulder, I broke my ankle and racked up this bad wrist again, and Susan got her face messed up some—I think she thought I did it to her on purpose. Anyhow, she walked out on me while I was in the hospital, and took Suzy, that was the baby. No wife, no daughter, no job—I didn't know if I'd ever be able to fly again or it the wrist was wrecked for good. So I walked out into the blue, the same way you did."
Tommy reached for Mario's wrist, moving it gently between his hands. "Looks all right now."
"I was lucky. I broke that wrist before, when I was a kid."
"I remember you telling me." That night we rode in the rigging truck. There were a thousand things unspoken, never to be said. Tommy wished abruptly that he had never come here at all. "It did get all right, though?"
Mario shrugged. "Seems to. It hurts sometimes; I have to keep it strapped up all the time. You said you saw the folks? I was just wondering if anybody in the family's still working. I never see a copy of Billboard anymore. Guess I've been kind of afraid to check up, find out."
Is he telling the truth? Or does he want me to think he doesn't know Lucia's been running that ad, four years, going nuts to know if he was alive or dead? Tommy knew

he would never know, as he would never know so many things about those lost years.
"Look," Tommy said on an impulse, "the talk ought to have died down by now. I was wondering if maybe you— you wanted to go back to work as a team. We used to work together all right."
"Oh, Jesus," Mario whispered, "if we only could!"
"Some reason we can't? You get on a blacklist again? Maybe with Starr's?"

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"No. I didn't even jump the show. I sent in my notice, all proper, while I was in the hospital. I mean, my partner was smashed up and my wrist such a mess I'd have to lay off the rest of the season anyhow; the act was finished. So I'm all clean with Starr's—they even paid the hospital bill for me."
That hadn't been what Tommy meant, but he let it pass.
"You all tied up with this Reddick, then?"
"Only for the season, and that's only got about six weeks to run. Only thing is, I'm broke. The pay here is peanuts. I had some money saved up, that season with Starr's, but I gave it to Susan for the baby. I own a share in the house in L.A., though; maybe somebody in the family would buy me out."
"Well, I got some money," Tommy said. "Not a lot, but enough to keep going a while. Something else: All the money I made with the act when I was a kid, and that year with Woods-Wayland, it's still in a bank someplace, in trust or in escrow or something till I'm twenty-one. Only, on my twenty-first birthday I was in Germany, like I said. So all that money's sitting there drawing interest. Joe ought to know about it, or Angelo. And after my dad got killed, Jeff Cardiff bought the cats—Angelo told me, that summer—and that money's there, too. It's no fortune, but it would pay for any new riggings we had to have made. You'd have to find us a catcher and all that stuff—you still got contacts, I don't."
"Far as that goes," Mario said, "there's a lot of rigging around home, and I don't think anybody in the family's using it. We could work out over the winter at the house—"
"Look, would your family want me there?"
Mario's face tightened. "They better. Like I said, I own a hunk of the place. The place used to belong to Papa Tony, Joe, and Angelo on even shares; Papa left me his share." Then he laughed. "Relax, kid, the family would probably swap me for you any day; they all thought the world of you.

And none of them heard that old yarn about the blacklist"
"Want to bet? But you been married and I been in the Army—there's a lot of water gone under the bridge. We were kids then. And now I'm a veteran, and you—you're a married man, a father, for God's sake! I don't think we have to worry any about that old talk, do we?"
Mario was slowly catching fire to the spark. "I'm rusty as hell—I've let myself slip—but a winter of good hard work ought to put us back in shape. We could advertise for a catcher in Billboard. Do you think we could get a copy here in town?"
"Hick town like this? I wouldn't bet on it."
"Tomorrow, then. Or when we play San Antonio. Anyhow, let's figure it out, how much cash we'll need for riggings. We'd need a new net and new wires, even if there was stuff around the house we could use. Papa Tony used to order the nets from some place down in San Diego—they make nets for the fishing fleet. I don't know if they're still in business."
Tommy chuckled. "I used to wonder about that. I never did know where you'd buy a flying net."

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"Well, it's for damn sure you don't walk into Abercrombie and Fitch toy department," Mario said with a wry grin.
Tommy pulled a ballpoint pen out of his pocket. "You got something I can figure on? In my suitcase I got a copy of that old contract, and the bankbook from that trust account or whatever it was."
"Sure. And while you do that, let me make some more coffee."
The night slipped by while-they were talking and figuring. Mario stretched at last, reaching for the long-empty coffeepot, and stared at the small clock on the table. "Good God, kid, it's after three."
"Oh, Christ," Tommy said, crumpling a page of figures, "you should have thrown me out hours ago! We can settle all the details tomorrow."
"I figured you'd stay here. Guess you'll have to, unless you want to sleep in the car. Even the tourist places would all be full by now."
Tommy looked at Mario sharply, but he was bent over, fiddling with the shabby strap of his sandal. Hell, he told himself, you drew the line. You said to tell him his brother's here. You're not a kid now. Forget it. He has.

"Okay, thanks."
Mario sat on the edge of the bed, in a shabby old robe.
"Cigarette?"
"Thanks. When did you start smoking?"
"I don't much. Three, four a day—even Angelo wouldn't lecture me about that."
"I saw his name on the—what do they call it?—screen credits on some movie. While I was in Germany."
"Yeah, the year I was with Starr's he did a lot of work in Hollywood. He's a good stuntman," Mario said. "I always thought that was more dangerous than flying." Mario put out his cigarette. "Long as we're dreaming, we ought to dream about talking him into coming back, catching for us."
They lay side by side, not touching each other. Mario had the same faint clove smell. Tommy fought an impulse to touch the scarred shoulder. Hell, he told himself furiously, you came two thousand miles to find him, you're friends again; leave it at that.
How still Mario was, hardly breathing! What's he scared of? And then he knew. Mario was—he would always be— the same. But he himself—-he had gone away a boy, he had come back a man; how could Mario know whether the years had changed him?
Why kid yourself? You -were thinking about this all along. Maybe you're crazy to try and stir up the past. You're not the same people anymore.
"Asleep?" he whispered.
"Just about." But Tommy could tell he wasn't.
"How old are you, Mario?"
"Twenty-nine. You know that."
"I'd forgotten."
"I hadn't," Mario said gently. "You were twenty-two on the first of May. I remembered that because is sounded like a good circus birthday."
"I forgot when your birthday is."

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"February," Mario said. "I'm supposed to be an Aquarius."
"Know what I wish?"
"No. What?"
"I wish to hell we'd have another thunderstorm," Tommy said, his voice catching in his throat. He reached out and pulled Mario into his arms as if only violence could annihilate five years of constraint and misery.

"Come here, Mario, you damn fool. What are you waiting for?"
Mario let himself be pulled close, but he was tense. Tommy, sensing reluctance, resistance, felt a split-second backlash of fear. You damn idiot, have you ruined everything? -Then he knew it was not reluctance; it was the old, terrible, tense control . . . He heard Mario's breath go out in a long convulsive sigh.
"I was wondering—which of us—would give in first. Same old bastard, aren't I, kid?"
Tommy muttered, "You want me to tell you what you are?"
"No. Once was enough, kid." He caught him close with hungry violence. "Oh, God, I thought—"
"Forget it Don't talk now. That's all over. Come on."
But five years were not wiped away as readily as that, and later Tommy, watching Mario go away from him into the depths of sleep, wondered if they would ever find their way back to each other. Or had they lost forever something he now knew to have been very rare, something very perfect and precious, something they had never known how to value till they threw it away?

CHAPTER 3

he woke and for a minute time was annihilated; he only knew that Mario was beside him. Then he saw the shabby trailer in the morning sun and remembered where he was. He felt scared at the intensity of his happiness. Mario opened his eyes and smiled at him.
"So I didn't dream it. Hello, Lucky."
He laughed, and Tommy asked, "What's so funny?"
"You. Grown up." Mario put a shy arm around him. They were both a little embarrassed in the bright sunlight. "Miss me?"
Tommy touched his cheek lightly, noticing that some of the tight lines around the mouth seemed to have vanished overnight. "Sure. Come on, you better get up and do your checking."
"This isn't the Flying and Reform School, kiddo. Paul and

I go over the rigs before the show—that's all the checking that gets done."
"No workout, either?"
Mario grimaced. "Does the act look like it? Paul and Ina think they did all their practicing at the beginning of the season."
"And you hold still for that?"

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"Got no choice. It's not my act and I'm not the boss." Mario threw a robe over his shoulders and yawned. "The rig man jumped the show six weeks ago, so Paul and I have been setting our rigs and the slack-wire rig and the balance stages ever since. Hey, I got an idea—why not ask Blanding to put you on the payroll as a rig man? Papa Tony made you set rigs along with Buck for two years. I'd rather be doing that than what I was doing before the rig man lit out— everybody with this show has to wet-nurse the damn horses. The pay isn't much, but—well, we might get some time to work out now and then, unless you're in a rush to get back to the Coast."

Tommy shrugged. "Why not? I said I was going to keep an eye on you from now on—I might as well start right away."

Mario had his back turned, filling the coffeepot. He said, not looking around, "Don't rub it in, Lucky. I know I've slipped. I thought I was all through worrying about the past, or the future. Now I've started being ashamed of myself. Maybe that's a good sign."

Bob Blanding was a fat little man with a ready laugh, who admitted candidly that he knew nothing about his regular circus acts. He had spent most of his life managing a rodeo, and had only this year been persuaded to bill the show as a circus, engaging acrobats and a flying act when he could not secure a full complement of riding acts.

"You "want me to put your brother on as a rig man? How come we need one? I thought you and Reddick were doing okay."

Mario drew a deep breath, and Tommy thought he would explode. Instead he stuck his head out the trailer door and yelled, "Pass the word for Paul Reddick!"

Soon the heavy little catcher, dressed in Army fatigues, stepped inside. "Tell the boss we ought to put my brother on as a rig man, Paul," Mario said. "I swear when I get mad, and Blanding doesn't speak Italian."

Paul Reddick grinned affectionately at Mario. "Bob, you promised Matt and I wouldn't have to set our own rigs for more than a week, and here, when Matt ropes and ties an experienced man for you, you hold back in the harness!"

"Okay, okay," Blanding said, turning to Tommy. "Can you do anything else on the side? Can you ride? We can use another man in the riding act."

Tommy admitted he could not ride. "But I grew up with a circus. I can do tumbling, aerial web, fixed traps, and flying."

Blanding looked shrewdly at Tommy. "Why do you want this job? You look smart enough to get a better one."

Tommy looked Blanding right in the eye, realizing that this was one of the times when a lie was essentially more accurate than the truth.

"I just got out of the Army, and I haven't seen much of my brother for five years."

"Okay. Thirty is what I paid the other man. I'll give you twenty-five till I know what you're worth. And I want to see your discharge papers; I don't hire anyone who's AWOL."

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Tommy went back to Mario's trailer for the papers in his suitcase. He turned over the certificate of honorable discharge to Blanding, who looked up sharply.
"Zane? Thought you were his brother."
"Stepbrother," Mario said. "But we keep forgetting; we've been together since the kid was thirteen or so."
"Okay. Sergeant, huh? What did you do in the Army?"
"Physical training. Some drill."
"That a fact? I was in for a while. Got a Purple Heart on Leyte," Blanding said. He shoved a contract form at Tommy. "You're hired. No drinking on the lot, no grifting, no shortchanging. This is a clean show."
Tommy found his time relatively full with attending to all the riggings on the show. He and Mario soon fell into their old routine of going out for practice before the day's work started, and for Tommy, at least, it started early.
The first two weeks were almost homecoming, with the curious difference that they were alone, isolated without their families, or anyone to interfere. Once, setting a rig in a small town in north Texas, Tommy realized that this was perilously like one of his teenage daydreams: he and Mario traveling together with some show where they could work together as much as they wanted. . . .
He had not been on a flying rig for five years, but he

found that he quickly recovered the old knack, the old timing. It was simply a question of muscles grown rusty from disuse, hardening again. When they practiced together, Mario was catching, as he had done when they first learned to work together. After a few weeks of practice, Tommy had developed enough confidence that when Mario called to him, "Still think you can do a back double?" he did not hesitate. But as he landed in Mario's hands and swung, he realized that Paul Reddick was standing at the foot of the rigging, watching him.
When they came down, Mario grinned at Reddick. "Told you the kid was a flyer."
"Seem you're a catcher, too."
"Yeah, when we started out I was the catcher because I was the biggest. I taught Tommy to fly—been catching him ever since he was tall enough to reach the fly bar."
Tommy laughed, exhilarated with the exercise and the feeling of success. "You ought to see us do a midair pass."
Reddick's eyebrows went up. "Want to try? I reckon I can still catch for one."
"That wasn't exactly—" Mario scowled at him, and Tommy shut up.
Paul Reddick started to climb the rope as Mario and Tommy went to their end of the rigging. "What the hell is the big idea?" Mario said.
"I don't understand. Just thought I'd like to try." "Well, you'll sure try it now. And you better not bitch it up, either."
"So, okay," Reddick said, when they were all on the ground again, "hot stuff. So what are you, Jim Fortunati's illegitimate son or something?"

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Tommy felt as if Reddick had slapped him, but he said nothing, by long habit. He returned to the trailer and dressed hastily, then went off to his work. Later he saw Mario and Reddick, near the foot of the flying rig, still deep in talk, but as he watched they laughed and walked off arm in arm. He did not see Mario again until after the matinee. When the crowd thinned and Tommy got back to the trailer, he found Mario there, wearing a robe over his tights. He was smoking a cigarette—always a storm signal—and his greeting was equally ominous.

"You sure fouled me up with Reddick. I thought I told you how touchy he was."

Tommy shrugged. "He's jealous. A blind man could see you can fly rings around his wife, or whatever she is, and now he knows you can catch well enough to make him feel like a fool. I don't know how you dare work with him. I wouldn't"

"Well, nobody's asking you to. And unless you can knock off showing off for him, we better skip the whole thing until we have our own act again."

Tommy pondered a sharp answer, then thought better of it.

"You're the boss, Mario."

"No, Reddick is, and don't you forget it, kid."

Tommy slammed out of the trailer. It made him feel sick, with an indefinable sickness, to see Mario knuckling under to that incompetent oaf. For the next two days they were silent, and Tommy made a point of being busy somewhere on the lot whenever Mario might normally have sought his company. He realized how tenuous their new arrangement was, how quickly it could be torn apart by a minor rift.

But late the third evening, in the rush of the teardown, striking the rigs in a sudden squall with the help of a particularly stupid workhand, Tommy suddenly looked up and saw Mario, in his old black sweater. He worked alongside Tommy without speaking, stowing the ropes and guys in precise, almost mechanical fashion, like a careful dance in which they manipulated wires and bars and steel wires in preordained motion. Neither spoke, but when they finally hitched the trailer and climbed into their separate cars for the long haul to the next town, they were grinning at each other in the old way. Tommy knew they wouldn't get to bed until two or three in the morning, but that didn't matter now.

The next morning, setting concession stands, Tommy was surprised to see Mario at the top of the flying rig with the slender, dark-haired teenager he had found in Mario's trailer that first day, Jack Chandler. He saw Mario give the boy the bar. Jack made a clumsy swing outward, then lost momentum in midswing. After a few ragged swings the trapeze came to rest in the center, Jack hanging from it.

"It's okay," Mario called, "just let go and drop."

Tommy stopped to watch. So Jack was getting the rough first lesson, calculated to discourage a beginner who thought it might be easy and fun. Tommy watched with the de-

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tached amusement of the natural athlete who had never gone into a "freeze" on the trapeze.
"Come on, it's all right, I tell you! You know how to do it, just let go!"
"I can't—" The kid's face was stiff, screwed tight; he was not far from hysteria.
"Come on! You've seen me do it a hundred times! Relax, now, take it easy, just let go and roll over. You're not going to get hurt!"
It wasn't just stubbornness; there was nothing willful about it. It was simply a case where the muscles obeyed the blind, instinctive fear of falling, rather than the reasoning mind which told them they wouldn't get hurt. No matter how the victim might want to let go, he couldn't. There was nothing funny about it, though it looked ridiculous. Santelli custom had always been to shout taunts, insults, and rude joked until the victim was shamed or exhausted enough to fall. But Tommy was wary, now, about butting in. He stood and listened to Mario storm, threaten, plead, and cajole for a solid ten minutes before Jack, with an exhausted gasp, let go and dropped into the net. Mario immediately dived down beside him, put an arm around his shoulders, and began talking to him in gentle, encouraging murmurs. Tommy, too far away to hear the words, could only hear their tone, but after a while, Jack climbed up again. He swung out, and again lost momentum in midswing, but this time he let go, rolled up, and landed neatly on his back. Mario came down laughing, patted Jack on the shoulder, and went off whistling to change his clothes.
When Tommy came to then" trailer, Mario turned around and said, "You see what happened on the rig? The Chandler kid's been pestering me to let him come up and swing, so I finally said okay."
"I saw the whole thing."
"The kid's okay, though. He went right up again."
"Yeah, after you conned him for ten minutes. Get out of the way, willya? I want to clean up, if you don't mind."
Mario lowered the towel, his face dripping. "What's eating on you?"
"Boy, you sure have changed! I remember when Barbie pulled a freeze on the bar, you had Liss climb up and unfasten the bar and spill her."

Mario shrugged. "You can't treat everybody the same way. I didn't want to discourage the kid."
Tommy snorted. "I remember the first time you let me come up. you told me if I was just kidding around, the sooner I got sick of it, the better! If I'd pulled something like that on the rig, you'd have chased me away from the rig and I'd never have got up there again—:and I knew it! And I remember when I fainted once on the rig and got sick, you made me go right up again, sick or not."
Mario put the towel down on a chair. "Look, Tom," he said, "you were a born flyer, and you'd been working up high since you were out of short pants. I didn't have to baby you."
"If the kid has to be babied, I don't see why you bother!"
"He's been hanging around all summer, watching me work all season. And what is it to you, anyhow? Why are you making such a thing of it?"

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"Because I know why you take so much trouble with kids about that age. Yeah, you like them just about fourteen, don't you? I ought to know."
Mario turned deathly white under his tan. "All right. You said it. You got it off your chest. Now you take it back or I'll kill you."
"You try it," Tommy said between his teeth. "I'm not fifteen years old anymore. You want somebody around you can make a big fuss over when you're in the mood for that, and con into bed when you're in the mood for that, and then slap hell out of it you feel like it. Well, you better start making up to your little chum, because, man, I spent the last five years learning to take care of myself, and if you take a swing at me, I'm going to hit you back so damn hard you'll light down in the bullpen!"
"Tom, take back that crack about the kid."
"How come you feel you have to protect his honor?" Tommy asked, his lip curling, and Mario hit him. Without a moment's hesitation, Tommy brought up a fist and drove it hard into Mario's diaphragm.
Mario doubled up with a startled "Ugh!" then lunged at Tommy. A chair went over with a crash, and they went with it, struggling.
Someone banged at the door. Mario was on his feet in an instant. "Hold it," he said, and yanked the door open. Paul Reddick stared at his cut lip, at the overturned chair.

"What the hell.. ." he said. "What the hell—"
With a shocked, terrible sense of deja vu—he could almost see Angelo's face—Tommy sat up. "For Christ's sake, Matt," Reddick said, "Blanding could soak you with a fine for brawling on the lot!"
Mario wiped blood from his lip. "This isn't a brawl, Paul, it's a family row."
"Better keep it down, then."
Tommy got out a handkerchief and thrust it against his nose, which had begun to bleed. "Who asked you to come butting in?"
Reddick ignored him. "Matt, you want me to get some ice for that lip? It's going to be a beaut by showtime." He turned to Tommy. "You lousy punk, where the hell do you get the idea you can get away with beating up the performers? I ought to run you off the lot!"
"You try it," Tommy said in a rage, but Mario shook off Reddick's hand on his arm.
"Shut up, Tom," he ordered. "Go do your work before we have the boss on our necks."
"Blanding—" Tommy started to say what Blanding could do, when he caught Mario's eye. There was desperate appeal in it.
"Look, Paul," Mario said to Reddick, "the kid and I have been fighting nonstop since he grew out of knee pants."
His look said, I'll handle Reddick. Tommy muttered, "Yeah, sure," and left the trailer. He heard Reddick laughing even before he was out of earshot, and he moved toward the horse lot, shaking with rage. He was ready to walk straight to his car, off the lot, out of Mario's life. He felt sick at the memory of Mario's arm around Jack Chandler's shoulders, at the humility and promptness with which Mario —Mario Santelli of the Flying Santellis—had humbled himself

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before Paul Reddick. But old habit took him to the flying rig to check it before the show.
Keep it off the platform.
That was, after all, the crux of the problem. Mario had been working with the Chandler kid.
In the intermission Tommy slipped back to the trailer while Mario was getting into his tights.
"Sit down," he said. "I'll fix your face."
"Okay. It could use some fixing."
Tommy pulled open the drawer where Mario kept his

makeup materials. He covered the cut lip with flesh-colored adhesive and worked tinted cream into the darkening bruise around the eye. By habit, not realizing what he was doing until he found himself doing it, he picked up Mario's comb and combed the thick hair with the precise touch he had learned years ago and had never forgotten. Mario reached up and closed, his hand over Tommy's.
"You missed your profession, kid. You could make a living any day in Hollywood as a makeup man."
"That might be good to know, someday. Clench your fists." Tommy took the roll of tape.
"Put it on good and tight. That's the one I broke." But as Tommy began strapping his wrists, Mario shut his eyes. "God, kid, we're right back where we were, aren't we? Least little thing, we start tearing at each other—"
"Hold it, hold it!" Tommy snarled. "Not just before a show—-you nuts or something?"
Mario started to laugh, deep down in his belly.
"Ragazzo," he said, "you are just too damn good to be true. Okay, fella."
But though he spoke lightly, there was something behind the voice that made Tommy brood.
My God, he's a wreck, if he can start that kind of talk five minutes before he goes on the rig! What else had those years done to Mario in ways that did not show on the surface?
He came back to their trailer after the night show to find Mario there, cooking bacon and eggs. Tommy washed up without speaking, dug in the drawer for knives and forks, and sat down. They ate without speaking until Tommy shoved his plate away. Then Mario leaned both elbows on the table.
"Kid, listen. We're going right back to the same old pattern, aren't we?"
Tommy stared at his plate, streaked with egg and crumbs. "I was thinking about that, too. If this is too rough, I can always pack my bag and move on. If we're going to start that old stuff, slugging each other— Look, it was one thing when we were kids. But we're a couple of hefty athletes now, and we have a few more fights like that, one of us will kill the other. How about it, fella? Want me to jump the show and just—drift?"
Mario put his face down on his clenched fists. He said into

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them, his voice drained of everything except exhaustion, "I've got no right to ask you to stay. But—but I'm begging you. If you walk out again, I don't know what the hell I'll do."
Tommy stared at him in consternation. He got up and came around the table, laying a hand on the hunched shoulders.
"You got me wrong, Mario," he said. "I'm not threatening to walk out on you. I'm asking would it be easier on you, you want me to get lost? If you want me to stay, hell, you couldn't chase me off with an M-one."
Mario raised his head. The tape had come off his mouth and it was bleeding again. "Why in hell did you make that filthy crack about the kid?"
Tommy wanted to yell, Was it true, or wasn't it? But he waited to control his voice. "Okay. So I was jealous."
Mario put a hand over Tommy's. He said, very low, "You've got no reason to be jealous, Lucky. Of anybody. You want me to run the kid off, I'll run him off."
Tommy stared at the floor. "Hell, no. Last thing we want is a reputation for being exclusive, a twosome." Then, out of the remnants of fury, he blurted, "I get sore. Watching you suck up to a jerk like Reddick."
There was a long silence in the trailer. "Tommy," Mario said at last, "Paul took me on when I was scraping the bottom. A bum. Nowhere. Like I told you, I spent a year bumming around in Mexico. I worked a carnival down there. Came back up at Tijuana and took a job working the rottenest grift show in the States—workhand, roustabout in a carny on the border, taking tickets on the midway, running a penny pitch. You think I'm a mess now, you should've seen me then." He was silent, lost in memory, his eyes distant, finally getting up the nerve to say, "I got thrown out of that show, and did sixty days in jail in El Paso."
"Christ! What for?"
"What the hell do you think? The public defender got the charge reduced to disorderly conduct, otherwise I could have gone up for ten years. That was Texas." After a minute he added, staring at the floor, "The kid had red hair. Well, hell, he wasn't a kid—he was from the Air Force base."
Tommy didn't trust himself to speak.
"Pour me some coffee, okay?" Mario held out his cup. Tommy slopped coffee into it, not noticing when he spilled

some on Mario's hand. Mario took the pot from him and put it on the stove.
"I got out, started looking for a job. I heard Blanding was short of acts, and he sent me around to see Reddick. I leveled with Paul. We—we sort of hit it off. He took me on, gave me an advance out of his own pocket, nursed me along easy until I started to get back in shape and was on my feet again. Only thing is, I didn't tell him I ever used the Santelli name. He covered with the boss—Blanding wouldn't hire anyone who'd done time. I'd never have made it on my own, Tom."
Tommy wanted to ask other questions, but was sure he would get no answers. Presumptuously, he had thought he was helping Mario out of the depths. Now

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he found he had had no idea of what those depths had been. "Reddick—is he queer?"
Mario hesitated a long time before answering, and finally said, "I think maybe. Only he—he fights it. Some men do. He never said so in so many words, only what I told him didn't turn him off, either. Maybe I'm just not his type or something. But I owe him a lot." There was another hesitation, then: "Look, Lucky, about the kid—Jack—look, I wouldn't carry on, not on the lot, not where it could get back to the boss and get Paul in trouble."
"Jeez," Tommy said at last, "you make me feel about two inches high."
Mario reached across the table and gripped his hand. "That wasn't what I had in mind, ragazzo. Only, like I say, Paul's not a bad guy." He got up, withdrawing, embarrassed, in the old way. "That coffee's lousy. I'll make some more."
He moved around the trailer, finally coming back to where Tommy sat slumped at the table.
"Kid. We can usually get through to each other if we keep our tempers. Let's promise each other not to get into this kind of wrangle again, huh?"
Tommy felt as if he were coming apart with the old, half-forgotten ache. "We haven't had much luck keep promises."
"No," Mario said through a constricted' throat. "Does it help to know I'm so goddamned ashamed of myself I could die?"
Tommy shook his head without speaking. If anything, it made it worse. He knew, deep down where the deepest knowledge was born, that this time they must stay together

or go under, but he was not sure why. He wasn't sophisticated enough, or philosopher enough, to think of himself as the instrument of Mario's salvation, but he had in a sense been walking on tiptoe around a thought something like that, and now he, too, was profoundly ashamed of his presumption. He knew now how much more selfish than that it was.
It's my job to get him back to the Coast in one piece. But it's because I need to have him in one piece.
But -we've got to find some way to live together without tearing each other up this way. And that's my job, because his nerves are all to pieces, and mine are in pretty good shape.
He leaned his head back against Mario, then turned and put his arms around Mario's waist. He did not realize it was, by instinct, a gesture he had made often when he was a little boy. "Hell, fella," he murmured, "if it did you any good to beat me up, I'd probably let you. But it just makes you tear yourself up that much worse afterward."
"Oh, you crazy kid," Mario whispered, "you crazy dumb kid!" And then, without transition, their solemn, pledging handclasp became a tense, struggling embrace. For the first time Tommy got a glimmering of how this tension worked in , Mario; then thought vanished. For a minute they only clung together, as if by some mystic process they could actually mold and press their aching bodies into one another—as always, breathless and clumsy with the necessary awkwardness of two males, with the brief brutal

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resentment at the refusal of their bodies to come together spontaneously into the perfect pattern of the need in them. Then Mario muttered, "Come on, damn it, come on," and pushed him down on the couch. They didn't even bother to pull off their clothes.

The next day Blanding came and stood watching them for a few minutes. Then he signaled to Tommy.

"I was watching you the other day. I told you if you could do something in the show I'd give you a raise. Want to go on with the flyers?"

"What will Reddick say?"

"What Mister Reddick says don't signify, sonny. I'll talk to Reddick."

Paul Reddick knocked at their trailer door some hours later, trying to be genial. "Matt, the boss wants to put your kid brother in the act. How about it?"

"Okay by me," he said with a shrug, but when Reddick had gone, he turned on Tommy, scowling. "What the hell—"

"Look, this is the first I heard of it. Blanding just walked up to me this morning and asked how did I feel about it."

Mario stared at him sharply, then relaxed. ".Yeah, I know —Blanding's so crazy for acts he'd have the Chandler kid up there if I'd hold still for it."

"At that he wouldn't be much worse than Ina Reddick."

Mario grimaced. "Careful; don't let Blanding hear you say that. She's Blanding's sister."

It felt strange to be before an audience again. Some people in these small towns had perhaps seen him performing with Lambeth when he was only a child. On the pedestal he felt a positive itch to correct Ina Reddick's timing, to move her forcibly into a more classic stance, and wondered how Mario could go through the slipshod routine without his old passion for teaching, for perfection, showing up. Had he lost it entirely?

Tommy had the nervousness any flyer feels about a strange catcher. And yet they were all trusting one another with their lives. Paul and Ina Reddick knew nothing about him, yet they were willing to take Mario's word and trust themselves to him. How did they feel about having a newcomer thrust into their act? They were, after all, professionals.

After the show Ina Reddick came up to them. "Come over to the trailer when you get dressed," she said. "We've got to honor the successful debut some way."

The Reddick trailer was larger than the one Tommy shared with Mario, clean and curtained, a small yapping puppy on a leash. There was coffee and cold beer, and sandwiches made with thick slices of liverwurst. They ate gratefully, and Ina, stretched lazily on a bunk, her long crimson toenailed feet bare, watched them with a smile. Paul handed her a beaded can of beer.

"You celebrate, too, Ina."

"Coffee, thanks—I can't afford to put on any weight." She turned on her side with a grin. "Okay, Matt, come clean. Who are you two really? I saw that pass before, only I know perfectly well the name wasn't Gardner. There's a

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Gardner used to be with Freres and Stratton, only he worked with a blonde girl and did double-traps—"
"That's my brother Johnny and his wife," Mario said after

a moment, and Tommy realized that they were singularly unlucky. Like Randy Starr, Ina Reddick had one of those freak memories sometimes found in show business; she never forgot a face or a performance.
"Now, what the hell was it? It wasn't with Starr's when I saw them a couple years back. Carey-Carmichael, Woods-Wayland—" She sat up suddenly and pointed. "Some small show," she said, "somewhere in Oklahoma. You were just a little kid"—she nodded to Tommy—"and the two of you did some trick on one trapeze, some kind of duo routine. There was an old man in the show—" She frowned and bit her lip, working on the memory. Suddenly she snapped her fingers.
"Lambeth. That was it. Flying Santellis."
"Mario Santelli," Paul said slowly. "Yeah. I heard the kid call you Mario once."
"Well, I'll be damned," Ina said. "Later you were with Starr's. They were comparing you with Barney Parrish! You hiding from the law or something?"
"I didn't lie about anything. My legal name is Matthew Gardner. Only the Santelli act broke up after my grandfather died, and I wouldn't sell the name this cheap."
"Yeah," Paul said wryly, "I guess it is a comedown from Starr's. Hell, you were doing triples. You could have leveled with me—I wouldn't have given you away," he added, and Tommy picked up the injured note of jealousy in his voice.
A lot of flying is sublimated homosexuality. Only most people never think about it. . .
"We ought to be honored," Ina said. "Guess I'll have that beer. We start out celebrating a kid getting a break and come to find out it's a famous team making a comeback."
The sarcasm flicked a raw nerve. "Knock it off," Tommy said. "We didn't volunteer this; you dragged it out of us."
"Okay, okay, so let's celebrate." Paul too sounded awkward. "Have a beer, Matt, Tom."
Tommy accepted the beer. "First time I've done any flying since"—he became aware of Mario's repressive frown— "since I went in the Army. Can't let Mrs. Reddick drink alone."
"Ina," she said, smiling, and Tommy felt a premonitory flash of warning. Trouble.
Paul said, "Guess I know now why you seemed to be

throwing your weight around some. How in the dickens did you two ever end up in a spot like this?"
Mario shrugged. "Broke my wrist one year, had to lay
off a long time. How does anybody wind up anywhere?"
Paul mercifully left it at that, but Ina could not let it drop.

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"Seems to me there was something else. Didn't you work with Woods-Wayland one season? Coe Wayland is a friend of my brother's. Seems—" She frowned, and Tommy felt the small hairs rise along his spine.
"You're probably thinking about when my grandfather died on the rig," Mario said. "He had a heart attack in midair and fell out of my uncle Angelo's hands. He was dead before he hit the net. There was a hell of a lot of talk about it that year."
"God," said Paul, "I'd think so. That's an awful thing! How old was he?" He kept talking, but Ina's eyes were still narrowed, and Tommy knew she was still trying to trace down an elusive memory. If she had that kind of memory, sooner or later it would surface.
Back in their own trailer very late, they stared at one another in mute dismay.
"Damn Blanding and his bright ideas," Mario said, pacing restlessly in the cramped space. "Paul's okay, I think. But Ina's jealous. Be careful around her, Tom."
"Why? She seemed nice. I thought it was Paul was the jealous one."
"Sta bene—just remember, I warned you." "If you got anything to say, Mario, say it. Don't fence." Mario crushed out his cigarette. "Never mind. You could be right. Let's get some sleep."
To Tommy's surprise, next morning when they turned out for practice—they now usually ran through a pass or two every morning after checking the rigs—Ina appeared and asked if she could join them. To Tommy this seemed reasonable enough, and he couldn't imagine why Mario was sullen and edgy about it.
Ina was a careful worker and ambitious; nevertheless, practice and polish would do her little good. She had reached a professional level, there was nothing of the amateur about her, but she had hit her final level and it was a low one. Mario acted as catcher during these sessions, and Tommy put down Mario's resentment to Mario's dislike of catching (he had never willingly acted as catcher for anyone but

Tommy or Liss). It soon seemed natural for Ina to invite them for coffee after practice, and it also seemed natural that Tommy would accept and Mario refuse. Ina was witty and brisk, even her sarcasm amusing. Mario teased him a little about his conquest.
"Heck, it's a good idea to stay on terms with the boss's sister. And she makes great coffee. Must use a different kind of lye than you do."
"She puts chicory in it or something." Mario made a face.
"I like it that way. I grew up in the South, remember?"
"Lu used to do it sometimes during the war, when coffee was rationed. But none of us would drink it. Suit yourself about Ina; you're a big boy now, but I still think it's not smart."
"Oh, come on, you ought to thank me," Tommy teased. "Keeps her busy, gives you a chance to try and put the make on Paul."
Mario's mouth tightened, and Tommy knew he had trespassed unforgivably.
"Shut the hell up, willya?"

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A few days later, over coffee in the Reddicks' trailer, Ina said, "Tommy, the show will be breaking up in a week or two. You and Matt won't be back next year, will you?"
"I don't think so, no."
Ina laid her hand on his arm. "Listen, we make a good team, don't we? You and I?"
Tommy started to toss back a flippant remark, then realized, incredulous, that the woman was looking up at him intently, her face flushed. Her lips were moist; her flared nostrils disgusted him a little. Gently he picked her hand off his arm.
"Aren't you sort of leaving Paul out of this?"
She gave him a sudden hard glance before dropping her lashes and his disgust deepened. If she had made an honest pitch, either way, he would have known how to deal with it. He could handle women who threw themselves at him; good-looking boys in tights got used to being looked at hungrily by older women. And he could have handled some kind of business proposition, however unwelcome, with some attempt at tact. But when they came tangled together like this he hardly knew whether to be dismayed or amused.
"With someone really good I'd have a ' chance to get somewhere. Paul's only fit for this mud-show circuit, so he

keeps me stuck here. But our marriage has been washed up for a long time—you know what I mean?"
Sex-starved, too. Tommy abruptly thought about Mario's guess regarding Paul Reddick. He said helplessly, casting about for words that would neither offend her nor compromise himself, "Well, it would be up to Matt." And oh, man, he thought, what a hot potato that is to pitch him!
She moved closer to him, almost pressing herself against his arm, almost snuggling against him. "I don't think your brother likes me. But you do, don't you?"
Christ! Tommy thought in furious embarrassment, and swiftly remembered a day with Lambeth, years ago. For the first time he had the sympathy for Mario he had been too young, too inexperienced, to feel then.
I gave the girl something else to think about, and now maybe that particular hunk of gossip will curl up and die for good. Easiest lay I ever had.
But even while the thought crossed his mind he rejected it. He said, gently and neutrally, "Sure, Ina. Only Matt and I both think a lot of Paul. He might get the wrong idea."
She got the message and backed away, her eyes wide in a fair imitation of righteous indignation. "You fresh little punk! I make you a decent business proposition, and you insult a respectable married woman!"
"Listen, I didn't mean to insult anybody—"
Abruptly she backed away, snapping her fingers. He saw the memory surface in her eyes.
"Santellis. I knew there was something. You're the ones the Waylands ran off the lot. Morals charge."

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Tommy was shaking and cold. He said evenly, "There were about four Versions of that story got around, Ina. If you or Paul would like to hear ours, you can have it after the show." He added, "Thanks for the coffee," and left. Hell, I shoulda given her what she was asking for! He had to tell Mario, and Mario's reaction was predictable.
"I told you that jane was poison."
"You did. And you were absolutely right. Now what the hell do we do? Let her fill Blanding full of crap? His favorite phrase is 'This here is a clean show.' He wouldn't know a grifter if one of them came up and bit him—I don't think he even knows those guys on the midway are stealing him blind—but something like this—well, you can figure."
Mario put his chin in his hands. "I hate to do this to Paul,

but I figure the best thing to do is jump the show. You shouldn't be so damn attractive to women!"
"You used to say it was a professional asset."
"I used to say a lot of goddamn rubbish," Mario snapped with sudden violence. "I had Ina tagged as a bad case of hot pants before I'd been with the show a week!"
"Look, if I clear out—"
Mario drew a deep breath. "The season's only got a week, ten days to run anyhow. Go ahead—I'll pack up while you hitch the trailer." With that sudden, absurd hilarity, he added, "Kid, getting thrown out of a place like this—hell, now we got noplace to go but up!"

CHAPTER 4

"the old place looks just about the same," Mario commented. Tommy, seeing the sun flash gilt on the windows as they turned in the drive of the Santelli house, remembered when he had sat here before, unable to summon up the courage to go inside. Yet now they were back.
He parked the car behind a large steel-blue Chrysler in the driveway, wondering who in the family had a new car. He set the brake that held the green trailer. They had sold Mario's battered old car the night they jumped the Bland-ing show, using Tommy's to drive home, and to Tommy this, more than verbal pledges and promises, more than any act of love, marked the point of no return, the burned bridges.
"Well," said Mario, "let's give them a chance to welcome back the prodigals."
They went up the steps together and rang the bell. After a minute there was a stir of steps inside and Joe Santelli, sweatered, barefoot, squinting against the sun, was staring at them, incredulous.
"Matt! And—for God's sake! Tommy?" He reached out and hugged Mario hard, giving Tommy his free hand. "I might have known you two would turn up together someday! Come in, kids, come in. Welcome home!" He slammed the door and shouted, "Lucia! Come see who's here!"
Lucia appeared at the back of the hall, then ran with awkward haste to fling herself on her son.

"Hello, Lu. The prodigal returns."

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She said in a muffled voice, "Well, it's about time. Matt, let me look at you!" But when she raised her head, her eyes were dry, her lips curved in the old self-possessed smile. "Thin as a lath, of course. You look like a bum."
"We drove all night," Mario apologized. "Didn't stop to clean up, or anything."
A tall teenager—it must be Clay, Tommy thought; he's about the right age—and a slender dark-haired girl of eleven or twelve, whom Tommy did not recognize at all, came into the hallway. Lucia clung briefly to Mario's arm, then released him. Mario put his hands on the dark girl's shoulders. "Hello, Tessa, remember me?"
She nodded shyly. "Where you been, Uncle Matt?"
"Oh, around." He kissed her gently on the cheek, and said hello to Clay.
Lucia gave Tommy her hand. "It's good to have you home," she said. "Come inside, boys." And that was that.
The big living room still smelled of smoke and driftwood and good cooking. Tessa said matter-of-factly, "I'd better set a couple more places at the table."
Joe poured them each a glass of wine. There were some new cushions on the sofa, but otherwise the old room was unchanged.
"What's Angelo doing these days?" Mario asked.
"Stunt work in the movies, what else?" Joe replied.
"Barbara's in the movies, too," Clay said.
"Dancing?" Mario looked interested.
Lucia said scornfully, "Johnny and Stella offered her a place in their act. But she'd rather dance! She and another girl have an apartment out on White Knoll Drive—that's the way young people are now! Personally, I think an unmarried girl ought to be under her family's roof, but it's not for me to say!"
Her look at Joe was aggrieved, and Tommy knew that the old arguments were still alive.
Tommy asked Clay, "What about you?"
"I'd like to fly, but Dad says I'm too young to start."
Mario chuckled. "I was on a bar when I was ten."
"Well," Joe said, "if you ever stuck around long enough, you could teach Clay. I can't, and Angelo won't."
"But now tell us where you've been, Matt," Lucia demanded. "Didn't you even see my ad in Billboard, all those years?"
"No. I just sort of bummed around. Worked carnivals,

spent a year in Mexico. I was working a small show when Tommy turned up, and we jumped the show and came home."
"But why—" Lucia broke off at the sound of a car in the drive, and ran to the hallway. They heard her voice, high and excited, calling, "Angelo! Angelo, guess who just turned up!"
Angelo was heavier and softer, and there were lines in his face that had not been there before; otherwise he was very much the old Angelo. He hugged them both by turns. Tommy's shoulders he held an extra moment, saying, "Kid, I don't know when I've been so glad to see anybody! For God's sake, kid, what made you walk out like that?"

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Tommy said uneasily, "I was a dumb little snot of a kid. Can you let it go at that? It's all water under the bridge anyhow."
Angelo finally nodded. "Okay," he said, "but how come you and Matt teamed up again? How'd you find him?"
"Pure dumb luck," Tommy said. It was all he would ever tell them. "I just happened to be driving through the town. He was working a flying act. They took me on for a while, but Mrs. Reddick started making hungry eyes at me and Paul Reddick was too nice a guy for that, so we jumped the show."
Angelo chuckled. "Woman trouble is sheer hell in a show. That was why I always liked to travel with Terry. If your wife's right there watching, you've got a good excuse to brush off all the dames with hot—" He glanced at Tessa and amended, "With an eye out for adventure." And Tommy knew that without saying a word other than the truth, he had nevertheless laid a false trail that would last for some time. We jumped the show because of woman trouble. It was the kind of thing Angelo wanted to hear.
After supper Mario diffidently broached his plan.
"We don't have to stay here if we're in the way. But we need a place to work out. We're thinking of going on the road again this spring, if we can find a catcher."
"Of course you'll stay here," Lucia said promptly.
"Angelo, I don't suppose I could talk you into coming back and working with the two of us?"
"No, I don't think so," Angelo said, smiling.
Clay's voice was bashful. "Any chance I could work out
with you?"

"Well, okay," Mario said, "but I'm a devil to work with. Just ask Tommy."
"He seems to have survived," Clay said, and Tommy laughed.
"Yeah. I survived. Somewhat battered, but I survived."
"But you'll work with us, Angelo? Even if we can't argue you into catching, you'll help us work out the details of the act?"
Angelo shook his head. "You know how I feel about that And I was never much of a trainer."
"Angelo, you taught me the triple!"
"Like I said a hundred times, I never did. I just put up with you while you worked it out for yourself. You're the trainer; why not teach Tom your big tricks and work a straight two act, you catching? You used to work good together in those duo routines. Hell, the percentages are against you, Matt—at your size, you're going to end up as a catcher sooner or later."
An agonized echo resonated in Tommy's mind and memory: Here's how much I care. If we ever have to, I'll quit flying and catch for you.
But Mario only shook his head. "Our old room empty?" he asked Lucia.
"Sure. Or any of the rooms up there. One thing we're not short of is room."
The familiar upstairs hall was a little shabbier, but the room with the striped wallpaper looked just as it had looked six years ago. Lucia said, opening the door, "You could move into Papa's room downstairs, if you wanted to. It's all torn up, though. Needs some paint, and the plaster mended."

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Mario grinned. "Forget it. Tom and I have been bunking together in that little trailer of mine, and this is the wide open spaces compared to that! No, seriously, Lu, don't fuss."
"Suit yourselves. If you really don't mind doubling up for a couple of days, I'll find another room later for one of you." Lucia kissed her son's cheek, and after a moment kissed Tommy, too.
"It's good to have you home."
Mario gave her a hard hug. "Lu, why don't you come on the road with us? I bet you still could!"
"Go on with you," she said, laughing, "I'm old and fat, and I like my comforts."

"Lu, I didn't want to ask in front of the family, but—how is Liss? Is she all right? Is she happy?"
Lucia's dark eyes were grave. "Who can say what's happy? She's settled. She and David have a nice house outside the city, Davey's in school, Cleo starts this year. He makes good money, they get along, they don't throw the dishes. Who knows, maybe she did better with her life than any of us knows about."
"Gesu! Is that all you can say?"
"I don't know what you want me to say, Matt." Lucia turned to leave the room, but hesitated in the doorway. "Don't you even want to know? Susan was here, last summer, with Suzy, for a few days. Suzy is beautiful, Matt. She looks just like Liss when Liss was a baby. She and Liss's Cleo could be twins."
Mario turned away, his mouth a tight line. "If she looks like Liss it's only because Susan looks like Liss. Nothing to do with me."
"Matthew, Gesu e Maria, that is a terrible thing to say!" She burst into a torrent of voluble Italian. Mario frowned.
"Listen, Mother," he said, and because Tommy had never heard him call Lucia "Mother" before, he felt shocked, although Mario's voice was perfectly gentle. "It may be terrible, but it happens to be true. Suzy is not my daughter. And if you wonder how I know that, I know it in the only way I could possibly know such a thing."
Lucia actually blushed. She said something in Italian, but Mario returned tersely, "Yes, and I will say it in plain English. Susan is a tramp, and Suzy is a bastard—is that plain enough for you? I was willing to keep Suzy and she'd never have known I wasn't her father, and since you say she looks like all the girls in the family, it probably would have worked out all right. But Susan didn't want it that way, so I gave her her divorce and her kid, period. And if I'd known she would have the nerve to come here I would have broken her neck first."
"Matthew Gardner, I will not have that kind of talk under my father's roof! Marriage is a holy sacrament. In the eyes of God, you and Susan are man and wife forever—"
"Lu, for God's sake, if you look at it that way, Susan and I were never man and wife at all, then; she divorced her first husband a year before I ever met her! And isn't it about

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thirty years too late to start getting sentimental about children?"
"Oh. Matt—" Lucia's face, still beautiful, crumpled. She spread her hands, and the gesture, so resigned, so beautiful, moved Tommy close to tears. "I only hope, Matt, that your children may be more forgiving than mine ever were. You've made me pay for it, all of you, God knows."
"Lucia, cara Lucia—"
"You called me 'Mother' a minute ago. But you had to be angry enough to kill me, first!"
Mario smiled, but he looked savage. "When we were young enough to want to call you that, Lu darling, you taught us to think of 'Mother' as a dirty word."
She flinched, and he put his hand on her arm. "You hit a nerve and I hit back, that's all. Forgive me?"
She tightened her fingers around his. "Of course. But— figlio—is it going to give you back the kind of mother you should have had, to take away Suzy's chances of growing up with a good father and a family?"
Mario shook his head wearily. "Hell of a good father I'd make," he said. "No, of course not, Lu. But nobody gets to start over. Suzy'll have to take her chances, I guess, the way we all did."
A few days later Tommy and Mario were downstairs, in the change room, sorting through the boxed wardrobe of the last season of the Flying Santellis. The room smelled dusty and closed, a mixture of mothballs and that indefinable smell of stale sweat and stale cloth. Once, Tommy thought, this had been the heart of the house, the living center; now it was empty, lifeless. The bulletin board was empty and covered with dust, the walls bare. Mario stared at the room morosely.
"I guess the Flying and Reform School has shut up shop for good. We'll set the flying rig tomorrow—get Joe and Angelo down to help with the wires."
Tommy nodded. "Better get out the mechanic, too, with all the kids around. Do you really want to take them on, Mario?"
It had happened like this: A year ago, three of Clay's schoolmates had formed an acrobatic team, and having advanced from skilled tumbling and horizontal-bar routines, they had started looking for someone to teach them trapeze

work. Angelo had curtly refused, but a few days ago Clay had mentioned it, and Mario's reaction had been "Why not?"
Now he said, slowly, "Well, I have to teach Clay anyhow —Papa Tony would have wanted me to. And if I have to have one teenager, I might as well have half a dozen."
"I don't suppose the big one would make us a catcher?"
"Not if I'm any judge. Oh, we might keep him in mind, but the thing to do is keep the three of them together, let them build up their own act." The "big one," Phil Lasky, was seventeen; the others, Clay's friends, were Bobby and Carl Meredith, fourteen and fifteen.
"You think Clay's going to be any good, Mario?"
"Too soon to say. He's interested, that's the main thing. But he might lose it, like Barbie did. Now, if she wanted to fly with us, I'd take her in the act; she

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used to be good enough. But she doesn't. It looks like the family's right out of it. You know, I tried to get Tessa up on the ropes the other night—can you believe she was scared to try? Lu said she'd always been afraid of heights, but when she was a little tyke, two, three years old, I was always hauling her down from somewhere. Once she climbed the aerial ladder all by herself. Now she doesn't even remember."
"The way Angelo feels, it's probably just as well."
"I'm going to have my hands full with those boys, anyhow."
"They seem to like you already."
Mario gave him a sharp look. "Still thinking about the Chandler kid?"
"Hell, no!"
"I thought maybe you didn't trust me with young boys."
"I'd be a fine one to talk, wouldn't I?"
"Hey—" Mario tilted his head sideways to listen. "Who's that on the stairs?"
The door of the practice room opened with a bang, and someone called, "Matt?" Then there was a rush of heels across the once-sacrosanct practice-room floor, the change-room door flew open, and Liss flung herself into Mario's arms, with such violence that he reeled and took a step backward before he could get his balance.
"Oh, Matt! All these years, I was so scared—I was afraid you were lying dead somewhere. When Lucia called I got in my car and drove straight down here ..." She buried her

dark head in his shoulder. "All those years, never knowing ..."
Mario's arms tightened around her and he looked over her head, his face drawn and deathly white. Then he took her shoulders in his hands and held her off at arm's length.
"Take it easy, sweetie, I'm here and I'm okay. Heck, this is a fine thing, bawling all over me! It's not a funeral!"
She wiped her streaming face. "Matt, how could you? All those years without even a word or a postcard, and then you never even let me know you were back—I didn't know till Lucia called me yesterday—"
"Sweetie, I—I would have. I guess I just didn't know what to say to you. Look, I'm here, okay?"
She clung to his hand. "Matt, you look so thin, so gaunt— and your hair's going gray—"
He twirled one of the curls at her temple around his finger. "Look who's talking, sweetie. Look, I would have got in touch with you, I just couldn't—couldn't talk with you over the phone. How are you, darling? Aren't you even going to say hello to Tom?"
She clung to his arm, trying to remember her manners. "Hello, Tommy. I heard you were in the Army. You're all grown up, aren't you? I didn't know it was you." She gave him her hand. It felt very soft and looked well-kept and fine, the nails long, rounded, polished. She seemed taller, then Tommy realized it was only that she was wearing high-heeled shoes; he had never seen her in anything but ballet or flying slippers. She was rounder, full-bodied, the delicate curve of her waist blurred, more womanly, and she had

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cut her hair short, in a soft feathery bob, the long pigtail gone. The heart-shaped face would always be lovely, the slender hands always graceful—like Lucia's, Tommy thought—but she had grown soft; in a few years she would be like Lucia, perhaps even heavier. Tommy felt irrationally sad; he would have liked to remember her swallow-grace, her flying long hair and delicate gestures, without the memory of an older Liss to blur them.
"Lucia told me you two are going on the road this summer."
"If we can find a catcher."
She smiled shyly, and for a moment there was a flicker of the old lass in her eyes. "Sounds like fun. I'll never go back,

of course, but I like thinking there are still a couple of Santellis flying, somewhere."
Mario picked up her slender fingers and began playing with them, sliding his own hands around the nails, touching each knuckle in turn. "Do you want to come back, sweetie?"
"Oh, God, Matt, I don't know," she said, and Tommy saw her hand stop, go stiff, a small taut claw. "Don't talk about it."
"Why not? You still could, you know. I laid off four years, and I'm back. Liss, if you want to—"
Suddenly she looked terrified. "It's too late, Matt. It was too late when I married David, only I didn't know it. I tried, but it was too late. I don't even want to think about it again."
His face was grim. "It looks like I wasn't the only one in the family to—to drop right out if sight."
"It's different. It's different for a man. Matt, don't, please. Maybe I was—was wrong, but it's done and I'm stuck with it, and I just can't go through that anymore. Please, Matt. If you love me—"
He picked up her hand again. It was so small it was completely hidden in his own. "Sweetie—" he murmured, and for a minute Tommy thought he would cry. Then he drew a long sigh and let her hand go.
Liss asked, "Have you seen Suzy?"
Mario shook his head. "Lu was on me about that. Don't you start."
"She's working with Starr's again, Lu told me," Liss said. "She looks so much younger than I do—she's kept her figure. Susan, I mean. And Suzy, she's such a little doll, she looks so much like Cleo Maria. I gave her a lot of Cleo's things— after all, she's family."
"Liss, do you mind not talking about it?"
Her lips curled up, but she wasn't smiling, not quite. "So that makes two of us. But, Matt, Suzy's the only other Santelli grandchild. You shouldn't have let Susan keep Suzy."
"How the hell could I raise a kid on my own? Would you give your kids to Lucia to raise for you? Well, would you?"
She was silent, and again, for a moment, Tommy saw the old Liss as she twisted one of the short curls around her finger. "I don't know that they'd be so much worse off. And if I'd seen it six years ago—" She shook her head,

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violently. "That hasn't got anything to do with it. Suzy could live with us. Dave likes kids—he'd be happy if I had half a dozen. And

Suzy looks so much like Cleo, she'd fit in just fine. Or—" Liss hesitated, then said, "Stella would just about die to have her. She can't have any, you know, and they can't even adopt one, living all over the map the way they do. She's even tried to get Johnny to settle down somewhere so they can get to adopt a baby." Her mouth twisted and she added, "Come to think of it. I know of a couple she could have, if I could figure out some way to give them to her. Oh, Christ, I sound like Lu. don't I? I guess the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence."

Mario said into the long, awkward silence, "Where are Johnny and Stella now, sweetie?"

She seemed relieved, too, at the abrupt change of subject. "You mean you didn't see the big circus spectacular on television? A thing called Circus Days and Nights? Johnny produced it, and Stella was one of the stars. Didn't you see it, last summer?"

"The only time I ever saw a television set was in a bar. But you can tell us all about it later, sweetie," he said, standing up and looking at his watch. "Tom and I have to get the rigs set."

Liss stayed for four days. On the last day she came down to the practice room and stood beside Tommy, watching Mario with the four boys, Clay and the three boys from Clay's school that he was teaching.

Observing him from a grownup level, Tommy realized that Mario was a born teacher. He had the rare gift of being familiar and informal, without losing for a moment the essential teacher-pupil relationship. He could laugh with the boys, tease them, make jokes and listen to theirs—and yet. when he snapped his fingers and said, "Okay, kids, time to get some work done," they instantly settled into serious attention. Tommy had not yet heard any one of them talk back. Liss watched them swinging, one after another, and their first clumsy drops into the net. "I don't think any of them will be any good, not really. Not even Clay."

"Oh, well, they get a kick out of it. And it's good for Mario, to be around them." Daily, Tommy could see the old Mario emerging from the taut, shattered stranger he had become over the years. He was still tense, too quiet, nervously explosive, but. working with the youngsters, he was more like himself. Liss was watching Mario fasten a mechanic around Bobby

Meredith's waist. "I can see that. Matt ought to have a dozen boys."

Tommy gave a guilty start, but Liss was watching Mario, with a serene smile. He realized that Liss had meant, he ought to have a dozen sons.

"It's really sort of tragic, you know, Tommy. He was the best of the Santellis, and he's going to be the last. He has no children except the baby. Joe's kids don't want to fly— Barbie's quit already, and for Clay it's just a game. And Johnny won't have any kids because Stella can't, after that miscarriage she had. So the Santellis, four generations, reached their height in Matt, and it's all going to end with him."

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"Well," said Tommy, "at least they won't taper out into mediocrity after him. Like that acting family—three terrific stars in one generation, and then their kids were all nobodies."
Liss touched his hand and said, "I guess you'll have to be his son. The only one he'll ever have, looks like."
That too, thought Tommy, watching Mario on the platform. And everything else he doesn't have. He's all the family I've got. All the family I'll ever have.
Tommy came downstairs one afternoon to find Angelo in the practice room.
"Matt's not home?"
"He's upstairs, setting a rat trap for Lucia."
"Tom, I can get you a few days' work on the lot taking falls, if you want to register for stunt work. Each call pays a hundred dollars."
"Thanks. We could use the money, Lord knows, with what riggings cost"
"All right. You'll have to come down and register with Equity, and join the union." Angelo sat down on the floor, leaning his back against the wall. "Feel like telling me what all the row was about, years ago? When you walked out?"
Tommy stared at the polished floor. He felt foolish standing over Angelo, so he sat down beside him.
"I got sore because he signed up with Fortunati and couldn't. I was jealous."
Angelo shrugged. "Skip it. You always covered for him, didn't you? I guess I ought to thank you for bringing him home, however it happened. Lucia was beginning to get gray

hairs over it. I wonder about it, though, Tom. You two were always such good friends, and suddenly—wham!"
"Skip it, Angelo. I was just a dumb kid."
"You know." Angelo said, with heavy-handed kindness, "You could've come here. This is your home, too, you know. Papa Tony always meant it that way. You were part of the family like any of us."
"He was always so good to me. I'll never forget him."
"Was it for Papa's sake, then—that you hunted him up and brought him home?"
Embarrassed again, Tommy shrugged. "I never worked with anyone but Mario, and I wanted to get back into flying. Unless I wanted to be an Army career man, it's all I know."
"And that isn't so good, either."
"Well, you quit us and we lived through it." As on another long-ago occasion, Angelo's probing, well-meant though it was, aroused exasperation and distress. Dammit, Angelo, quit it! I know what you're trying to get me to say. You want to know if I broke up with Matt because I found out he was queer; you'd love to hear me say he made a pass at me and I walked out. Only it hadn't been like that, and he couldn't ever say that, and it made him angry and faintly sick.
"I feel like we owe you something, Tom."
"If anybody owes anybody anything, it's me. I walked out on my contract. Nobody kicked me out. Mario begged me not to go."
"Just the same, I feel responsible. I let you pal around with him that way."

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Tommy wondered how much longer he could contain himself without exploding. "Like I said, I walked out in a tantrum and was too stubborn to come back." Vaguely, like a half-remembered toothache, he felt the painful memory of that night: the streets he had walked without seeing them, lost, finally winding up in a coffee shop where Eddie Keno's had been the only familiar face—he had wanted to run away, and at the end of the night—He cut off the memory, a clean slice, out of sight, over a cliff, forgotten. Angelo stared fixedly at him, but finally his heavy shoulders went up and down in a shrug.
"Okay, kid. If that's the way you want it."
"That's the way it was."
"I feel guilty about it," Angelo said. "I was responsible for

you. Legally and morally. I never should have left Woods-Wayland without taking you with me."
"I wouldn't have gone."
"You'd have had to. You were under contract to the family, not to the circus, and by then I was your guardian. Don't you think I know it was Matt got all you kids fired? I'm not saying I believe all that filthy smut Coe Wayland was peddling"—he looked at Tommy sharply—"but it was Matt socked him and got you all in bad."
"If Matt hadn't socked him, I would have. Or Johnny. He was drunk. None of us would have gone on with him."
"Just the same. If I'd stayed with the act, or taken you with me—"
Tommy punched his arm lightly. "Forget it, Angelo."
"Matt had a rough time, too, kid. I'm not defending him, no way, but when he came up to the house that night, and found you were gone—"
"Angelo, this is all old stuff. Can't we drop it? We've been over it and over it!"
"Okay, okay, kid. I'll get you some stunt work. Like I say, you'll have to join the union."
"Thanks. I can use it." But he was relieved when Angelo left the practice room.
When Mario came down some time later, he asked, "What did Angelo want, anyhow?"
"Asked if I wanted to make some money doing stunt work. I told him sure."
"I wish to hell you could talk him into coming back and catching for us. He won't give me the time of day, and he's always done damn near anything you asked him to."
Tommy retorted amiably, "Jealous?" before he realized Mario was in no mood for this kind of teasing. "I did mention it, but he's not interested. Hell, Mario, he's got the same right not to fly that we do to keep on flying."
"Yeah, I know." He stared moodily at the wall. "It's not that I mind catching for you when we practice. But damn it, it isn't getting us anywhere, and I want to get back to flying."
If we ever have to, Lucky, I'll quit flying and catch for you. If it's the only way we can stay together.
He had said it then, and meant it: I wouldn't let you.

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He would never have asked it. Not even if it had been willingly offered, a gift of love. And Mario did not even re-

member the pledge; yet it was being exacted of him. Tommy looked thoughtfully up at the rigging ropes.
"How much do you weigh, Mario? Exactly, that is?"
"Hundred forty, dressed in shorts. Why?"
"Because I weigh almost that much myself, and I'm as big as Angelo. Any reason I can't catch for you? Papa Tony did, sometimes."
Mario blinked. "A little guy like you?"
"I'm not that little. You're tall and skinny and you look big, but you've got small bones. My feet are bigger than yours, and my hands. Johnny taught Stella to catch him. And he is bigger than she is."
Mario shook his head. "I always stuck to what Barney Parrish said. That the catcher had to be big enough to take the weight. Anyway, I thought you hated catching."
"No more than you do," Tommy retorted, though it was true, he loved to fly and had had little interest in catching. "I don't know if I could hold you on the big tricks, but anyway you aren't doing the triple now. But until we get a regular catcher, I'm going to do my fair share of the catching."
Mario looked troubled. "Lucky, do you really want to do this?"
"Fair's fair," Tommy said. "I'll do my share."
But he felt a sudden dizzy apprehension when he began practicing the steady, head-down pendulum swing which was the first step of a catcher's work. He had mastered it once, but had forgotten. Lucia came down to practice with them, to handle the bars for Mario. Over Tommy's protests, she insisted that the catch trapeze should be reinforced with a "cradle"—the foot brace used by women catchers. With the feet tucked through the brace, the catcher was less likely to lose his grip than with the leg hold of experienced men. Time enough for that, Lucia insisted, when he was used to the weight. For some days he only worked at timing his swing to the empty trapeze, with Lucia calling the beats. Finally, after many tries, Mario said, "Okay, let's go."
Tommy had forgotten that the catcher could not see the flyer's hands, only the loom of the hurtling body. Nevertheless, with some old precision clicking off clockwork awareness inside him, his hands went out by instinct, and their wrists locked together with a slight jerk.
"See," he quipped, "nothing to it." He thought, We move

as if we had only one heartbeat, and instantly forgot it again. He was startled to discover that supporting Mario's weight seemed no harder than supporting his own; the strain on shoulder muscles was fierce, but momentary.
It took him much longer to master the second half of the catcher's work: releasing the flyer at the precise instant for his return to the bar. Lucia watched them work for days, in skeptical silence, and her silence was disquieting. Tommy wished she would say something, if only to criticize. As in the early days of his training with the Santellis, he was always achingly tired,

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shaking with fatigue, his arms and wrists always sore; the unaccustomed muscles would not harden fully to the strain for years.

Angelo was as good as his word, and Tommy worked for five days as stuntman in a slapstick comedy, falling down ladders and into bathtubs for the comedy star. He wondered why Mario had never tried this work, and it occurred to him for the first time that perhaps, with an arrest record, some doors might be closed to Mario. But Mario, as it happened, brought up the subject of his own accord.

It was late, and Tommy was half asleep in their room— periodically Lucia spoke of fixing up another room, but somehow never got around to it—when he realized that Mario was not beside him, but standing, silent, at the window.

"What's the matter?" Tommy did not know anything was the matter until he heard himself ask; on the surface of his mind he would have thought Mario had simply gotten up to go to the bathroom, or for a cigarette. Not until the words echoed in the dark room did Tommy realize that yes, something was wrong, and the awareness of it had simply not surfaced before.

"Tommy, do you really like stunt work?"

"Sure. And I can use the money, God knows."

"Are we that broke?"

"Well, every little bit helps. And if we have to mount our own act, we'll need it. We really need a new net this year."

Mario said with suppressed violence, "Trying to show me up?"

Tommy sat bolt upright in bed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

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"Makes you feel good, doesn't it, knowing you're doing something I can't?"

Tommy stared at him, still not understanding. "Look,

would you rather I hang around sponging off your family? I'm not going to be anybody's kept boy, Mario. We're just going to have to accept the fact that unless we're working together we're going to be separated now and then. I wouldn't make a fuss if you went off and taught at the ballet school again. Why are you getting on my back about this?"

"But did you think—" Mario scrabbled in the night table for a cigarette. "Is that what you think, that I was mad because Angelo got you a job and not me?"

Tommy had, without verbalizing it, but now he didn't "No. But it's a cinch something's bothering you."

Mario made a funny sound that might have been a laugh. "I misjudged Angelo, then. I thought he wouldn't be able to resist telling you all about it— that I chickened out on it That I'm scared to hell to have you doing all that stuff, trying to break your goddamn neck . . ." His voice went off into a thin croak. "Not that it matters, but it's a neck I happen to think a lot about. Worry about."

Tommy couldn't manage a word. If Mario had suddenly kicked a window out of the house he would have been less amazed.

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"Angelo's been doing stunt work every year—riding rodeo, taking falls—since there were movie stuntmen. He got me some calls once. About the time I—got thrown out of college. And"—Tommy heard him swallow in the darkness— "I panicked. Muffed it. Scared shitless, that's all. Chicken."
"Jesus," Tommy whispered, "and you spent five years working on a triple. And they call it—what is it?—salto mortale."
"That's different. Not the same thing—not the same thing at all! I know what I'm doing on the bar, know just where every swing will take me. But that business of coming down hard, all sprawled, every which way—" His voice faded out. "I can't take it. It's .just plain cowardice."
"What the hell, Mario! A fall is a fall—you do it by instinct!"
"That's what Angelo tried to tell me," Mario said thinly in the dark, "but I can't seem to get the message across from my brain to my—my muscles, or my guts, or whatever's in charge."
Reason told Tommy that he had hit a raw nerve, a pocket of unexpected illogic, and that he should leave it alone; but he couldn't. "Go on," he said, trying to defuse the

tension by clowning in the old way, "you just can't make yourself do anything that doesn't look pretty. You need the spotlight and the applause before you risk your neck."
The dresser drawer squeaked as Mario pulled it open. "Probably you're right," he said, and his voice was neutral, flat.
"Where you going?"
"Nowhere. Go to sleep."
"Mario, I didn't mean—"
"Shut up and go to sleep." Whatever he said now, Tommy knew, would only compound his offense, so he stretched out again, and in the long silence suddenly knew that to say nothing would be worse. Mario's withdrawals, his sudden let-me-alones, were a reflex—probably from a childhood when any urgent need for attention or sympathy had so often had to be shelved until after the show or after the season. Now sympathy only disturbed Mario; it seemed very necessary that he should never seem to demand attention or warmth. And he repelled it most when he needed it most. He pulled on jeans and shoes and was already out the door when Tommy realized this. He got up and went after him.
"Come back here, you idiot! You know I didn't mean anything. Don't be a damn fool. Hell, Mario, do I have to make up a list of every damn thing I'm scared of?"
Mario relaxed, laughed, and let Tommy bring him back to the bed. But as they stretched out to sleep, Tommy thought, wretchedly, I never tell you the one thing I'm afraid of most. You, sometimes. And he knew things would never be right between them until he could tell Mario this, too.

CHAPTER 5

it was the last day of the old year. Barbara had come for dinner, but even to Tommy the Santelli house seemed empty. Lucia, wandering back and forth from living room to kitchen, remarked half a dozen times to anyone handy

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that it hardly seemed like New Year at all. She called Mario in to open a bottle of wine, as if determined to make the occasion as festive as possible anyway, but the house was full of ghosts. Mario, his face drawn and silent, looked as if he could see them in every corner.

But neither of them, as they went up to put on clean shirts and jackets for dinner, spoke any of the missing names. They were starting down the stairs when Mario cocked his head to one side to listen.
"Is that a car in the drive? Maybe Liss and David drove down from San Francisco. Even that would make the New Year for Lu." The doorbell rang, and Mario lengthened his stride. "But Liss wouldn't ring . . ."
Lucia was already in the hall. Halfway down the stairs, Tommy heard her wordless cry of welcome and delight, saw her caught up into Johnny's arms. When he let her go, she was radiant. Tommy had always suspected that if Lucia had a favorite among her children it was Johnny. Even troubled as she had been by Mario's long absence and disappearance, she had not reacted like this to his homecoming.
"Matt, come and see—"
"Matt? Is he here?" Johnny let his mother go, strode to the foot of the stairs, and caught his brother in a fierce hug.
"Hey, fella, I always knew you'd turn up someday," he said, holding Mario at arm's length and staring at him. "Where in hell you been? Jail or someplace like that?"
"Someplace like that. Tell you all about it someday, huh? Good to see you again, Jock."
Johnny held out his hand to Tommy.
"Hi, kid. Where you been all this time?"
"Army," Tommy said. Johnny was still thin, bright-eyed, restless; he looked like a college boy. "What you been doing?"
"You mean you didn't see us on television? Network show, broadcast everywhere, big spectacular—Circus Days and Nights, they called it."
"Liss said something about it," Mario said. "Only I wasn't where I could watch any television."
"Or anywhere else," Johnny said, and he sounded aggrieved. "You had no business staying away so long. We did a special about Barney Parrish, and the triple. Jim isn't flying now, so you and Simon Barry are the only ones doing it, and he's got no style! I wanted you for that, the worst way, and I couldn't locate you!"
"For heaven's sake, Johnny, don't start scolding him before you've been in the house ten minutes," Stella chided. "Hello, Mario, I'm glad you're back!"
Johnny insisted, "But if I could have located you, you

could have had coast-to-coast exposure on television, could have made a big comeback, with the triple—"
Mario shook his head. "I haven't done a triple since I split with Lionel."
"You haven't—" Johnny stared at him, his mouth open. "Let him alone, Johnny," Stella said sharply. "Go and get the luggage out of the car."

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She held out both hands to Tommy. She was expensively dressed, her hair swept up, and for the first time that Tommy could remember, she was wearing makeup. If he had seen her somewhere, he thought, he wouldn't have recognized her. But as he took her hands, recognition came: hard, callused, a flyer's hands, dried with resin. The nails were still ragged, bitten short. For all the years, the success, the expensive clothes, she was still Stella, his Stella, as when they had been two alien children in a strange and bewildering family. He hugged her tight, with a sense of real homecoming.

There were still many empty places at the long family table, but Lucia said with satisfaction, looking down to Joe at the far end, that it was just like old times.

"Last year was dreadful," she said. "Johnny couldn't get away from New York, and Angelo was on location in New Mexico. And we didn't even know where Matt was. Or Tommy."

Tommy found himself wondering about Lucia Gardner. Mario had told him, once, that although her marriage had lasted only a scant seven years, she had never even considered marrying again. Papa Tony had said it, once: Our family eats people up alive. It had eaten up Lucia. At least, she had preferred it to a family of her own. Tommy reflected soberly that he had done the same thing: He had chosen of his own free will to come back to an adopted family, not to start his own. Joe, at the head of the table, was pouring the wine. The world might change, but the Santellis went on and on.

Lucia asked, "What are you going to do this summer, Johnny? Are you going back to Starr's?"

"No future in that. The circus as we knew it is dead, Lucia."

"I don't believe that," she protested.

"Doesn't matter whether you believe it or not, it's true. There's Starr's, and there are eight or ten little traveling shows wandering around in the boondocks, and that's that.

Who wants to cart around a whole circus by railroad when every zoo and entertainer in the world is right at the other end of your television switch? The movies killed off vaudeville, and television is going to finish off it—and the circus— for good and all."

"Television?" She stared at him, disbelieving. "Television is where the future of entertainment is going. Lu."

"No!" she protested. "Who will want to sit at home and watch a little box when they could go out with their family? Television, it is only a fad. I will not have one in the house." "You wait and see, Lu. Ten years from now, every family will have a television set just the way they have a car and a radio."

"Oh, sure," Angelo scoffed. "They were saying ten years ago that the helicopter would replace the family car, there'd be one parked on every roof!"

Lucia protested, "You cannot tell me that a day will come when no one is interested in the strange, the unusual, things no one else can do—"

"I didn't say that. It's the old-style shows that are going. Starr's already gave up their tent, or didn't you hear? They're only going to play in big arenas now, like Madison Square Garden. There are a few tent shows out in the

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backwoods but they won't last long. How many shows are listed in Billboard now?" He didn't wait for her answer. "And twenty years ago there were over a hundred. See? People's idea of entertainment, that's what's changing. But there's always going to be some interest in acrobats; the softer people's lives get, the more they go in for spectacular endurance stunts. And television is the perfect showcase for that."
Mario said good-naturedly, "Then maybe I'm not out of a job after all."
"Hell, no. Only you'll be doing it on television. I signed for another circus show sometime this spring—same people who put up the money for Circus Days and Nights. How about it, Matt, you ready to get back into flying?"
"Provided we can get a catcher," Mario said, and Johnny nodded.
"No problem. I'll find you one, or work with you myself. You used to be pretty spectacular."
Mario's smile was good-humored. "What difference does it make? On one of those television screens—what are they,

about a foot across?—how the devil can you see the fine points of flying when the flyer's maybe two, three inches high?"
"Yeah, but against that, just think, you got maybe two, three million people watching you! And you know what a close-up lens is? People will be able to see flying close up, the way they never saw it before. And now they have a slow-motion camera—"
"Gimmicky," Angelo said. "Why would anybody want to watch flying in slow motion? Speed's what flying's all about.'" Johnny shook his head vigorously.
"No. You're wrong, Angelo. Listen, they're using it in baseball games, football, so you can see just how a runner slides into a base, how a triple play went when it was really too fast to watch. Remember how every show, we got people asking questions, wanting to know everything, all about how it was done? Now we can show them."
All evening, Johnny bubbled over with energy, enthusiasm, a thousand plans.
"What you need is a manager, Matt. Anybody in the business will tell you I'm about the best there is. While you were away, I worked on a movie, but it didn't pan out—life of Barney Parrish, would you believe? You want to hear something real hokey? What do you think about me doing the triple?"
Mario said, in flat disbelief, "I wouldn't believe it. Not even if I saw it. You? Never."
Lucia said, "Gianni, you are making fun of your brother—"
"Tell him, Angelo," Johnny said.
Angelo laughed and shook his head. "I saw it and I still don't believe it, but that's because I know how it was done. I didn't say anything at the time, Lucia, because I didn't want you to get the idea I was going back to flying. But when they were working on that Parrish movie—the one that fell through—Johnny and I did a few days doubling for the flyers, him flying and me catching."
Lucia said, "You are not going to tell me that you did a triple, Johnny?"
"Nope," Johnny said, "but I sure as heck faked a good one. I did four, five back doubles, then they cut and spliced it together. Pure fake, trick camera work."

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"That does not seem to me honest," Lucia said.

Johnny shrugged. "Show business. Simon Barry did get one triple on film, but my fake looks better than his real one. If I had done a real one, half the audience would have thought I faked it, anyhow."
Mario asked, "What happened to the movie?"
"They never finished it," Johnny said.
"They ran out of money," Angelo added, "and there was trouble with the stuntmen's union. I heard a rumor a while back that they were going to make it again—there's an actor called Bart Reeder who's crazy to do it."
"Well, I don't want any part of it. The damn show's a jinx," Johnny said.
But Mario was frowning, his mind fastened on another detail.
"Bart Reeder? I used to know a guy by that name. Started out on the legitimate stage, then got a few parts in the movies, about the time I lost track of him. I wonder if it's the same guy I used to know."
"I never met him," Johnny said. "I don't know whether he can act his way out of a paper bag, but he's getting a big buildup as a romantic star, playing in bare-bosom historicals with Louise Lanart, and they talk like he was the greatest thing since Valentino. But most actors can-'t act these days, and you've only got to turn on the radio to find out most of the singers can't sing."
"Oh, he's a good actor," Angelo said. "Hell of a good star. Handles himself good, too. I doubled for him in that pirate movie. He didn't really need a double—he could have done his own work—but the studio was afraid he'd tear up that maiden's dream of a face of his."
Johnny threw back his head and guffawed. "Talk about press-agentry! The idea of giving Bart Reeder a buildup as the biggest romantic hero— Just between you and me, he's a real screaming swish, the biggest fag in Hollywood!"
Lucia looked puzzled. "The biggest what?"
Angelo said something in Italian, under his breath, and Lucia blushed.
"Even so," Johnny said, "everything in skirts in Hollywood is screaming over him, from little girls to grandmothers. Next to that, my faking triples hardly seems dishonest at all."
Lucia demanded, her face wrinkling in dismay, "Matt, how did you come to know a man like that?"
Mario said, carefully offhand, "I'm not even sure it's the

same guy. He used to come down and work out at the ballet school, took some of the classes in acrobatics. He used to race a sports car, and I went down once to the races with him. Then he got a couple of big parts in the movies and I kind of lost track of him."
But Tommy was remembering a long-ago, half-forgotten conversation he had heard without understanding. You can have my share of Bart Reeder and welcome. And, telling Tommy about the youthful episode where he had landed in jail, Mario had said, I was scared to call Joe or Angelo, and I couldn't get hold of Bart.

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"Anyway," Johnny said, "how'd we get off on him? That just goes to show you what a good press agent can do. And I want to get into television production— that's where the money is these days, not in acting or performing. Catchers are a dime a dozen."
Mario shook his head. "Not the kind I need, they're not."
"Just the same, I'm going to build this new special around you. You were on the way to being the best there ever was, big brother, and by the time I get through with you, everybody's going to know it!"
It was impossible not to catch fire from his enthusiasm. He raised his glass. "How about it, Matt? We're still the Flying Santellis— aren't we? We're not through yet!"
Tommy felt doubtful. It seemed too good to be true, another of Johnny's grandiose plans and exaggerations. Yet the idea roused memories, old dreams, ambitions he thought he had forgotten, and he could see them coming to life in Mario, too, as he watched.
Tommy said cautiously, "Is there any money in this?"
Johnny laughed, with an expansive gesture. "Is there any money in it? I'll have contracts as soon as I get on the phone with my backers. You just wait till you see what kind of money there is in it! Come on!" He set the glass to his lips, drank, then waited, laughing, for them to follow suit.
"To the Flying Santellis—ancor!"
Watching the gesture, raising his own glass slowly and tasting the familiar wine he had never liked and still did not really like, Tommy thought, Ifs weird. For all Johnny's talk about getting away from the family tradition, he's Papa Tony all over again. Forty years from now he's even going to look

like him! Looking around the table as the family drank the toast, he wondered if anyone else could see it.
Johnny talked nonstop till midnight, ideas still pouring from him.
"Remember the big act we used to talk about when we were kids, Matt? Keynote streamlining: have the rigs painted silver and anything that doesn't have to be handled, have it glittered till it shines. Play colored lights on them. Even the fly bar—get old what's-his-name to figure out some kind of coating that will shine without slipping. Skip the old tights and leotards and try bizarre, futurist costumes, metallic— suggest jets, space flight."
"And Buck Rogers flying belts?" Tommy asked with gentle irony.
"Why not? Man, we're halfway through a new century!" Mario demurred gently: "I thought I was the only one in the family cared anything about science fiction."
"Matt, the flying trapeze almost is science fiction!" Johnny perched with one leg folded beneath him, graceful, reckless, laughing. "It goes to the outer edge of the humanly possible. All the laws of motion, dynamics, fluid patterns of flight —man's urge for the unattainable."
"Like that old picture of Lucia's," Stella murmured. "Flight dreams."
"That's right," Johnny said excitedly. "That's it exactly! Call it Flight Dreams— a kind of dreamlike fantasy, almost a dream-ballet, levitation and slow motion—"

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Mario narrowed his lids, thinking, his eyes distant. "Flight dreams. Angelo said something like that once . . . 'the oldest, most universal dream of mankind.' Dream psychology."
"I don't know anything about psychology," Johnny said, "but it's going to make a damn good show. Hit people in their guts. Because, down deep, I think everybody wants to fly, and that's what we're going to give them." He turned gleaming eyes on Stella. "I knew you'd be the one to come up with the right thing at the right time! She always does!"
"It was really Lucia's idea, the scrapbook," Stella said, laughing. But Tommy noticed that behind the bright, brittle facade she was really still the old Stella, as quiet and intense as ever. She had learned the trick of masking her silences in animation and vivid interest, that was all.

"I'm glad I have something to do with it," said Lucia, edging jealously close. "All this talk about science fiction and futuristic design, you make me feel like a back number!"
"You've got everything to do with it," Johnny said with a grin.
"Hush," Stella said, listening. "Midnight." Somewhere a clock struck twelve. Johnny took Stella in his arms and kissed her, a long and tender kiss. Joe laughed and gave Lucia a brotherly hug, and after a moment Angelo, chuckling, pulled Tessa to him and kissed her. Mario gallantly put his arm around Barbara, and Johnny and Stella held out a hand apiece to Mario, then drew Tommy into the circle.
"Let's hope it will be a good year for all of us." Mario toasted.
Mario's fingers tightened on Tommy's, but the very secrecy of the gesture made Tommy feel depressed, alienated. Again he was having his nose rubbed in the knowledge that whatever his commitment to this family, to Mario, the very nature of this relationship filled it with subterfuge. Stella gave him a sympathetic smile, trying to include him, but for once he avoided her eyes. Stella had made her own way into the family, accepted in a way he could never be. He turned away from Mario, knowing that even if he managed to communicate how he felt to Mario, his friend would have no comfort to offer. I can't take your falls for you, Lucky. Soon after midnight Joe kissed his daughter good night and went upstairs. Tessa was half asleep, and Lucia took her to her room. One by one the family withdrew, but Tommy and Barbara sat on in the big living room.
Barbara was twenty now, a big sturdy girl, her chestnut hair pulled back into the smooth dancer's bun. She curled up on the rug before the fire.
"God, the family is just the same as ever, isn't it?" she said, grinning at him. "Especially at New Year. I can stand it once a year or so, but I'd go nuts if I had to live with it all the time. Which is why I don't."
"You used to be so crazy to fly," Tommy said. "I still miss flying sometimes," she said, leaning her round chin on her hands. "I wanted to fly, but I didn't want to be a Santelli. You know the difference?"
Tommy did. He couldn't understand it, but he knew.

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"I haven't told anybody outside the family, yet," she said. "I suppose, if I ever get a good part in a movie, it will come out. I'm registered with Central Casting as Barbara Clayton. That was my mother's name—you never knew her. Clay uses that name, but he's really Joe junior, you know." Tommy hadn't, but he wasn't surprised. "I wouldn't have dared to do it while Papa Tony was still alive," Barbara said, "and I know that Daddy will have a fit, and so will Aunt Lu. But I don't look Italian, and I don't want to get typecast, doing bad girls in dance halls and that kind of thing. They tend to put Italian actresses into that kind of part. Sombreros and ruffled skirts in Western movies. You know, I was christened Lucia Barbara Santelli, but when I started school I raised Cain until they started calling me Barbara. Liss was baptized Lucia, too, but they said it would be too confusing having two Lucias in the act, so they started right away calling her Elissa. Her birth certificate still reads 'Lucia Cleo.' "

All this seemed wholly incomprehensible to Tommy. He said, "I never wanted to do anything but fly."

"I know. I got my first break in movies, flying, doubling for Lillian Whitney—I did half a dozen catches and a back double. I've done stunt work, too—Uncle Angelo knows everybody in that business. Anyhow, that's why I won't live in the house, because I get calls from my answering service for Barbara Clayton, and I can just hear Lucia saying there isn't anybody here by that name."

"I think Angelo would understand," Tommy said. "He was the one made them let Mario go to college."

Barbara gave a skeptical shrug. "Uncle Angelo? The family is God, and Uncle Angelo is Its prophet." She stared into the dying fire. "Funny. I always thought it would be Mario I could talk to about this. He was really a good dancer, you know. And he was always so detached about the family, living outside, and with an outside job, and everything. And yet here he is, right back in the middle of it all again." "I guess the family means a lot to him." "I can't figure it out," Barbara said. "Johnny, too. He wouldn't even use the Santelli name when he was younger, acted like all he wanted was to get loose and be on his own. And here he is, tonight, talking like there was nothing he wanted more than to start it up all over again. 'To the Flying Santellis—ancor!' and all that stuff. Maybe I could have un-

derstood it from Mario. From Johnny it sounds real weird." Tommy, not understanding it completely himself, suddenly remembered a morning when Johnny's mask of hard indifference to the family had slipped. "Maybe it's because he knows he and Stella won't ever have any family of their own."

"Maybe. But I should think that would make it easier," Barbara said. "It was Liss's kids that kept her tied down like she is."

Tommy shook his bead. "It doesn't always work that way. Lucia had four, and she went on working till she got crippled."

Barbara's mind was running on its own track. "When we were kids, and used to go to the movies on Saturdays—remember?—Aunt Lu said I ought to plan on marrying you when we grew up. Keep you in the family act." She gave him

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a quick sidewise look beneath her slanted eyebrows. "Only you found another way, didn't you?"
"I don't know what you're talking about," Tommy said, but he did, and she knew it.
"Look, I've known about Mario all my life. He's always been my favorite cousin. Of course, as far as he was concerned, I was just a baby like Tess—he never gave a damn for anybody except Liss, and she never understood him at all. I love Liss," Barbara said, "but she's an awful dumb bunny. The first time Mario brought you to the house I knew how he felt about you. You see a lot of that stuff around the ballet school."
Tommy was uncomfortable. "Come on, Barbie, you know he's been married."
"I met his wife, too. And I know how long that lasted. Susan never had her heart broken over anything or anybody, so I'm not losing any sleep over her. A lot of guys try to make it both ways. It kept Aunt Lucia off his neck. Which is why I say"—she squeezed her long, slender fingers around his hand—"if you ever need to get married—like for the same reason, to quiet down a scandal or anything—it would keep it in the family."
Tommy was embarrassed before Barbara's knowing eyes. "That wouldn't be awful fair to you, would it?"
Barbara laughed, a soft small sound at the back of her throat. "Don't be scared. We could always stage a big fight and live separately. Only if I was married, if I'd been mar-

ried, Daddy and Aunt Lu would have to admit I was grown up and had a right to my own life. I'd get more out of it than you would."
Tommy laughed, too, uneasily. "This is a heck of a way to start the new year! Suppose you really wanted to get married someday, and you'd already married me? Suppose you fell in love?"
She sat looking at him. "I'd be scared to marry anybody I loved. I guess it works better the other way. Daddy married my mother for the act, and when she died he never would marry anybody again. And Papa Tony told me once he never even spoke to Grandma Carla alone before they were married, but it worked out fine. That was in the old country, and she was a Fortunati. And Johnny and Stella, and did you ever see such a pair of lovebirds? But Liss married outside the show because she thought she was in love, and she and Dave can hardly stand the sight of each other! But she can't even divorce him, because Catholics can't."
"Mario did," Tommy said. It was the only thing he could think of to say.
"And he's excommunicated. But you and I could get married and then get an—an annulment, because if I did want to get married someday we could always swear we hadn't—" She looked at the floor. "A marriage of convenience, they call it. It might be convenient for both of us."
Tommy did not know what to say or where to look. He tried to make a nervous joke of it. "My, this is so sudden!"
She pulled his head close to her. "You were the only one didn't get a kiss for New Year," she said, and put up her lips. Tommy, reacting with detached amusement, realized that her body was pressed to his, her lips opening under

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his own. He felt halfway between embarrassment and outrage. Women had made passes at him,, but Barbara was family! In angry reaction he pulled her close and kissed her very thoroughly, probing her open mouth with his tongue. When he let her go, she was bruised and breathless, flushing crimson, but her anger faded quickly.

"I guess I asked for that. Are you mad at me, Tommy?"

"Mad? No. But I can't figure what you were trying to prove." This episode, strange and abortive as it had been, had clarified something he had never really understood about Mario. This kind of thing was not what he wanted, but it could be easier, simpler; he knew now why so many homo-

sexuals wound up married. It was so easy to do, so hard to criticize, and so many marriages failed anyhow. But Barbara deserved better than that.

"Let's go back and start over, Barbie," he said. "I think this is the kiss you really meant to give me, okay?" He kissed her gently, on her closed lips, like a child. "Happy New Year, Barbie. And thank you."

CHAPTERS

johnny was as good as his word. Lucia grumbled about the number of long-distance calls he made in the next four days, but before the week was out he had contracts, and Mario and Tommy had signed them, for the television special he would produce that spring. The special riggings were ordered, Lucia began work on the costumes, and they began rehearsing downstairs. Johnny agreed to act as catcher for the flying sequences, and he was good, his old brilliance undimmed but the carelessness gone. The real surprise, however, was Stella. Tommy realized that she was the finest woman flyer he had seen since Cleo Fortunati. He was not surprised when, after a week's work, Mario said, "Let's let Stella do the midair pass; she's showier." Tommy ceded the position without arguing, but, watching Mario and Stella fly together, he felt a sudden sick resentment which, after a moment, he recognized as jealousy.

They're so damn perfect together! Stella was not really a pretty girl, but watching her on the platform, swinging to Johnny's waiting hands, he began to understand what it had been in Mario that had made him, once, the star of Woods-Wayland: not just a fine performer, but a star. Maybe it was the poise and vitality of every movement, maybe it was just high spirits that called forth an equal excitement in anyone watching.

Whatever it was, Tommy realized soberly, Mario didn't have it now. He went through his routines with perfect style and polish, but Tommy was troubled to realize that it was Stella, not Mario, who lent flair and perfection to the act. Maybe, as Mario recovered confidence and strength, he

would recover whatever that special quality had been. Yet Tommy didn't know how to criticize Mario, or what to say to him. He couldn't put his finger on whatever it was that Mario wasn't doing that he ought to be doing, or was doing that he shouldn't do. But, remembering the days when Mario had done the triple to Angelo's hands, Tommy's heart ached.

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Johnny thinks it's fine, because it means Stella's going to be the star. Yet in fairness he realized that the way Mario was now, nobody would look twice at anyone but Stella.
Johnny, too, knew that something was wrong, and didn't quite know what. But he seemed troubled. At one point he said, "What you need is showmanship, Matt. You're good, you're one of the best. But you do everything so simply that nobody notices. With the right kind of showmanship, you can make a crowd gasp at a kid doing a somersault down into the net."
Mario grinned. "That kind of crowd, I don't give a damn what they think."
"Hell, circus is showmanship and hoke, Matt. It always has been. Did you ever study—really study—Lucia's scrap-books?"
"Hell, no. I got better things than that to read."
"Then you don't know what I'm talking about. Lu never was so great; she never did anything enormous or unusual But she was showcased just right, and she spent fifteen years as a super kind of star. Cleo never got that kind of publicity and she's three times the flyer Lucia was."
"Oh, come on—" Mario protested, but halfheartedly.
"Cleo's like you, Matt. She makes everything look so damn simple and perfect."
"That's artistry—" Mario began. It was the old argument, and again Johnny brushed it aside:
"Artistry is fine, sure, but you have to spotlight it just right, so people will appreciate it."
Mario shrugged. "You're the boss," he said, and even this pliancy troubled Tommy. There had been a time when he would have argued Johnny to a standstill on this.
They did reach one direct confrontation, over the use of the mechanic. Mario had brought it out for the teenage boys he was teaching, an additional safety factor, but when he saw Johnny rigging it for Stella, he laughed in wry amusement.
"Have we come down to that, Johnny?"

Listening, Tommy realized his scorn was overdone. Angelo had made Liss wear one, the year they had auditioned for Fortunati. Johnny knew it, too.
"I'm letting Stel try a two-and-a-half, and I don't want her to get any bad falls right now."
"Why not? It's the best way to learn."
Johnny shrugged. "Your Spartan methods are way out of date. This way she'll get it without half the trouble, till she really catches the timing. Why expose her to some damn silly accident while she's getting it just right?"
"If she uses that thing, she never will get it right. It's all done for her."
"Bullshit," Johnny said, dismissing the argument as not worth the breath it took to argue about it. "Tommy, you don't do a two-and-a-half, do you? I bet with the mechanic you could learn it in about half the time."
Tommy looked thoughtfully at the device. "I wanted to try the two-and-a-half, the year we were with Woods-Wayland; Papa Tony wouldn't let me."

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"If you do it," Mario said testily, "you'll learn it right, and you won't do it with any damn mechanic, either; you'll learn how to fall and come out of it without breaking your neck. And if you give a damn about Stella, Johnny, that's the way you'll make her learn it—the right way!"
Johnny's eyes blazed. "God damn it, Matt, I'll train my wife and you train your"—he hesitated just half a second too long—"your partner. And none of your goddamn supercilious wisecracks, either, Signor Mario!"
"My way was good enough for Barney Parrish. Maybe it isn't good enough for you and Stel, but I'm sticking to it!"
Clay was the most enthusiastic convert. Mario would not yet allow him to fly, restricting him—as Tommy had been restricted in his first months of training—to swings and drops into the net. With Johnny's connivance, however, Clay began learning a few of the simpler tricks in a mechanic, and soon was able to discard it and soar to Johnny's hands with a quarter of the falls Tommy had had at his age,
"So what?" Mario said when Johnny pointed this out. "Sure, he does all right, but he hasn't built up that clock inside that runs on split seconds. He doesn't really even know how to fall yet. Oh, sure, he can fall if everything's all right, but it's not instinct yet. I've lived through falls that should have got me killed, because I've had so much practice

in falling from every kind of mistake you can imagine. Knowing how to fall—really knowing-—was all that kept Joe and Lucia from getting killed that time. Clay doesn't know it, and you're fixing it so he never will."
Johnny started to reply, then visibly held his temper. "Okay, Matt. You train your way, I do it mine. We'll just have to wait till Clay is Tommy's age, and see which of them is better." Mario would have said something further, but Johnny cut him off. "Knock it off, Matt, I'm not going to argue with you about it."
A few days later, Tommy took an early stunt call at the studio. It turned out to be a fairly simple shot, calling for the actor's stand-in to plunge through a pane of "candy glass,"—which would cut, if you were careless, but not shatter—and he was finished before noon. After picking up his check in the office, Tommy telephoned Mario to come down and pick him up in their car. He was waiting outside the main gate when a slightly-built, good-looking young man in his thirties, with a face Tommy found vaguely familiar—but did not recognize— came through the gate behind him, started to walk toward the parking lot, and stopped, glancing at Tommy with a faint smile.
"I seem to be out of matches. Got a light?"
Tommy dug into his pocket. "I don't smoke much, but I might. Wait a minute." While he was rummaging, the man studied him with an intense scrutiny which he recognized from his years in the Army. Tommy, who had accepted the request in good faith, was suddenly annoyed. Nuts! The oldest line in the book, and I didn't spot it! But in the Army, too, he had learned how to make a tactful brush-off, and the best way was to act as if the request were genuine, give the guy a match, and walk off, never conceding by word or look that you knew you were being approached. He looked up, and saw Mario

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coming toward him. He said neutrally. "I'm out of matches, but maybe my brother's got some, or a lighter."
Mario came up and said, "I had to park around the corner, Tom, There's a couple of big trucks—" He broke off as the stranger looked up, with a grin of recognition.
"Matt! Where you been hiding out these days?"
Mario stared blankly, then his eyes focused.

"Bart! I didn't recognize you for a minute!" They shook hands. "Tommy, you know Bart Reeder?"
Bart Reeder said, his eyes lingering on Tommy, "I was trying to get to know him."
Mario chuckled. "Your technique must be slipping, darling. Bart, this is Tommy Zane."
Tommy blinked at that, with a flare of resentment. Mario had made such a point, outside the house, of calling him "my kid brother." Then he remembered.
Bart had known Mario for years. Tommy had guessed that they had been something more than casual friends. Bart would have known how many brothers Mario had. And he would have known their names.
He took the hand Reeder offered; it was shapely and well manicured, but felt muscular. Reeder held his hand for just a moment too long to be casual. "A pleasure. Matt, are you in this new musical they're making here, by any chance?"
"I'm not dancing now. Just drove down to pick up Tommy."
"Nice work," Reeder murmured. Tommy caught the inflection, clearly. You grew a sixth sense for that sort of thing; you developed perfect pitch for certain tones of voice, certain words an outsider would never use but would never notice, either. You had to. A mistake could mean disaster: at best, embarrassment; at worst, arrest. Every homosexual learned to live with that. Yeah. Johnny called him the biggest fag in Hollywood.
He listened to the conversation, with all the old revulsion against the deliberate, exaggerated effeminacy of the jargon. He understood it now, of course. He had used it himself, in the Army; it was a way of giving cues without making any unwise betrayals when you were not sure of your listener. A way of exchanging passwords: name, rank, and serial number. But he still didn't like it.
"I tried to hunt you up, years ago, but you'd dropped right out of sight. Where have you been?"
"Oh, bumming around."
Bart was still looking sidewise at Tommy. "You kids in a hurry? Can I buy you a drink somewhere?"
Mario glanced at Tommy. "Okay with you?"
"Sure, why not." Much as Tommy disliked the chatter of

this particular underworld, it was good to see Mario actively interested in anything again.

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"My car's in the lot over there." Reeder gestured.
It was a small, shiny silver-painted MG, and Tommy felt, against his will, a flicker of interest. He had not been in an MG since the day Stella had taught him to drive her battered old one. His worst regret had been that his saved-up Army pay would not—quite—buy him the kind of car he had really wanted.
Reeder saw the admiring gleam in his eyes and asked, "Want to drive?"
Tempted, Tommy would not accept the gambit. "Thanks, but I'm not sure I could handle it."
"It is small," Reeder murmured. "We're going to have to sit on each other's laps."
Mario and Tommy crowded into the small bucket seat on the passenger side, and Reeder drove them to a small local bar. "This place is fairly square. There's a clause in my contract specifying a few places I have to keep out of."
Mario said dryly, "I can imagine. I heard rumors."
"Oh, and I've been such a good boy, and so careful!"
The bar was darker than usual, the jukebox silent. At this hour it was virtually deserted, except for two young men sitting in one of the booths at the far end; even in the dark Tommy could see that they were holding hands. He told himself that his distaste was irrational.
What in the hell do you think you're trying to hide? Reeder spotted you even before he recognized Mario. He told himself it was only the blatancy that bothered him, then was angry at his own hypocrisy. They're more honest than you are, -that's all!
"Let's find a table. What are you fellows having? Beer. Tommy? Yours was gin and tonic, wasn't it, Matt?"
"You've got me mixed up with some other fellow—I'm the guy passes out on the hard stuff, remember? Beer."
"No accounting for tastes." Bart ordered himself a whiskey and soda, but Tommy noticed he only sipped at it. "Your folks used to be circus people, didn't they, Matt?"
"Still are."
"You do know there's a movie being made of the life of Barney Parrish?"
"I know there was one," Mario said. "My brother Johnny and my uncle Angelo did some of the doubling. Only An-

gelo said they never finished it—ran out of money or something."
"That's right, only there's a guy making it again," Reeder said. "Angelo Santelli—he's some relation to you? He does a lot of stunt work here. Now, there is a gorgeous hunk of man!"
"Don't tell him that," Mario said, on a note of mock-warning. "He's the original fairy-slugger!"
"What a waste," Bart sighed. "Are you sure, sweetheart?"
Mario chuckled. "Try if you want to, but don't come cry
ing to me if he kicks your teeth right down your throat. My brother Johnny did some kind of circus documentary for television—Circus Days and Nights, something like that. . ."
"But I saw that!" Bart interrupted him. "Was that your

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brother? The studio people were sore because he did a scene about Parrish, and they wanted to get going again on the Parrish movie. I watched it—you know I've always been kind of a nut on circuses. Was your brother one of the flyers in it?"
"He produced it. Johnny Gardner."
"I know the name," Reeder nodded. "The grapevine says he's one of the coming guys in the field. What's he doing now?"
He seemed genuinely interested, so Mario told him a little about Flight Dreams.
"And you're both in that?" Reeder asked, turning to Tommy and trying to bring him back into the conversation. "If they're making a film about Barney Parrish," Tommy said, "They must have found out what happened to him, then? Last I heard, nobody even knew if he was alive or dead."
Was that what Mario had done? In conscious, or unconscious, imitation of the great flyer who had preceded him, was this why he had tried to lose himself so completely that no one knew where he had gone? Preoccupied, Tommy lost track of the conversation, then heard what Reeder was saying:
". . . late forty-six, forty-seven, found him dead. He'd been working with some small show—Woods, Wills, something like that—as a what-do-you-call-it, roustabout—he was crippled up bad. One day they found him shot to death. Suicide. Nobody'd known who he was, he just worked around the show, but after he died they knew—"

"Woods-Wayland?" Mario said.
"Yeah, that was it."
Tommy felt Mario, crowded against him at the table, shudder, a deep shudder that went all the way through to the bones. Forgetting caution, he reached for Mario's hand under the table and squeezed it hard. He knew they were both remembering the same thing, a small sandy-haired man with a faint trace of accent: I have been hearing that one of the young flyers was doing a triple nowadays, so I traded work with Sandy for this morning so I might perhaps have a chance to see him rehearsing.
Bart asked, "Did you know him?"
"I knew him when I was a kid," Mario said. "He was— was an old family friend. He's dead? He—he shot himself?"
"Through the head. They said the only thing he had with him, except his British passport, was one of his old publicity pictures and a clipping about some young flyer who had been smashed up doing his big trick. The triple, was it? I didn't know anyone was doing triples, these days."
"They're not, I guess." Mario's voice sounded strained. "I did, for a while, but not now."
"That was really what I wanted to talk to you about," Bart said. "Lucky I ran into you. I told you, they're starting to remake that movie about his life, and my agent's negotiating to get me the part. You still do trapeze work, don't you?"
"If we can get a catcher, Tom and I are going on the road this spring."

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"Well, listen, Matt, I think it would do me good if it got around that I was taking lessons in trapeze—flying, you call it?—from a real circus pro. How about giving me some lessons?"
"For real, Bart? Or for the publicity?"
"Both, I guess," Bart said with a chuckle. "The more I look like I know what I'm doing on the flying trapeze, the better my chances are! Of course, they won't let me do any flying in the movie—the insurance people wouldn't stand for it. But if I can look convincing up there . . . Anyway," he added, nudging Mario gently in the ribs, "you were always trying to tell me how good I looked in tights!"
"That's for sure," Mario said with a grin.
"Seriously, Matt. My agent would handle the publicity.

We might even manage to get in a plug for your brother's television special."
"Well, I'm teaching some kids to fly, why not you, too? I'll talk to Johnny."
"Give me your phone number, and I'll call."
"We're in the book. The listing is for Mrs. Lucia Santelli."
As they talked, Tommy realized that Reeder was crowding against him, had been crowding against him for some time, but he put it down to the closeness of the small chairs around the tiny table. Now, suddenly, he was aware of Bart Reeder's leg and thigh, subtly moving against his own.
"Here," Bart said, sliding a small leather-bound notebook across the table, "write it down in my little black book, darling."
Tommy was reluctant to withdraw too suddenly; anyhow, the small chairs were flimsy enough that a quick movement might have tipped them both over onto the floor. Now he felt Bart's hand lightly, carefully traveling up his thigh. Still unwilling to make any rude withdrawal—Hell, you can't blame a guy for asking!—he remained quiet, pretending to be unaware of the touch. It wasn't the definite brush-off he had in mind, but it wasn't response, either. And then, almost against his will, he remembered a younger Tommy, a younger Mario, in the back seat of the Santelli car.
Who did I think I was kidding? I knew perfectly well what he was up to. Mario and Reeder were still talking about times and places, but Tommy's mind was divided between Reeder's hand, inching toward the groin, and the compelling memory. Abruptly, almost awkwardly, he pushed his chair away from the table, letting it tip backward, then making a leap to catch it.
"Damn flimsy little chairs!" He turned to Mario. "I ought to get to the bank before it closes—suppose I go deposit that check, while you stay here with Bart and make the arrangements you want to get made."
But the interruption had served its purpose. Reeder reached out and caught the chair, steadying it. "Not hurt, are you? I can't figure out why in the world they make chairs this size for grown men! Matt, I'll drive you two back to where your car is parked. I'll call you in a day or two."
After Bart started the car, he turned to Tommy and asked, "You're keen on cars? Ever do any racing?" Tommy shook his head.

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The insurance people at the studio won't let me race now, but rally driving's something else—you can't get hurt in a rally unless you're some kind of stumblebum. It's kid stuff, driving against a clock, but kind of fun. You might take in one with me someday, all right? I'll be in touch."
When they reached the lot, Mario and Tommy jumped out, then waved as they walked toward their own car. "Looks like you made a conquest, kid," Mario remarked laughingly.
"Oh, hell, you were his old flame, weren't you?"
"That's ancient history, Tom. Very ancient."
Tommy shrugged. "Anyhow, that's one hell of a car he's got"
"Maybe someday we can get you one like it. Meanwhile, you might take up that invitation," Mario said, and Tommy chuckled.
"I reckon he was mostly pitching a line of bull."
He had not really expected anything to come of the meeting, but to his surprise, a few days later Bart Reeder did call, turning on the charm with Lucia so that she forgot her original reservations about "a man like that."
That afternoon he arrived at the house, during Mario's lesson time.
Down in the practice room, Mario was on the platform with Bobby and Clay. Tommy, at the catcher's end of the rigging, was calling instructions to Phil Lasky.
"Not so high, slow down a little—you want to get right in time with the bar—okay, okay, that's better—" He broke off and turned as the door opened.
Lucia asked, "Okay to have somebody watch?"
Mario looked down and called, "Bart! I'll be right down—"
"No, it's all right—I'll just watch for a while, try and get the feel of it, okay? Just go ahead with what you're doing."
"We've got about twenty minutes to go, then," Mario said, and turned back to Clay on the board.
"Okay, go ahead. Wait for my call. Then turn around on the bar for a foot catch. Phil, you ready? One, two—wait, wait—all right—go!"
Reeder walked over beside Tommy, watching silently as Clay went off the platform, swinging from the bar. He watched while Phil Lasky caught Clay's ankles securely in his grip, swung with him, then released him. "It looks so easy from down here," he said.
"Yeah. That's the whole point of good flying."

"Like ballet," Reeder said, "or fencing. It has to look like you're doing it for fun."
"That's what Mario always said."
"How long have you known Matt?" Reeder asked.
"I've been in the act since I was a kid."
Reeder asked under his breath, "You are gay, aren't you?" Tommy had never heard that word before, but the connotation was immediately obvious.
Reeder added, "No, you're not that easy to spot. But ... in the bar. I saw you were wise to what kind of place it was."
"Sure. I was wise to you, too."

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"And tactful." Reeder turned toward the rigging, watching Mario as he swung off, demonstrating to the teenagers the facility with which he could turn, change hands at any point in his swing. After the amateurs, his grace was spectacular; Tommy, even now, was stunned by it. After a minute Mario dived into the net, called Phil down, and said, "That'll do for today, kids. See you Thursday. Go and get changed before you get chilled." Slinging a towel around his neck, he came toward Reeder. "Hello, Bart, still want to try?"
"Sure. I know it can't be as easy as it looks, though."
"It isn't," said Mario, rubbing his neck and upper torso with the towel, "but it's not that hard, either. Johnny says he can break a kid into a flying act in six weeks if the kid does what he's told. I like to take a little longer than that, myself. But there's a lot .of crap talked about how terribly hard flying is. Question is, what kind of shape are you in, what are your muscles like?"
"My muscles are in marvelous shape, darling," Bart said in falsetto.
"Cut out the crap, Bart. I don't want you to break your neck."
"Why, I didn't know you cared, sweetheart," Bart said, then quickly added, "Relax, I was kidding. I do judo, I work out with weights every day at a health club, and I take ballet class once or twice a week. See for yourself, if you want to."
Mario felt his stomach muscles, as impersonally as a doctor. "Not so bad. You could probably get the hang of it without much trouble."
Bart squirmed away from his touch, saying, "You tickle, darling!"
Mario looked at him warningly, not smiling. "Look, Bart,

you start that stuff here and I'll break your goddamn neck myself."
"What the hell, Matt! Tommy's wise—"
"Tommy, sure. But the kids in there—and my brother Johnny—you watch yourself, okay?"
The smile slid off Reeder's face. "Okay, Matt. I get you. Sorry."
"I'm sorry I had to come on strong like that. Tommy, take him in and show him where he can change. Bart, did you bring along a pair of tights?"
"Yeah, and a sweat suit."
Stripped to tights, Reeder was impressive, with an athlete's grace. Like many men with impressive musculature, in street clothing Reeder looked weedy and thin, but his tights displayed the bulging calves of a dancer, and his shoulders were broad, with strong pectorals. Tommy could not keep from a quick glance of admiration, but was annoyed to realize Bart had seen it. He made his voice brusque.
"You ever been on a fly bar, Mr. Reeder?"
"Bart, please. No, but I used to work out on parallel bars when I was a youngster, and I did some tumbling."
Mario was waiting for them. He nodded in approval when he saw Reeder's black tights; they were well-worn and shabby, obviously for use, not for show.
"Not scared of heights, are you, Bart?"
"Good God, you think I'd be trying to get this part if I was?"

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"You never can tell," Mario said dryly. "Angelo told me about a big-name cowboy star who's scared stiff of horses. Okay, I guess the first thing you have to learn is how we climb the ladder. Did you ever notice?"
Reeder went and grasped it with both hands, then set one foot on the bottom rung. The ladder twisted sideways, and Mario said, "Nope. That's how an outsider would do it. Like this, up the outside of the rope, putting your toes around both sides. Watch."
Mario went ahead; Reeder, following unsteadily, soon grasped the trick of it. Tommy sat down to have a cigarette. It was apparent that in this first session Reeder would learn only a few professional tricks: how to climb the ladder, how to balance and seem at ease on the high platform. But

Reeder was a quick study, and Tommy watched him with frank pleasure.
"Okay," Mario said, "you better learn to fall into the net without breaking your neck." He explained the process carefully, then dived down to watch as Reeder came off in a dive, rolling up and landing in an awkward ball. He uncoiled, wincing.
"Ouch! Now I know where you got all those scars on your arms, Matt," he said, wading clumsily to the edge of the net.
"You got a nice net burn," Mario said, looking it over. "Take him in and get some stuff on it, Tom."
"Not yet, okay? I want to try that again."
"Sure, go ahead." Mario watched Reeder climb the ladder. He did it the right way this time, placing his toes delicately around the outside rope, and Mario said, "Anyway, he learns fast."
Tommy said, "He's better looking than Parrish ever was."
"Oh, I don't know about that." Mario's smile was reminiscent. "When I was a little kid, I thought Parrish was God. Once he gave me a lollipop. I never did eat it, just kept it in a drawer to look at now and then. Christ! It kills me, to think I never even recognized him, that time . .."
"I guess nobody did, Mario. He must have changed an awful lot."
"God, yes! When I was about seven years old—Cleo was working with Parrish then—I keep remembering him as being about seven feet tall. I was crazy about him. I hated Cleo because she was in the act with him and I wasn't old enough. I used to hang around showing off so he'd look at me, even if he yelled at me. I think maybe that was why I wanted to fly."
It was rare for Mario to reveal himself this way, and Tommy would not for worlds have interrupted him, but behind them the practice room door opened, and Johnny came in. "Still down here, Matt? I thought the kids had gone home."
Bart came down hard, grunting as- he landed in the net and it drove the breath from his body. He rolled over and said, "How the devil do you get out of this thing?"
"Show him, Tommy." Mario held out a hand; Tommy leaned on it for a moment, vaulted up into the net, and demonstrated the flyer's neat downward somersault over the edge. Bart followed suit, not too badly for a first time.

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"Good work—you'll look like a pro in a week or two," Mario said. "I want you to meet my brother Johnny. John Gardner. Bart Reeder."
Bart shook his hand. "I saw your television thing."
"I did some doubling for you once," Johnny said, "but you probably don't remember me. I mean, who notices a stuntman?"
Bart laughed and said, "As it happens, I do. I started out as a stuntman myself. Doing another circus documentary?"
"Right. Angelo said you were going to be in the Parrish movie."
"I hope so. But nothing's signed yet."
"What are they calling it?"
"Nothing's settled. Somebody suggested Flying Demon, but my agent said that sounded like a kids' horror show—you know, Frankenstein Meets the Demon, Curse of the Demon, whatever. The front-office people will think something up."
"You're doing your own flying in the movie? That might be good publicity," Johnny said, and Bart laughed ruefully.
"No chance I could get good enough for that! Even if the front office would let me. They make it very clear, I pull a muscle or sprain an ankle, and the whole cast goes on overtime. But your brother says he can help me look right for the part."
"If anyone can do that, Matt can."
"I know. I'll put in a word with the studio for Matt to do the doubling. Matt, you did do Parrish's big trick, didn't you, the triple?"
"Yeah." Mario looked strained. "I haven't done it for a while, though."
"We're just started rehearsing this new documentary," Johnny remarked, deliberately redirecting the conversation
Bart quickly picked up his cue. "Any chance I could get to sit in on a couple of rehearsals? Just to get the feel of it—the way people move, the way they stand ..."
"Sure, why not?"
Reader's grin was charming. "And some day this week I'll bring along some cameramen. I figured out that if it got around I was taking lessons from a real pro, it would do me some good. The Flying Santellis are a well-known act."
Tommy, watching at a distance, realized that Reeder

had found the proper bait to charm Johnny, too. God, can that guy turn on the charm, like a faucet! But he's not a phony, either. He realized that he liked Bart Reeder, and was annoyed with himself for admitting it. Charm, yes— the man was an actor, it was his business to be charming. And he looks damn good in tights, sexy as hell. And because it was almost his first experience with that kind of raw sexual attraction, he was furious and embarrassed at himself. Like some jerk in the Army drooling over some goddamn pinup girl!
After Reeder left, Johnny, exuberant, went to the kitchen to tell Stella.
"Listen, Stel, guess who's coming to watch us rehearse Flight Dreams . . ." He told her, to an audience that included not only Stella and Lucia but Angelo, who had come in and paused before going up to change his shirt for dinner.

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"Reeder carries a lot of weight with the studio," Angelo confirmed, "and of course he has a big following at the box office, so if it gets around beforehand that he's going to play Parrish, that's good publicity, too. You know he's using you—it's going to do him a lot of good, that the Flying Santellis would agree to teach him flying."
Johnny chuckled. "Sure. But we're using him right back. Any way you slice it, that kind of publicity won't do us anything but good."
"Well, you watch yourself," Angelo warned, good-humored. "He's the biggest fag in Hollywood, like I said. How he can keep that up when he's married to a luscious broad like Louise Lanart, damned if I know, but you better stay out of reach!"
"You shouldn't talk that way," Lucia reproved. "Angelo haven't you worked in Hollywood long enough not to listen to slanderous gossip about the actors? They will say anything, and if they have nothing to say, they will invent something!"
"He's very handsome," Stella said shyly.
Johnny put his arm around her. "Well, thank God Reeder's private life is no business of mine. I'm not his confessor. And if the guy is queer, I don't have to worry about him making passes at Stella, even if she goes around swooning—"
"Oh, Johnny!"
He laughed and hugged her. "I was kidding you, babe.

You can look at all the good-looking guys you want to, and I'll look at the good-looking girls. No harm in looking, huh? Matt, have you known Bart Reeder long?"
"Years ago, at the ballet school. Tom and I ran into him the other day. and had a drink with him,"
"Well, it could lead to a lot of good publicity. And maybe more. If," he added with a hard glance at Mario, "you ever get back that goddamn triple of yours!"
"Johnny, willya quit crowding me? Not till I'm good and ready I"
"Christ Almighty," Johnny said, regarding him with disgust, "when are you going to grow up? A chance like this and you're still pulling temperament on us!"
"Look, Johnny—" Stella began.
"Keep out of this, Stel. Matt, are you going to louse us all up again?"
"I haven't even got a catcher!"
Johnny was really angry now. "It wouldn't be the first time I'd caught you on a triple. What's the matter, I'm not good enough for you?"
"You're not Lionel Fortunati!" Mario snarled.
"No," Johnny said, "and catching you isn't exactly my idea of fun. You're one hell of a handful, Signor Mario. But I can do it if I have to, so what's all the fuss about?"
"Look, kids—" Angelo began.
Mario turned on him angrily. "This is your fault, Angelo! You quit right when I had it going right! All Papa Tony worked for, and you let it go—"
Oh, God, Tommy thought, that's all we need, for him to tangle with Angelo right now . . . but the look Angelo turned on the younger man was gentle,

affectionate. "I'm sorry, kid," he said. "I know how you feel about that. But I couldn't get back to it now even if I wanted to. And I don't. I'm sorry, kid, but I don't."
"Not even to help me get the triple back again?"
"Ah, come on, Matt." Angelo laid a hand on Mario's shoulder and shook it gently. "You know better than that. No blackmail, okay? I'm not the only catcher in the family. ragazzo." His voice was gentler than Tommy had ever heard it. "Matt, don't keep lookin' at me like I'd kicked you in the balls. We went all over this years ago, kid." He pulled Mario close to him in a rough but tender hug. 'Take it easy, okay? You'll get your triple back. You don't nee
e. Give yourself time. Johnny, you lay off him, hear me?
He let Mario go, and Mario left the room without a word. “Something’s boiling over!” Lucia exclaimed and hurried to the stove.. Tommy started down the hall to take a shower. Johnny, behind him in the hall, muttered angrily that if he'd known it would set old Matt off like that, he'd never have mentioned the damned triple!
"I wish to Christ Barney Parrish had never invented the goddamn trick!"
When Tommy reached their room after his shower, Mario was sitting on the bed, glowering and sullen. Tommy recognized the storm signals and was helplessly, wordlessly frightened.
Anything I do is going to be wrong. Anything I say is going to set him off. Temporizing, playing for time, he took off his bathrobe and rummaged in the closet for a clean shut.
"It's not a wake," Mario said, nervously stabbing out his cigarette. "You scared to mention the triple, too?"
And if I don't say anything, that's going to set him off, too. His stomach knotting with cold panic, Tommy pulled his T-shirt over his head. "What's to say? I can't nag you about it, Mario. Like Angelo said, you'll get it back when you're ready."
"Fuck Angelo!" Mario snarled.
Tommy felt the hairs rise on his forearms. Oh-oh. This is it. Now what do I do? Desperately trying to turn it off as a joke by clowning, he said, deliberately imitating Bart Reeder's falsetto, "Sorry, darling. He's really not my type!"
"Listen, you son of a bitch—"
Still in the clutch of the cold panic, Tommy knew what he had to do. It was that, or face something that would exclude them from the Santelli house as they had been thrown out of Woods-Wayland. Once again, Mario was courting danger and disaster. He was too trained, he had been too disciplined, to do it on the rigging. But he would do it here.
"Spoiling for a fight again, Mario?"
"What the hell do you mean by that crack?"
"This." Tommy went to the door and locked it.
"Not this time. For once you got me wrong." Deliberately, he advanced on Mario and gave him a hard backhand slap across the face.
"You damn little—"

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Tommy hit him again, hard. "I decided for once I'd give you a real good excuse," he said between his teeth. Mario lunged at him, and they grappled in a silent, deadly struggle. Mario's fist went into Tommy's stomach; he grunted, hit back, and they went to the floor together, fighting, struggling. But awareness surged in Tommy as he locked Mario hard in a wrestler's grip. For the first time it was not a desperately unequal, impotent struggle. He was stronger than Mario; his strength flowed like a dam bursting inside him as he grabbed Mario around the waist and pushed him down to the floor.
Mario struggled violently, dazed by the savagery of the attack.
"Tommy, God damn it, what—"
"Get up," Tommy said between his teeth.
Tommy rushed him again, hitting him three times with deadly accuracy—ribs, eye, and the side of his head. Mario got in a couple of swings, then Tommy hit him, hard, a slamming blow on the jaw that dumped him on the floor. Tommy sat on him.
"Okay, damn it," he said, breathless, "the worm's turned for good. I'm not doing this in front of anybody else. But once and for all, Matt Gardner, if you ever take your fists to me again, the neck that gets broken isn't going to be mine. I thought I'd show you that, just once. If you want to pitch me out of the house and down the stairs, I'll go. Or if you want to fight some more, okay, I'll prove it all over again that I can beat the shit out of you any time. But one way or the other, this is the last fight we're going to have. Get me?"
Mario lay still on the floor, pale and amazed. His mouth was bleeding, and a trickle of blood was coming from his nose.
"Let me up, Lucky," he said at last.
Tommy released him, and Mario sat up, bracing himself with both hands, not moving. Finally he got up and sat on the bed. He thrust out his hand.
"Shake on that, Lucky. I guess I deserved it."
Tommy took his hand but winced as Mario's closed over his own. Mario turned Tommy's hand over and looked at it "I guess I've been asking for that for a long time, kid."
They sat side by side on the bed, curiously peaceful, as if in reaffirmation of an old pledge. Then Tommy laughed.

"Go on, Matt. Wash your face. Or what I'll get from Lucia won't be supper!"
Mario unlocked the door, picked up a towel, and started across the hall. Abruptly he stopped and turned back to Tommy.
"What did you just call me?"
Tommy blinked. "Matt," he said slowly, surprised.
"Do you know, you never did before?"
"Yeah. I know."
"You're growing up, I guess. You're not my kid anymore."
Tommy walked over to him, took Mario's hand in his own, and held it for a minute. "I guess I'll always be your kid. Some ways, anyhow." Then he gave him a rough push.
"Go on, Matt. Wash your face."

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They went down the stairs shoulder to shoulder. In the dining room, Angelo, pouring wine into glasses, turned and stared at Mario's swollen mouth, at the darkening bruise over Tommy's eye.
"Gesu e Maria! Che—what the hell happened to your eye, Tom?"
"I ran into a door," Tommy said.
Angelo shook his head. "That don't look like—what happened to your mouth, Matt? You been—"
Mario said, flatly, "I ran into a door."
"In other words, mind my own goddamn business. Okay, ragazzi. Have it your own way. Matt ran into a door. And Tommy ran into a door. That must have been some door." He surveyed them both, shaking his head.
"I guess I better turn out the lights and find some candles," he said at last. "We don't need Lu asking a lot of questions."

CHAPTER 7

three days after Reeder's first visit, Mario bit into a piece of toast at breakfast, spluttered, and jumped to his feet, his chair scraping sharply back from the table.
"Did I bring you up in a pigpen, Matt?" Lucia said tartly.
"Sorry," he said thickly through a napkin. "Filling or something came out of my tooth. Ouch!"

"Dr. Ashland's number is in the little book in the hall," Lucia said. "Call the answering service right away, and he can probably see you this morning as an emergency."
"There are all those people coming in this afternoon for that publicity thing with Reeder—"
"You'll be through by then, if he sees you as soon as his office opens," Angelo said. He glanced at his watch. "If you can be ready in fifteen minutes, I can drop you off a block or so from his office. Tessa, it's cold, get your sweater."
She went silently for it. She had grown into a dark, quiet girl, so soft-spoken and prim in her severe school uniform that Tommy once wondered aloud if she was considering becoming a nun. Mario insisted it was only a phase she was going through, that Liss, at her age, had been equally solemn and pious. Tommy found that difficult to imagine and said so, but Angelo and Lucia both agreed it was true.
The three of them left, and Tommy was having a second cup of coffee when Johnny appeared. "Matt sleeping late this morning?"
"No, he had to go to the dentist. He said he'd be back in time for the publicity people Reeder's bringing in this afternoon."
"He'd better be." Johnny reached for the coffeepot, poured a cup, then leaned his elbows on the table, staring at Tommy,
"Tom, you know him better than I do. Level with me, fella. What the hell is wrong with Matt, anyhow?"
"I wish to hell I knew, Johnny."
"When he's good, Tom, he's so good. Even now, he's better than most of the flyers around, but he hasn't got that extra something he used to have. Maybe if he could get the triple back—"

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"He misses Angelo, of course."
"Yeah, but that's been six years, and anyway, I'm not that bad a catcher."
"I don't think it's that, Johnny. I think—I don't think he believes in himself anymore."
"That's a load of bullshit," Johnny said. "Don't tell me you've taken up that 'positive thinking' crap."
"I didn't say I had. It's Matt we're talking about."
Johnny frowned, ignoring the plate Lucia set before him. "Well, whatever it is, I wish he'd get over it. I wanted to build this show around him, give him star billing, and the way he is now, I can't."

"Yes, I know." Tommy sighed. There was no way he could discuss the real problem with Johnny. In desperation, hoping to avoid one of Mario's self-destructive crises, he had beaten Mario; he had had no choice except the choice he could not make, to walk out of Mario's life, leave him abandoned and helpless to the inner forces ravaging him. He had hoped it would put an end to the storms which left Mario so torn by guilt and self-hatred that he would have been a wreck for weeks afterward.
But although Mario had seemed to understand—And at least it means we're not going to by slugging each other all the time—it was as if the final flicker of the old light had been extinguished in Mario.
"I wish Angelo would come back and work with him."
"Me, too." Johnny nodded. "He was always the only one could straighten Matt out when he got like this. Matt would take it from him, but damn it, Tommy, I'm just his kid brother!"
"Well, we'll work around him this morning, if we can get Stella to haul herself out of the sack." Johnny looked grim. "I think sometimes she's as bad off as Matt. She doesn't say much about it anymore, but I think after this show I better quit the circus and take a nice respectable job in production. Then maybe some adoption agency will take us seriously next time we apply."
Tommy said, "It would be a hell of a shame if there weren't any Santellis left in flying."
Johnny shrugged and didn't answer that. "Pour some more coffee, Lu, while you're up. I'll take some to Stel and see if I can get her awake."
Tommy went down to the practice room, his mind full of what Johnny had said, and Liss before him: So the Santellis, four generations, reached their height in Matt, and it's all going to end with him. And now it was beginning to look as if even Mario . . . Loyally he cut off the thought and began to check the riggings.
After a time he began to think about the trick they were perfecting. It had been Tommy's own idea, a trick which was not, strictly speaking, part of the flying-return repertory at all, and would never have fitted into a regular flying act; but it had seemed to Tommy to have some of the alien, dreamlike quality that Johnny wanted. Early in rehearsals, he had brought it up to Johnny.

"Can Stel do a one-and-a-half?"
"Sure. Blindfolded."

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- "No point in doing it blindfolded," said Tommy, "but listen to this. I make some kind of cross; then Stel comes out and does a straight flying pass over me as you let me go—so far, everybody thinks it's just an ordinary flying pass. But instead of coming back to the bar, while you're swinging with her, I turn and hang by my knees, and when you let her go, instead of her coming back to the bar, I catch her—see? Catcher-to-catcher. She's real small and light, and here's the gimmick: I can see this with one of those slow-motion cameras, all of us moving together in slow motion, sort of dreamlike ..."

Johnny slitted his eyes, visualizing it. "It might just come off, at that. Sounds good. Only you couldn't let her swing all the way back; you'd have to pull her up on the backswing." He walked over to where his coat was hanging and rummaged in the pocket for pencil and paper.

Tommy asked, "How would Stel feel about being a human baseball, thrown back and forth between two catchers?"

"She'll do it if I tell her to," Johnny said confidently. "That girl can do absolutely anything. Only thing is, she doesn't know it yet. If I went up on the rigging and said, 'Okay, Stel, throw me a triple,' she'd do it. And someday I'm going to do just that."

Tommy stared, laughing. "Stella? A triple?"

"Why not? Cleo Fortunati did it a few times before she had that fall. No, quit laughing, Tommy. Stel could do it. She does a forward double, and that's supposed to be as hard as the back triple."

Stella had been agreeable when the new trick was explained to her.

"What made you think of it, Tommy?" she had asked.

"Dunno. I guess I was remembering a picture I saw of the old act they called fly casting—two catchers on fixed trapezes, throwing a flyer back and forth between them—and I wondered if anyone had ever tried two swinging trapezes instead."

Now, waiting for Johnny to come down with Stella, Tommy morosely mulled over what Johnny had said upstairs. Maybe, if Stella did a triple right under Mario's nose, it would shock him into trying it again. Or would it upset him enough that he would never want to try again?

Johnny and Stella joined him, and after an hour's work Johnny declared himself satisfied. "We'll do it in rehearsal this afternoon. It's going to look spectacular when they get the slow-motion cameras in. The two moving catchers, and the flyer moving between them—I can see a kind of dreamlike quality to it, as if none of us were quite real."

As soon as Mario came back, Bart Reeder brought a man from the studio's publicity department and a couple of men with cameras. They interviewed Lucia, and even talked to Joe, about the Santelli tradition, and photographed Bart everywhere: on the pedestal with Mario, climbing the ladder, falling into the net. It was nearly four o'clock when the publicity man called off the photographers.

"I think we've got all we need, but I'd like a few shots of you people rehearsing," the photographer said.

Johnny shook his head. "Not till the act's shaped up a little better."

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When they had gone, Mario said, laughing, "Never thought I'd see the day when you'd turn down publicity, Jock!"
"There's publicity and publicity," Johnny said shrewdly. "I want people to be guessing about this, not seeing little bits and pieces of it and getting the wrong idea."
"You don't mind my inviting Reeder to stay, do you?"
"Heck, no. I was noticing what a quick study the guy is— did you notice, already he walks like you do? Watching him climb the rope once, I thought it was you. Somehow I got the idea an actor mostly studies voices and words, but he seems to do it with his body."
The first part of the rehearsal went well, but when they showed the special trick they had worked out, with the two catchers, Mario, to Tommy's amazement, flew into a rage.
"Just who had that bright idea?" he stormed.
"You don't like it?" Stella asked, puzzled.
"Like it? Are you nuts?" His face was contorted with anger and contempt. "You call that flying?"
Mario flipped off the platform and into the net. As he stalked toward the change-room door, Johnny called down, "Hey, we're not finished!"
"I am," Mario said. "Looks like there's no room for flying in this act."
"Hey, wait—" Johnny slid down the rope. "Where the hell do you think you're going, anyway? We've got work to do!"
Mario swung around as Tommy and Stella joined him and

Johnny on the floor. "Who had the idea for that bastard routine? It's a crazy mix-up of casting, flying return, and balance stunts! It's cheap, showy junk, and I don't want any part of it!"
"This kind of thing is beginning to bore the hell out of me, Signor Mario!" Johnny blazed. "I'm managing this act, in case you hadn't remembered, and I okayed it."
"I should have expected that of you! You pulled that once before—that kind of cheap, crummy exhibitionism!"
"Cheap!" Johnny exploded. "If you think it's so goddamn simple, I'd like you to go up there and try it!"
"Look, if I go up there and do it first time out, will you take this mixed-up bastard stunt out of the act? Sporting bet, Jock. It's beneath any flyer's dignity to do a cheap trick like that, but if I do it, will you pull it out of the routine?"
"No, damn it, I won't. Nobody's asked you to do anything that's beneath your fancy dignity. And where do you get off anyway, blasting us all to hell like Papa Tony on his worst days? 'Cheap exhibitionism,' 'vulgar displays,' all that crap! Get one thing straight, big brother: I am managing this act, and you're working for me this time. God damn it, Matt," he finished, looking wretchedly at his brother, "I don't get any kick out of pulling rank on you, but I don't have the time for this kind of temperamental bullshit!"
Mario leaned against the change-room door. "Tommy and I signed for a straight flying-return act, not a lot of cheap monkey tricks!"

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"As a matter of fact, it was your precious Tommy thought up this cheap monkey trick!"
"That's right, Mario," Tommy said. "It was my idea. I'm sorry you don't like it—"
"Look, Matt," Johnny interrupted, "as a favor to me, will you explain what you've got against this stunt? It seems to me that it fits right in with the theme of the show. Flight Dreams. Try to think of it in slow motion. You've got three moving bodies here, each moving at its own rhythm, but all synchronized with each other, dreamlike, weaving—sort of sensual. See?"
"But it's not flying," Mario said.
"So what? Listen, Matt, people want to see new stunts. We're halfway through the twentieth century—hell, I thought you understood this when you signed for this show."
"Let me try to explain," Mario said slowly, striving to curb

his anger. "You were saying, flight dreams. Sensual, sure. But subtle. There's a kind of—of purity about flying. Pure, perfect. You don't need flash. You've got—I guess you'd have to call it the poetry of motion. Artistry. Can't you see that cheap, showy tricks just detract from the—the dreamlike purity of the flying? You don't even realize how hard it is, or how much effort it takes, because it looks absolutely perfect, natural. Like anybody could do it, the way you can do things in dreams." He stopped to draw breath, and Tommy, seeing the spark newly kindled behind his eyes, thought:
My God! I thought that was gone! But he's still got it, and if Johnny kills that off in him again, I'm going to break his goddamn neck!
"I don't think I see it," Johnny said. "I know you mean what you're saying, Matt. But try to see it my way for a minute. Dreams are complex, mixed up, and that kind of slow-motion interweaving, in and out, crisscross—"
Mario shook his head. No longer angry, he said with passionate seriousness, "Jock, you're wrong. Honest to God, I see what you're trying to do, but you're dead wrong. You say dreams are complex. That's the point, Jock: Dreams aren't complex. They're perfectly simple, stripped down to basics, like a little kid sees things. You don't want the audience to gasp and say, 'My God, how does he do it?' That's just one step better than the ghouls hoping they'll see somebody fall and break his neck. Flying is supposed to look like one of those flight dreams, so simple that people can't believe they can't do it themselves. That's what you want with your talk about flight dreams. Just pure, simple, perfect. So everybody watching will want to cry, because they know somewhere inside, in their guts, that they had wings and could fly once but they just forgot how."
His voice was actually shaking. "Back when we were little kids, watching Lucia. And—and Barney Parrish. I used to dream I could fly, and when I woke up I'd be crying because I'd forgotten how. That's what we want, Jock, to make people feel like that again."
Stella's voice was vibrant with emotion. "Johnny, I know what he means. He's right, Johnny. And we're wrong."
"Christ Almighty," Johnny exploded, "you, too?"

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"Johnny, he's got the right idea, only I couldn't have put it into words like that. We ought to be big enough to admit it when we're wrong."

Johnny looked from his brother to his wife, baffled.
"I can't see it myself," he said, "but I never did get into all that great mystique of flying. I'm just an acrobat, and to me a stunt's a stunt. But you two are better flyers than I am. It really means that much to you both, then?"
"It's what flying is all about, Johnny," Mario said. "Can't you see it?"
"Stel, are you going to take his side?"
She bit her lip. "Johnny, it's not a question of taking sides. It's just that what he said, that's what flying is all about, and what we should be doing in the show is to try to make people see it."
"Hell," Johnny said, frowning, "if you both feel that strongly about it, there must be something to it. Forget the damn trick. I'm just sorry we spent so much time and effort on it. Tom, looks like your trick's out."
"That's okay with me," Tommy said. "What Mario said sounded about right to me, too."
Johnny's mouth twisted in a wry grin. "I won't debate aesthetics." Snobbishly, Tommy was surprised that Johnny even knew the word. "So if we can get back to practical matters for a minute, if we yank that trick we've got a hole in the act you could drive a rig truck through. So what are we going to do instead? Put your great aesthetic sense to work on that, huh?" But by the time he reached the top of the rigging he was laughing, and Tommy thought, That's another way he's like Papa Tony—I never knew him to hold a grudge.
But the brief passionate spark he had seen in Mario had faded again. It's still there, Tommy thought, down under. But oh, God, is it buried.
It used to come out when he was flying. It still does, a little. But it doesn't come out anywhere else. Not even . . . Abashed at his own thought, he nevertheless carried it through to the logical end: Not even in bed, not anymore.
And then the discipline of rehearsal took over again and he had no time for any other thoughts. When they were finished and in the change room, Johnny pulled his sweater over his head, laughing.
"You know, Matt, I think that's the first fight we ever had that I let you win. It's not fair—you always get the girls or. your side. When we were kids, it was you and Liss against me, and now it's you and Stel!"

Mario was sitting slumped on the bench. "I don't get any kick out of fighting with you, Johnny."
Tommy looked at him in dismay. He ought to be on top of the world. For once he didn't let Johnny argue him down. Mario had managed to be persuasive, even eloquent, about something that meant a great deal to him. But he just sits there looking like death warmed over!
Johnny saw it, too. "Hey, Matt, what's eating you? Something wrong?"
"This damn tooth. Dentist put in some kind of temporary . filling, and it hurts like hell—I have to go back in three, four days. And I still have to take Bart home. His car's in the shop."

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But, Tommy knew it was not as simple as that. Mario just did not react to pain that way; Tommy had known him too long to be deceived. He had seen Mario do some of his best flying with raw sores on his wrists and open net burns which must have been giving him sheer hell. Troubled, not knowing what else he could do, he said, "Take it easy, Matt, I'll run Bart back home. You're in no shape to drive anyhow. You go on up and take some aspirin."
"Aspirin, hell," Mario said, grimacing. "I'm going up and ask Uncle Joe for a good big slug of whiskey and see if that helps."
"It'll probably put you out like a light," Johnny said, "and that's what you want, I guess."
Bart Reeder had changed out of his tights. Tommy's voice was more brusque than he had intended when he said, "Come on, Bart, I'll drive you home. You'll have to give me directions—I don't know where you live."
"Do you know how to get on the new freeway from here?"
"Sure." Tommy backed out of the driveway.
They did not speak for a few minutes. Then Reeder said," "You're not a bad driver, at that. Ever done any racing?"
"Never had a chance. When I was a kid there was a lot of dragging on the streets, but that always seemed a damn silly game. Anyhow, I never had a car of my own. When I was overseas, I went up to Le Mans to watch a race, but I'm not much to sit around and watch things. Anyhow, I knew I wasn't in that class."
"Me neither. I've thought sometimes I'd like to get behind the wheel of one of those Grand Prix one-seaters, but I know

my limits. I did ride with Tony Rogers as a passenger twice in the Mille Miglia. though."
"I wouldn't think that would be much better than watching."
"Goes to show you don't know much about it. It's the only way you can get into a race if you're not a driver, and believe me. nobody's going to want you in his car if you don't know just exactly what you're doing there. You have to put every pound of your weight right where it will do the most good for your driver." He chuckled. "Come to think of it, the way Tony checked me out before the race was not too different from the way Matt checked me over before he let me up on the flying rig the other day! I guess an expert is an expert, whatever his art is."
"Art?"
"Oh, sure. Racing is an art, like any other. You need talent, and skill, and special training, like ballet. Or flying. Or even playing the fiddle, I guess. And after all that, you need that little something extra. I quit ballet because I didn't have that little something extra. I'd never have been more than just competent as a dancer, and competent isn't good enough in ballet."
Tommy thought about that as he steered the car onto the freeway and accelerated to merge with the traffic. "Matt said something like that once."
"Tom, what's wrong with Matt?"
Had Reeder sensed it, too? "That row he had with Johnny? That doesn't mean anything. He and Johnny fight all the time about some trick or other."

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"That's not what I mean," said Bart. "I mean, what's wrong with him? Tom, I've known him ten, twelve years. I used to see him dancing and think, That kid's got something very special. You think I can't tell?"
For a moment loyalty held Tommy silent. Then the older man could hear the desperate concern in his voice as he said, "Bart, I just don't know. It's like a light's gone out. I don't know what to make of it, and it scares hell out of me."
Hearing his voice shake, Tommy shut up cold. "Which one of these exits do I take?"
"Third after this one." They drove in silence for a few minutes. "Want to tell me about it, Tom? I've known him a long time and—as you probably guessed—I used to be pretty

fond of him. Still am, really. I could probably understand better than most people, too."
Tommy swung into the exit, almost intolerably tempted. Reeder was an older man, himself homosexual, an old friend of Mario's and capable of understanding at least something of their common concerns. And it had been so long since there had been anyone to whom he could talk freely.
Tommy thought, Angelo would have been perfect. But I can't talk to Angelo, not about this. He stopped the car in front of the house Reeder indicated.
"Like I told you, it's like a light's gone out. Maybe it's just because he can't get back to doing the triple."
"I was right about you two, wasn't I? You're lovers."
In all the years, Tommy had never heard it put like that, very simply, with complete acceptance. He suddenly felt he could begin to cry from sheer relief.
"Yeah. Since I was a kid."
"That's a long time for a couple to stay together."
"Is it? Maybe. I guess I don't know all that much about" how it is with other people." He had never, Tommy thought, really cared to know. Hesitating, searching for words, he told Reeder how he had searched, how he had found Mario, gaunt, withdrawn, a shadow of his old self. "It was good, for a while. Only while we've been rehearsing this show he's been going down and down. I'd have thought maybe he was getting sick of flying, only you heard what he said to Johnny today. If just talking about flying can do that for him . . . I'm wondering if what I did—oh, God, Bart, I feel guilty because it's like I beat all the life out of him."
"I don't quite know what you mean," Bart said guardedly. "Is either of you"—he hesitated—"involved—in sadism?" At Tommy's look of bewilderment he elucidated carefully: "Does either of you—have to get hurt to—to get your kicks? Do you go in for—for whipping each other, tying each other up, that kind of thing?"
"Good God, no!" Tommy blurted. "I never heard of anything like that! That's not what I mean. It's—well, whenever he used to get real down, he'd take it out on me by picking a fight over nothing, and wind up beating me up. And—and— it didn't even make him feel any better; it just made him tear himself up worse. So a few days ago he started to pick a fight over nothing, and I—I got

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sore and beat the stuffing out of him. I'm stronger than he is now. I don't know, but

maybe my turning things around like that, maybe he couldn't take it, maybe—maybe he didn't know it, .maybe it was something like—like you said— Bart, did I do the wrong thing? If he needed to beat me up—"
Bart shook his head slowly. "I know what a nervy bastard he is. You certainly couldn't be expected to hold still for being beaten up every time he had some kind of a nerve storm. If he got a kick out of doing it, you'd have known."
"I keep wondering," Tommy said shakily, "maybe now I'm grown up—I know there are some men just go for kids. I keep wondering if finding out that I'm grown up turned him off me—-if now that I'm a man, and not a boy, he doesn't want me anymore. Only we're partners, Bart. The other stuff, if he wanted to get himself another boy—oh, hell, sure I'd care, I love the guy, but I could get along. I just want to see him all right again, see him the way he was. The way he ought to be. I love him," he said helplessly, swallowed, and fell silent.
"I can see that." Bart's voice was gentle. "It doesn't happen all that often to guys like us."
"I don't want to leave him. If I wasn't there, it would be just the family. And they drive him nuts. He'd walk out again, and God knows where he'd wind up this time. He was in jail in some god-awful place down on the Mexican border. He won't talk about it, but it must have been pretty awful. I don't know why in hell I'm telling you all this—there's nothing you can do about it, either!"
Bart put his hand gently over Tommy's. "All you can do is just what you're doing now."
"Only I'm not doing anything now," Tommy said, "and that's what kills me."
"Oh, yes, you are," Reeder said. "You're there, and he can trust you. And if he makes it at all, that's going to be why he makes it, whether he knows it or not. You stick with him, Tom." He glanced at the house. "You want to come in for a drink?"
Tommy hesitated, and Bart said, "No. Not this time. In the shape you're in, you wouldn't appreciate it, and—and maybe you better not leave him alone too long. If he's full of codeine and whiskey he's probably all right, but maybe you ought to be there when he wakes up—"
"Bart, what are you trying to say?"
Reeder's mouth was a tight line. "I'm not trying to scare

you. But the suicide rate—for us—is about twenty times what it is for—for ordinary people. When I see somebody looking the way Matt did this afternoon, I get twitchy about it. He doesn't have a gun, does he? Does he take sleeping pills?"
"Christ, no—I never even knew him to take aspirin before."
"And I know he doesn't drink. Okay, but it wouldn't hurt you to stick kind of close to him for a few days." He laughed and released Tommy's hand. "And if I asked you in I'd probably try to make you," he added with the light-heartedness Tommy now knew to be a mask assumed at will, "and right now you wouldn't get much of a kick out of it. You'd better get back to him."

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Tommy switched on the ignition again. "Thanks, Bart. I feel better, just talking about it."
"I know. There have been times I'd have given my ears, just for somebody to talk to," Reeder said, sober again. "We all need it. It's why so many of us hang around the bars. Tom, here, let me give you my number. It's unlisted, but you call me any time." He drew Tommy close, briefly, in a gentle hug. "I'll see you Thursday,. okay?" He opened the door and got out. Then he came around the car to Tommy's side, stopped by the open window, and took Tommy's face between his hands.
"You're a lovely boy," he said. "When things are better with you, we'll talk about this again. All right?" He leaned in the window and deliberately kissed Tommy on the mouth, then let him go and walked away up the driveway.

CHAPTER 8

the television spectacular, Flight Dreams, was to be broadcast live from the winter quarters of the Starr Circus just before Easter. Ten days beforehand Johnny called them all together.
"Something we left too long," he said, "is how do we bill this thing? 'John Gardner presents'—that's how I sold the thing. How are we going to use your names?"
"I took it for granted it was going to be Flying Santellis."

Johnny said, "Matt, any way you slice it, the regular circus is dead. It's been dead for years, only people didn't know it yet. People like Papa Tony—well, maybe it's as well they didn't live to see it."
"Good God, Johnny," Mario said, "I thought the Santelli tradition was one of the things you wanted!"
"I did," Johnny said, "and I do, but I'm not going to keep on living in the nineteen thirties, either. We're in a new age. The Atomic Age, maybe even the Space Age. Right now, if you want to, I'll bet you five hundred bucks we get a man on the moon, or maybe the Russians do, before the year two thousand."
Mario chuckled. "If you weren't my brother I'd take you up on that. Make some money for my old age."
"Well, I'll remind you, if we both live that long. But that's a long way off. I thought I'd bill it this way: 'John Gardner presents Stella Gardner, Matthew Gardner, Tommy Zane.' If you want to argue over Stella getting top billing, you two can flip a coin. Okay?"
Mario shook his head. "My professional name is Mario Santelli. That's the name I worked under with Starr's, and for all your talk about the circus is dead—and I think it's a damn lively corpse, myself—your television audience is going to be partly circus fans. A lot of them will be tuning in because they remember that name, and I'm going to stick with it."
"Me too," Tommy said. "I called myself Tommy Santelli from the first time I went on with the act."
Johnny pressed his lips tight together and said, "I could have expected- that. Every damn time you say anything. Matt, Tommy pipes up like Little Sir Echo. Why in hell don't you ever let him speak for himself?"
Mario opened his mouth to speak, but Tommy beat him to it.

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"Knock it off, Johnny. Matt and I are partners—we've been doing duo routines since I was a kid. Maybe I'm superstitious about changing the name, but anyway, Matt and I. we're the Flying Santellis, and that's the way you bill us, take it or leave it. Right, Mario?"
"Damn right."
Johnny slammed the table with his fist. "God damn it! The one thing I want is to get away from that old-country, family-circus image!"

"I wish Lucia could hear you say that," Mario snapped angrily.
"I don't give a damn—" Johnny began, then broke off, sighing. "I don't want to hurt Lu. But times have changed. When she was flying—that was another world."
"Sure. Lots of things have changed. We change, too. But why not keep the name, the tradition, the goodwill—all the good publicity the Santellis built up over fifty, sixty years? You're in show business, Jock, you know what that's worth."
Johnny shrugged. "Have it your own way. 'John Gardner presents Stella Gardner and the Flying Santellis'? That what you want?"
Stella, who had listened intently, spoke for the first time. "Johnny, I think Matt's right. Keep your credit line, if you want to. But make it 'John Gardner presents the Flying Santellis.' That's what it ought to be."
"Oh, for crying out loud, Stella!" Johnny exploded, but she silenced him with a quick gesture.
"Look, Johnny. When you brought me here, they took me right into the family. Papa Tony treated me just like he did Liss or Barbara. We're not a lot of stars, Johnny. We're a family. A family act. And I'm part of it." She bit her lip and Tommy saw her mouth tremble.
Johnny looked at her in astonishment. Then, as if he had forgotten for a moment that Tommy and Mario were there, he took her hand in his and held it, hard. After a minute he raised it to his lips and kissed it. It was so intimate a gesture, somehow, that Tommy turned his eyes away, embarrassed.
"Does that mean so much to you, babe?"
Her voice was shaking so hard that for a moment Tommy thought she would burst into tears. "What else have I got, Johnny? If I'm not part of the family, what was it all for?"
"Baby. Baby." Johnny put his arms around his wife and held her close. "If that's what you want, that's what you're going to get. Okay, you guys, it's the Flying Santellis, then. Because what Stella wants, Stella gets, as far as I'm concerned." His voice, angry and belligerent, dared them to say one word.
Tommy's own relief was tempered by something he recognized as purely selfish. As long as he and Mario were simply two members of a family act, it was highly unlikely that any hint of old scandal would touch them.
Bart Reeder came in that afternoon jubilant. "It's official

now, fellows," he said. "My agent just signed me for the Parrish movie. They're going to be doing some of the stock shots down at Starr's winter quarters. Isn't that where you people are doing the television thing?"

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"Way down in the boondocks," Johnny confirmed. "Out in Orange County."
"Who cares?" Reeder said. "I'm just glad I don't have to go on location down in Texas or someplace like that."
"Me too," said Mario. "I've had it with Texas."
"Is there going to be any kind of live audience for the television thing?" Bart asked. "Any chance I could get a seat?"
Johnny shrugged. "Sure. We're going down a couple of days early to get our riggings set, have a day or two to rehearse on site, get used to the lights, and stuff. You could come down with us for the final rehearsal."
"And if they see us a lot together," Bart said, "they're all the more likely to think Flying Santellis for the doubling in the Parrish movie."
"Right," Johnny said, "if Matt ever gets back the goddamn triple!"
Mario had promised Bart that he could try a cross to the .catcher today. He put him into a mechanic, and sent Tommy over to catch for him, rather than summoning Johnny. Despite the help of the mechanic, Reeder missed, and fell heavily, the first five times he tried it, and Tommy found himself admiring the man's courage. Flying had come so easily to Tommy that he had never really stopped to think what a dangerous business it was.
When they knocked off for a brief rest, Tommy asked him, "Why the hell are you doing this, Bart? They're going to double it, for the movie."
Bart said, lightly, "Vanity, perhaps. Don't want to admit there's something I can't do."
"That's not a very good reason," Tommy said.
"Maybe not," Bart said, "but it's all the reason I've got"
Mario, a towel around his shoulders, came and asked, "You want to try it again, Bart?"
Tommy said diffidently, "Look, maybe I'm lousing him up. Maybe Johnny—"
"No need," Mario said. "You're a better catcher than you think you are. You've got the timing. Like Stel. If she was

twenty, thirty pounds heavier, she'd be the best catcher in the family."
Swinging head down, waiting for Mario, Tommy thought about that. Vaguely, out of the corner of his eye, shadows and blurs, he could vaguely see the swing of the other trapeze, Mario's flexing body. Automatically, without thinking, he flexed his shoulder muscles, lengthening the swing a little. Stella was handling the ropes, but he didn't see her, either. The flying shadow came out, blurred, then a moment of tension, simultaneously braced and relaxed—and then their wrists meshed, slid, held, and Mario was swinging with him. He felt the blood pounding in his ears.
I bet I could hold him on a triple . . .
But as the thought crossed his mind he pushed it away again. For that you need a heavyweight catcher. I'm no Fortunati. And if he tries it and misses it again he's going to come apart.
Publicity was beginning to build up for the Flight Dreams show. A photographer came to the house to take pictures of their costumes for a movie fan magazine which was beginning to take occasional interest in

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television stars. Three days before the show, Johnny and Tommy disassembled their rigging and packed it into a truck rented for the occasion.
Tommy asked, "Want me to drive? I drove some trucks in the Army."
Johnny shook his head. "No need. Driving trucks between shows for Freres and Stratton, I learned to like handling the big semis. It'll be like old times for me and Stel, huh, babe?"
For Tommy, too, there was a hint of "old times" as he drove his car toward winter quarters of the Starr Circus. Only this time he was driving; because of his bad wrist, Mario seldom drove anymore when there was anyone around capable of handling a car.
The Starr Circus was to open in four weeks, in Madison Square Garden, and rehearsals should have been in full swing. The grounds seemed empty, though, with nothing to remind them of the opening except the posters plastered on every available surface.
"Where is everybody?" Tommy asked.
"Easter weekend," Johnny answered. "How do you sup-

pose the television people got permission to set this thing up here right in the middle of rehearsals?"
But it was no holiday for the television crews who had come in to set the lights and cameras. Before they had finished, a small crowd had collected in the entrance of the rehearsal tent. Finally they had everything the way they wanted it. The Flying Santellis would drive down tomorrow for a final rehearsal on the site, spend the night in a local motel, and do the television broadcast the next day. As they finished, a tall, familiar form broke away from the group of watchers.
"Hello, Matt, good to see you," Jim Fortunati said, and Mario took his hand.
"Hello, Jim."
"Every time I see Lionel, he asks about you. I heard a rumor you're going to be doing the flying for that Parrish movie they're making."
"Nothing official yet, Jim. How is Lionel, anyhow?"
"Last I heard, he was fine," Jim said. "He never did get back to flying after that accident you two had; he's opened some kind of tourist place down in San Diego. Listen, why don't the four of you come down to our trailer, have dinner with us? Cleo would love to see you all again."
As they started walking to the trailer, he added, "Matt, I saw your little girl the other day. Your wife—er, your ex brought her along to rehearsal. She sure is getting cute. Looks a lot like Liss at that age.?
A shadow crossed Mario's face. "I didn't know Susan was still with the show, Jim. I haven't seen her since we split."
"That so? When she heard you were coming down for this
thing, she asked where you'd be staying, and everything."
"I know what she wants. I'll have to get in touch with her, I guess."
Cleo was waiting for them at the trailer, slender and pretty as ever. Her flame-bright hair had darkened to chestnut, and she wore it fashionably short, but there were no other visible signs of the accident that had ended her flying career. There were lines around the smiling eyes that Tommy did not

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remember seeing there before, but her smile was undimmed. She threw her arms around Mario and hugged him hard, and after a minute gave Tommy, too, a friendly squeeze. Stella, when introduced, was shy and tongue-tied. Cleo said, with her quick, brilliant smile, "I saw you on television—Circus

Days and Nights? I thought so. You remind me a little of Lucia."
"Family resemblance," Johnny said gaily.
They were crowded in the dining cubicle of the trailer, but nobody minded. Tommy remembered that for Mario and Johnny this was a family reunion. Looking at the array of food spread out on the small table, Mario teased, "Learning to cook after all these years, Cleo?"
She laughed. "I'm too old a dog to learn new tricks. I sent out for all this stuff to a place that does up fried chicken by the basketful."
"It's about as good as home cooking anyhow," Johnny said, sinking his teeth into a biscuit.
Cleo giggled like a girl. "Home cooking like mine is why men leave home," she said. "Matt, are you going to do a triple tomorrow in this television thing? No? I'm sorry to hear it. Simon Barry is a nice boy, and a pretty good flyer, but he's not in your class. People used to think that anybody who could do the triple at all was pretty special, but now that every good flyer is doing it, people are beginning to realize that there's more to it than just being able to get that third turn. It's not just doing it, it's how you do it."
Mario shook his head, acutely uncomfortable. "Since Lionel quit, there aren't that many catchers that can hold me on it."
Cleo' glanced at Johnny. "I should think you'd be big enough."
"I am," Johnny said, "only Matt doesn't think so. There's a lot of garbage talked about the triple. Like you said, everybody's doing it now, just to prove they can, and I wanted Matt to do it for this show. But he still has this dumb notion in his head that a catcher for the triple has to be some kind of superman. Sure, when it was first invented, it was something special. How long did it take Barney Parrish to get it? Four years, five? But now it's not so much. There's a lot of bull thrown around about how hard flying is," he added, and Tommy felt the words were a challenge. "Hell, I can break a kid into a flying act in three months, if the kid does what he's told!"
Cleo said clearly, "I took piano lessons for three years when I was a kid, and I could play everything in the Baptist hymnal. But that doesn't make me Vladimir Horowitz, either. There's doing tricks on the trapeze, Johnny, and there's fly-

ing." She reached her small freckled hand across the table to Mario. "That's why I hoped I'd see you doing it again."
"Maybe some other time, Cleo."
"It wouldn't fit into this show, really it wouldn't," Stella said, surprising everyone. "I know Johnny doesn't agree with me about this. We had a row about it. But it really wouldn't fit. The triple—" She bit her lip, searching for words. "It's an—an accomplishment—something spectacular. But this show, this whole Flight Dreams act—it's supposed to be something that looks

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perfect, simple, almost dreamlike. The triple, that's a showstopper. But we don't want show-•stoppers in this. It's—it's—again she groped for words—"it's got to be all in one piece. No star stuff, just perfect teamwork and simplicity." She broke off. "I'm no good at saying this."
On the contrary, Tommy thought, you're pretty damn good at saying it, and I hope Johnny gets the point!
Cleo nodded thoughtfully. "I know what you mean," she said. "That's the reason I only did it a few times, and only once or twice in the ring. People kept talking about my being the first woman to do it, and I felt they didn't really care how it was done, or how well, just that I was the only woman who could do it."
Stella's eyes lighted up. "Oh, you do understand! I couldn't make Johnny see it! That's exactly why I don't want to do it, Mrs. Fortunati!" She had forgotten her shyness.
"Cleo, dear, for goodness' sake!"
Mario's eyebrows tilted up in the old devilish grin. "In college I read something like that. Some old goat about a hundred years ago said that a woman making a speech was like a bear walking on his hind legs; you didn't expect it to be done well, because it was surprising enough that it was done at all."
Jim Fortunati laughed. "Whoever your old boy was, he didn't know anything about the circus. You expect a bear to walk on his hind legs there!"
Stella ignored him, saying, "Even if I did it, nobody would care how well I did it, or why. Just that I was the only woman doing it. Oh, I know you have to have publicity, a certain amount of ballyhoo, but—but I don't want that kind."
Johnny made a wry face. "Matt on one side and Stella on the other, and me in between! Is it any wonder I want to get

out of flying when this Flight Dreams thing is over? There just isn't all that much you can do on television with circuses!"
Fortunati said, "That's why I wanted to talk to you, John. How would you like to manage the aerial wing of the show?"
"Starr's? Good God, are you serious, Jim?"
"Dead serious. I'd like to hand it over to Cleo, but Starr would raise holy hell if I put a woman in charge of the whole shebang."
"That isn't fair," Stella said.
Fortunati shrugged. "You don't have to tell me that, honey. Cleo knows more than any three men. She's been training every woman flyer on the lot for the past ten years. But that's the way it is. How about it, John?"
Stella's eyes were shining, but Johnny shook his head soberly. "I don't know, Jim. It sounds good, but I don't know how much future there is in any circus job these days. I'd want some time to think it over."
"Why don't I set up an appointment for you to talk with Randy Starr, about money and so forth? I know the show would be in good hands with you."
Stella said softly, "It sounds like just what you've been wanting, Johnny. I know you don't want to fly anymore. Anywhere on the business end, whether it's circus or television ..."

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"It's a thought," Johnny said, "but I'm going to have to do a lot of thinking about it, Jim."
"Well, you think it over, and we'll talk about it later," Fortunati said. "For now let's forget about business for a while. Tell me all the family news. What's Angelo doing these days?"

CHAPTER 9

the next day, driving down for the final rehearsal and the television broadcast, Mario chose to go with Johnny and Stella in their car. Tommy was to drive down with Bart Reeder in the MG. To Tommy's immense relief, Bart did not refer, even with a look, to the subject of their last conversation. He merely motioned Tommy in under the wheel. "Like to drive?"

Bart checked him out meticulously on each of the controls before starting, showing him how to put the car into each of its gears.
"What's the speed limit on the freeway, anyhow?"
"Legally, seventy. Practically, anything the traffic will bear," Bart said. "I've gone up to a hundred when there wasn't any traffic. The road's engineered to take it. On the other hand, if you go zipping in and out of traffic from lane to lane at rush hour, you can get a ticket doing forty-five. Take her up to anything you feel safe with."
"I did a hundred and thirty on the autobahn, once. A buddy of mine had a Mercedes."
"Well, there's a hell of a lot of freeway between here and Tijuana. Have fun."
There was a little too much traffic for Tommy to feel comfortable with anything over eighty-five. Nevertheless, the silver MG handled like a dream, and he slipped into the curious, hyperconscious blend of acute attention and exhilaration which characterizes all drivers who handle a car for the sheer love of it. For a time he lost all awareness of time and space, conscious only of the road, the traffic, the controls, the silent presence and close communication of the man at his side. After a long time a series of signs warned of the approach of the Mexican border, and, regretfully, he slowed the car and came back to ordinary consciousness.
"What time is it, anyway, Bart?"
"Quarter to eleven. We've got time enough to have some lunch down here, if you want to."
. "Sure. What is it, about eighty miles back to winter quarters?"
"Something like that. You like Mexican food?"
Tommy chuckled. "I grew up on Texas chili. The hotter, the better."
Bart nodded. "I like it Border style, too—hot enough to tear a hole in your mouth, and with plenty of beer."
"Okay, but I better go easy on the beer. I got a show to do."
"I know a place where all the guys go after the races." He walked around the car to slide under the wheel. Tommy, moving into the passenger seat, met Bart's eyes, and the older man reached out and laid a hand on his arm. But he didn't speak, and Tommy was relieved.
The restaurant was a small unpretentious place, but the

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half dozen cars drawn up outside made Tommy blink with sudden envy.
"Like I say, the whole race crowd goes here a lot," Bart said. Then, meeting Tommy's eyes with a sudden, intimate look, he warned, "Listen, car buffs are mostly so straight it hurts. I'd like to be able to hold your hand, but this isn't the right time or the right place. Understand?"
Tommy laughed. "Okay by me, Bart," he said, and somewhere in the back of his mind was aware of what was happening between them, a series of small barriers being lowered one by one. He wasn't sure he wanted it quite like that. Part of him was glad that Bart could pass in an ordinary crowd without immediately being spotted as queer—and believed that he could—but in another way, the sense of sharing a secret with Bart Reeder was not entirely welcome.
We're two of a kind. Why should that bother me? And as another barrier went down, he realized it didn't bother him at all, that it was good to know he was with a man who could understand and share his own sense of alienation.
"Hey, Bart!" someone called from the counter as they entered the restaurant, "you coming down Sunday?"
"You bet," Bart said. They joined a group in one of the big corner booths. "This is Tom Zane. Tom, you are coming down for the rally day after tomorrow, aren't you?"
Tommy's hesitation was only momentary. By that time the Flight Dreams show would be over. It would be a welcome change from his constant preoccupation, not with flying—he didn't mind that—but with constant worry over whether Mario would hold together long enough for the show.
"Sure," he said, "glad to."
As Bart had promised, the Mexican food was very hot and very good. While they ate, Tommy listened more than he talked. The conversation was mostly about cars, and he did not feel quite as much of an outsider as he had feared.
"You do any driving, Tom?" one of the men asked.
"Strictly an amateur."
Bart laughed and said, "He's being modest. He brought the MG down, and he's got the knack."
"And MG is amateur stuff. Sooner or later you're going to want a Ferrari."
"I can do anything in the MG that you can do in the Ferrari," Bart argued, and they were lost again in a discussion of cornering speeds and controlled slides.

They ate quickly, however, with one eye on the clock. Bart said, "I'll drive back. You don't want to turn up all worn out." As he slid under the wheel he gave Tommy another of those quick, intimate smiles. "Or all stirred up, either."
At the winter quarters, Mario was waiting in the rehearsal tent, already in tights, pacing restlessly back and forth, fretting.
"Where the hell have you two been? You get lost or something?"
Tommy glanced defensively at his watch. "I've still got half an hour. Take it easy, huh?"
"You're not even dressed yet!" Mario was glowering.

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"For Christ's sake, Matt, how long does it take me to get into a pair of tights? Where do we dress?"
"Men's dressing top, right over there." He pointed. "Our bags are there, too. Johnny and I made reservations at a motel, but we haven't checked in yet, okay?"
"Sure. Look, I told Bart I'd go to that car rally with him on Easter Sunday. That all right with you?"
"Lucky, you don't have to ask my permission to go to places, for God's sake!"
There were half a dozen strangers in the dressing tent Tommy found his bags and Mario's, stripped hastily, and got into his costume. Bart looked around curiously, seeming to take in every detail of the tent. Tommy guessed that for any actor, this opportunity to see inside the life of the character he was to play was a valuable thing, not to be missed.
He was losing his nervousness about Bart. The man might be one of the "obvious" types he had detested since childhood—but only among those he knew and trusted. Before outsiders, Tommy was beginning to know, he could be £.-. discreet and ordinary as Tommy himself. He did give Tommy a quick, shared grin as he helped him adjust the silver belt of the costume. As they left the tent he said under his breath. "Sure, Tom. In my business you can be a crook, a rapist, blackmailer, any damn thing you want to, and so long as the public thinks you're a solid citizen the front office will stand by you. There's just two things you can't admit to- being in this business. And the other's a Communist."
Back in the rehearsal tent, bleachers had been set up for the live audience, and the television men were fussing with their lights. Tommy joined the others at the foot of the rigging. It seemed strange to wear streamlined silver and white

instead of Santelli green and gold. Stella looked pale, and Mario was as taut as a bowstring.
Johnny walked over to confer with one of the cameramen. "Okay, kids, we'll run straight through. The show's being done live tomorrow, but they want some film footage of us to use over the opening credits. First they want to get shots of us coming out of the entrance over there . . ."
From his work as a stunt double, Tommy was familiar with the endless retakes, repetitions, and "protecting" shots, to be spliced in from any angle. But the monotony made Stella nervous, and before too many retakes, Mario was fidgeting and tense. By the time they actually climbed the rigging to go through the program for final rehearsal, Tommy could see that he was sweating, his eyes narrowed against the light. He murmured as they climbed the ladder, "If I ever let us in for anything like this again, Tom, kick me, will you?"
It was easier when they were actually going through the routines they had rehearsed so often in the practice room. When Mario and Stella flew past one another in the midair pass, there was a burst of applause from the scattered few in the seats. Tommy, handling the ropes, thought, They're good together, very good, and then he was briefly, painfully jealous. In their old duo routines

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he had had that kind of perfect synchronization with Mario. Sick at heart, he thought, As a -flyer, I'm not in their class, not at all.
"You're on!" Stella nudged him in the ribs, and he pushed aside all personal awarenesses, conscious only of the thick taped bar under his fingers, of Johnny's swing accelerating to match his own. He spun off the bar into the forward double, not even realizing that he was altering his own rhythm in midair to accommodate to Johnny. He frowned as they swung together, wrists meshed, and the thought barely skimmed his mind: Johnny's not as good a catcher as he thinks he is. Stella would look even better with a better catcher. Then he was flying free, in the split second of mingled fear and exaltation, the held-breath jolt of released adrenaline flushing him with heat as he landed on the platform.
The repeats and extra footage for slow-motion sequences took longer, with more repeats and retakes. They worked steadily until nine that evening, and afterward the four of them went out for supper at a local steak house. Mario was silent, sunk in after-show depression, but Johnny was jubilant.

"Reeder said he'd have people here associated with the Parrish movie. This is going to be a big thing for all of us. Now, if I can only give them some kind of assurance—" he said, glancing at Mario. Tommy, seeing Mario flinch, made an excuse to draw Johnny aside as they were sliding into the booth at the restaurant.
"Listen, John, I got something to say to you."
"What the hell's biting you?" Johnny demanded.
"Keep your voice down, dammit! If you start chewing Matt out tonight about the triple, getting him all shook up when he's got this show to do tomorrow, I am personally going to beat the living shit out of you! Can't you see what you're doing to him?"
"But, Tommy, what the hell are we going to do? You know as well as I do, he's never going to be right until he gets it back again. Look, I'm not trying to hurt him. You're acting like I was his enemy or something. You're not the only one in the world wants to see him acting like himself again!"
"I shouldn't have said it just that way. Maybe what he needs is somebody to take over, and give him hell, the way Papa Tony used to do. All I'm saying is, tonight, with this thing hanging over him, lay off, okay?"
"I'll lay off him till this thing is wrapped up. But I'm not going to keep on handling him with kid gloves indefinitely, and the sooner you get that through your head, the better for all of us. Understand?"
"Hey, you two, we're waiting," Stella called.
Johnny, tilting up his eyebrows, said, "What's the rush? You got a train to catch or something?" and slid into the booth beside Stella. Tommy, taking his accustomed place beside Mario, welcomed consciously, for the first time, the family arrangement that had allowed him to do this without comment.
There's just two things you can't admit to being, in this business. And the other's a Communist.
What the hell is happening to me? I'm acting like I want to hire a hall and let everybody know I'm queer!

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Stella said impatiently, "Tommy, the waitress is waiting for your order. You asleep or something?" Quickly he roused himself, glanced at the menu, and ordered the first thing his eyes fell on.
Later Johnny said, "I know a place a few miles away

where they play good jazz. Want to go down and listen to them a while? Nothing else to do in this town, I guess."
The music was good and they stayed out very late. It was noon the next day when they woke. Mario was in the shower when the phone rang, and Tommy reached to answer it.
"Is this Mr. Gardner's room, please?"
"Who's calling?" Tommy asked.
"This is Susan Gardner," said a husky female voice, "Cleo Fortunati gave me this number."
Oh, Christ, Tommy thought, -whatever I do now, it's going to be wrong. And if I don't do anything, that's going to be wrong, too.
"He's not here right now, Sue-Lynn," he said, using the old name. "Can I have him call you back?"
"As usual, huh?" The woman's voice sharpened. "Yes, you tell him I've still got some unfinished business with him, and if he knows what's good for him he better come and get it settled, hear? I've been trying to get in touch for weeks now, and if he won't talk to me, he's going to find himself saying it to a process server. You got all that? Who is this, anyhow?"
Tommy hesitated, wondering if Sue-Lynn had heard the ancient scandal. He was unwilling to find out. "This is his brother. Look, you do know he's got a show to do tonight?" Maybe he should call Mario out of the shower and leave it at that; the thought of what Mario would say if he knew Tommy was taking it on himself to protect him, made him flinch. "Can I have him call you after the show, Sue-Lynn?"
Her voice was irritable, grudging. "Say, what the hell goes on? Has he been sick or something?"
"You could say that." Tommy hesitated, seeking for words which would neither compromise Mario nor antagonize the woman at the other end of the line. "If you have any generosity or any goodwill at all toward him, Sue-Lynn, wait till he's got this show off his mind. You're a flyer, you know what it's like with something like this coming up."
"I guess it could wait one more day. But you have him call me tomorrow, or he'll find out what kind of trouble I can make when I really try."
The sound of the shower had ceased. Tommy said hastily, "Where should he call you?"
"He knows where I am," she said spitefully, "and you can tell him I'm still in the book, and it's no good pretending he

doesn't know how to get in touch with me." She hung up, and Tommy slowly replaced the receiver as Mario, in his shorts, came from the bathroom.
"Who was that on the phone, Tommy?"

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"Wrong number," he lied, unhesitating. Mario looked calm, but Tommy knew how quickly that could give way to depression or an almost hysterical restlessness. "We better go out and get some breakfast," he suggested. "We aren't likely to feel much like eating before the show tonight."
"Breakfast!" Mario glanced at his wristwatch and chuckled. "Some time for breakfast!"
He ate enormously—as always on a day when he had a late show and his later meals would be sketchy—but Tommy felt as slack, stale, and weary as an untwisted rope. Remembering an insight that had come to him the day before— As a flyer, I'm not in their class, not at all—he was troubled, restless, wondering why he was here at all. Had his childish hero worship of Mario led him back to work for which, as an adult, he was in no way fitted? Had it been a mistake to come back, an emotional decision born of the excitement of meeting Mario again? He looked at Mario, relaxed and shabby in his old ballet-school sweater, the graying hair shading his thin face at the temples. The face of one dearly loved, but essentially a stranger.
"You're awfully quiet, Tom," Mario said, pouring more coffee from the insulated pot the waitress had left on the table. "Look, don't worry about tonight—it's going to be great. I know how you're feeling; it's like it used to be on the first day of the season, when I was a kid. Every year, on the first of May, when we opened, I used to wish I was back in the ballet school. I still do, only now I know it's just one of those things I have to go through on the first day of the season, wondering why I'm here at all. Relax. Here, you take those last couple of sausages." He dumped them on Tommy's plate. "It's going to be a long day."
Looking up to meet Mario's smiling eyes, Tommy suddenly knew Mario was right. They had a show to do in a few hours. This was not the time to wonder about whether he ought to be doing it.
"Yeah," he said, picking up his coffee cup and draining it "we got about six hours to kill. No sense hanging around here letting it get on our nerves. Let's go out and hunt up a good movie, or something."

Before the show, television makeup men and specialists prepared every detail of costume and makeup for the cameras. As they waited for their cues, Tommy felt with distaste the pancake makeup on his face and wrinkled his nose at the sickish smell of whatever they had put on his hair to hold it in place. They waited, watching on the television monitor screen behind the enormous panels of equipment the TV crews had moved in. There were four images from different cameras: one on the stage, where the famous Hollywood actor who was to host tonight's special was warming up the audience; one on the audience itself, which would later be turned on the flying rig for long shots; another lens mounted very near the flying pedestal; and the fourth focused on the empty, swinging catcher's trapeze. At a central monitor a technician, preoccupied and silent, was mixing the images for broadcasting on the main screen.
Tommy wondered what all the complicated equipment was for. Johnny was watching as if he knew what was going on. He probably did.

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The actor was telling some joke which sent the audience into ripples of laughter. In one of the side-screen images Tommy saw the actor, a handsome graying man who slightly resembled Jim Fortunati.
"And now we take you, live, to the winter quarters of the Starr Circus in California, and to your host tonight, Barry Cass."
Watching on the TV monitor, Tommy saw behind Barry Cass's head the first of the trick-photography sequences they had filmed, now going out on the television broadcast all over the country: a swinging trapeze, Johnny's upside-down form blurred by distance, unreal and dreamlike, moving back and forth with hypnotic rhythm. Unconsciously, Tommy felt his own shoulders flexing, his calves tightening as if around the padded supports of the catcher's trapeze. In the background he saw the flyer, swinging higher and higher in perfect matching rhythms with the catcher. He had never before seen himself flying, and was not until afterward aware that he saw himself now. His whole awareness was focused on Johnny in the catch trap; his body was motionless before the screen, but there was the tiny subliminal tensing of the appropriate muscles, the motionless straining in inward identification as the locked linked swing of two bodies perfectly merged ...

His world. Where he belonged.
He felt Stella's hand slide into his and squeezed it with hard tenderness. Just beyond her he saw Johnny in profile, tense and apprehensive, so different from the arrow-straight locked perfection of the catcher on the television screen. I love him, too. I never realized it. Sometimes I don't even like him much, but he's my brother, too, and I love him. , . .
"Santellis, please. Mr. Gardner. Thirty seconds."
And Mario was just behind him, where he had been for so many years. Tommy did not look at him or touch him, but he was aware of his breathing, the warmth of his body. Barry Cass was saying, "And now John Gardner presents .. .the Flying Santellis!"
Lights in his eyes. A heavy spatter of applause like rain on a trailer roof years ago. Lights at the foot of the flying rig, lights everywhere, a center ring with an audience of millions. Stella was just ahead of him on the ladder. Tommy felt as if he were watching himself take the resin bag between his hands, losing track of time . . . Was it now, or was it years ago? Then Mario was beside him, stepping off the ladder with the old careless flourish. At the far end, lights glinted on Johnny's bright hair.
"Okay, Lucky, you're first. Wait for my call."
Stella's hands as she passed it to him, hard and steady, not trembling now, rocklike with concentration. Grasp the bar, out in the long swooping dive, tension in shoulder muscles as he swung up and over the bar, backswing, playing with it, diving, the long tumbling sense of free flight. Johnny's wrists gripping and meshing with his. The long breathless backswing, the excitement of fingers closing on the bar again when he was braced for the long drop and fall . . . feet slamming on the platform. Stella like an arrow, flying, swooping.

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Mario. Mario flying, his body melting into the flowing perfect line. Tommy, feeling his own shoulder muscles straining in identification, hardly knew for a moment whether Mario had meshed into Johnny's hands or his own. Perfect merging, perfect flight, Mario and Stella soaring past one another like birds.

And yet, for all the dream images, his attention was harshly focused as never before. Stella's body was smooth and hard and impersonal against his own, and yet he felt an awareness of her so enormous that it was almost a sexual

ache. Mario's eyes, meeting his for a moment. Mario, flying. The precise, endless, timeless rhythm of flying ...

Then it was over, and they were diving into the net one by one, posing for rehearsed bows. Tommy came back to ordinary consciousness cold and shivering, knowing that on the monitor screens the prephotographed trick shots were going on and on, endless, perfect . . . but for them it was over. Cleo Fortunati came up and spoke to him, and he managed to answer her civilly, not knowing what she had said. Mario was beside him, their hands meeting for an instant. Johnny, looking pale, almost nauseated, was answering questions and accepting congratulations, his face deathly white. Stella, too, looked pale, and small, but still taller than Cleo Fortunati, who came up and hugged her, saying things that made Stella glow like a praised child.

Bart Reeder came into sharp focus, smiling at Tommy with a friendly, correct handshake and formal compliments meant for the ears of outsiders. Then he whispered, "Tell you tomorrow what I really thought about it!" with a quick, secret, shared grin. Mario and Bart shook hands, and newspaper reporters took their picture together. Even that could not take the elated grin from Mario's face. Nothing wrong with Mario now. This is where he belongs. Where we belong.

Back in the dressing room, he scrubbed off the pancake makeup, feeling the residual stiffness on his skin. A reception was being held for the television people, the circus people, and the people from the movie studio. Tommy was getting into the neat dark suit he had bought just for this event, the first one he had ever owned, when Mario thrust out his wrist, sticky with tape. An old memory tried to surface as Tommy pulled off the tape, then wrapped gauze and adhesive around the raw, chafed wrists.

"What the hell is this reception all about, anyhow?" he asked.

Mario shrugged. "God knows. Publicity for Johnny, maybe. Or maybe for the Parrish film. What the hell, does it matter? It's a free drink."

At the reception Cleo came up to Mario and asked, almost hurt, "Why wasn't Lucia here? I really wanted to see her."

"She sent you her love, Cleo. But she had already promised to take Tessa to the sunrise Easter Mass."

Cleo looked pretty, unfamiliar in her low-cut evening gown. Her mouth tilted in a gentle, amused smile.

"I should have expected that of Lu. She won't come down here for anything. But after what she did for me when I was hurt, it doesn't matter anymore."

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"What did she do, Cleo?" Mario asked.
"All the years, since she had her fall and left the circus, she would never come down and see me. I thought she hated me. I had resented her so; people were always comparing us. Nobody ever noticed me— it was always 'in the great tradition of Lucia Santelli.' And I felt like a shadow, an imitation, whatever I did, and then when she fell, I thought she hated me because I was still flying and she couldn't..."
Tommy listened with dismay and a strange, growing insight. This woman was the greatest star of the circus, perhaps the greatest woman star in the history of flying. Yet she had felt inferior, outclassed. Always in Lucia's shadow, as Mario felt that nothing he did could ever equal what Barney Parrish had done. Had Barney Parrish, too, cherished some inferiority, some inward shadow, some feeling that he could never equal an ideal within himself? Did it happen to everyone?
"I was paralyzed, I couldn't move. And then when I woke up, Lucia was beside my bed. She wouldn't drive down to Anaheim to see me, but she flew to Boston to be with me in the hospital. Matt, she stayed with me even minute. I didn't want to live. I thought if I was finished flying, I might as well give up and die. Lucia kept reminding me that they hadn't expected her to live, either. She bullied me, she fed me, she washed me, she stayed with me at night when the nurses didn't have time. I don't think I'd be here now, if it hadn't been for Lu."
Mario looked stunned. "Lucia? Lucia did that?"
"Matt, she mothered me. She kept me alive, I think. And the day they said I'd walk again, she came and told me I didn't need her anymore. She kissed me good-bye, and she went back to California. And I haven't seen her since, and I don't expect I will."
None of us understands Lucia, Tommy thought. None of us ever will.
The reception was drawing to a close, the reporters drifting away, exhaustion settling in steady lines down over

Stella's taut face. In Jim Fortunati's car, Tommy felt heavy and sleepy. When Stella's head collapsed on his shoulder, he held her tenderly, filled with love for her, too.
After a few last good-nights, he was alone with Mario in the room they shared. He looked up, and suddenly it was the old Mario again, the one he had known as a child. The way he used to be. Speechless, he turned to Mario and put his arms around him. There was nothing he could say. Mario's arms closed around him, but he didn't speak, either, for a long time. They didn't need to. After some time Mario let him go, but his hand lingered a minute on his shoulder.
"What in the hell. . ."
Tommy's hand went up* touching what Mario had touched. It was the St. Michael's medal, the one Mario had given him years ago, the day of his first real taste of flying.
Mario said, in a whisper, "Good God, have you worn that all these years?"

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Tommy had not the faintest memory of transferring it— automatically, as he had done all these years—from one shirt to another. He said, "Yeah. I forgot I had it. Whaddya know about that?"
Tommy went into the shower, feeling the hot rain on his head and body, remembering somewhere outside himself the last time he had been in a motel with Mario. And as if past and present had come together and merged, Mario was there, wedged into the shower beside him, silent, close, the past very much with them both, but they could not speak of that time. They soaped one another, still not speaking; Tommy knew that if he said a word he would begin to cry like the child he had been that night years ago. They toweled each other dry, still without a word, still in that absolute awareness. Mario put out the light, and Tommy pulled him down on {he nearer of the beds.
He was still almost reliving that night, so many years ago. Then it had been a despairing frenzy, a desperate need for reassurance in the face of his own cruelly new self-knowledge. Now it was reaffirmation, coming together in the full knowledge of what they had always been to one another. He was not a child, now, clinging to an older boy in a confused mixture of hero worship, adoration, and sexual wakening. Now, confident and aware, knowing precisely what they both wanted, he pulled Mario into his arms.

Something lost between them since they had met again as men, something he feared had gone forever, was there again.
We belong together. We're not kids now. We're men, and we know what we are and what we want. But out of the excitement of watching Mario tonight there was a touch of the old wonder and awe. He said, "I love you, Matt," but he knew the words were a shorthand for something more than love, more than sexuality, more than the need which drew them together. Again there came the quick image of the meshing grip, interlocked, soaring, there, perfect, together . . . entwined, sensual, their bodies meeting as they met perfectly in midair. Flight dreams. Which are sex dreams ... In a split second of memory, words he had forgotten came back to him, and he whispered, "We have only one heartbeat." He wasn't sure Mario could hear. But it didn't matter. He knew.

CHAPTER 10

he woke, and again time was confused. A return to the past or a new beginning? Very gently he freed himself from Mario's entangling arms and lay looking down at the other man's sleeping face. The room was light; Mario's watch on the dresser, which he could see by craning his neck a little, read almost nine. With a combination of tenderness and resignation, looking at Mario's face-—relaxed, all the lines of tension and bitterness momentarily smoothed away—he sighed, realizing the depth of his commitment to this difficult damn fool.
Like all lovers, he found himself trying to put his finger on the first moment he had been aware of love. Not the night of the Oklahoma thunderstorm, when Mario had first taken him into his bed. Not the dark night when, drowsy with the rolling thunder of the sea, he had felt the fugitive brush of an unrealized kiss. Not even, perhaps—though this was closer— the night when

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Mario had shaken and slapped him into awareness of what he was: a performer, a flyer, not a crybaby kid. Had it been the day of his first fall, when Mario had pinned the little medal into the neckline of his shirt and

Tommy had realized he would take a hundred falls, a thousand, without whimpering, to call forth that grin of approval? He touched the little medal lying on the nightstand. It was thinning now, smoothed from resting against his body.

No, it had begun earlier, in the time before he was aware of anything but obsession, a boy on the ground looking at an older boy flying, falling through space to land, bruised and shaken, almost at his feet—soaring through space, straining without wings for the unattainable. I wanted to give it to him even then. I didn't know what he wanted, but I wanted it, too. The hunger to fly, the shared need, obsession: the living that made all the rest of life worth it.

Mario had given him so much. First the freedom of the platform, then of flight. Strength and awareness and the priceless gift of courage; he had armored him with harshness and broken him relentlessly like a ring-shy colt, sparing him nothing even in the name of love. And later Mario had given him the knowledge of his own nature, the dawning of sexuality, had shared that with him, too, but unsparing, uncompromising.

I had to be rough on you, Tommy. If I wasn't tough that way, I'd melt down and go soft all over and you'd find me lying in a puddle someplace. Tommy realized suddenly that if Mario had ever softened to him in training, had ever even once compromised with his own rigid standards, then everything else between them would have gone for nothing, and their relationship, rooted in softness instead of strength, would have taken on a subtle flavor of corruption. But this alone they had never tainted, never compromised; only apart from Tommy did Mario slip and falter into softness. And because of this, what might have been a leech, sapping at and infecting the roots of their strength, became instead the source from which a harsh purity flowed through them, emerging into the clean brilliance of flight.

And if in the overflow of that strength, the power behind them flung them into each other's arms, what did it matter?

Tommy had never realized to what extent a lingering guilt, the shocked child hiding behind the man, had remained, making him ashamed of what he was, until now he examined the roots of love and found them whole and pure. He had let outsiders make him ashamed of what he was and what he felt for Mario; he had been defensive about it, but still ashamed. Mario stirred restlessly and woke, opening his confused

dark eyes, and as always it was deep reassurance to Tommy to see him come back out of that strange unknown country of sleep into day. Mario blinked, then smiled at him.

"Hi, Lucky. That thing went good last night, didn't it?"

Tommy nodded. Mario turned on his elbow and said, "What time is Bart picking you up for this auto race or whatever the hell it is?"

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"Sports-car club rally run. Ten, I think." Abruptly he remembered something else, and flinched.
"Matt, I've got something to tell you. Remember that phone call I said was a wrong number?"
"I knew it wasn't," Mario said, "but you seemed so shook up about it, I didn't want to ask questions. What was it, Tom?"
Haltingly, distressed, Tommy told Mario about Sue-Lynn's call. Mario's face tightened, but when Tommy had finished, he said, "It's okay, Lucky. I probably couldn't have taken it, right then. I guess I've got to call her, though. I know what she wants."
"What does she want?"
Mario sighed. "I owe her a lot of money," he said. "When we split up, I agreed to pay child support. And then I walked out and never paid her anything but that first check I gave her. I got a letter from her after we got home, but I couldn't face opening it. And Lucia said she'd been calling, but I never did call her back. I couldn't—couldn't manage it. I guess I don't blame her for being sore enough to take me to court. It might be kind of useful having a wife around. Even an ex-wife. I wouldn't be the first-—the first queer in Hollywood to get married for a good front, a cover story." He added, "She'd have to know the facts of life, of course. About us."
"Jesus," Tommy said, "why not just call up the Times about it?"
"No, listen, Tom. I said I'd tell you the whole story someday. About Susan and me, that is."
Tommy felt a painful hollowness inside his belly. "You don't have to tell me anything, Matt."
"No, I want to. We ought to talk about a couple of other things, too. Like, I figured you might have got married yourself, after we split."
Tommy could laugh about it now. "Are you nuts? You cant still say a thing like that, after last night?"

"We never really talked about any of this, Tom. Not since that one time, the time we rode in the rig truck. I don't know how you feel about women, for instance, because every time it ever came up, we were having some kind of row!"
"I was a dumb punk," Tommy said uneasily.
"No," Mario said, "you were a nice little kid. Only I never realized how much of a kid you were. You acted so grown-up all the time, I never did get it through my head how young you were." Dimly, Tommy remembered Angelo saying something like this once. "Believe it or not, Lucky, when you walked out—when we broke up, that time—the only thing that kept me from jumping Starr's, hunting all over the country for you, coming crawling on my knees if I had to—"
"Matt, easy, easy, fella—"
"No, listen, Lucky. The thing was, I kept telling myself, lots of boys that age get a crush on some one guy. Because you were always tagging around after me, you never got a chance to find out how you felt about girls. I got to you before you knew any better, and I figured if you got loose from me, you might

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find out—no, wait, Tommy, let me finish, huh?—I figured, once you were away from me, you might try it out with girls, find out whether you were really—really homosexual, or whether you were just so god-awful hung up on me that you didn't know what you were."

Tommy folded and refolded a pleat in the bedspread. "When I left, I was kind of thinking along those lines myself," he said at last, in a low voice. "There were a lot of girls, that first year. But somehow, some way, it just never felt right. It didn't mean a damn thing to me except—except just"—he felt his face heating—"just what they used to call in the Army, getting my rocks off. Nothing more than that."

"I'm not sorry I got married," Mario said. "Otherwise I might never have been sure. I always felt I didn't need to be queer, that any time I wanted to I could make it all right with women. You know. Every time I started feeling rotten about myself, I'd go out and start helling around with some girl, and I started to try and get you into that, too—God, the nights I've waked up and wanted to puke, remembering those two broads— Doing it to myself was bad enough, but getting you in on it—Jesus!"

"Forget it, Matt. I have," Tommy said, not truthfully. He could forgive it, knowing Mario's inner torment, but forget-

ting was something else. "Is that how you came to get married?"

"I honestly don't know. That summer I felt like I was going crazy. Missing you, and—and worrying about Liss, and —and having nightmares, doing crazy things, taking crazy risks. I even picked up a school kid once. A teenager. I didn't—didn't touch him. I—I asked him, and he looked at me like I was something that had crawled out from under a rock, and I let him out of the car and drove off. For ten days afterward I went around scared green, expecting they'd pick me up, arrest me—but I guess he didn't say anything to anybody. Maybe he was ashamed, or maybe he figured there was no harm in asking, so long as I took no for an answer. And every time I saw a red head in a crowd somewhere I'd feel—feel all jumpy, thinking it was you. Oh, hell. Tom, I can't talk about it. And then Susan was around all the time, and—and it was all right. I wasn't so scared all the time. And then one day we went off and got married. Seemed like a good idea at the time, that was all."

His face was expressionless; he was remembering some kind of lonely hell Tommy knew he would never share. His words had skimmed the surface, no more.

"I tried," he said at last. "Before God, I tried. We weren't married by a priest, because she'd been divorced, but I tried. I felt like one of the crowd, one of the guys, for the only time in my life. It was kind of nice, not to be always—always on the outside, looking in. And while Susan was pregnant I figured I must really love her after all. I wanted to baby her. spoil her, make a fuss over her. The way I used to—used to with Liss. You should have seen me in the hospital the night Suzy was born." Tommy saw the remote smile on his face and marveled at it. This was a side of Mario he had never seen.

"Susan had a real rough time, and I really got scared. Afterward I was so tickled, so proud. I felt like whatever happened, it was all worth it, because we

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had Suzy. Even when things started to go sour with Susan, I figured we could make it because of the baby. I was nuts about her. My kid." He blinked, and Tommy saw that there were tears in his eyes.
"I thought you told Lucia that Suzy wasn't yours, Matt."
Mario swallowed. "Well, hell, I'm not perfectly sure. Legally she's mine, anyhow. There's a law called 'marital access.' Meaning we were married and sleeping together.

when Susan got pregnant. I guess Lucia got me upset and I wanted to say the rottenest thing I could think of. But she could have been mine, all right; in fact, I've really got no reason to think she isn't. Anyhow, I felt like Suzy was mine, even if I wasn't sure. I tell you, I was nuts about her. She's a beautiful kid, Tom—big blue eyes and lots and lots of curly dark hair, not quite as dark as Tessa's, more like Liss's. And so smart and cute. Susan said I spoiled her rotten, but I, said she just wanted her Babbo—that was what she called me—no reason she shouldn't. She was a good baby, too, never cried a lot. Yeah, I know you don't like babies much, but I do. Always did." Suddenly his face darkened, his voice went dry.
"All of a sudden Susan told me she wanted a divorce. I said okay, but I wanted to keep Suzy, and that was when she threw it at me. She said, 'What makes you think she's yours?' I realize now she was just trying to hurt me, trying to say the thing she knew would hurt me most—"
"Oh, Jesus, Matt," Tommy said, and reached to put an arm around him. But Mario jerked away, swinging around with an abrupt, graceful movement that made Tommy think of Lucia.
"No, Tom, let me finish—let me get it off my chest before I come apart." He stared into space. "Susan's not a bad kid. She's quiet, easy to live with, lots of fun. When we were first married, there was what most people would call a normal amount of sex, I guess. It was okay. No big charge, but I felt —oh, relaxed and good, most of the time. No nerves. Only after she got pregnant, the sex thing kind of tapered off. She was sick a lot. I wanted to baby her, spoil her, fuss over her. I figured, like I said, I must really love her after all. Boy, did I get some bumps!"
He sat down on the bed and began absentmindedly rubbing his bad wrist. "When Suzy was about two, three months old, Susan told me the doctor said it was okay, we could start sleeping together again. And that was when it hit me. She was easy to live with, I was real fond of her, and we didn't get on each other's nerves. But as far as sex, she just wasn't. I could lie beside her, and cuddle her, like I did Suzy, pick her up on my lap and rock her, but I didn't want anything else. She did, though, and I"—he swallowed—-"I tried. I figured she had a right. But it—it—it just didn't work, somehow. So I put it up to her: I'd take care of her, support

her, she could keep house for me and look after Suzy, or if she wanted to come back to flying, that was okay, too— we'd get somebody to look after the baby during the season —but we'd just be pals. Well, my God, you should have heard her. I don't know, maybe most women would feel that way. We did

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make it up, sort of, but then I had that bad accident, and she left me. I guess I don't blame her, much." He looked away. "I married her in good faith. I wanted to be a good husband and—and father. But that's a raw deal for a girl, what I offered her. So I didn't fight it when she walked out."
Tommy asked, very low, "Did she know? That you were— queer?"
"I'm not sure. She never said. She got the divorce on grounds of mental cruelty. I wanted Suzy, but you can't take a kid that age away from her mother. Oh, I probably could have gone into court, but I was afraid that shyster lawyer of hers would hunt up my record or hear that old blacklist story. And if that had happened, by the time they got through with me, I'd never be allowed within a hundred miles of any kid not even my own. I went out of the lawyer's office and just walked around the streets for hours, trying to calm down before the show. Only it was that night we fell. Like I say her face got marked up some, and she got the idea I did it to her on purpose."
Tommy felt himself shudder, remembering moments of apparent reasonless cruelty. "But you didn't did you?"
Mario bent his head into his hands and said through them "Before God, Tom, I don't know. I can't even remember going into the ring that night. The doctor said it was concussion. I remember Sue-Lynn nagging me in the lawyer's office and walking out because I was afraid I'd hit her if I didn't. I sort of remember getting into my tights, but nothing after ward—not the fall, not the ambulance. Next thing I remember I was in the hospital with a cast a foot long on my wrist I thought I was blind. I was so dopey I couldn't figure out that there were bandages all over my face. But Susan said I threatened her, and she thought I'd tried to kill her."
He was silent, but this time he did not move away from Tommy's arm around him. "It wasn't her I was mad at," he said, stumbling. "I was mad because I knew I shouldn't have married her. But if I could walk out of the lawyer's office to keep from slapping her face, it stands to reason I wouldn't

do anything worse. Anyhow, I wouldn't have racked up my wrist this way just to spite her—it's never been right since. And she's my kid's mother. I wouldn't have wanted to hurt Lionel, either. So it makes sense to think I wouldn't have tried to hurt her." There was a moment of silence. "Doesn't it?"
Only now did Tommy realize the lonely hell Mario had been through. And I did it to him. Walking out on him. But at the time there had seemed no other way.
"Tommy, I know I couldn't hurt Susan. Only I couldn't remember, and it scared me. So I signed what they told me to, and I gave her a check to keep her going, and then I walked out of that hospital, and I don't remember where I went or what I did until I came out of a fog one day, sitting on a park bench in Dallas, Texas, with fifteen cents in my pocket. I was going to wire home for some money, and then suddenly I said to myself the hell with it, and I went and got a job in a carnival that was playing town, and they were going to Mexico, and the rest I told you about."

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"God Almighty," Tommy whispered. But he knew that nothing, now, could touch what was between them. Never again, He reached out and clasped his hand around Mario's wrist.
"That was a long time ago, Matt. A real long time ago."
"And you don't think I—I owe it to Sue-Lynn, to go back to her, look after her and Suzy?"
Tommy blinked and said, "Is that what's been bothering you?"
"Yeah. Part of it, anyway."
"The way I see it," Tommy said, "you don't owe Sue-Lynn a damn thing. Except money, and that ain't hard to get, the way things have been going. Sure, you've got to help take care of your kid, but I don't see you owe her anything more than that."
Mario let out his breath. "I knew that," he said, "only trying to figure it out all by myself, I was going round and round in a squirrel cage. That was why I couldn't call her, or answer her letters. I don't mind supporting Suzy. Right now I'm kind of short, but if Susan's willing to be reasonable, and she usually is, I'll scrape up something. Money's never been any problem when I can work, and after the show last night, I'm not worrying about that anymore."
The quiet, matter-of-fact way he said it told Tommy, more

than any protestation, that the healing process was deeper than he realized. Mario added gently, "Only after—well, after last night—I know something else, too. I'll help her out with Suzy, but I won't go back and live with her. If I try that again, there's not going to be enough left of me to put in a slot machine." He asked, "Did she give you a number to call?"
"She said to tell you she was in the book and you knew where she was."
Mario's grin was mirthless. "Damn. She knows me pretty well, at that." He reached for the phone.
Tommy went to shave. He was not consciously listening, but the walls of the bathroom were thin and he could no; help hearing Mario's voice, quiet, alien, distant.
"Hello. Mrs. Susan Gardner, please. Susan? Oh—let me speak to Mommy, darling." There was a long pause. Tommy, shaking with anguished empathy at the ordeal facing Mario, braced himself. They had always said to each other, I can't take your falls for you. This had always been at the heart of their relationship, the incorruptible core. Now, more than ever, he must pull away, keep that intact. Nothing now, outside, could touch what was between them.
At last he heard Mario's voice again. "Sue? It's Matt. Was that Suzy who answered the phone? My God, she sounded so grown-up! . . . No, of course I didn't tell her who I was She wouldn't remember anyhow." There was another silence "I got your message just a little while ago. I hope I didn't wake you up. . . . Yes, I know that, honey. It's a long story. I was broke and bumming around a lot of that time. . . . Yes. of course, that's why I called. ... Oh, right away, I guess unless you're going to church—" He turned around, cupping the speaker with his palm. "Tom, is Bart picking you up in his car for this thing?" he called. At Tommy's answer in asked, "Okay if I take the Chrysler, then?"
"Sure, why not?"

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"Susan, I'll be right over. How do I get there? . . . Oh, sure, I can find it, then. . . . Oh, you don't have to do the! honey, I can get some breakfast in the hotel. . . . All right, then, I'll be there in half an hour. Give Suzy a hug from me. . .. Yes, sure, I'd like to speak to her.. . ."
Tommy turned on the shower full force. When he came, out. Mario was dressed. In his lightweight summer suit, thin' blue shirt, and dark tie, he looked like a stranger, like some-

one Tommy had never seen. He said, almost absentmindedly, "I've got to hunt up a drugstore that's open and pick up an Easter basket for Suzy. Stuffed rabbit, or something."
"They've got some in the motel gift shop."
"That's right, I remember. Tell Bart I said hello." Suddenly he chuckled, low in his throat. "Hell, give him my love."
He picked up the car keys from the dresser, started toward the door, then turned and came back. He put one arm around Tommy, hugging him against his shoulder, and brushed his cheek with his lips. He had not done this since Tommy was a child. He said, in a whisper, "Take it easy, Lucky," and went out.
Tommy's eyes blurred with tears again. Mario couldn't say it. He could never say it. But Tommy knew that in his own way Mario had been saying— as he had not been able to say since they had found each other again—I love you.
For breakfast, Bart and Tommy went to a place where the sports-car club gathered. It was filled with teenagers and men and women of all ages and apparently all social classes, for the cars parked outside varied from an old and battered MG which reminded Tommy of Stella's ancient one, to sleek Alfa-Romeos, a Porsche or two, and half a dozen Jaguars. The room was filled with talk, mostly about cars, of which. Tommy picked up snatches here and there.
Bart was listening, too, but suddenly he glanced at his watch. "Come on," he said, "they'll be drawing numbers for starts in five minutes."
As they were heading toward the door, somebody called out, "Louise not with you this time?"
Bart shook his head without breaking stride and called back, "She doesn't like having to do arithmetic."
As they went out the door, Tommy asked, "Louise?"
"My wife. The studio likes us to be seen together occasionally, so I brought her along a couple of times. Only when she found out it wasn't a race and she had to navigate and figure out an average speed, she got all upset. Don't get me wrong—lots of women are damn good rally drivers, some better than men. But the only figures Louise can manage are thirty-six, twenty-two, thirty-six."
His face held wry amusement. "You can figure out an average without panicking, can't you? Or does math scare you, too?"

"Anything short of a slide rule," Tommy said, and Bart chuckled.
"Right. We don't want to get thrown out for excess speed."
That was the first surprise of the day. Somehow Tommy had still believed it would be something like a race, but the instructions handed out at the

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starting line startled him. He realized quickly that it was a different kind of competition. The success of their teamwork would depend on how quickly he could compute a complex route and signal Bart in a way that would leave his companion completely free to concentrate on the skillful and efficient handling of the car. He was surprised most at the need to keep their speed down to a very precisely computed average, since excess speed was penalized with more points than lateness at checkpoints. He found himself enjoying the challenge, even trying to spot the hidden checkpoints between the ones where they had to clock in—so drivers would not cheat and take shortcuts away from the assigned course, he supposed. Later Bart offered him a turn at the wheel. It was new to him, but his reflexes were excellent, and after a minute or two he managed to conquer the temptation to let the speed build up for its own sake.

It was the kind of thing he could never share with Mario. For Mario a car was something to get you from here to there, and back again, with as little thought for the mechanics as possible. Mario liked to drive fast, but it was sheer restlessness, not pleasure in the act of driving.

Tommy was surprised at what a relief and joy it could be to do something pleasurable, demanding, but entirely unrelated to flying—although requiring an equal amount of concentration and skill. He suspected this might have been one reason why, years ago, Papa Tony had tried so hard to teach him to play chess. He had noticed that Papa Tony and An-gelo could get involved in a chess game and completely lose themselves in it until five minutes before a cue was called. By the time they came into the final checkpoint, less than three minutes off the clock time, he realized, with astonishment, that he had not thought once, all day, about Mario's problems, or Sue-Lynn, or the television program, or the triple.

The prize went to a team in a Porsche—a lean, horsey-looking woman and her teenaged son—but Bart and Tommy took one of the three consolation prizes, a certifi-

cate from a service station entitling the holder to free car washes, fill-ups, and repairs totaling twenty dollars. Bart glanced at the location of the station, shrugged, and held it out to Tommy.

"Can you use it? I keep my car in North Hollywood, and they do all my car work—what I don't do myself, that is. I'd never get down there."

"Thanks, we can use it." Tommy tucked it into his wallet.

Bart glanced at the darkening sky. "Let's go get something to eat." No allowance had been made for stopping during the rally, and despite their late breakfast Tommy was hungry. "Going to stay another night at that place near the circus grounds?"

"I guess so." He still had the room key in his pocket, Mario, uncertain how long his business with Susan would take, had gone off without checking out.

"That Mexican place okay with you?" Bart hesitated. "Look, I'd enjoy taking you somewhere really nice. But—" and Tommy understood the hesitation. The burden he had forgotten for much of the day rushed over him again. Most elaborate restaurants catered to couples; only under the most impersonal and

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obviously business circumstances could two men dine together at a fine restaurant. And Bart's tastes and inclinations were known to his studio, so that anywhere he went, and with anyone, was immediately suspect.
"Fine with me," he said. "I'm not dressed for any fancy place anyhow." Bart looked relieved. As driving partners for the rally, everyone had seen them and no one paid the slightest attention to them. And then he remembered something Mario had said to him, before he was fifteen:
Look, if I introduce you somewhere as my kid brother, don't contradict me. Okay? He had not understood. Not then.
God, have I got to live like this all my life? Never doing anything without stopping and thinking about whether somebody's going to get the wrong idea? Or—hell—the right idea?
But what was the alternative? To be flagrant, a screaming swish of Eddie Keno's type?
Halfway through dinner, Bart said abruptly, "Look, if you want to join the sports-car club, I'll sponsor you. I need a driving partner. I have to take Louise along to these things about one time in four or five—the studio likes us to be seen

together—but I've been looking for a steady partner. And as you can imagine," he added, very low, dropping his voice to where they would not be overheard, "I need somebody who knows the score. Somebody I can trust, so it doesn't matter if I let my guard down for a minute or so. And—" He hesitated, then added, "Somebody who can pass as straight, not the kind you can spot a mile off."
Tommy could understand that. "Sure, Bart. I'd like that, too. Matt and I were talking, the other day—maybe if we get any money out of this deal, I can pick up a proper car somewhere."
"I can help you get hold of a secondhand MG," Bart said. "Not cheap, exactly, but at least you won't get skinned. Matt's a good kid. I used to like going around with him even after we lost interest in sleeping together—he did tell you that, didn't he?—because we could be seen anywhere and he wasn't obvious. I feel like a goddamn hypocrite, talking that way," he added vehemently, "but my job depends on it. And I had too much of playing crummy parts in crummy movies. I like making decent money, and I like living good —no reason I shouldn't."
"Me too," Tommy said, "and anyway, I don't figure my private life is anybody's business but my own. I don't see how it makes me all that honest to go around with a big label pasted on my forehead saying I AM queer. I mean there's more to me than that. I don't ask other guys what they do in bed."
Bart laughed. "Well, I do sometimes," he said with a brief, meaningful grin. "Okay, kid, I'll put your name up. I never could get Matt interested in cars. I used to race sometimes, back then, and I took him with me to one of the speedway trials. He was real gutsy about it, but I could tell he didn't enjoy it."
"I went up to Le Mans once, but I don't think that's my kind of racing. It was kind of a bore, watching them go round and round. Though it must take a hell of a lot of skill."

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"It does, but racecourse driving isn't really my thing. either. Like I told you, I rode passenger twice with Tony Rogers in the Mille Miglia. Cross-country racing, that's I get a kick out of—the Mille Miglia, the Alpine run."
"Yeah. I think I'd like that."
"There's nothing like it. Riding with Tony—well, I can

kind of see how Matt felt. It takes a special kind of nerve to sit there digging out a sandwich while your partner is going around a blind curve on a mountain road at a hundred and sixty, downhill and standing up on the accelerator. It never bothered me, because I knew Tony could handle the car whatever happened, but I can see how it would bother some people. We did the Mille Miglia in a Lancia, but we were out-classed and out-carred with all those Maseratis and Ferraris. We came in fourteenth. All things considered, we did a good race, though. We came in ahead of any of the other Lancias, and made better time than any of the Jags. The next year was the year I had the Ferrari, but we threw a tire in the first hundred miles, and then a brake shoe went. Tough luck, too; that year a Ferrari made first place."
"You miss racing, don't you?"
Bart shrugged. "I could quit. If you're a real racer you can't quit unless you get killed first. I asked a violinist once if he could quit playing, and he said not unless his hands were off at the wrists. I was never that way. Tony was. I got a lot of fun out of racing, but when push came to shove, I knew I could give up racing, the way I damn near gave up eating, if that was what I had to do to hang on as an actor." After a minute he added, "I think that's why I want to do this Parrish film. Knowing Tony, and Matt, I can figure out from the inside what made him tick. Flying was something Parrish had to do, and when he couldn't, he destroyed himself. I think Matt's like that. I think he could have been the kind of dancer Nijinsky was, if he'd stuck with it. But dancing wasn't what Matt had to do. And, the way I heard him talk, flying is."
Tommy found that he couldn't get words out of his tight throat. He had never guessed that Bart had this kind of understanding. How remorselessly he had judged the man, from his early posturing!
"And acting is what you have to do, Bart?" he asked finally.
"I guess so." Bart's grin was wry. "Hell, I even married the Lanart broad, which is what you might call a considerable sacrifice to my beloved art."
Tommy sensed, ghostlike, where Mario had picked up something of his own ironic detachment. Bart was burlesquing it, but Tommy sensed a core of bitter honesty which gave

him courage to ask, "Does your wife know? I mean, does she care, about you being—queer?"
"Know? Sure," Bart said. "I wouldn't marry any woman under false pretenses. Date her, maybe, but not marry her. I guess the studio put it up to Judy the same way they put it up to me. Her real name isn't Louise Lanart, you know; it's Judith Cohen. Far as I know, Judy has no love interest at all -—I never knew her to warm up to anybody except her Siamese cats. That's rough for a woman in this business. I guess she had to sleep with some of the wrong

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men before she could get to where she is, and it kind of wrecked her. Acting is something she has to do, too. She's not a lesbian, either—might be simpler if she was. It's just as devastating for it to get out that a woman is frigid as it is for it to get around that I prefer men. They said, if Judy and I got married, she wouldn't have to date other men, and I wouldn't have to come on romantic with half a dozen different dames every month or so. And of course I wouldn't make any demands on her. So in public we're a very devoted couple, and they figure being married to a good-looking guy makes her look sexier at the box office. Not that she needs much help in that direction."
"I only saw her in a couple of movies. She's very beautiful, though, I thought."
"Oh, she is, she is. Not that I'm equipped to appreciate it," Bart added with clinical detachment. "I kind of envy the kind of queer who can function with women. I know Mat; can. Can you?"
"Sure," Tommy said, "I don't bother, though. Not anymore."
"I can't. I never could. You are over the age of consent, I trust?"
"Hell, yes, I did four years in the Army!"
"It must be the red hair, or the freckles. You have that all-American wholesome-kid look. Matt always did have a taste for San Quentin chicken. How old were you when he made you first, about ten?"
Really offended this time, Tommy said, "I was plenty old enough to know what I was up to. And," he added, exasperated on Mario's behalf, "just for your information, if there was any seducing done, I did it. It was me crawled in bed with him, not the other way around!"
"Just the same, I bet he made it damn obvious that his

bed was all warmed up and waiting," Bart said, laughing. "He was jailbait himself when I had him first. God, he was a beautiful kid! He's not bad-looking now, of course. Wasn't that marvelous flying he did last night? How is he, really, Tom?"
"Cross your fingers," Tommy said. "He seems like he's okay again."
"Thank God. We need him in good shape for the Parrish movie. You should have heard the guys from the studio." He pushed his plate away. "Come on, let's get out of here. Want to come back to my place for a drink? I've got some pictures of Tony and me in the Ferrari."
Behind the wheel of the MG again, Tommy let the speed grow on the deserted freeways, building and releasing tension, very conscious of Bart in the seat next to him. He understood what was happening, but it didn't matter. He only asked very briefly, when they drew up outside the house, "What about your wife?"
"She has her own rooms on the second floor, and we never pay the slightest attention to each other's guests. But anyhow, she's gone to spend Easter with some friends in Acapulco."
In the big room at the back of the house Bart had dozens of photographs: the Lancia, the Ferrari, signed pictures of some of the best-known racing drivers in the world. There was a picture of Mario and Bart at the ballet school, in the black sweaters and gray tights the men wore there, and Tommy examined it with a curious pain at his throat. He had never known Mario this young.

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Abruptly, Bart took the photographs away from Tommy and put his arms around him. He touched him, experimentally, and made a questioning sound. Tommy had known this was coming. Bart had been moving to this, gently but inexorably, since they had met. By coming here tonight he had given at least implicit consent. All day, in the shared, hothouse atmosphere of the car, they had been indulging in something as intimate as foreplay, rousing one another with looks, touch, with every word. He found himself intensely aroused by the older man's vitality, by everything—his looks, his dancer's gracefulness, his warm breath against his cheek.

"You know I want you," Bart said softly against his ear, "and I've seen you looking at me. Let's go to bed." Tommy

did not withdraw, not an inch, but Bart said, "What's the matter? You're not naive, surely—you knew perfectly well what I wanted."

"Sure," Tommy said. "Only—" He did not know he was going to say it until he heard his own words: "I don't like doing things like this behind Matt's back, that's all."

Bart put his hands on Tommy's shoulders and turned him gently around. "Listen to me, Tom. You know how I feel about you, so you can say this is something I made up to con you into bed. I know how you feel about Matt. I know you love the guy. Hell, a blind man could see it. God forbid I should come between you two; the kind of thing you two have together, it doesn't happen often among our kind of people. Hell, it doesn't happen that often in marriage, even— for two people to love each other, care what happens to the other one, stay friends and partners even outside the sack. That's something special, something everybody dreams about, not just homosexuals. And it doesn't happen all that much. I thought Tony Rogers and I had something like that going for us. Only I was wrong about it."

For a moment his face was closed and bitter. Then he said, "But there's one thing you can't do with that kind of a —a partnership, Tom. You can't try and pretend it's something it isn't. And what it isn't, is marriage."

"Hell, I know that." Tommy turned his face away, embarrassed.

"Do you? I wonder. That thing about faithfulness, about forsaking all others—that's for teenagers not dry behind the ears, or it's for mamas and papas raising children, where somebody else in the picture would rock the boat for the kids. It doesn't work for men to try and play that game. Maybe two women could do it, I don't know. But it's no good for men. You try to play chastity and faithfulness and never touching anyone else and jealousy, you'll wind up hating each other. I know, because I tried it once. You can't belong to each other that way; you're not his property any more than he is yours. I want you. It's as simple as that. Do you really think it's going to take anything away from Matt? Hell, you come down to that, I'm his friend, too, I love him. But what's that got to do with anything?"

And suddenly that made sense to Tommy. He had sensed, without being able to put it into words, that he must keep aloof from Mario's confrontation with Sue-Lynn. It was part

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of what they had always known. I can't take your falls for you.
He knew now it would not have mattered if Mario had actually taken young Jack Chandler into his bed—or, rather, it would have mattered only as much as it mattered to the boy. It would have mattered far too much to Jack, and in the end, Tommy was sure, that was why Mario had not done it. But it would have in no way touched what was between Mario and himself. Nothing—he knew it now—could ever come between them again. Sex was only a part of it; an important part, but it could not be falsified into a bond of marital fidelity. Sexual fidelity was completely irrelevant to what he and Mario had together. He was a grown man, not a child, and there was no longer any reason his own needs and desires should be subservient to Mario's.
Bart remained silent, letting him think it all out for himself, not trying to persuade him with a word or a touch. Yet he sensed that Bart too was lonely, that despite his enormous prestige—or perhaps because of it—he was in a sense far less free than Tommy. There were not that many men he could trust or approach in simple friendship.
There was erotic excitement, of course. But it was also a genuine offer of friendship, trust, shared affection.
He turned and put his arms around Bart, laughing. And although this had not been his intention, he sensed dimly, beyond the external motives, that this too was a kind of coming of age, a way of declaring himself independent, even from the love which he now knew would always be the most important thing in his life.
"Sure," he said, pulling Bart close to him, "let's go to bed."

CHAPTER 11

bart drove him back to the motel very early. As they drew up, Tommy saw his car parked in front of the room. At least Mario was back. Bart leaned toward him, but it was already light and he did not touch him. "I'll be down for a lesson in a few days," he said. "Give Matt my love."
Tommy used his key noiselessly in the door, not wanting

to wake Mario. Not that he cared if Mario knew about the night past—sooner or later, he would tell him—but because he knew how badly Mario slept. But just inside the door, he whacked full tilt into something that had not been there when he left. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light inside, he discovered that a rollaway bed had been moved in, and in the bed, a very small girl was sleeping. She had masses of curly dark hair; hugged close to her body she held a stuffed yellow plush duck.
"Don't worry," Mario said, "she won't wake up. With kids that age, once they're honest-to-God asleep, you could stage the Battle of Gettysburg under the bed and they wouldn't budge."
Tommy edged carefully around the cot. "I suppose that's Suzy, but what's she doing here?"
It was a little too dark to see Mario's face. "Once we got through the preliminaries, that turned out to be what Susan wanted. Seems she's going to get married again, and I agreed to take Suzy off her hands. For good. She called up her lawyer, and I made her sign things so she wouldn't change her

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mind again." He added, with detached compassion, "I guess she's had a pretty hard time at that. They were living in a pretty crummy place, and she was wearing a dress I bought her the year we were married. And Suzy's underwear looks like she got it at the Salvation Army."
Tommy blinked, not quite taking it in yet. "What are you going to do with her?"
"God knows," Mario said, "but I wasn't about to leave her with anybody who didn't want her, either. I can't figure Susan out," he added. "I don't think I'd want to live with somebody who couldn't stand the idea of having my kid around. But she seemed scared to death this character would run out on her if I didn't agree to take Suzy off her hands, You don't mind having her around until I figure out what to do with her?" Tommy shook his head, and Mario sighed. "I'll probably have to take Liss up on that offer. I hate to do it, but I don't know how in the hell I'd raise a kid on my own."
With the growing dawn light in the room the little girl's eyes popped open and she sat up, staring around her.
"Mommy?"
"Mommy isn't here, Suzy," Mario said in his deep voice.

"Remember, I told you you were going to live with Babbo and Grandma Lulu for a while now."
"Oh." She sat and considered that for a moment, and Tommy wondered if she would begin to cry for her mother. She didn't. "Will I still go to my school?"
"Not that school, Suzy. It's too far from where Grandma Lulu lives. I'll find another school for you when you're a little bigger."
"I'm bigger now," she said. "I'm five years old. Babbo, I have to go to the bathroom."
"Right in there, Suzy. Can you manage for yourself?"
"Of course," she said with dignity, then put her finger in her mouth. "You'll have to unbutton my sleepers. The buttons are stuck."
Mario unbuttoned her pajamas with deft fingers. The faded sleepers were tight and gaped at the tummy. She scampered toward the bathroom, holding up the unbuttoned sleepers with both hands, and Mario, watching her, said in an undertone, "She does so many things for herself that it worries me. She must have been left alone an awful lot."
Tommy said, trying to reassure him, "Maybe she's just smart."
Suzy came out of the bathroom, her sleepers over her arm, stark naked. "I want a bath. I didn't have a bath last night."
"Suzy, I haven't got the time to run a bath for you now."
"I can run my own bath," she said disdainfully. "Do you think I'm a baby? Babbo, can I open the little bitty cake of soap?"
She ran the bath—Mario, watching her unobserved from the doorway, reported that she even tested the water carefully with her elbow before climbing in—and they heard her splashing and prattling away, carefully explaining to the stuffed duck why he could not get into the tub with her. "You'll get your nice new fur all wet."

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Bathed, and buttoned into a clean but extremely short and tight dress, she came and sat on Mario's lap, demanding to have her hair brushed, but she was disdainful of his attempts to tie her hair ribbon, and finally flung it off, pouting.
"Maybe Aunt Stella can fix it for you when we go to breakfast," Mario suggested, and the diversion worked.
"Who is Auntie Stella?"
"She's your uncle Johnny's wife."

Suzy had ignored Tommy till this moment; now she turned to him, demanding, "Are you my Uncle Johnny?"
Tommy chuckled. One way or the other, it seemed he and Mario had acquired a family. "No, honey. I'm your Uncle Tommy. Matt, have Stella and Jock seen her yet?"
"No, I got back late with her. I'd better ring their room and break the news." He suggested they should meet in the motel coffee shop for breakfast, but while Mario was dressing, Stella appeared in the door, still wearing her dressing gown. She said to Tommy, with a quick glance at Suzy, "Oh, isn't she a darling!" But although Tommy had half expected her to grab Suzy and cover her with kisses—as she had done so often with Liss's baby—she only looked at Suzy with a tentative smile.
"Suzy? Your father suggested that I might be able to tie your hair ribbon for you. If you'll bring it to me, I'll see what I can do with it." She spoke, Tommy noticed, exactly as she would have done if Suzy had been her own age.
Suzy handed her the scrap of pink ribbon. "It's my best hair ribbon," she explained. "Mommy got it off a box of chocolates her boy friend gave her. Babbo was getting it all mashed. Men can't tie ribbons, can they, Auntie Stella?"
Stella concealed a smile and said gravely that she supposed it depended on the man. She knelt before Suzy and deftly tied the ribbon into a bow. "Look in the mirror and see if that's the way you wanted it."
Suzy clambered on the bed to look into the mirror.
"It's just fine," she said, patting it. "Thank you, Auntie Stella."
"You're welcome, Suzy. What is the rest of your name?"
"Susan Lissa Gardner," she pronounced carefully. "My mommy is Susan, and I have an auntie Lissa. Do you know my auntie Lissa? Does she have any little boys and girls?"
"She has a boy named Davey, older than you," Stella told her, "and a little girl, about your age, named Cleo."
"I think Mommy and I went to see her once," Suzy said, frowning in concentration. "She had a big Raggedy Ann doll and she let me play with it. And Auntie Lissa said I looked like Cleo, only I don't—she's taller than I am, and she wears her hair in pigtails. Auntie Stella, do you have any little boys and girls?"
"No, dear. Not a single one."

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"Why not? Don't you like little girls? Mommy doesn't. She said so to the lawyer, and that's why she let me come to live with Babbo." Stella flinched, and Suzy asked, "Don't you like little girls, either?"
Stella looked quickly away from Suzy. She said, trying to steady her voice, "I like little girls very much, and little boys, too, and I wanted them very much. But I guess God didn't want me to have any."
"That was mean of God," Suzy said seriously.
Stella managed to laugh, and called through the bathroom door, "Matt, I'm going to kidnap your daughter! Suzy, will you come and help me dress, so we can go to breakfast?"
"Sure." Suzy tucked her small hand confidently in Stella's and walked off at her side. Tommy went into the bathroom and stood watching Mario shave.
"She is smart," Mario said. "Smart as they come. I told you."
"She sure notices a lot. She knows Sue-Lynn didn't want her—did you hear that?"
"I heard. Nothing I can do about it, though, I guess."
"I think she must be yours after all. If she's that smart. Sue-Lynn wasn't. And she looks just like Tessa did at that age."
"Oh, she's mine, all right," Mario said. "She's got the family eyebrows, and that funny little crooked tooth on one side that Liss and Tessa both have. She's a Santelli, all right. Not that it matters all that much. She's mine now, anyhow."
In the coffee shop Suzy insisted on sitting beside Stella, and ordered pancakes for breakfast. Mario demurred "Shouldn't she have—well, oatmeal, or orange juice, or something like that?"
Stella chuckled. "Let her enjoy herself this once. When she's settled down, you can start worrying about whether she's getting nourishing foods and all that. She's not going to get spoiled with Lu around."
Mario sighed. "And that's another thing. Lu's really too old to raise another kid, even if I wanted—even if she really wanted to. Tommy, okay if I take the car tomorrow and drive up to San Francisco with her? I'll call Liss tonight, and make sure it's okay." He sighed again, heavily. "She's been shuffled around so much—nursery school, babysitters, all that. But I don't know what choice I've got. You want to live with Auntie Lissa and your cousins, Suzy?"

"I want to stay with you, Babbo," she said mutinously, "and Auntie Stella, and Grandma Lulu."
Johnny said, "Sounds like someone around here has a mind of her own. Matt, how about that boarding school An-gelo sent Tessa to, while he was on the road? She wasn't but three or so."
Mario nodded thoughtfully. "I could ask Angelo what they charge, and what the place is like. And how Tessa liked it."
Stella flared. "She hated it! You're not thinking of sending this little, tiny thing off to boarding school, are you?"
Mario signed, "Stel, she seems awfully young for it to me. But I'll have to be on the road this summer, and I can't look after a kid, living out of a suitcase. If you think it would be better to send her to Liss—"

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"Ah, no, Matt." Suzy had climbed into her lap; Stella put her arms protectingly around her. "You really don't think you're going to get her away from me that easy, do you? You know how I've wanted—how I've prayed—" Her voice caught in her throat. She clutched Suzy fiercely, her blonde head bent over the dark curls. She said, not looking up, "Please, Matt. Please."
Mario glanced at Johnny, frowning. He said, "Stel, do you mean it? I don't know. Johnny, how do you—"
Johnny reached out his hand to Stella; it fell on Suzy instead, and he patted the little girl's back. "Look, Matt. Far as I'm concerned, what Stella wants, Stella gets." He added, defiantly, "From what you tell me, nobody else wants the little punkin!"
"Oh, God, John, it isn't that I don't want her," he said, troubled, but Stella interrupted him. "Matt, I know you want her. Who wouldn't? But this way—I swear, I'd treat her as if she were my own—our own—" She broke off, blinking fiercely, swallowing again and again, clutching Suzy to her meager breasts.
Mario drew a long sigh. He said, "Stel, if you really mean it—"
"Oh, God, Matt, if I mean it—"
"But you don't want to give up flying, do you? I mean—"
She raised her head and said defiantly, "No, I don't, and I won't. I don't want to leave her with Lucia, either. I love Lucia, but I don't think she's the right person to bring up— to bring up such a tiny little thing. You yourself said she's too old. And Tessa is so quiet and—and solemn; I don't think I want my baby to be brought up like that. I want her with me, even if I have to take her on the road. I want her to be gay and happy, to laugh a lot, to be with me all the time and know somebody loves her and wants her all the time—" Her voice broke again.
Mario sighed, this time with relief, a smile breaking through. He said, "God bless you, Stel. That was what I was worried about, leaving her with Lu while we were all on the road. Okay, Stel. We'll have her brought up as a Santelli." He laughed. "We won't even have to change her name!"
Stella clasped Suzy in her arms and rocked her back and forth,, laughing and crying at once. "Oh, Matt, thank you, thank you—oh, darling, do you want to be Auntie Stella's little girl?"
Suzy raised herself up on Stella's lap, putting her hands up to the woman's face.
"Don't cry," she said severely. "You stop it right now, Auntie Stella. Big girls don't cry."
Lucia was delighted with Suzy, though Tommy was not sure whether she was pleased with the child or with the fact that Mario had reclaimed a Santelli grandchild. As for Stella, Tommy had never seen her so relaxed, so joyous. She did not let her care for the child interfere with her regular practice with them. She arranged for Tessa to stay with Suzy after school, and offered to pay her for baby-sitting, but Angelo refused for her, saying that this was simply a family responsibility and Tessa must do her share like everyone else. Tessa reacted to Suzy as to a new doll, and would have spoiled her, until Stella

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told her firmly that Suzy must not have everything she wanted, but only what was good for her.

Several days after they had brought Suzy home, Stella came down unusually early, with Suzy, already dressed, beside her. Lucia raised her eyebrows; before this, Stella had rarely risen much before noon. Stella sat Suzy at the table, fetched her a bowl of cornflakes from the kitchen, and sat slicing a banana into it.

"What are you girls doing up so early?" Johnny asked.

"I've got to go into the city and get Suzy some clothes," Stella said. "Honestly, she doesn't have a rag to her back. Her feet are going through the toes of her shoes, her vests

and panties belong in a ragbag, and her dresses are so short they aren't decent even on a girl her age! I'm ashamed to take her into the store to try anything on!"

Mario chuckled and reached into his wallet. "Get her what she needs, Stel. How much will cover it?"

"Now, wait—hold on here," Johnny interrupted. "If we're going to be responsible for the kid, we can get her what clothes she needs. Put your money away, Matt." And when Stella had gone to get another glass of milk for Suzy, he said urgently, under his breath, "Come on, Matt. Can't you see what this has done for Stel? Let me take care of it. I want Stel to know I'm behind her all the way, on this!"

Lucia said firmly, as Stella buttered Suzy's toast, "There is no sense in buying too many dresses for her, Stella. I have a coat and three dresses already cut out for her. And she must have a dress to wear for church; you must go to the fabric store, and I will give you a list of the fabric and trim to buy."

Stella smiled affectionately and said, "I remember the first year I was here. You made over a coat for me out of one of Liss's. And you made me some dresses, too. They were the nicest dresses I'd ever had in my whole life."

Lucia smiled and patted Stella's hand. "You were wearing rags not much better than Suzy's, weren't you, dear?"

"I remember. I didn't even own a bra or a slip; you gave me some Liss had outgrown." She leaned over and pressed her cheek against her mother-in-law's. "You were always good to me, Lu," she said, almost defiantly.

Mario smiled. "Well, Lu, you have your faults, but I will say that you never forgot that the two chief corporal works of mercy are to feed the hungry and clothe the naked."

"I've tried," Lucia admitted, smiling at Suzy, "though I admit some people are more fun to dress than others. Suzy looks sweet in pink, but all little girls wear pink, and I've dressed Tessa and Cleo Maria in pink until I'm sick of it. Be sure you get her a red plaid skirt and a bright red sweater, Stella. I think she'd look lovely in pale yellow, don't you? And next summer I'll make her First Communion dress."

Tommy, listening, was remembering a night when Lucia had fussed over him with sunburn cream, and remembering what Cleo had told him. It was not

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that Lucia Santelli was devoid of maternal instincts. Why had she been so unable to mother her own children?

Mario and Tommy spent the morning working on the riggings, replacing wires, splicing one of the ropes on the net. Then it was time for the boys' lesson. Mario was working with Bobby Meredith, explaining a new trick he wanted him to try, when Bart Reeder came down the stairs to the practice room. Tommy waved to him, motioning to Bart to take off his shoes and drop them into the box. Watching Bobby swing out, he was reminded of his own early days on the bar. Mario scowled, motioned Bobby down, and said, "Look, Bob, you're beginning to get the idea. But you're clumsy, you don't look all that good. Flying's not just a competition of strength. A flyer has to be graceful. Beautiful."
"Like a ballet dancer?" the biggest of the boys, Phil Lasky, asked.
"Yeah," Mario said, "just exactly like that."
Bobby Meredith scowled and said, "Ballet dancers are mostly sissies, aren't they? I don't know if I want to look like that."
Bart Reeder, standing behind them, laughed and said, "I used to think so, too. When I went to college—oh, yes, I did go to college, uncounted ages ago—the men's gym class learned, to our absolute disgust, that the college had hired a famous male dancer to instruct us in calisthenics, gymnastics, and—horror of horrors—ballet. Some of the young would-be football players, among whom I numbered myself in those unenlightened days, had the same idea you have, young Bob. So we decided we would get together and show up this famous sissy who thought he was going to make all of us young he-men types do ballet dancing like little girls. Somehow or other, Mr. Teigh—you have heard of James Teigh? They used to call him an American Nijinsky—Teigh got word of this, and on the first meeting of the gym class, he invited all of the men in the class to come up, one by one, and shake hands with him. First guy to come up was one of these big, hulking line-backer types, shoulders like an ox. You could just see that he was all ready to crunch James Teigh's fingers and make him yell uncle. So he went up, and he stuck out his hand, and the next thing you know, he yelled and went flipping over on the floor. And one by one, Teigh put the whole class on their backs on the gym floor, even the last few who were warned and tried to rush him four at a time. And when every one of us—including me, I ought to. add— had been flipped ignominiously ass-over-teakettle and were

rubbing our bruised butts, he dusted his hands together and said very politely, 'Gentlemen, that concludes the lesson for today. Tomorrow, I expect all of you to be here in tights and proper shoes for your first lesson in the elementary arts of the dance.' "
The boys stared, giggling uneasily. "And were you?" Carl finally asked.
"Damn right," Bart said. "In fact, after that I decided to go in for dance instead of football to keep in shape. It's more strenuous and builds better muscles—and who in hell can play football once you're out of college?"
Phil Lasky's eyes were wide. "You studied ballet, Mr. Reeder?"

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"Sure did. Anybody who needs to know about movement —and I was on the stage—needs to study dance."
Phil sounded really surprised. "But there's nothing sissy about you!" He looked at Reeder's muscular shoulders, then at Mario, slender in his flying tights, but with wrists and hands like steel wires.
Carl Meredith remained hesitant. "My father would have kittens if Bob and I wanted to take ballet lessons. He says ballet is full of queers, and any decent kid who goes in for it— No offense, Mr. Reeder, that was what my dad said. Of course I know you guys are all right, but aren't there a lot of queers in ballet, and don't they bother you?"
"No," said Bart with an ironic smile, "they never bothered me at all."
Tommy wondered if they could see that Mario was holding himself with a tight effort when he said, "I've been taking ballet classes all my life, and I never met anybody there who'd bother a kid."
Bobby, serious and shy, said, "I'd still be kind of scared to take up ballet, because of what people would say about it. It does have that kind of— of reputation."
"I used to feel that way," Tommy said. "I grew up with a circus, and I used to put on a wig and come out and perform in the web act. In a girl's costume. When I was little, I never thought about it, but then some kids made fun of me for wearing girls' clothes. I got upset and tried to chicken out. because I was scared people would think I was some kind of sissy."
"You, a sissy? Gosh," Bobby said in wonder, "you were a

sergeant in the Army, weren't you? But you didn't wear the girls' costume after that, did you?"
"Sure," Tommy said. "Had to. There was a show to do. Matt finally got it through my head that you do your; job and you don't worry about what other people think about it, or you get some other job." Over the boys' heads, he smiled at Mario.
"I guess I care too much what people think," Bobby said. "I don't think I could have done that."
Carl said, "But if people think you're a sissy, doesn't that matter, too? I mean, if people get the idea into their heads that you are, are they ever going to give you a chance to prove you're not? In my school, they make a big thing out of saying you have to adjust to society. Being well adjusted, doesn't that depend a lot on—on what people think of you? Don't you have to—to conform?"
Mario nodded slowly. "Yeah, there's something to that, too," he said. "What you are inside, and what people think of you and say about it. I haven't any answers, Carl. Maybe there aren't any answers; maybe everybody just has to figure that one out for himself, and do the best he can with it. I was lucky in a way, because I grew up with a circus family and we were different anyhow—people were going to think we were different no matter what we did." He checked himself, bringing himself firmly back to the matter at hand.
"I guess maybe it's just something everybody has to figure out on his own, how different he can be and still get along. And we aren't going to solve it standing here gabbing, either. Look, Bobby, I was talking about being

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graceful. Watch any good swimmer, or tennis player. Notice how they keep everything all in line, no unnecessary motions, all tucked in, not spread out all over the place. Why do you think a duck is clumsy and a flamingo is so graceful? But you watch that duck flying, and he's just as graceful as the flamingo. Go to the zoo and watch the animals, see how they move. Look—"
He took Bobby's hands, impersonally, and extended his arms to the sides. "It's not a matter of trying to be oh-so-graceful—" He burlesqued the words in a high falsetto, and all the boys giggled. "A limp wrist is not graceful. What you want is an unbroken line of strength. It's like that wild duck flying, or look at airplanes—the streamlining, aerodynamic line. You streamline your body. Break the line, and you get

less efficiency, less strength out of the line, and that's what makes it look bad."
Carl said, surprising them, "Like they said in a book I read on architecture and industrial design, form follows function?"
"That's it, that's it exactly. Okay, watch how I keep my body in line at the waist, even when I have to bend in the middle around the bar." Mario turned and climbed the rope ladder. Then he swung out, moving with steady pliancy over, around, and under the trapeze, with flowing smoothness, rock-hard economy of motion. After a few minutes he straightened his body over the trapeze bar and dived arrow-straight into the net, rolling up to land into a neat coil. The boys gasped. Tommy, watching in fascination—as often as he had seen this, he was still stunned with admiration and envy—heard Clay say jealously, "You make it look so easy, Matt!"
Mario laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "Just takes practice, kid. If you work hard, you'll be that good some day. Okay, kids, that's it for this time. See you next week, okay?"
Phil Lasky asked timidly, "If you and Mr. Reeder are going to be flying, can we stay and watch?"
Bart looked at the eager faces of the kids and shrugged. "Sure, why not?"
"You've all got to sit down and keep quiet, then," Mario warned. "No noise and no horseplay, or out you go. Clay, don't get undressed, okay? I want you to come up to the platform and handle the ropes for us this time."
Clay glowed with excitement. He went with his friends to talk with them while they were changing into street clothes, but already he seemed a little apart from them; he was a Santelli, a member of the family, a serious aerialist in training for the family business.
Mario and Tommy stood at the foot of the rigging, watching the boys move off toward the change room. Bart murmured, "Nice batch of kids. Good-looking. I guess it's the way they move."
Mario nodded. "I know. Pretty faces don't mean a damn thing to me, either. It's bodies I notice."
"I could have guessed that," Bart said, teasing him, but Mario shook his head. "That's not what I mean. I mean movement, bodily perfection."

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"I know what you mean. I can even appreciate that kind of beauty in women," Bart said.
Mario nodded. "I know. Watch Stella sometime. She's not even pretty, she's kind of a scrawny nothing, but, my God, flying, she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."
Bart said, "I noticed. In the Flight Dreams sequences. If I hadn't known better, I'd have sworn you were lovers. The way you move together."
Mario looked remote, faraway. He said, "I know. Even when I was a kid. Doing ballet with Liss. God, I haven't thought of that in years!"
Bart said, laughing, "Well, I must admit, watching those boys of yours does something to me."
Mario laughed, too, and the closed, frozen look slid off his face. He murmured, "They're not my boys, Bart. They're strictly off limits where I'm concerned. And you, too."
Bart lowered his voice. "Oh, I understand, believe me! These days, I'm so discreet it hurts. I never lay a finger on anybody under legal age, or even think about it. Come to think of it, I never did go for jailbait all that much. But there's no harm in looking where there's something beautiful to look at. Like those kids. Or Stella."
Carl, Phil, and Bobby returned and sat down to watch. Mario and Bart climbed behind Clay to the flyers' platform. Tommy, climbing the rope at his own end of the rigging and sitting in the catch trap as if it were a swing, watched Clay standing beside Mario on the platform. How much alike they were! In the thin, long-legged boy, dark hair touseled, a pair of patched, worn practice tights thin across the knees and mended at the feet, he could see a younger Mario, all stringy long arms and cocky insolence and a kind of childish, unconscious grace already merging into the deliberate gracefulness of the trained athlete. Tommy felt an almost painful tenderness. Mario had always been so much older. By the time they met, Mario was already a man, and Tommy, always racing to keep up with him, had put his boyhood away from him with both hands, as fast as he could. It made him ache to see what Mario had been as a boy, what Mario had been before they knew each other. I'm not surprised Reeder fell for him. ...
"How about it, Clay? Ready to go across without the mechanic? Bart ought to get some practice in handling the ropes, and you won't get hurt, by now, if you fall."

Clay took the bar from Reeder's hands. Suddenly the grin slid off his face and he looked shaken, scared. Tommy, lowering himself to catching position, saw Mario's hand on Clay's shoulder. He couldn't hear what Mario was saying, but he could imagine; he had heard it so often himself.
Finally Tommy saw Clay swing out, a blurred flying bundle of arms and legs. Tommy arched his back, pushing his own swing higher, and the boy's thin wrists slapped hard into his outstretched hands, the hands interlocking around his wrists.
"Easy does it," Tommy said, smiling into the young face below his, feeling the tension in the arms and wrists. "Here you go!"

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Swinging upright again, he heard Mario criticizing. "Trouble is, Clay, you don't really leap at all, you just let Tommy pull up and scoop you off the bar."
"Well, that's the way Johnny said to do it," Clay argued, and Tommy almost fell off his own trapeze in astonishment He could imagine what Angelo would have said to him for making excuses!
Mario snapped, "I don't remember asking Johnny—or you, either. Damn it, no back talk, Clay! Move over, take the bar for Bart. Okay, Bart, that's good, but take the bar a little closer to the center, okay? I want to get you to where you can make at least a simple cross by yourself. I know most of it's going to be doubled in, but you'll understand what you're doing better, this way. Now, when you start to swing, be careful to keep your elbows flexed ..."
Bart was learning to fall gracefully now. Tommy supposed it was his long training in other athletic skills—fencing, dancing, driving—which had given him such splendid reflexes. He would never be a flyer, but he might make a very good imitation of one. He was already beginning to walk like Mario, to mimic his gestures, artlessly, without deliberation, an actor becoming the character of his part.
"They're signing people for the Parrish movie now," he told them in the dressing room when the boys had gone, "Barry Cass wanted to play Reggie Parrish—Barney's brother and his catcher. They even tested him for the part but no go."
Tommy remembered the handsome graying man who resembled Jim Fortunati. "Isn't he about thirty years too old?"

"That doesn't mean a lot in this business," Bart said. "It wasn't his age; it was his height. He's six foot two, so he and I looked like Mutt and Jeff. Of course, the catcher usually has to be a big guy. Tommy's taller than you, isn't he?"
Mario stared and laughed. "You've got to be kidding, Bart. People are always telling me I'm too tall for a flyer. You and I are about the same size, and either of us could give Tom three inches."
Reeder looked from one to the other, confused. "I guess there's something about it that makes him look bigger. I could have sworn—in the catch trap, he looked twice your size!"
"Flyers all look big on the bars," Mario confirmed. "It's one of the main illusions of the business. Everybody thinks aerialists are big men until they see us in ordinary clothes."
"Anyway," Bart said, "Mason is completely sold on using the Santellis for doubling in the flying scenes."
Mario was standing with his back to them, disentangling
his foot from his tights. "I won't be able to show him a triple.
Not yet." ' - . -
Bart shrugged. "No hurry. That can be the last thing you do," he said, and Tommy winced at the double-entendre. Skinning out of his tights, Bart added, "Too bad there's no shower down here."
Mario shrugged. "You can come up and have a shower upstairs, if you want to."

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"No, that's all right," Bart said, and laughed. "With my reputation, someone might get the wrong idea." Suddenly he sobered, standing naked and looking at the others. "God," he said, "I know why you had to do it, but it just killed me to have to mushmouth around with those kids today. Not to be able to be honest with them. God damn it, if we had, somebody would probably have got the idea we were trying to convert them or something. All I wanted was to be able to— to talk straight. When they had that damn stupid idea that ballet's all full of queers and your son's not safe there!"
Mario said, with an uneasy laugh, "Well, you can't deny it does happen. As who's got more reason to know than you."
"No, damn it, Matt," Bart said vehemently, "that's not what I mean, and you know it. Hell, kid, I knew about you. And if I'd been wrong—"
"If you'd been wrong," Mario said, "there'd be just one more dirty story about how ballet is full of queers who go

around making passes at kids. And even so, there's some people would say I might have grown up normal, if you hadn't—"
"Come on, kid," Reeder said, gently, "you know better than that. You might have gone along with it once because you liked me, or because you were curious and wanted to know what it was like. Maybe twice because we were friends and you didn't want to hurt my feelings. Only if it wasn't what you really wanted, down inside, sooner or later you'd have told me to go peddle my papers, and found yourself a girl. God knows there's enough pretty ones get into dancing." He smoothed up his briefs and stepped into his trousers. "I get so goddamn sick of it. Those kids innocently piping up that their father says all dancers are fairies. Like that was a fate worse than death, or something. Even if it was true— which it isn't."
Tommy said, "It's the way people feel, and that's all there is to it. You never know anything about things like that until you—until you start to feel them yourself. And then it's too late. People who don't feel that way, how you going to make them understand?" "
"Maybe," Bart said, with suppressed savagery, "by doing what we just chickened out of doing with those kids today. Talking to them straight. Saying something like, 'Look, kid, I'm queer, and it doesn't make me some kind of frigging sissy, and I'm not going around trying to put the make on every kid I see, either!' "
Mario said, with an uneasy smile, "And then we'd all be in mud up to the neck."
"Of course," said Bart, suddenly despondent. In his agitation he had knotted his tie crooked; he took it apart and painstakingly retied it. "It's like being a spy, a double agent or something. Going around pushing love and romance on the silver screen, and all the time—God, I get so sick of it. Women drooling over me, and I get love notes, and I feel like standing up and yelling, 'That's not what I am! That's not what I'm like at all!' " His voice was not steady. He lighted a cigarette with shaking fingers.

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Mario said, "I know how you feel, Bart. I guess we all do. But it's just the way the world is, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it, unless you want to go back to that book you gave me when I was a kid. The Greeks, and their

army of lovers." Smiling faintly at Bart, he quoted words Tommy remembered hearing him say, years ago:
" 'Love and friendship are found in their purest form between men. In Sparta every boy of good character had a mature lover who was a teacher to him and a model of manhood'—oh, hell, I've forgotten the words. Something like, 'Both lover and youth would rather die than act in any dishonorable manner in one another's sight.' "
"You and your damn Greeks," Bart said sullenly. "Yeah, I know the bit. The Greeks could do this, and the Greeks could do that, and the Greeks could do the other thing, and what in the hell good is that to me, now?"
Mario put an arm lightly, for a moment, across Bart's shoulders. Tommy remembered that they had been lovers. Now he knew that they had been more than that: they had been friends. "Maybe that's how you feel now, but you don't know what it meant to me. It was you that said, when I went off to college, that I ought to be familiar with Greek literature. Don't you know how this all hit me, Bart? Until then I thought I was the only one in the world, except for a few low-life types, degenerates, and I was going to be like that, no matter what. And then I met you and I realized there were— there were good men who were homosexual, that a man could be queer and still be—be honorable, and honest, and dedicated, and—and even an artist—" His arm tightened across Bart's shoulders. "All that stuff about being an inspiration and a model of manhood. Christ, don't you know how you looked to me then? Don't you know, it took everything in those books—and more, too—just to help me get a little—a little self-respect together about what I was—what I am? Not to feel good about it, not to feel right about it, just to get me to where I could live with it."
Bart stubbornly did not look at him. "You're an idealist, Matt. I used to be, too, when I was your age. Only what good does it do any of us?"
"I don't think you've changed all that much," Mario said. "You're right, of course. It would have been better if we could be as honest with those kids as we tried to be with— with each other. If we didn't have to chicken out about it."
Bart laughed, breaking the tension. "Yeah, I can just see it," he said. "We set up the Greek ideal in all the high Schools and colleges and assign each kid a big brother to look after him and teach him honorable ideals. And then try to

convince everybody how honorable and idealistic we are about it!" But he smiled at Mario, and, as if he had forgotten that Tommy was there, tousled his hair as if Mario were a young child. "Maybe if more of us lived up to those ideals of yours, kid, the world wouldn't be so down on queers."
"Only that's the point," Mario said, very gently. "Where do you think I got those ideals in the first place? I got them from you."

CHAPTER 12

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it seemed to Tommy that he woke from confused dreams with the knowledge that he must get down to the practice room at once, that something terrible was about to happen. Without turning on a light, he went out of the room and through the darkened halls of the Santelli house, down the landing and the stairs, past the kitchen, and down the second flight of wooden stairs toward the old ballroom. There was no one else in the hallway or on the stairs and his feet made no noise on the floor, but inside the practice room there was a light, a dim greenish light which seemed to come from everywhere at once, and he saw Johnny on the rigging, swinging head down in the catch trap. And Mario was already on the platform, already taking the bar between his two hands. It was too late. All he could do was watch, on the TV monitor which was here at the foot of the rigging, as Mario swung out, and back, and out again, higher, and higher, and higher.

Johnny called to him, "You can't wait any longer! You know you've got to get the triple back, or else you're never going to amount to anything," and Tommy cringed, hearing the contempt in the words.

Stella was beside Mario now on the bar, and Bart, beside Tommy, watching them on the TV monitor, said, "It is quite obvious, to watch them flying, that they are lovers." But that didn't matter now, because Stella was back on the platform, and Mario was swinging on the bar, back and forth, a restless rhythm, back and forth, building up height and speed, and Johnny was waiting for him, readying his swing, and Tommy knew he was going to attempt a triple.

He was going to attempt a triple.

He's not ready. . ..

But all he could do was watch the two swinging figures, as he had done so many times when they were in the Woods-Wayland Circus, watch, them with anguished inner empathy, only for once his eyes were not on Mario, his consciousness not soaring outward with Mario. Instead his eyes were" fixed on the shape of Johnny in the TV monitor, watching him with obsessed awareness.

Too slow. Pull up a little, your beat spot's a little behind. ... He felt his own muscles flexing, twitching, trying by inward concentration to adjust what he knew was wrong, to speed Johnny's swing, push it forward from inside, even trying to breathe for Johnny. Now Mario was off the bar, spinning backward into the first turn, the second, now the third—Oh, God, he's going to miss it!—the third, the third, in a nightmarishly slow-motion movement on the TV monitor, spinning backward, backward, coming untucked, sprawling down and open and backward, down and down, slower and slower, striking the net hard, the net bouncing him upward and then, like quicksand, drawing him in and down, lifeless, sprawling, broken, dead. . . . Tommy heard his own scream strangling in his throat, and he went on shrieking. "Mario! Mario! Doesn't anybody hear me? Mario . . . Mario . . . Somebody, come quick! Johnny, Papa Tony, Angelo! .. . Mario, Mario ... He's dead . . . Mario!"

But there was no answer, no sound in the practice room, nothing but his own cries echoing from the walls, and on the TV monitor the form of Mario, in

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hideous close-up, broken, sprawled, unmoving. . . . His shrieks made no sound, had never made any sound, had never been there, had never been uttered. It was dark and he was sitting bold upright in bed, making shocked gasping, whimpering sounds.
"Tommy?" Mario said, confused, at his side. "What's the matter, kid? Is something wrong?"
Slowly, in the sudden darkness and warmth, Tommy realized that none of it had happened. There was no TV monitor. Mario had not been lured against his better judgment into trying a triple with Johnny. That horrifying sequence of spin, and turn, and fall and fall and fall, none of it had been real. A dream, thank God, only a nightmare. He was still gasping with the unspoken, stifled, sleeping screams, but now, at the overwhelming awareness that Mario was here at his

side—safe, unbroken, warm, breathing, alive—he was overcome. He clutched at Mario in the darkness, his breathing still shaky from the shrieks of his dream.
"Lucky," Mario said, his arms going around him in quick concern, "what is it, kid? What's wrong?"
But Tommy could only gasp, "You're here, you're alive, you're not dead . . ."
"Oh, God," Mario said, pulling him roughly close. "One of those. Tommy, Tommy, it's all right, you're all right, you're right here with me. . . . Come on, come on, it's okay, get hold of yourself . .. you're here with me . . ."
Tommy, held in his arms, feeling his warm breath, feeling him miraculously alive, warm, unbroken, felt the tight gasping in his chest relax into long sobbing breaths. All he could say, confusedly, was "I thought I was downstairs—there was a TV monitor—you were lying there dead—"
"Okay, okay, it's all right," Mario soothed, holding him close. "You're here, you're awake now, you're here with me. Here, you're going to get chilled—come under the blanket Come on, let me keep you warm . . ."
Slowly relaxing against the warmth of Mario's body, Tommy said with an uneasy laugh, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up. Only I didn't know it was a dream. I thought I woke up right here and went downstairs . . ."
"I know. I know. It's okay." Mario sought in the dark, an old gesture, to enlace his long and flexible toes with Tommy's.
Tommy, slowly relaxing, was still overwhelmingly conscious of Mario's warm body in the dark beside him, that he was really there. Really alive, warm, real, not that hideous sprawled broken heap. . . . He put his arms around Mario again and said, his voice muffled into Mario's shoulder. "You're still alive. That's real. I have to keep telling myself."
"I know what that's like," Mario said into the darkness. "That year after Lu had her accident, all us kids used to wake up screaming the house down. That's when I got in the habit of crawling in bed with Liss. Angelo used to raise hell with us, but I used to keep dreaming she was the one who fell and got smashed up, and I just wanted to be sure she was okay—" His voice trailed off into silence. "And later, the year I was with Lionel, I used to dream I was back with Angelo again and he'd turn into Lionel on the bars, and I'd

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wake up in a cold sweat. Funniest damn thing. I liked Lionel, I trusted him, only these damn nightmares kept coming back!"

After Mario slept again, Tommy lay holding him, unable to relinquish the reassurance of the touch, of the reality of Mario alive in his arms, not broken on the floor of the practice room. After a long time he began to dream again, seeing images from an old book, a visit once to a museum, paintings on vases, athletes running, racing, hurdling, running naked with lighted torches. All that I am that is good is because he made me so. I bear his honor like a lighted torch given to me by the previous runner that I may carry it undimmed and pass it with its light undiminished to the next runner. . . . He half knew he was dreaming, imagining a world where honor and ideals rested in them high and precious because of their love. Gradually the dream slipped away into darkness, but even in sleep he clung to Mario's hand.

At the entrance of the practice room Tommy hesitated, shaking his head in vague memory. The night before he had had some kind of gruesome nightmare, something about Mario falling, some nonsense about a TV monitor set up down here. He flung his shoes into the box, then climbed up into the net to check the ropes, carefully walking from one end to the other, bending to make sure the newly spliced rope was still in perfect shape. He paused at the foot of the web leading up to the catcher's trapeze, suddenly remembering how he had watched Johnny on the TV monitor from behind the panel, waiting for the entrance, on the Flight Dreams sequences. Now, although he didn't remember the details, he realized why the TV monitor in his dream had seemed important to him. The important one had been on the Flight Dreams set.

For the first time in my life I was watching Mario fly without being inside him while I watched. I was watching Johnny catching him, and all of a sudden I could see what Johnny was doing wrong.

Johnny's a good catcher, but he's not the right catcher for Mario. He can't feel, from inside, what Mario is doing. And I can. Like when we used to do those old duo routines. That was what we had that was so special; somehow or other we

can feel each other move, like we were both moving on the same heartbeat. And I could feel from inside what Johnny was doing. Like I was trying to breathe for him, move for him. I'm starting to think catching, instead of flying.

Now all I've got to do is figure out how to talk Matt into it.

"Johnny had to go out," Mario said, coming into the room. As always when Stella was working with them, he had put on his tights upstairs; all he had to do was take off his shoes. "I'm getting fed up with our wheeler-dealer manager putting all this stuff ahead of practice!"

Good, Tommy thought. That's what I wanted to talk about.

"Be fair, Matt," Stella said. "Johnny's as good without practicing as most of us are with it."

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Mario shrugged. "Maybe. But I don't like to work that way. I remember reading about some pianist who said if he missed a day practicing, he knew it; if he missed two days, his friends knew it; and if he missed three days, the audience knew it. And I've got a three-year layoff to make up for, and so does Tommy."
Stella laughed. "You can still say that after Flight Dreams? That was a triumph, Matt!"
"Maybe. But I still feel like I've got a long way to go. And Bart told me they wanted the Santellis for stock shots some time in the next ten days or so, so every day we miss, I get upset." He asked, "You want me to catch today, Tom?"
"No," Tommy said, and Mario frowned at him.
"What do you mean, no?"
"Just no," Tommy said. "No percentage in that. Waste of time. I don't think Johnny's going to be very reliable as a catcher this year, and it's time we started working on that assumption and counting him out."
"Look, Tommy," Mario said, "we went all over this. You couldn't hold me on the big tricks—"
"That's a lot of—" Tommy glanced at Stella and amended, "Baloney. Matt, you're still thinking of me as if I was the little kid you had to lift up and see if I was big enough to reach the fly bar. You're doing just what you laughed at Bart for doing the other day! Stel, who's taller, me or Angelo?"
"You are," Stella said, unhesitatingly. "Not much, maybe, but you're certainly as tall as he is."

Mario swung around, confronting her incredulously. "What have you two got cooked up between you? Angelo's a big guy!"
"He always looked big to you," Tommy said. "Face up to it, Matt: He taught you to fly when you were a little kid, and you still think of him that way. I bet I weigh six, eight pounds more than he does. Damn it, start looking at me the way I am now, not the way I was when I was fourteen years old! I weigh a hundred forty-five pounds, and my shoulders are broader than yours—try putting on one of my jackets! I could throw you four out of five times, wrestling."
Mario said, "You're getting me all mixed up."
"No," Tommy contradicted roughly, "I'm trying to straighten you out! Johnny wants to quit anyway; he's never going to be a catcher for us, so it's time we quit kidding around. We been looking all over hell's half acre for a catcher, and here I am, so let's work it that way. If Johnny wants to manage the business end, okay, that's fine, more power to him."
Mario still looked doubtful. "I guess we could try it, and see how it works out. What do you think, Stella?"
"Johnny doesn't want to fly. He doesn't want to at all. I don't know why, but he doesn't—he can't even understand why I want to. He's been going along with it because he doesn't want to let you down—he says he owes that much to the family—but he really wants to get into management."
"So let's quit fooling around and get to work, then," Tommy said.

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But as Stella was climbing the ladder, Mario put his hand on Tommy's arm. "Tom," he said, "look at me, straight. Are you doing this because you know I hate catching? Tell me the truth or I'll break your neck. And don't think I won't be able to tell!"
Tommy swung around to face him. "Before God, Matt, this is what I want to do. I've started thinking about catching, all the time. When I watch somebody flying now, I don't watch what he's doing, I start thinking how I'd handle catching him if I was in the catch trap. I'm just not a flyer any more—I don't think like a flyer."
Mario's face suddenly, incredulously, lighted up from within. "Hey," he said softly, delighted, "if it's like that, maybe this is what we've been working for, all the time, only we didn't know it. Let's try it, Lucky. Let's try it!"

He turned and went to his own end of the rigging.
To Tommy, swinging in his own trapeze, lowering himself for the first catch, it seemed all of a sudden that everything around him was sharper than usual, as if everything had new bright edges. This had happened to him a few times before, but never while he was catching. Now, deliberately, for the first time since Mario had sent him up, rebellious, to learn to catch the younger girls, he began to examine precisely what he was doing. Not, this time, treating it as something he must master, but examining each movement, somewhere within himself.
Carefully he timed the swing. Stella was on the bar now, coming out, swinging; she would make one more backswing before crossing. . . . Only after he had flexed his chest muscles, pushing his own swing higher, did he know consciously what he had done. Automatic, It's built in, now, the timing. Dimly, with peripheral vision at the very corner of his eyes, he saw her braced over the bar; his hands were out for the meshing wrist grip even before he told them what to do. Her wrists locked around his own, his hands aware of her thin bony wrists in their muslin tapes. She felt so light, so fragile, the weight of her body hardly sufficient to add enough momentum to their swing. He made an extra push to thrust them higher as he tossed her back into the air, with the thin line of the fly bar crossing, cutting his vision. Automatic, clockwork, heartbeats ticking off as he saw Mario on the bar, sensing inside every fragmentary muscular cue . . . Slow down, back a little or he'll overswing on you ... all below the level of consciousness. If he waited until he saw Mario doing these things, there would not be time enough to alter what he was doing himself; it must all be inside. Now, forward to meet him at the nearest point, braced and relaxed, the unendurable strain, release . . . their wrists had locked together without effort. Before his fingers were aware of it, he sensed pain, stress—That's the wrist he's broken twice—and infinitesimally shifted his grip to focus the pressure away from the weakened point of the old break. Mario, deep in the almost-hypnotic tension of flying, had not been aware of the pain, or its release. Then the quick shifting turn, and the flying line of the bar—no need for a call; the reciprocal hand-wrist grip released at the same instant. How did they do it? Small shifts of muscular pressure, too faint for either of them to sense on a conscious level?

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It works. Somehow, it works.
Maybe we're reading each other's minds or something, way, it works like we are.
Again and again it worked, through the foot catch, the back double, the two-and-a-half. Then Tommy was conscious of the tremendous stress of their three-way awareness during the flying pass, Stella leaving his hands and Mario coming into them, an awareness that worked on split seconds too slow to cue what his hands and brain were doing. Mario, he sensed, was warmed and relaxed, confident, trusting.
It works. He knows it, too. This is what we've been working up to all these years, and he knows it now.
Now. Before he began to get tired, before he began to think too much, or worry about it. Now, in this first flood of confidence.
"All right, Matt," he called, swinging upright for a moment, "throw me a triple."
Even at this distance he caught the quick, startled look, felt the jolting surge of adrenaline within himself—Oh, God, am I rushing it?—and Mario's momentary hesitation.
"Lucky, I'm not sure—"
"I am. Come on, Matt. Now. Quit stalling."
This is what I didn't know before. The flyer is the star, sure, but the catcher is the boss, the anchorman. Mario always needed somebody he'd take orders from. That's why I had to prove I was stronger than he was.
"Come on, Matt. You know you can do it. I'm right here waiting."
He didn't wait to see if Mario had done as he said. He lowered himself, head down, and began the high, hard swing, pushing himself to the limits of what the trapeze would take. Outer limits of possibility . . .Thoughts skimmed across his mind and vanished without trace. In a curious inverted image he could see Mario swinging out, arching his body, arrowing —high, hard, and straight. He felt himself tightening his shoulders, arching his chest, flexing his thighs to accelerate his own swing. As Mario swung back, swooping away, he felt himself shift position to slow his own swing very slightly, and once again the two trapezes arched fast and hard toward one another, and Mario went up, higher, passing him, upward and upward. He could not see Mario as they swung back, but still the clockwork rhythm of the swing was with him. As the catch bar reached its furthest point of backswing,

he caught his breath, thrusting his hands out at the ready for the rush forward. ... This is it. He arched his back, knowing without seeing that Mario was off the bar and turning. From somewhere, blurring shadows at the rushing edge of vision, Tommy saw him turn, again . . . and again . . . and again. And then the looming, spinning body snapped out and straightened, and wrist slipped, locked on wrist, slid slightly and locked again as the backswing of the catch trap absorbed some of the momentum. He felt the tremendous strain on wrists, shoulders, arms . . . felt Mario instinctively

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flexing to take some of the strain. Tommy, soaked in sweat, knew he was breathing again, and now he had time to be afraid.
He whispered hoarsely to Mario, swinging just below him, "Okay?"
Mario's voice, harsh, too fiercely concentrated for relief or exultation, "Okay . . . watch out!" He let go, dropped into the net, rolling up as he fell, landing with a perfect bounce, and even in that moment alert enough to call up to Stella, "It's all right, okay—'•"
Even before Mario bounded to his feet, Tommy dived down beside him in the net.
"What happened? You all right?"
"Sure," said Mario, automatically steadying him with one hand, not aware he was doing it. "I'm fine—just forgot what a hell of a strain that is on my bad wrist. When I was doing it all the time, I used to keep it wrapped up, remember? I got out of the habit while I was laying off." And then, suddenly, the smile broke from his eyes and spread all over his face.
"Hey," he whispered, incredulous, "I did it, Lucky! I really got it back again!"
Tommy wanted to laugh and cry at once. He did neither. His voice was matter-of-fact. "Sure. I knew you would."
Stella was already on the floor as they climbed out of the net. She flung her arms exuberantly about Mario. "You did it, you did it! Oh, Matt, I'm so glad! I'm so glad I could cry!"
He dropped a light kiss on her forehead. "Well, don't do it on me," he said, laughing, "I'm soaking wet already. Whew! I'd damn near forgotten what that was like! Looks like the Flying Santellis are back in business!"
"This calls for a celebration!" Stella cried. "Let me go up and tell Lucia!" And she was off, her light feet flying up the stairs.
"Come on, Matt, get your sweater on; you're drenched

with sweat," he said brusquely, and went into the change room, picking up a towel.
After a moment he heard Mario behind him. Then Mario came up and put his hands on Tommy's shoulders and turned him around. Their eyes were almost on a level. "Tom, do you think I can just let it go like this? You don't think I knew what you were doing?"
"Look—Matt—" He fumbled for the words that would justify what he had done. He had taken the step that had made the triple itself almost an anticlimax. But he didn't have the words to say it. He would never have the words.
Mario, looking at him, knew it, and suddenly he put his arms around Tommy, and as he had never done since they had first been lovers, kissed him hard on the mouth. He said, his voice breaking, "I love you, Tommy," and went quickly out of the room and up the stairs.
This auspicious day had a rough tomorrow. In the early afternoon, Stella had to see the Mother Superior of Tessa's convent school, where Suzy would enter kindergarten that fall. Mario and Tommy had to practice alone, and it turned out to be one of those days when everything went wrong. While climbing the ladder, somehow Mario knocked his bad wrist on the pedestal with such force

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that he stood clinging to the ladder for several minutes, white with pain, before he could continue. The need to favor the wrist threw him off balance for two or three tries. Finally he went down and strapped it up more tightly, after which things went a little better. But he missed his first try at the triple, insisted on trying it again, and went into the net wrong, managing somehow to strike his face against his own kneecap. He had been knocked so nearly senseless from the blow that he lay dazed in the net, bringing Tommy down in sudden panic, afraid he was seriously hurt. Tommy had to fetch ammonia from the change room to revive him, but a careful appraisal of injuries revealed only a nosebleed and an eye already darkening.

"We'd better call it a day." Tommy fetched ice from the kitchen, wrapped it in a towel, and held it to Mario's swollen face. "Sure your nose isn't broken?"

"No, I could feel that. I've got a blood vessel or something that lets loose every time I give it a knock. I used to have the most god-awful nosebleeds when I was a kid." He

put away the ice-filled towel and laughed. "I remember the last time I did this. We were with Lambeth then, and you knocked me right out of the trap. Remember?"

"Sure." On a sudden impulse of tenderness, Tommy bent and kissed him. Mario reached out and pulled Tommy against him. They stayed like that for a minute or two, remembering a dozen shared falls, moments of closeness. Then Mario laughed and pushed an ice cube down Tommy's neck and they started scuffling and punching each other like teenagers. Suddenly Mario stopped and stood quiet for a minute.

"Tom. Did you hear anything, like a door opening and closing, a couple minutes ago?"

"I didn't hear anything." Tommy glanced at his watch. "Angelo wouldn't be home yet, and the kids are in school. I don't think—could it have been a prowler or something?"

Mario's face was very grave. "That's not what I'm thinking about. I don't suppose anybody could have seen anything, or would think anything about it if they did, but—oh, well."

But Tommy was troubled as he went up to change his clothes. Mario had gone to the kitchen for more ice. Tommy was buttoning up his shirt when the doorknob rattled. Thinking it was Mario, he went to unlock it.

"What's the big idea?" Angelo demanded through the closed door. "We never lock doors in this house!"

"You never knock on them, either," Tommy said amiably, "and I have a kind of crude objection to Lucia or Tess catching me in my shirttail."

"Where's Matt?"

"Downstairs, putting some more ice on his face."

"I saw you putting ice on it in the change room," Angelo said. "How did it happen?"

"He went into the net wrong and knocked his head on his knee. Nosebleed, and he's going to have one beaut of a shiner."

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Tommy motioned Angelo to the one chair, and sat on the end of the bed, kicking a pair of discarded tights under the edge of the bed frame.
"Cigarette?"
"I'll smoke my own, thanks. Those things you and Matt like, they taste too much like cough drops." Angelo grinned uneasily at him. "Remember the day when I offered you a cigarette and you gave me a lecture on all the reasons athletes shouldn't smoke?"

Tommy laughed with him. "God, what a rotten little prig I must have been in those days."
After a minute Angelo said, "Tom, we were all glad when you decided to team up with Matt again. It's marvelous, the way you've straightened him out. He was a wild kid, you know—got into trouble, was thrown out of college—"
Tommy clicked the mechanism of the lighter restlessly, but when it finally flared he leaned forward and blew out the _ tiny flame. "He told me all about it, Angelo."
"I wonder"—Angelo frowned—"just how much he told you. And now you're catching for him. Tom, how much have you tied up in this partnership, anyway?"
Tommy said flatly, "We share and share alike, just like we did when you were with us. I put my saved-up pay into the new rigging, but it works out about even, because he's the big draw for an audience."
"I don't mean money, Tom. I mean, how much of yourself have you put into this? I'd hate to see you two get so dependent on each other—" He broke off, and Tommy, an unendurable memory recalled, knew that Angelo was walking on tiptoe around something he did not want to come out and say.
What did he see, anyhow? What was there that he could have seen? Nothing, absolutely nothing, yet Tommy felt like shouting in the man's face, Damn it, Angelo, I know what you're trying to find out, and the answer is yes, and to hell with you anyhow!
But his genuine love and respect for the other man held him silent. Finally he said, "Sure, we're dependent on each other. A flyer and catcher always are."
"You're not answering my question."
"No, and I don't intend to. Listen, Angelo, I don't want to be rude, but you're not in the act anymore. You quit, you wanted it that way, and now you got your life and we got ours. Isn't it kind of up to Matt and me how we run our act?".
"Fair enough," Angelo said. "None of my damn business. But you used to be a pretty good flyer yourself, and now he's got the star spot and he's got you catching for him. I hate to see you sacrificing yourself—"
"Sacrificing, hell! I'm catcher for the best damn flyer around. Anything I do, it's because I want to do it!"
"Confound it!" Angelo clenched his fist and struck the arm of the chair with it. "Why not come out and say it's be-

cause—" He broke off, got up, and swung around, and for a moment Tommy thought Angelo would walk out of the room, unable to complete his sentence.

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Tommy knew what Angelo had started to say: because you love him. And if Angelo could understand that—with sudden, tentative hope, Tommy opened his mouth to speak, but Angelo turned to him again and said, "Look, I guess I ought to say this. I don't know whether Matt ever told you or not. But—but knowing what I know about Matt, maybe I'm taking that the wrong way."
"You're not telling me anything I don't know," Tommy said. He was surprised to find his voice so steady. "I wonder, too, Angelo. Knowing that. Can you really understand why things are the way they are between Matt and me?"
"I been trying to tell myself I just didn't understand, ragazzo."
The old childish name lowered his defenses; Angelo had called them all that, indiscriminately, when they were boys. "Try and understand this, then. Matt and I—we need each other. Do I really have to say any more than that, Angelo? Can't we leave it at that?"
Angelo colored to the roots of his dark hair. He put out his cigarette in a china ashtray shaped like the state of California, grinding it out painstakingly to cover his embarrassment. "I keep forgetting what a kid you are, Tom. Look, two grown men shouldn't—"
Before his embarrassment Tommy felt scalding heat rise in his own face. "Angelo, for God's sake, I did four years in the Army—you don't have to explain the facts of life to me!"
"It's a goddamn cinch somebody does," Angelo retorted. "No, you listen, Tom. I know you had a hell of a crush on him when you were just a little kid. I thought you'd outgrow that stuff. Kids mostly do. I wasn't so sure about Matt for a while, only then he found himself a nice girl, got married, had a kid. I wouldn't believe it, I never believed all that smut Coe Wayland was spreading around—I told myself Coe Wayland was just a dirty-minded drunk with a grudge. Even after what I saw downstairs just now—"
What could he have seen? Nothing that could not be explained away. Tommy found he had forgotten to breathe and did. "Hell, that-—we were just kidding around," he said. He saw Angelo's frown lighten and knew that Angelo would believe what he wanted to believe.
And things would go on as they had for years, based on a

lie. . . . With an emotional revulsion so great that it turned him physically sick for a moment, he knew he could not stand here and lie again to Angelo.
"Look," he said, "I'm sorry if it bothers you, Angelo. But that's the way it's been with Matt and me for a long time. You once tried to get me to tell you why we split up. Well, we got on a blacklist. Wayland saw something and talked, and we knew it would hurt the act, hurt the family—that meant more than anything to Matt. Lionel Fortunati said he'd take a chance on Matt if we split up. Matt did the right thing, I guess, only it wasn't the right thing at all; it nearly destroyed us both." His voice had risen in his eagerness to make Angelo understand.
"All those years, knocking around on the bum . . . you don't know what he went through, and I got no right to try and tell you. There's things he didn't tell me, things I don't think he'd tell a priest in confession! When I found him in that filthy little mud show in Texas—oh, hell, I can't talk about that. You

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can't imagine." He swallowed. "You just got through saying I'd straightened him out."
Angelo shook his head, disbelieving. "At that price, I wish you hadn't. He's not worth it."
Anger flowed through Tommy like a destroying tornado. He got to his feet, the bitterness pouring from him in a torrent.
"No, you'd rather see us both in the gutter, wouldn't you? You're jealous, damn you, Angelo—jealous because Matt and I have something you never had! For you, flying was something you did because you loved your father—you found out you couldn't work without him, didn't you? Just a week after he was killed you quit the act, right in the middle of the season, left the Flying Santellis stranded for Coe Wayland to make hash with! Just because you couldn't stand to see Matt and me still working together, flying, and loving each other—"
Angelo was deathly pale. "Shut up," he got out, strangled. "Shut up before I kill you—"
"Yes, for the love of God, both of you, shut up!" Mario said. There was no telling how long he had been there in the doorway, holding to the doorframe as if only his clenched knuckles kept him upright. He was still in the sweat-darkened tights, bare to the waist, a towel thrown loosely around his shoulders. His bruised eye gave his face a lopsided, clownish

look. "I should think they could hear you down in Starr's winter quarters!"
"I blame myself for this whole rotten mess," Angelo said, turning on Mario. "For ever thinking you could be trusted with a kid, you—you contemptible freak, you rotten fairy!"
Mario came inside the room. "If we're going to be tossing around that kind of language, let's not have the whole family for an audience," he said. He shut the door and locked it. Angelo watched in silence.
"Now I see the point of the locks," he said. "I guess I ought to admire your discretion. You've improved, if you can call it that, since the cops in San Francisco picked you up for molesting a kid sixteen years old."
Mario's swollen face twisted. "Just to keep the record straight, you might add that I had just passed my own seventeenth birthday when I committed that crime—quote, unquote."
"You mean the last time you got caught at it."
Mario put a hand to his bruised face and chuckled, and Angelo said, "Yeah. Real funny."
"It wouldn't be so funny, only I knew you'd get around to telling Tommy someday. So I made sure I told him myself, a good long time ago."
"And he still wanted to be your little pal after that?"
"I think just maybe he could have learned something more from Papa Tony than how to rig a guy wire. Something called live and let live. And it's a damn shame Papa never managed to teach it to you!"
"You leave Papa out of this," Angelo exploded. "He was too tolerant for his own good! He should have let me beat you within an inch of your life, that time, like I was all set to do!"

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Mario looked at him with a sad, embarrassed smile. "Do you really think that would have changed anything, Angelo?"
"It might have taught you there were things you just couldn't get away with," Angelo said. "And when I think that we trusted you with Tommy!"
"Now, damn it, Angelo— Tommy began, but Mario motioned him to silence.
"No, Tom, this is my inning. Angelo, if you think I corrupted Tommy, nothing I'd say would change your mind. Though if sixteen years of living with his parents didn't make Tommy heterosexual, I don't know how a couple of seasons

on the road with me could have turned him queer, just like that. And he spent four years in the Army, away from my so-called evil influence. Angelo, for God's sake, use your head! If some man made a pass at you, would it turn you into a queer, just like that?"
Angelo said, with a contemptuous smile, "The only queer ever laid a hand on me lost three teeth, you better believe!"
"Well, there you are." Mario shrugged. "Tom was plenty old enough to tell me to go to hell, and he'd have done it, too, if he felt like it. Tom and I are partners. As for the rest of it, Angelo, I don't see how it's any of your goddamn business."
"It's everybody's business! Tom is just a kid—"
"Listen. Angelo, the hell with that," Tommy interrupted. "You're talking like it was all Matt's fault, like I had nothing to do with it. Nothing happened that I didn't want to happen." He swallowed hard, remembering words he had flung at Mario in his childish despair: If I'm old enough to risk my goddamn neck with you on the flying rig, I'm old enough to know who I want to sleep with.
"If you proposition a woman and she turns you down, do you rape her, or something? I knew what I was doing—"
Angelo squeezed up his face in distress and disgust.
"Don't, for God's sake, go into details!"
"You were the one brought it up," said Tommy, taking an angry step toward Angelo. He saw, with detached astonishment, that the older man actually flinched away. He did not know how enormous he looked, wide-shouldered, angry, looming over Angelo in fury, but for the first time in his life, it was really borne in on him. He was stronger than most people; he was stronger than Mario, and he was stronger than Angelo, who had always seemed to him immense, adult, invulnerable.
Angelo picked up the china ashtray and sat turning it in his hands. He said, "Matt, this is a decent home. With kids in it."
"It always has been, as far back as I can remember. And now one of the kids is mine. So what?"
"I saw you and Tommy. In the practice room—"
Mario laughed weakly. "Oh, Angelo, you idiot! Is that what all this uproar is about? Of all the things—look, all us kids used to kiss each other. Didn't you see Johnny grab me

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the other day, when he came in? God Almighty, Angelo, how many times have you and I—"
Angelo's face twisted. "I think you better not remind me of that right now!"
"But, damn it, Angelo, that's just the point! I'm no different than I ever was. I'm the same person you've known since— well, ever since I was born!"
Angelo shook his head, with a little denying gesture. Tommy was remembering a time when Angelo, without self-consciousness, had picked him up and carried him like a child out of a doctor's office, under circumstances where Mario, aware and guilty, would not even give him an arm to lean on. And Angelo had kissed him, half a dozen times, in public. Which Mario had never done. They had always been so careful, so circumspect.
We've been so damn good at lying. For so long.
Angelo said, shaking his head again in distress, "I wish you wouldn't make this harder for me, Matt. You're going to have to give me your word there'll be nothing of that kind under this roof, or I'll have to ask Tommy to find another place to live."
Tommy said, "Hey, look—" but Mario took an angry step toward Angelo. "What do you mean—my word? If you mean, not to let Clay catch us in bed together, or not to make passes at the kids down in the practice room, that's a damned insult, and you'd better take it back before I ram your teeth down your dirty throat! There's just exactly as much chance of that as there is of you taking Tessa along to watch next time you visit a whorehouse down on the strip! As for our private lives, what the hell do you expect? You want us to take separate rooms, or something?"
Angelo turned, looked quickly away again. It was perfectly obvious there was only one bed in the room they had shared for so long. He said, not knowing where to look, "Well, that would be a good start."
"Are you crazy? Are you going to lock us in our rooms and patrol the halls every night? Or do you mean you want us to go out and hunt up a dark alley somewhere?"
Angelo's neck seemed too big for his collar, and his face was congested and dark. "Do we have to go into that? You know what I mean."
"No, I don't. I can't figure out whether you're stupid, or

vicious, or just naive. Why not just be glad Tommy and I are old enough and smart enough to be discreet about it, and leave it at that?" Angelo made a grimace of distaste, but Mario gave him no time to speak.
"It's time you got a few facts straight, Angelo. Fact one. If Tommy goes. I go. That's flat. He's my partner. If you're going to kick him out, kick me out, too, and forget my existence. And you can have the job of explaining to Johnny and Stella—and to the rest of the family—that-the Flying Santellis are dead again and you killed them off, like you damn near did the last time!"
"Matt, that isn't fair—"
"Fair, hell," Mario said, and Tommy saw that he was working himself up into one of his old-time rages. "How fair are you being to me and Tommy? Or do

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you figure that just because we're queers we don't have to be treated fair, like human beings? Fact two. Legally, I own a third of this house."
"Kid, nobody's arguing—"
"You were. You were talking about kicking my partner out of my house. The house was tied up so it couldn't be sold during Nonna's lifetime, I know, but she's dead, God rest her, and that's that. So it's time you stopped to think what you're doing. The way I understand it, you and Papa and Joe all went equal shares on this house back in the nineteen thirties. And in his will, Papa left his share to me, or didn't you know? Because he knew I'd always look after Lucia. Liss was married, and Johnny—he thought then he couldn't trust Johnny. So I own a third of this house. I don't think I could buy you all out for cash, but considering I own a third of the place, I could probably get it financed. I'll do it if I have to. Or do you want to raise the cash and buy me out?"
Tommy, silent till now because he was too appalled to speak, finally found his voice.
"No, Matt. No, Angelo. That isn't necessary—I can find a place to live—"
"Not without me. This isn't personal, Tom. This is a business matter. We're partners, and the house, the flying rig—if Angelo can force me out of the house, he could probably force me not to use the family name, and that's my means of livelihood. Hell, even in bankruptcy court you can't take away a man's means of livelihood!"

Angelo said heavily, "Matt, if I called your bluff—"
"Goddamn it, Angelo, if you think I'm bluffing, I'll have a lawyer here tomorrow morning, and a real estate agent to appraise the house! If you and Joe want to get together and buy me out, I won't make trouble, but you'd have to tell Lucia why the house that's held five generations of Santellis suddenly isn't big enough to hold her son and his partner—"
"Don't!" Angelo said painfully, and broke into Italian. "Dio! Do you think the family means nothing to me, boy? Everything that I have done—" He swallowed hard, tightened his mouth, and deliberately returned to English. "We always said, everyone in a family act is family. I got no right to order you out, and even if I did, I wouldn't break up the home. It's been Lucia's home all her life, and she's all the sister I've got. But what do you expect of me, Matt? To say I approve of this—this—" He ran out of words again.
"I don't expect a damn thing, Angelo," Mario said. "Look, if you're just finding out about Tom and me, only now, doesn't that tell you something? At least you can be sure we're not going to get into the gossip columns and make some kind of scandal!"
Angelo looked at Tommy as if he were seeing him for the first time. After a perceptible pause he said, "Just how long has this been going on, Tom? No, Matt, shut up—I asked him, not you."
I got us into this. And now -we've both got to live with it. At last he said, "Since the first season I worked in the act, regular, with Lambeth. The year I was fifteen."

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Angelo stood as if rooted to the floor. "Gesu e Maria . . I would not have believed it of you. ..."
Tommy thought, That's a lot of crap. He's been pussyfooting around, trying to find it out, for years. He said aloud, "So now you know, Angelo. If I didn't tell you before, damn it, it's not because I was ashamed of it! It's because I figured it would bother you. And it did."
After a long time Angelo said with a heavy shrug, "Ebbene . . . okay, okay. You're both grown up now. I wash my hands . . ." He started with faltering steps toward the door. Then he turned and walked back, past Tommy, going straight to Mario. He took Mario's shoulders between his hands.
"No, boy," he said in Italian, "it is not possible for me—I am a Christian, a Catholic, I cannot pass by on the other

side and pretend—you are the son of my only sister, my godson—" Abruptly he switched to English. "I got a responsibility. Matt, this is a mortal sin—you know that, don't you? I—I don't know what to say to you. If I bring Father Bazzini down here, will you talk to him? Just talk to him?"
Mario said something in Italian about what Father Bazzini could do—it was too idiomatic for Tommy to follow—then broke off. Angelo looked as if Mario had struck him in the face.
"I'm sorry, Angelo. No. Tell the Father to save his time and energy. I'm not a repentant sinner. I don't think I'm a sinner at all."
"So this is why you didn't go to confession at Easter—"
"Right. I know your damn church says it's a mortal sin. But it would be a mortal sin to say I have a firm purpose of amendment, because I don't. I tried that once, and you know where it landed me."
"Matt, you know this would kill Lucia—"
"What Lu doesn't know isn't going to hurt her. Unless you think you have to save your immortal soul by telling her."
Angelo made a gesture of horror. "How could I tell such a thing to a woman, my sister? But how Lucia will feel when she knows you are out of grace with the Church—"
"If she doesn't know that, she's dumber than I give her credit for. I divorced Sue-Lynn, didn't I?" His face was set.
Angelo said at last, "Ebbene—I will say no more. I wash my hands of you." He gave them a clinical glance of disgust. "I am only glad that Papa did not live to see this day. He loved you both, and it would break his heart—"
Suddenly Tommy was angry again, with a surging rage. "You haven't got a grain of decency, have you, Angelo? What the hell makes you think he didn't know?"
"I know how my father—"
"You don't know shit," Tommy flung at him, in such a rage that he could gladly have broken Angelo's neck. "Papa Tony knew, all right! I don't know if he approved or not, he never said, but he could have put a stop to it any time he wanted to, just by not taking up my contract again—and anyway, he could have stopped us from sharing a room, any time!"
"I don't believe you!"

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Mario swung around, his face working, his eyes full of tears. "No, you'd rather believe we're both low enough to

lie about it! You dare throw Papa Tony up to me, you damned pious bastard? You go preaching us a sermon, I'll preach you one—about the man who is without sin casting the first stone. Where do you get off talking about breaking Papa Tony's heart? I'd have died rather than hurt him," he said, tears running down his face, unheeded. "You think you loved him a damn bit more than I did? He was a hundred times the man you are, Angelo-—" His voice broke. "Get the hell out of here, or I'll kick you down the stairs, you rotten hypocrite! And if you ever mention Papa's name to me again in that tone of voice, I'll kill you—I'll kill you with my bare hands! Now, you get the hell out of here! Get out!"

Angelo fumbled with the doorknob, but the door was locked. Tommy got up and unlocked it and Angelo went out without a backward glance. Tommy locked the door behind him. Mario had slumped on the bed, convulsed with that terrible sobbing, as if his slender body would break with the violence of his grief. Tommy turned away, unwilling to watch him weep. He knew that he himself had hoped against hope for the miracle. He had loved and admired Angelo so much; he had hoped that Angelo, knowing, would understand, would look on them with unchanged eyes.

Tommy thought he had lost all his illusions long ago, but as he stood with his hand on the locked door, he felt another one crack and topple. Angelo was not superhuman, after all. He was a bigot, an intolerant fanatic who could be stupidly cruel about anything that ran up against his prejudices.

It was a bad and bitter end to a good friendship, and he knew it was the end. He had never known how deep the warmth of Angelo's affection went until he felt it being withdrawn, and felt as if the roots were being drawn out all the way from his toenails. Mario was still crumpled on the bed, convulsed. Tommy went and sat beside him, knowing that he had just begun to feel the pain.

"I could have stood anything," Mario said thickly, "if he hadn't said that about Papa Tony. Oh, damn, my nose is bleeding again—I'm bleeding all over the damn sheet. Lucia will have a fit."

"Take this. Put your head back," Tommy said. "I'll go get you some more ice." But Mario held him, gripping his hand hard. "I said it a long time ago. Make ourselves so good a team nobody will want to separate us, no matter what. And now we've done it,

getting the triple back ... I thought I'd never feel so right again. For it to come right now, right now when we got it back! It's like he could put up with anything, until we had that. Tom, is he really jealous? Jealous enough to want to destroy us if he can't be part of what we are?"

It had been his own thought. You'd rather see us both in the gutter, Angelo, rather see us dead than flying, loving what we do and each other. . . . But was it true? He said, "I don't know, Matt. Before God, I don't know."

"It's all we've got now, Lucky."

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Tommy said bitterly, "I haven't been so lucky for you, have I?"
Mario sat up and looked at him. His face was a ghastly mess, his eye darkening with bruises, his mouth and nose smeared with blood. "You're all the luck I've got," he said. "Maybe-bad luck's better than none."

CHAPTER 13

neither of them felt able to face the family dinner table. No amount of soap or water or ice could make Mario's face even remotely presentable, and Tommy could tell that he was more distressed by the traces of tears than by the bruises. Tommy himself was not eager to face Lucia's concern, An-gelo's hostility, the questions of everyone else. When he returned the ice trays to the kitchen, he told Lucia that they were going into the city for dinner and would not be back until late.

They ate at a roadside diner, and afterward drove around for a long time, unwilling to return. They did not talk about what was uppermost in their minds; they did not talk much at all. Tommy found a certain release in letting the speed of the car build up on the freeway. Mario, well aware of how he felt, did not protest, but at last he said, apologetically, "Look, kid, all we need is to be hauled up for speeding in traffic court," and Tommy reluctantly slowed to the legal limit, the tension still unrelieved. In the end they went to the small dark bar where Bart had taken them that first day. Tommy had never overcome his distaste for the hangouts of the homosexual underground, and said so, but Mario retorted bitterly, "Where the hell else can we go?" It was true; there

were almost no other places where he and Mario could go together without continual fear that some careless word, some absent-minded touch would betray them. And however discreet they might be, ordinary bars took it for granted that a man, or men, alone, were in search of congenial female company. Two men content with one another's company were conspicuous. Now even their home had been barred to them. Angelo would make it increasingly hard for them to mingle with the family on the old terms, and if they stayed by themselves, that was a source of suspicion and trouble, too. As they took seats at an isolated corner table, Mario said, "I'd like to get myself blind drunk," and Tommy sensed the first menacing ripple of the old self-destroying rages and guilts. Would this be the safest answer after all, to let Mario blot out his anguish in oblivion? I could take care of him, make sure he didn't get into trouble.

But that was too ready an answer, could all too easily become self-perpetuating. He was remembering Bart's frightening statistics on suicide among homosexuals, statistics closely related to drinking and drugs.

"You going to let Angelo do that to you, too?"

"Hell, I guess not," Mario conceded.

They sat sipping beer, slowly. After the first two, Mario, saying he would throw up if he drank any more of the damn stuff, switched to ginger ale. Tommy's response was that he'd throw up after the first glass of that stuff. The bar, on a weekday evening, was not crowded; there were a few couples and a few single men, but none of these tried to attach themselves to Tommy

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and Mario. Coming back from the men's room, Tommy noticed that Mario's black eye was still enlarging and darkening. As he slid into the seat he said, "You look like one hell of a desperate character with that eye, Matt. A gangster or something."

Mario's smile was only a grimace, twisting his mouth. 'They probably think you get your kicks out of beating me up." A few weeks ago, Tommy would not have known what he meant. Now, with growing sophistication, he felt the scalding heat in his face and was glad for the darkness in the bar; he did not want Mario to see him blush. He sipped at his beer, randomly wondering. On two or three occasions, Mario had shown a random, reasonless cruelty which did, actually, seem to derive a kind of pleasure in inflicting—not pain, but

humiliation. Mario was not a sadist, but Tommy wondered now, sometimes, if he might not have had some leanings in that direction, adding to his own spiraling guilt and depression. It wasn't anything they could talk about, and he let it lie.

In the car on the way home, Mario said, "Look, we've got to talk about this, just a little. Angelo won't do anything right away. I called his bluff on that—he won't sell the house out from under me. But we can't take it for granted he's shot the only bolt he has. He's not like Johnny, or Papa Tony. He holds grudges."

Could it be only coincidence that Angelo had delayed his attack on them until Mario, sure in the knowledge of Tommy as his catcher, had recovered the triple, and his old confidence? Angelo's suspicions had been there long enough; the knowledge that Angelo did have a suspicious eye on them had given them, in the first season, a furtiveness which had almost destroyed them both. Was there, after all, an element of real jealousy in the scene he had made?

Tommy put the question, and Mario said, "I don't know how it could be that. I begged him to come back with the act, often enough. Hell, I love—I loved the guy, he brought me up. And I begged him to stick with me. Why in hell should he be jealous now?"

But did Angelo dare to accept that kind of love? Was his jealousy entirely unconscious, then, never to be admitted even to himself? So much the worse, then. If Angelo knew his rage was based on jealousy, he might be ashamed to make trouble—but if he had firmly convinced himself that the distress he felt was righteous moral indignation, there was no end to the trouble he could make.

Finally Tommy said, "Why borrow trouble? I don't see what Angelo can do. Short of having us arrested as sex offenders, or something. And I don't think he'd do that to Lucia."

"Anyway," Mario said, "we're likely to find out."

The worst moment for Tommy was early the next morning, when he came down to find Angelo at breakfast with Lucia and Tessa. Lucia said a friendly good-morning; so, after a moment, did Angelo. Tommy resented this more than anything else, the need to preserve, for Lucia's sake, an unbroken facade. He wondered why he did it—Lucia wasn't his

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mother, he didn't owe her that. Then he realized that ever since Papa Tony had first defined his place here, Lucia had never varied for an instant in welcoming him into it. By his commitment to Mario, he had taken on, as well, certain family responsibilities, and this was one of them. He muttered, "Good morning, Lu, Angelo," and went into the kitchen to get his coffee.

Stella came in with Suzy. She unfolded the little girl's napkin, tucking it into the neck of her frock, and demanded, "Where were you two last night? Johnny and I waited up till after two. We needed to talk to you when you came in!"

"We went into the city for drinks," Tommy said. He spread butter on his toast, frowning. Angelo had said he would not tell Lucia, but would he feel himself morally bound to inform Johnny and Stella, and would it make a difference? But Stella, firmly removing the sugar bowl before Suzy could put a second spoonful on her cornflakes, smiled with her usual friendliness.

"We finally figured you two had decided to make a night of it, and went to bed. But he absolutely has to talk to both of you this morning before ten. Say good morning to Grandma, Suzy."

"Good morning, Nonna Lulu. Good morning, Uncle Angelo. Good morning, Uncle Tommy. Good morning—"

"That will do, Suzy," Stella said firmly.

"But I haven't said good morning to Tessa—"

"Just eat your cereal, Suzy—we get the idea. Lucia, there is a producer in Texas—"

"Good morning, Babbo," Suzy chirped, and even before he raised his face from his plate, Lucia's shocked gasp told Tommy that Mario had come in, and that his bruised eye and cheekbone had ripened into Technicolor.

"Madre di—Matt, how did you do that?"

"Hit the net wrong, Lu. Don't worry about it."

"Babbo, did somebody hit you? Did you run into a door? That's what Mommy said people always said when they had a black eye. But she said it usually meant they ran into a fist. How could anybody run into a fist? A fist is down here, not up where your eye is."

"When they say you ran into a fist, Suzy, it means somebody hit you, but no, nobody hit me. I fell into the net wrong and I hit my face on my own knee."

"That was goddamn silly," Suzy chirped, instantly divert-

ing Lucia's shock from her son's face to her granddaughter's language.

"Susan Elissa Gardner! Now, you see what happens when you men do not watch your language! Don't you dare laugh at her, Tessa! If she knows you think it is cute—"

"Well, Mommy says it," Suzy argued. "She said it when Babbo—"

"Never mind, Suzy," Stella said.

Angelo remarked, "If she never says anything worse than that, Lucia, we'll all be lucky. Tessa, you'd better get your book bag and your school beret. You might have to take the bus home today—I could be late at the studio."

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"I hate to have her riding that bus," Lucia fretted. "You can never tell what might happen. Can't Stella pick her up, or Matt? That part of town isn't what it was when Liss went to school there."
"I'll pick her up," Mario said.
"Then you wait inside the school gate for Matt, Tessa— don't hang around on the corner. Aren't you ready yet?"
"In a minute, Papa. One of my braids is undone. Can you fix it, Lulu?"
Lucia frowned at the end of the tidy plait. "The rubber band is undone—no, it's broken, Tessa. Run up to my room —there are some in a tray on my dresser."
"For heaven's sake," Angelo exploded, "can't you go without it?"
"I get demerits for being untidy," Tessa said sulkily, "and Sister Mary Veronica gets mad at us." She ran out of the room, shouting, "I'll only be a minute," and collided with Johnny, hard, in the door. He edged around her as she ran on.
"It's good to hear Tess making some noise around here for a change," he remarked with a good-natured grin. "She usually creeps around this house like a postulant nun! Suzy's doing her good, I guess. Hey, what the hell happened to your face, Matt? Listen, I was looking for you last night. Now I have to drag myself out of bed at this ungodly hour, because I have to wire this guy, without fail, by ten this morning. There's this big producer in Dallas; he's staging a big circus-type show for crippled children, and he saw Flight Dreams on television. He wants us to come and do a television show, live, for them, and to talk about it on television. Is that okay with you, Matt?"

"Heck, I can't talk on television!"
"I'll do most of the talking," Johnny said. "You just sit there and look handsome."
"With my face like this? And I'm not crazy about spending eighteen hours on a train to Dallas, either!"
"I forgot to tell you," Johnny said, "but we get expenses, including plane fare. There's not that much money in it, aside from expenses—a couple of hundred apiece. But we can use the publicity, and the exposure."
Mario glanced at Tommy. "How do you feel about it?"
"I always did want to fly on one of those big transcontinental planes. Let's."
"Okay, Jock, we're with you. I hope my face is back to one color in time for it, though," Mario said.
"It ought to be," Johnny said, waving away the coffee Lucia poured. "No, no, Lu, I'll eat at a civilized hour. I've got to go and phone that guy. He'll arrange for our hotel reservation. What shall I tell him, Stel? One room for us, and they can put in a cot for Punkin here," he added, tousling Suzy's hair. "And you two can share a room, can't you, Matt? You always do."
Tommy caught a glimpse of Angelo's face as he shoved back his chair. For a moment he thought Angelo was going to say something, and resolved, if he did, that he'd break his neck. But Lucia broke in before Angelo could speak.
"You're not going to take Suzy with you, are you, at her age? Why should she be dragged around—"

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"I wouldn't think of leaving her," Stella said. "You want to ride on a plane, don't you, Suzy?"
"I've got to get going," said Angelo, heading for the doorway. He shouted up the stairs, "Tessa! Teresa Santelli, get yourself down here!"
"I'm coming, Papa, but let Lucia fix my braid first, won't you?" Tessa sidled into the room, bending down for Lucia to slip the band on her braid.
"If you're not in the car by the time I get it started, I'll go without you, and you can take the bus," Angelo said, and slammed out the door.
Tessa pulled her braid loose and ran after him with the rubber band in her fingers, and Lucia murmured, "What in the world has gotten into him?"
Tommy didn't say anything. But he thought he could make a fairly good guess.

Johnny was on the phone much of the morning, and toward noon he went out to pick up the advance money that was being wired for their plane fares. Shortly afterward, Lucia called Mario to the phone.
"It's Jim Fortunati. He said he'd been trying to reach you all morning."
Mario went to the telephone. He came back in a few minutes, saying, "Tommy, this is it. Jim wants us to come down .and sign a contract for the season, with Starr's. We have to make up our minds."
"Well," Tommy said, "isn't it that or nothing? There's Starr's, and there's half a dozen small shows racketing around under canvas. I don't see what else we can do." He grinned. "Not to mention that it's where you belong anyway, with the Big Show."
Mario glanced at the hallway clock. "We've got just about enough time before we have to pick up Tessa; we can do that on the way back."
The drive took a little over an hour. When they turned in at the gate to winter quarters, they stared, for the clutter of small rehearsal tops was now overshadowed by an enormous tent, the old-fashioned Big Top never seen, now, with circuses of any size.
"What the hell . . ." Mario said as they parked the car in the visitors' lot. "Are they going back under canvas, after all these years?"
But when they arrived in the circus office, the small silver wagon where Randy Starr conducted the business of the show —it was a very old wagon, one Mario said he remembered seeing when Lucia had been on the road with Starr's in his childhood—Jim Fortunati, waiting for them there with Randy Starr, said, "Oh, the Big Top? That's for the Parrish movie; they're going to film a lot of it right here in winter quarters. I thought you knew, thought you were going to be doubling the aerial scenes."
"We haven't signed anything yet," Mario said.
"No? Well, I'm working as flying consultant on the circus," Fortunati said, "and they told me they were getting you for it; in fact, I said there wasn't anybody else worth a damn. You can still do the triple, I imagine?"
"Oh, yes. No problem."
"You found a catcher, then? Who is he?"

"You remember Tommy," Mario said, and Randy Starr broke in:

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"Oh, sure. The kid—I remember him. You weren't old enough last time I saw you, but I said to myself, 'That kid's got good timing. He's going to make a catcher someday; that's where timing really counts.' You're over twenty-one now?"
Tommy dug in his pocket for his discharge papers. The circus manager studied them for a moment, then handed them back. "Okay. I've got your contract here—flyer and catcher, one or two others in the act, however you want to fix it up. You want me to find you a girl for your act? Your ex-wife is still with us. She married again, but she's a pretty fair flyer," Randy Starr said. "Nice looking, too. No, huh?"
"No," Mario said firmly.
Randy Starr shrugged. "Up to you, then. I like at least one woman in the act, though; the crowds like to look at pretty girls in a flying act. But you got a sister, don't you? And one of your family doubled for Lillian Whitney in some circus movie—was that Angelo's girl?"
"Joe's," Mario said. "Angelo's daughter is only thirteen."
"I don't think I ever met either of them," Starr said, and Tommy remembered that he had a freak memory, never forgetting a face or a performance. "And there was that woman who was with you in Flight Dreams. She was damn good, if you can get her. Only that wasn't the sister you had with you before, though. She was one of the family—-reminded me a lot of Lucia, the way she moved. Elissa. But the Flight Dreams one was a blonde . . ."
"My brother Johnny's wife. Stella Gardner."
Starr shoved the contract form across the table. "You sign for the Santellis," he said. "That was the way I always set it up with Tony. The senior man in the family makes the arrangements for everybody; you get the other people in it under private contract to you."
Mario signed. As he was folding up his copy of the contract to put it away, Jim Fortunati said, "Speaking of contracts, Matt, tell your brother John to get off his rear end and make up his mind. I have to make living arrangements for the year for him and his wife—do they have any kids? And we have to have him by the time we open in the Garden, and that's just about a month away now. If he can't make it, I have to know so we can get somebody else."
"Okay, I'll tell him."

"I hope he'll take the job. I know the show will be in good hands with him, and there isn't anybody else I really feel right about.. There was some talk about hiring Coe Wayland, only I don't like that guy—he's a born troublemaker." He looked straight at Mario. "Didn't you have some trouble once, with that guy? But no Santelli was ever a troublemaker. I'm counting on that, Matt."
Mario said, "You can count on it all right, Jim," and gave Randy Starr his hand. Tommy, shaking hands in farewell with Jim Fortunati, realized that somehow, Jim Fortunati knew—and was willing to take a chance.
And for the first time since Angelo had come into their room, on the warpath, he felt, Maybe it's not so bad, after all.
No Santelli was ever a troublemaker. Well, I just hope Angelo remembers that, too!

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That afternoon, changed and ready for practice, they met Clay coming in from school. Mario said, "Hurry up and get changed, Clay. We're starting a little early today. If you want to, you can come up to the board and handle the ropes for Stella and me for a while, before Phil and Bobby and Car| get here."

Tommy expected Clay to react with enthusiasm; instead the boy hesitated for several seconds before saying, "Well, okay, I guess that's all right. I'll be along after a while."

Mario opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. As they hurried down the stairs, Tommy demanded incredulously, "Why the hell do you let him get away with talking to you that way?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Mario said, controlling himself with an effort. "Angelo's dropped a hint to him to be careful around his big bad wicked cousin. And there's not a damn thing I can do about it, and Angelo knows it."

His shoulders dropped in dejection, as they went into the practice room. He cheered up a little, however, when Stella came down and he had the pleasure of telling her he had just signed the Flying Santellis for the season with Starr's.

"Oh, Matt, that's wonderful! That's absolutely wonderful for you! Are you getting top billing?"

"The Santellis are. Center ring," he said, and she drew a deep breath of delight.

"Oh, that's marvelous! When I was a kid, I never dared to dream--center ring with Starr's!"

"You're going to stay with us this season, then?"

"Why, I thought you said, the Flying Santellis—Matt, don't you want me?"

Tommy said, taking her small hard hands in his, "Stel, there aren't any words for how much we want you. But what about Johnny? He keeps saying the circus is dead, and he still hasn't given Jim Fortunati any answer about this aerial manager job they offered him."

"Well, maybe this will help him make up his mind," Stella said firmly, "and he never said he's not going to take it." She turned away and began climbing the rope ladder, effectively closing the subject for the moment.

We need Stella, Tommy thought as he went toward the catcher's end of the rig. Except for Matt, she's the best flyer we've got in the family. Liss was never in her class at all. But how in hell can we take her with us, if Johnny doesn't take this job with Starr's?

She's too damn good for Johnny. ...

And then he put it all out of his mind again, as always when he was working. But it came back, willy-nilly, when Stella came across to his hands.

He marveled at the way she came into his hands—precise, sure, and steady, needing no extra care on his part, her weight so light, so perfectly balanced, her hands locked so lightly around his wrists—and the way in which she almost, but not quite, anticipated the toss with which he threw her back. This is what catching ought to be like. Perfect, with that extra something he

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couldn't quite define . . . Later, swinging upright, mopping at his forehead with a handkerchief, he realized something else. Mario never yelled at Stella, never shouted directions or made sarcastic comments. He didn't need to. They were matched. Perfectly matched.
Bart had said something like that after watching Flight Dreams. If I hadn't known better, he had said to Mario, I'd have sworn you were lovers.
We can't lose Stella! We can't!
And yet. And yet. Her primary loyalty was to Johnny— and Johnny wanted to leave them and leave the circus.
Mario called, "I want to work on Parrish's big trick—the double pirouette return after the triple. Okay?" Tommy lowered himself to catching position again.
The vertical pirouette was considered by many flyers to be the most difficult of trapeze maneuvers. The flyer spun

around in a vertical position, thus making it imperative to create his own momentum, in a different direction from the horizontal momentum of the swinging trapeze. Tommy himself had never mastered even a single pirouette; the double one was about as difficult a maneuver as possible, and apart from its difficulty, it held its own serious danger. Because of the uneven stress in returning to the bar, the slightest deviation in angle could tear out a flyer's shoulder muscles. But what could he do? The triple regained, Mario had to go on to new challenges. Tommy couldn't stop him—and he faced the fact that he didn't want to.
The triple went off perfectly, but on the pirouette return, Mario spun upright once, half around again, miscalculated, and the returning trapeze caught him above the bridge of his nose. He let out a stifled cry of pain and fell, rolling over by sheer automatic reflex, and Tommy saw in dismay that his nose had begun bleeding again. He came down beside Mario, but when he put out a hand to help him, Mario shook his head.
"It's okay. I know what I did wrong. I want to try it again while I've still got in my head what I didn't do."
"Your nose is bleeding again. You better go and get it stopped," Tommy said.
"You fuss worse than Lucia," Mario said irritably. "Go ahead, I need to try it just once more. Not the triple again, okay—just the pirouette return."
He actually did it three more times before he managed to correct for the spin, and when he finally managed it, he was frowning. "It still doesn't look right. Just doing it isn't enough —I have to get it looking right," he said. He sat on the edge of the net, then noticed Angelo in the doorway.
"I thought it was Bart that came in," he said to Tommy.
"Yeah, me too. The kids are in the change room, getting dressed," Tommy told him.
Mario wrinkled his nose, then put a hand to it with a grimace. "Ouch. I forgot I still have a lesson to give. Stel, will you bring me some ice so I won't be bleeding all through the damn lesson?"
"No shoes on the floor, Clay," Tommy called, watching the youngster walk across the polished floor.

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Clay made a face. "You're worse than Lucia. What is this, a parlor?"
The four boys came to the foot of the rigging. Watching

Mario put ice on his face, they were full of concerned questions.
"It's all in the day's work," Mario said, shrugging it off;. "You get used to it. Phil and Clay, let's have you up first."
Tommy went toward the catch trap to coach Phil from below. Angelo, standing at one end of the practice room, smoking a cigarette, watched all through the lesson. Tommy wondered what Angelo was up to. Was he simply trying to let them know he had his eye on them? Later, while the two sets of boys were changing places, he said to Mario in an undertone, "What the hell, does he think he'll catch us giving the kids a feel, or something?"
Mario started to laugh, but it didn't quite come off. "As far as I'm concerned, he can watch till he's cross-eyed," he said. "Hell, he taught me himself to keep my personal life off the rig."
As Tommy went back to his coaching, he wondered if it was possible for Angelo to really believe that, after knowing them for so many years. He had said that short of having them arrested, there was nothing Angelo could do. Now Angelo was trying, it seemed, to show them how difficult he could make it for them if he chose; and if this began to get on Mario's nerves ...
Damn it, Tommy thought between rage and despair, he was just beginning to get back in shape, and Angelo has to pull this! He realized that he would take distinct pleasure in breaking Angelo's neck.
The day before the flight to Dallas, Bart Reeder telephoned. Mario had gone to the dentist to have the permanent filling put into his tooth, so it was Tommy who spoke with him.
"Hello, Bart, what's happening?"
"Shooting starts this week on the Parrish movie—I wish they'd release a title for it!—and I may be a bit tied up. When they're actually filming, it's early and alone to bed, and up at five for makeup at the studio." His voice took on the exaggerated effeminacy which Tommy now knew was a private joke between them, a parody of something Bart was not and would never be. "I just didn't want you to think I didn't love you anymore, darling."
Tommy chuckled, but did not respond in kind. Bart had all the privacy he needed, but the Santelli telephone was cen-

trally located in the hall. "Don't worry about that, pal. But we've had some trouble here. Family trouble."
"Hell," Bart said, "what happened?"
"I can't very well talk about it over the phone."
"Somebody listening?"
"No. But somebody could walk in at any minute."
The older man's voice was kindly, sympathetic. "Want to come over and talk about it?"
"I don't think I can. We're flying to Dallas about noon tomorrow, with Johnny and Stella, for a television show there."
"Your trouble wasn't with them, was it?"

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"No." It was such a temptation to tell Bart all about it, knowing he would understand. "No, they're okay. What happened—well, Angelo saw something, or thought he did. I could have talked him into thinking it wasn't anything, only I was fed up with lying to him. So I told him to think what he wanted to, and in the-end I—I more or less admitted it to him."
Bart gave a low whistle of dismay. "Was that why Matt was wearing a black eye when I came over for my lesson?"
"Good God, no," Tommy said. "He did that on the bar."
For the first time he realized it could have been worse. In the Army, Tommy had met a couple of morally self-righteous types who believed the very existence of a physically intact homosexual to be a challenge to their own manhood. Angelo had boasted that a homosexual who had once made advances to him had been beaten. Tommy couldn't understand that, either; was a man Angelo's size afraid of physical force? At least Angelo had not felt compelled to demonstrate his moral distaste by beating them.
"He said that was what happened," Bart said, "only I have to admit I didn't believe him. I thought probably you and he had gotten into some kind of donnybrook again."
"No. We won't do that again. But look, Bart, I'd rather tell you all this stuff when I don't have to worry about somebody walking in and hearing my end—you mind?"
"Right you are," said Bart, all business again. "I called up to ask if you and Matt would have dinner with me tonight. Wally Mason—the director—wants to see you both in his office tonight, to sign for the doubling on the movie. He wants to get a look at you both, see how much of a problem it's going to be to make you up as the Parrish brothers, and all

that. He'll probably call you this afternoon. Will that be all right with you?"
"Sure. Matt should be back from the dentist soon."
"We're shooting at the studio tomorrow. Next week the second crew goes on location at Starr's winter quarters. They want to get as much circus footage as they can before the show opens in Madison Square Garden. And they'll probably want a lot of flying footage. So you people have to sign contracts, join the union and Actor's Equity and all that stuff— you are union men, aren't you?"
"I've been in AGVA since I was a kid," Tommy said, "and Angelo had me join the stuntmen's union when I started working this winter. I don't know about Matt—you'll have to ask him."
"Well, you can settle all that with Mason, and he can answer all your questions, and I'd like to take you both to dinner afterward." Tommy could imagine Bart's grin when he added, "Safety in numbers, and all that. And they can take my picture for the newspapers and be damned to them—I mean, hell, it can get into all the papers, and we have a good, solid business reason for it. star of circus film dines with real circus stars—that kind of thing. So I can take you out on the town, right under their goddamn noses!"
"Fine. We'll be there."

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Wally Mason was a fat, unimpressive little man with a thick Brooklyn accent. It was hard for Tommy to believe that he was a director of international renown. Bart Reeder was there, too, and Jim Fortunati, who was the technical adviser for the aerial scenes of the movie.
"The contract is for the Flying Santellis," Jim told them. "How many people is that, Matt?"
"Three right now, Jim. Tommy and me and Stella."
"Good. Parrish always worked with three-—him, his brother, and Eileen Leeds. After Eileen got killed, it was him and Reggie and Cleo. Stella will make up all right as either Eileen or Cleo in long shots—they both had red hair."
"Stella will be tickled pink, playing Cleo," Tommy said, remembering Stella's childish admiration of the woman.
Jim laughed. "Cleo will be tickled, too; she thinks Stella is marvelous."
Mario said, "I'll have to remember to tell her that. Who's playing Cleo in the movie?"

"Jessica Anderson," Mason said. "We wanted Louise Lanart, but she's too tall."
Jim smiled in a friendly way at Bart and said, "Too bad. But even when Cleo was a young girl, there was no romantic interest between her and Barney, and she had to make that clear to the script writer before she'd sign the rights to use her name. I know you'd like to have your wife for your leading lady, Bart, but I guess it just didn't work out. Of course Miss Lanart is too young to play Eileen Leeds—she was ten years older than Barney."
"Well, of course, in the movie we play that way, way down," said Mason. "It's hard to make that kind of thing look romantic. How did Parrish come to marry a broad forty years old when he was thirty, anyhow? Was it just because she was a circus star, too?"
"No," Fortunati said, "he was crazy about her. He never got over it, after she was killed. It may sound funny, but it was a real love match."
Bart said courteously, "That's all right. Louise is a professional. She understands how the breaks run in this business." But his smile was gently ironic, and he met Tommy's eyes for a moment.
"You'll notice, Mr. Gardner," Wally Mason said, "that this contract gives the studio exclusive right to your services, and first call on your time, till the show opens May first in Madison Square Garden, with a provision for extra time at the Garden after the circus is actually running. Do you know that's where Parrish had his accident?"
Mario shook his head. "I was just a little kid then. Everyplace was the same to me."
"Anyhow, we can arrange it so there's no conflict," Fortunati said. "Notice, you'll get a screen credit."
Tommy looked over Mario's shoulder at the line Jim pointed to: "Screen credit to read, Flying sequences performed by the Flying Santellis."
"Jim got that for you," Mason said good-naturedly. "I thought it was enough to say, Circus scenes performed with the cooperation of the Starr Circus."
Mario said, "Thanks, Jim. You advise me to sign this one the way it is, then?"

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Mason's good-natured voice was suddenly stiff. "You are perfectly free to have your own legal advisor, or a contract lawyer, go over it before you sign, Mr. Gardner. It is

our standard contract for all stunt doubles not paid by the day."
"Look, I'm not arguing. It's just that Papa told me never to sign anything without reading it," Mario said with a diffident grin, scanning the lines. "You put in this list of tricks, Jim?"
"That's right," Mason said. "I don't know a flying trapeze from a flying saucer. That's what I need a technical advisor for. I just told him to be sure he got somebody who could do that special Parrish trick, the triple whatever-it-was."
Fortunati met Mario's eyes in a grin. "Triple back somersault, double pirouette return," he said, "and if you can't do them back to back we'll fake them."
"I can do that okay," Mario said, and quickly scanned the rest of the contract, reading it aloud for a moment.
" 'A repertory of performance as specified by the technical advisor, to include the triple back somersault with double pirouette return, the back and forward double somersault, the flying pass in midair, and such other exhibitions as shall be mutually agreed upon' . . . okay, okay. . . ." He glanced at the top of the contract. " 'Matthew Gardner, also known as Mario Santelli, and the individual and several members of his troupe, including but not limited to, Thomas LeRoy Zane, also known as Tommy Santelli, performing respectively as aerial leaper and catcher in the aerial trapeze flying-return act known as the Flying Santellis' . . . Okay, Jim, I'll sign Give me a pen. Tom, you have to sign this, too," he added, scribbling Matthew Gardner and under it, Mario Santelli, Tommy took the pen and carefully wrote Thomas LeRoy Zane and Tommy Santelli in the indicated spaces. The last time he had signed a contract he had been young enough to need his father's countersignature, and to write Jr. after his own name.
"And now," Bart said, "we'll go out and celebrate."
It was Tommy's first taste of elaborate nightlife. He knew it gave Bart a certain amount of pleasure to go with them to one or two of the best-known Hollywood nightclubs, and he knew it would please Lucia to see their photographs later in the papers. Tipped off by the studio, newspaper reporters clustered around to photograph them, celebrating the making of what was later to be called the greatest circus film of the century. Tommy wondered if all the glamorous movie-star stories in newspapers and fan magazines were as contrived

and truthless as this one. He decided, when a well-known starlet was photographed sitting on his lap, that they probably were.
Later, driving back in Bart's car, Bart said, "And yet, you know, I can't really figure out how the world got in this kind of shape. Where we have to fake everything that way." He spoke with such vehemence that Tommy wondered if he was drunk, though Bart had, as always, drunk very sparingly.

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Mario said, "I suppose the kind of people who spend a lot of time and money at the movies need a certain amount of romantic slush. Tommy, you don't mind being photographed with what's-her-name, Karen Andrews, in your lap, do you?"
"Heck, if Karen doesn't mind, why should I mind?"
"But I mind," Bart said savagely. "I'd like to see a world where I could have my picture taken, say, with Tommy on my lap if I want to. For every woman who got upset because I wasn't, shall we say, available for her romantic daydreams, there'd be some young kid reading the papers and going to movies, and he'd be able to stop hating himself and say, 'Okay, Bart Reeder is queer, and he's happy and successful, and he's getting along okay, so maybe I don't have to go out and hang myself after all.' And the suicide rate would go down, and everybody would be happy. Why should I have to make out like I have a big romantic interest in some dumb broad like Louise Lanart?" He spoke the name with loathing. "Now, don't get me wrong. Judy's a good kid. I like her a lot, and she doesn't want to sleep with me any more than I want to sleep with her. I've got nothing, nothing at all, against Judy Cohen. It's Louise Lanart I can't stand. But why should she have to act like we have a big romantic thing going? Why can't she live alone and admit she never found a man—or, for that matter, a woman— who could turn her on? I happen to know she's tried that, too, when she found out she couldn't get wound up even in a big romantic idol like me!" His voice was bitter beyond tears. "For that matter, why in hell should she have to be Louise Lanart instead of Judith Cohen? We fought a whole goddamn war to make a world where Judith Cohen could call herself Judith Cohen, and still the studio didn't want her to sound Jewish. When will we get rid of all that crap?"
Mario smiled bitterly. "About the same time we get one

of those interplanetary empires in one of my science fiction magazines. Johnny thinks we'll have a man on the moon before the end of the century. I don't, but I bet when they do, they don't hire any goddamn queers to go out in their spaceships."
Later, when they had picked up Tommy's car and were driving, alone, back to the Santelli house, Mario said, in a low almost as bitter as Bart's, "Now do you see why some of the boys like to go to those bars you hate so much? At least there you don't get your picture taken with a starlet in your lap."
Tommy said, "Hell, it's just show business." The smell of the girl's face powder was still on his skin, and it roused another unpleasant memory. But he had become a realist. "Well, anyway, when Angelo sees that in the papers, he's going to get it through his thick head that at least we're not going to go around wearing labels pasted on our foreheads saying I AM A QUEER, KICK ME."
"Oh, Christ, Tom, you're as bad as Angelo is, sometimes! Can't you see what a filthy fake it is?"
Tommy reached for his hand. He said, "Sure I can, fella. But what do you want me to do about it? I didn't make the world the way it is. Hell, I'm not the one believes in a God who's going to send me to hell because I like sleeping

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with men. But we tried it their way, splitting up, and that didn't work so good, either. So what are we going to do? I don't mind doing a little lying, if"—for the first time his voice faltered—"if it lets us stay together without all kinds of trouble."
Mario's fingers squeezed tight on his hand. "Anyway, we've got that," he said.

CHAPTER 14

the plane that took them to Dallas was a four-engined Boeing Constellation. Tommy's only previous experience of flying had been an Army transport, herded into narrow metal seats With a thousand other servicemen to Germany and back again, crowded, uncomfortable, and airsick. He found the contrast welcome and pleasant. Mario had never

been on a plane before, and though he tried to conceal it, he was almost as excited as Suzy. Tommy good-naturedly yielded him the window seat—there was nothing to see anyhow—and tried to fall asleep.
After a long time, Suzy, in the seat behind them, grew tired of Stella's lap and began to fret and complain. Mario turned his head and asked, "Want me to take her for a while, Stel? How about it, Suzy, want to sit on Babbo's lap for a while?"
"Oh, would you, Matt? She's so heavy, and my legs are going to sleep," Stella said. "I think what she really wants is a nap."
The stewardess came and said, "You can lay her in an empty seat, if you want to, Mrs. Gardner."
They put Suzy down, covered with a blanket, and Mario said, "Why don't we change seats? I'll sit back here with Johnny—he wanted to talk about the contract."
"Yeah, I'd really like to know how you wangled a screen credit out of Wally Mason. From what I know of the guy, that takes some doing," Johnny said.
Stella slid into the seat beside Tommy. "You've been on an airplane before?"
"Only in the Army. And that wasn't what you'd call going first-class. No stewardesses running around with free drinks and good meals and waiting on you hand and foot. Just a couple of sergeants handing out box lunches, and a medical orderly making with seasick pills. This is great, though. How do you like it?"
"It's interesting for a change, but I don't think I'd like it all the time. The noise hurts my ears, and really there's nothing to see. I'm not surprised Suzy is fussing. Johnny says someday people will hop on a plane the way we used to travel around by train with the show. But I don't think so. I think people would rather see the country. We're going all the way to Texas, and not seeing anything at all, except clouds!"
"Well," said Tommy, "as I remember from driving across it a few times, there's not much to see anyhow, except tumbleweeds and cactus. And sky."
"But you have the fun of driving," Stella said shyly, "and in a good car you can drive fast. They have a lot of good roads, and there's not much traffic. When I had the MG, I really used to enjoy it."

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"Me too." It occurred to him that Stella would have enjoyed the rally he had driven with Bart. "How come you got rid of the MG, Stella? I liked it a lot better than that Cadillac you and Johnny have."
"We had to sell it when I went to the hospital that time," she said, "and when we could afford a car again, Johnny wanted one that looked more impressive. Television producers, and people like that, they sort of judge you by what kind of car you drive."
"An MG is impressive," Tommy said, but she shook her head.
"Impressive in the wrong way. More—oh, luxurious, sort of conventional."
"I see," Tommy said. "Matt and I are kind of arguing about that, too. With the money we get out of this movie thing, he wants a car that's easy to drive, and with his bad wrist he needs one. So he wants an automatic shift, and I told him I wouldn't have an automatic shift if they gave it to me wrapped up in a Lincoln Continental. I like to drive a car. So I'm thinking of trading my Chrysler in on something for him that he can drive, and picking up an MG, or a secondhand Fiat."
"If you do, will you let me drive it sometimes?"
"Sure," he said, laughing. "You let me drive yours, didn't you?"
She laughed back at him. "I wasn't hardly old enough to drive then. My license said I was nineteen, but I was nowhere near that old! I guess you and I are pretty near the same age, only back then I wouldn't have admitted it."
So, he thought, she had conceived and lost Johnny's child, and married Johnny, before she was fifteen years old. Somehow that seemed very sad to him.
She put her head back and closed her eyes. He had not noticed that she had begun to let her hair grow. She was wearing only a little makeup, her pale lips painted, her blonde eyebrows darkened carefully with pencil. After a time she got up to go to the ladies' room; he rose to let her edge past him. A sudden lurch of the plane jolted them both and they fell together into the seat. Tommy steadied her impersonally, his arms around her.
He had done this a thousand times on the flying rig, but now, with Stella warm and breathing and scented in his arms, it was suddenly not impersonal at all. Her face was against

his cheek, the whole length of her slight body in his arms, and a dozen images of Stella jolted through his mind. Stella bending beside him as she showed him the controls of the MG, Stella wet and laughing from the rain, Stella lying in his arms in her childish fuzzy bathrobe, Stella pale and shaken, holding him for comfort when Papa Tony died . . . Stella, Stella, Stella . . . Carefully, betraying nothing, he let her go.
Stella. The other alien child in the bewildering Santelli family, the frightened little girl he had held and comforted when Papa Tony shouted at her. He remembered the feel of her small grubby hand, with its bitten nails, in his own. . . He had always been so aware of her.
He shook his head slightly, settling in his seat again. He shut his eyes and tried to rationalize what was happening to him. It was not unusual to find himself briefly, casually aroused by women. Vague memories of other women

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spun briefly in his mind, all the way back to the childish scuffling at the drive-in movie with Little Ann. That had certainly been sexual, perhaps the first conscious sexual awareness he had known from any woman, but there had been tenderness, too, surely. Only she was a kid, like me, and I always thought of Stel as an older woman.

And there had been women in the Army. But none of them had meant anything. What had he said to Mario? It didn't mean a damn thing. Just getting my rocks off. It might have meant more than that with Little Ann. It would certainly have meant more than that with Stella.

She came back. He noticed that she had carefully made up her face. He settled her courteously in the window seat, bracing himself so that he would not accidentally touch her again.

She knew. How did she know? Do women always know?

But in the old, abrupt, childish way, she had withdrawn again into silence. She shut her eyes and put her head against the seat back, and Tommy shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep, too. But his mind was running around and around like a squirrel in its cage.

The women didn't mean anything. Getting my rocks off, proving to myself that I could make it with women, that I didn't have to be queer unless I wanted to. Only I wanted to, He had long since made up his mind about that. He was homosexual, irrevocably so, and had decided that no woman

would ever mean anything to him again. Only, now, all the agonizing upheaval was with him again.

Oh, God, if it had only been Stella, how different it could all have been! He had never been aroused, had never allowed himself to be aroused, by a woman who could mean this much to him, a woman he could love . . . no, a woman he loved. He loved Stella. He now could admit to himself that he had loved her from the first moment he had held her, a sobbing child in a faded gym suit, in the Santelli practice room. He had never had a woman he cared about; he had carefully avoided any woman he could not despise and reject afterward.

Would I have wanted it to be different? Mario was not just a lover. Mario was his friend, his partner; their entire lives were bound together by a tie far deeper than the sexual sharing which, though important, was secondary to the deeper bond. Flying was his life, and flying, somehow, on the deepest level of all, was his love for Mario. Yet he was aching and tortured with the knowledge that he might have found someone like Stella. Or Stella herself . ..

She's not happy with Johnny. She never was. I don't think I ever saw her really look happy until the day Mario handed over Suzy to her. Maybe I could have made her happy. Anyhow, I wouldn't have screwed up her whole life the way Johnny did.

For a moment he felt a surge of hatred for Johnny, so great that he could hardly contain it. But then he was aware of something else.

I love Stel. I think I always did. But of all the women in the world, she's the only one I ever gave a damn about, and the only one I really can't have. She's my brother's wife.

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He was a Santelli. Even legally, now, that contract he had signed had made him one, but he had been one all along. He had reaffirmed that bond when he found Mario and brought him home. And Johnny was his brother, and Stella was his brother's wife, and it was just as simple as that

Just as simple as that, and that isn't simple at all.

He faced the knowledge, new and old and irrevocable, that he loved Stella, that he had always loved her and would love her as long as they both lived, and that he would never have her. He was a man, not a greedy kid.

He and Mario belonged together; they had made themselves into something greater than the sum of their two parts.

No woman could possibly have given either of them that. Flyer and catcher, linked by a thousand bonds of habit, shared work, failure, and success.

We're the two halves of one thing. They had been hardly more than boys when they exchanged that pledge and sealed it with everything they had to give one another— their hearts, their bodies, their minds. Mario was the very center of his heart. At the edge of sleep, he thought, All I am that is good, I am so because he made me so. His honor is mine, and I bear it undimmed like a torch. . . , Lover and youth would rather suffer death than act dishonorably in one another's sight....

And suddenly he jarred awake again. Angelo, he thought, Angelo wouldn't think this was half bad, my getting shook up over Stella. He might even have some goddamn notion that it would make me normal or something. All he could think about was to get Johnny and Stel married, even after they screwed up each other's lives that way. It came out all right, but Angelo didn't know it would—he just wanted to get everything all straight again. Nice and normal.

He'd probably be sympathetic as hell if he knew I was in love with Stel.

But that's not what honorable behavior is all about. ...

He loved Stella. And she was his brother's wife, and the face of honor demanded that she should never know or be troubled by his new knowledge.

Suddenly he was not sleepy at all. Through his half-closed eyelids, he watched Stella, her hair shining in the sun, sleeping.

He was filled with tenderness for her. He loved her, but he would never disturb her by telling her so. He would never touch her, never have her; someday he would forget that he had known this hour when all of him, body and mind and heart, cried out for her and wept for what could never be. He wanted her to be happy, he wanted her to be peaceful and content, he wanted to touch her on the flying rig and know that her body would be the same steady, controlled partner it had always been, with no guilty awareness to make either of them self-conscious. It would take time. But for now he was torn, crying inside, wanting her, convulsed with rebellion.

It could all have been so different. . . .

He had to touch her somehow. Just this once. After a moment he reached out and slipped his hand into hers.

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Sleeping, she tightened her small hard fingers on his, and with a small, soft, trusting noise, she shifted her weight so that her head rested on his shoulder. He sat holding her like that, aching with the weight of his love, and feeling tears burning inside him. And yet with the whole weight of what he was, he knew that this too would pass, the pain and the rebellion, and that nothing would be left but the love, nothing left except to be what they were, Santellis, brother and sister, each bound elsewhere by honor and commitment which could never be lessened. Someday the pain would lessen; for now he could only endure the ache of loneliness and waiting.

Wouldn't you know, if I was going to fall in love with a woman, I'd fall in love with damn near the only woman in the world I couldn't have? And a small, wry, honest voice, deeper than his pain, remarked coldly something he would never remember or admit again even to himself: If I really wanted to fall in love with a woman, wouldn't I have fallen in love with somebody who wasn't the only one I couldn't honorably have?

But none of them were Stella, he argued in rebellion, and again, for the last time, the small voice remarked through the pain, Nevertheless . . . But it did not lessen the pain. Not at all.

The fierce dryness of the Dallas air reminded Tommy of his years with Lambeth. Stella took Suzy to the hotel's coffee shop for an early supper before tucking her in, and Johnny came through the connecting door into the room Tommy shared with Mario.

He sat down on one of the twin beds. "Look, Matt, it's great that you managed to get a screen credit for the Santellis. But there's something you said about it that worries me. Do you have that contract with you, Matt?"

"It's in my suitcase."

"Mind if I have a look at it? I wish you'd asked me to check it over before you signed it," Johnny said. "It isn't that I don't trust Jim Fortunati. But I've been around in that business—"

"Look, I read it before I signed it," Mario said edgily.

"All the fine print, huh? I never knew anybody read all the fine print except a contract lawyer. And me. I learned it when I couldn't afford a lawyer, back when I was just a

kid on my own, bumming around. After I got skinned a time or two, I learned to read all the legal double-talk, down to the last word." He was already flipping through the long typed sheets Mario had reluctantly handed over. "Yeah, here it is ... 'a repertory of performance as specified by the technical advisor, to include the triple back somersault with double pirouette return, the back and forward double som—' where's he get all this stuff? Mason wouldn't know a double somersault from a double bed! Probably picked it up from Jim Fortunati. Oh-oh, here it is. I was afraid of that." He read aloud: " 'To include doubling of falls and missed trick sequences as stipulated by the script.' Did you read that goddamn script, Matt?"

"Are you nuts?" Mario asked. "Stuntmen don't get to read scripts! I read through the list of tricks they wanted me to do, and since they started with the triple, I figured they couldn't get any harder than that. I figured I'd have to

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double a few falls, but what the hell, Jock, I learned the triple without using the mechanic—I took so many falls I could almost come down without a net and come up without breaking my neck. I'm awfully good at falling, kid."
Remembering Mario's fear of stunt work, Tommy frowned, troubled. But Johnny slammed his hand against the end of the bed.
"The longer I know you, Matt, the more I get the idea you shouldn't be allowed out without a keeper! That was how Simon Barry got hurt—doing that missed trick sequence in the first make of the Parrish movie! Did your friend Reeder even bother to warn you what the script calls for you to do in that missed trick sequence?"
Mario shook his head, and Johnny scowled and said, "Some friend! Oh, hell, I guess he thinks if you can do a triple you can probably do anything."
Mario demanded with growing apprehension, "Just what is that trick you're scared of, anyway?"
"The script specifies," Johnny said, "or did—and if it's Parrish's life story, still does—that you have to go for a triple, miss it, go to the net, hit the edge of the spreaders, and bounce out on the floor."
He spoke with a slow, angry deliberation, and the color drained from Mario's face. But it was Tommy who said, "Nobody alive could do that!"

"Right," Johnny said. "I tried to help them figure out a way to fake it. I'm still hashing it over in my mind from time to time, but no luck. If you'd taken me along to look over the contract, I would have had them put in that you don't do that one unless they can figure out a way to fake it without anybody getting hurt! Their script writer could damn well make his point some other way."
"I guess that's why we needed you to manage the act, Johnny," Mario said tonelessly. "I just don't think that way. I trusted Jim Fortunati."
"I still do," Tommy said. "He isn't going to let you get killed on any movie where he's the technical advisor." He was shocked and dismayed. Mario had found the courage to commit himself to do the stunt work for this movie, despite a lifetime fear—and now he discovered that he had been maneuvered into signing a contract to do sequences which had crippled another aerialist!
Mario said, "Lay off, Johnny. The stuntmen's union is going to have something to say about that. If it looks like we can't handle it, we yell for a union rep. We've got the right to have a union man right there on the set all the time, to make sure all the safety regulations are taken care of."
"You do that," Johnny said. "You yell for a union man, and you keep right on yelling until they listen. It's better to break your contract than to break your neck!"
He went back to his own room, and Mario sat holding the contract, looking pale and frightened. Finally Tommy asked, "Is this the trick where Parrish got crippled up, Matt?"
Mario went on staring at the floor. "No. It's what convinced him he was lucky. Look, you know how the triple was done the first time?"
"I heard it was done by accident. I never knew whether that was true, or something some publicity man cooked up."

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"Oh, it's true, all right. Gerard Might did it by accident —it was years before I was born, but Papa Tony knew him—and was so surprised he lived through it that he said he'd used up his lifetime's share of luck, and quit the circus and never went up on the rigging again. That was back when they were still calling the triple the salto mortale-—you know what that means?"
"Leap of death," Tommy said, remembering that Papa Tony had called it, for Mario, the leap of fate.

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"Well, this is what convinced Parrish that he was lucky. Cleo told me the story when I was a kid. The first time he really managed to get the three turns, he missed the catcher, hit the spreaders, bounced on the floor, and came up with nothing worse than a broken thumb. So he figured he was lucky, lucky enough to go for it and put it in his act regular—" Mario's voice trailed off. "I always thought I was lucky, too. Maybe I ought to find out, once and for all."
"Matt, you quit talking that way, damn it!"
"No, Tom, I'm serious. If Parrish could do it by accident and live through it, I ought to be able to figure out a way to do it on purpose. Not fake it, just do it. All I have to do is figure out how he managed to live through it, and do that."
"How the hell are you going to do that?" Tommy demanded, in a rage. "Hold a séance with a medium and call up his ghost and ask him?"
But Mario did not rise to the bait. "No, of course not. I just have to take all I've learned about falling, and put it all together."
"That's impossible," Tommy said, and Mario finally raised his head and smiled at him, a slow, strange smile that made Tommy's blood run cold.
"I got the word on that from Barney himself," he said. "Or didn't you realize, haven't you figured out that was him, that time, the little lame guy wanted to see me do a triple? He was right, Tom. Nothing's impossible. Not while there are damn fools like us, with open minds about breaking our necks."
"Matt, you are absolutely, completely, out-of-your-mind, fucking crazy!" Tommy exploded at him.
"Of course I am," Mario said matter-of-factly, still with that strange smile. "You've got to be a little crazy to. do a triple, anyhow. Lucky, kid, don't you know I killed Barney Parrish, just like I pulled the trigger on him myself? I worshipped him when I was a kid. And I killed him."
"Matt, what the hell-— You didn't even know he was dead till Reeder told us!"
"Oh, I know. But I killed him, just the same."
"You didn't even recognize the guy when you met him! You hadn't seen him since you were—what was it?—six, seven years old! What the hell!"
Mario clutched at Tommy's hands so hard it hurt. "Don't

you remember what Bart told us? He said, when Parrish shot himself, he had nothing on him but his British passport and a newspaper clipping about some young flyer who did the triple and had been smashed up. That was me, Tom—I was the only one doing triples on the road that year. Susan and I were talking about it in the hospital; some ghoul came in and did the sob-story bit, about

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how I would be crippled for life, would never fly again, might never walk again— Susan and I were laughing about that newspaper crap! But Barney Parrish must have seen it, and took it seriously. And he shot himself because he knew he was the one who got us all started doing the triple! And he couldn't live with that, and shot himself."

"Mario, how can you blame yourself—"

"How could he blame himself? But he did, and it was his life," Mario said, "and I never even knew. That's why I have to do this now. Because now people think of him as a failure, a suicide. Now I have a chance to do something for his memory. This movie's got to be made, Tom. I couldn't stand to see it put on the shelf again. I want to do it for Bart, of course. And for the Santellis. But mostly I want to do it for" —he swallowed hard—"for Barney Parrish. Because of what he was. And because he meant so much to me, when I was a little kid. It's because of him that I got where I am today. So I have to do this much for his memory, and if it means I have to take chances, then I just have to take chances, that's all. It's not like it was the first time in my life I ever risked breaking my neck!"

CHAPTER 15

for the first time in his life, Tommy was not glad to return to the Santelli house. This was the only settled home he had ever had; now, in a sense, it had been spoiled for him. He had the constant sensation that now they were watched, that every word he said, everything he did, was observed.

They had never worked harder. They consulted with Lucia about the details of the act which Barney Parrish and his brother had done, incorporating a few tricks now rare. Once Mario said wryly, "Randy Starr is missing a bet if he

doesn't call this act 'The Flying Santellis Present Barney Parrish'!"

They were all edgy. Stella seemed constantly on the verge of tears, and Mario was tense, touchy, demanding. One trick Parrish had made famous was never seen now: a double somersault with a half pirouette at the end, a dreadful routine which demanded that Mario should come off the trapeze like a cannonball, make two somersaults, then change directions at that speed, going from a horizontal into a vertical spin, coming out of his tucked-up ball into an upright sidewise motion. Tommy was terrified by it. The flyer came at the catcher unevenly, and it was almost impossible to catch him without undue strain on one shoulder or the other. No one since Parrish had ever done this trick in the ring.

"Give it up, Matt," he urged. "We're playing around with the same kind of thing that wrecked Jim's shoulder, and Parrish's."

But Mario was adamant. "Parrish did it. And that proves it can be done. And if it can be done, we can do it!"

Tommy thought, Yeah, he did it, and look -where it got him. But he did not say it aloud. Still, he wondered. Was he feeding a death wish in Mario? Did Mario want to end like Parrish, crippled, broken? Was his inner guilt pushing him to destruction?

Angelo did this to him. He was all right again for a while. Only now Angelo's after us all the time. Tommy knew that Angelo watched every move they

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made, and it made him self-conscious. Even when they were alone in their room, with the door locked, he was aware, unable to forget. When Mario touched him, he went tense, unyielding. Mario raged at him for this, but there was nothing he could do about it.

There's only a few weeks till we go on the road- with Starr's. On the road, out of here, it will be better.

Bart was already filming the first scenes of the movie. Mario had told the boys that they might come in every afternoon for a while, to wind up what they had accomplished that winter. By some unfortunate coincidence, Angelo was not working just now. Every afternoon, without fail, he came down and stood watching them from the doorway, chainsmoking, his eyes never leaving them.

One afternoon Mario's temper exploded. He walked over to Angelo and said, "Damn it, what happened to our old

house rules down here, that nobody watches unless he's invited?"

"Is there something going on down here that I shouldn't see?" Angelo asked.

Mario, burning with wrath, said, "Nothing. But put out that cigarette."

Angelo shrugged and put out the cigarette, but after, a time Tommy smelled smoke again and knew he had lighted another. Perhaps it was pure absentmindedness.

There was also something in the air, intangible, which made them feel sure he had dropped a word to Clay. The boy seemed defiant, and he refused to join Tommy and Mario unless his three young friends were there.

One afternoon, when they were all in the practice room, Tessa came running down the stairs, bursting in noisily and shouting, "Matt, you're wanted on the telephone—I think it's that man from the studio!"

By sheer luck, no one had been flying at the moment. Mario dived off the pedestal into the net, somersaulted down, and strode over to the girl. He loomed over her, glaring.

"Teresa Santelli," he demanded, "how old are you?"

"Thirteen," she said, hanging her head before his obvious wrath.

"And you grew up in a circus family, and you don't have sense enough— Look, Tess, let me spell it out to you in words of one syllable. You never, never, never yell at anybody on a flying rig. And the next time you pull a goddamn silly stunt like that down here, I'll—" He broke off, tightening his mouth, looking at Angelo standing in the doorway.

"You wouldn't dare do anything to me," she said insolently. "My papa wouldn't let you!"

"Maybe not. But I'll tell Lucia, and see what she has to say about it. Now, what the bloody hell did you come down here screeching about?"

She said shakily, near to tears now, "You're wanted on the telephone. Lucia sent me to tell you."

"Well, if we'd had an accident down here because of your damn yelling, it would have been a long time before that phone got answered, wouldn't it? Now you get out of here!"

She sidled toward Angelo and said, appealing to higher authority, "Papa . . ."

Angelo looked angry; it was hard to tell whether his anger

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was for Tessa or for Mario. He frowned at them both indiscriminately. "He's right, Tess. You mustn't yell at people when they're flying; it isn't safe. I thought you had more sense than that. You'd better go up to Lucia, and help her in the kitchen. But, Matt, I don't want you talking to my daughter that way. If you have anything to complain about, tell me and I'll deal with her."
Mario opened his mouth for an angry reply, and Tommy almost hoped for an explosion that would clear the air, but Angelo added, "You better go on up and answer the telephone, hadn't you? It might be something important. I'll handle things down here." He looked up at the platform, where Bobby was snapping the belt of the mechanic around his waist. He said, "Here, I'll hold the mechanic," and took the heavy wooden handles in his hands.
Tommy, coaching from the floor, called to Bobby, "Okay, go ahead—" and the youngster swung out, came off the bar, and dived at Phil, in the catch trap. He missed, and Angelo braced himself and stepped backward, slowing the boy's fall with the tightened ropes of the mechanic. The other boys laughed. Angelo let go the ropes and came toward the net, helping Bobby to unfasten the ropes on the leather harness.
"That's not very smart, coming down on your feet that way. Not even when you have a mechanic on. You've got to make it automatic to get over on your back, so you can't fall any other way," he said. Tommy, listening, thought, It sounds just like old times, when he was working with me. And the rest of us . . . Resentment mingled with a touch of the old affection and admiration.
"Clay," Angelo said, "go on up and show him how they teach you to fall in this family."
Clay scrambled up the ladder, took the fly bar in his hands, and swung out and upward. At the high point of his swing he somersaulted down toward the net, landing neatly on his back. He bounced to his feet, and Angelo said, "Nice —-you're learning fast." Then he motioned the other boys down, and by the time Tommy came close to them, he was explaining the art of falling.
"You land on your back if you possibly can. If not, you tuck up in a ball and tuck your head way down between your shoulders, like a turtle going into his shell, like this—" He bent his head down to demonstrate. "That way, the main

impact comes here." He slapped Bobby between the shoulders.
"Like in tumbling, you never let the head take any weight?"
"The back of the head can take weight," Angelo said. "The main thing is, never land on the front of your head. The neck is the weakest link in the whole spine." He put one hand on the boy's chin and pushed on his forehead with the other. "Land in the net on your face or your forehead, and your neck will go like a toothpick." He hesitated and added, "If you ever find out you're coming down on your face, break your fall with your hands. You'll get your wrists broken that way, but better your wrists than your neck. You shouldn't have to. But if you ever do, you have to be able to do it."
Mario had come to the doorway. Standing there in amazement, he had listened to Angelo's speech. "That's how I broke this wrist of mine, the first time. But Angelo's right— it would have been my neck otherwise. Thanks,

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Angelo. Well, have things come to a nice screeching halt down here? How come you're all on the floor?"
"Lecture on falling," Angelo said. "Hope you don't mind."
Mario laughed and shook his head. "No. A good half of your flying practice is falling practice. You ought to know, you watched me doing it often enough. Anyhow, that's it for today, kids, and no lesson tomorrow, or day after; Tom and I have to be down in Anaheim." When the boys had gone to change, he added, "That was Mason on the phone. He wants us tomorrow at six for makeup."
"And they're getting flying footage for the movie? What are you going to do? The triple, of course. What else?" Angelo asked.
"You've seen us working on the double-and-pirouette?"
"That one is murder. I don't think anybody's done it since Barney got smashed up," Angelo said. "Joe wanted to do it, and Papa Tony wouldn't let him. I hate to see you trying it, kid."
Mario said dryly, "I didn't know it mattered to you."
"Damn it, ragazzo," Angelo exploded, "you think I want you to break your neck?" He made an abortive movement toward Mario, as if to touch him, then stiffened and drew back.
"There's no movie in the world worth that, kid. Lucia's

got enough trouble without you getting yourself killed, too." He turned and went out of the practice room without another word.
The makeup men had set up a trailer on the grounds of the Starr winter quarters. After a long session Stella emerged with her hair dyed as red as Tommy's, and Mario with his bleached to an uneven sandy color. Tommy felt strange and clumsy in the old-fashioned costume, and finally realized what it reminded him of: the old picture of the Flying Santellis, with Lucia and Joe and Cleo and Mario's father. Mario was unrecognizable; neither himself, nor, quite, like the pictures of Barney Parrish.
Stella was twitching the clumsy-looking belt of the costume.
"Did women ever manage to fly in these bloomer things?"
Mari said good-naturedly, "You've seen enough pictures of Lucia doing it in that kind of outfit."
Jim Fortunati came toward them as they went into the Big Top. "Santellis, ready? Good Lord, I don't think your own mother would know you, Matt. You look great!"
Mario quirked up an eyebrow, and all at once Tommy could see the real Mario through the makeup. " 'Great' is not the word I'd use, Jim, but suit yourself. How long before they need us?"
"Few minutes. Right now they're getting some shots of Reeder with the audience—they brought down a load of extras all done up in nineteen twenties costume." He gestured toward the bleacher seats inside the Big Top. It had been transformed into a circus of the twenties; even the audience had been transformed into a crowd of thirty years before. They waited outside the ropes that excluded everyone not actually on the improvised set. In center ring a fair-haired man in white and silver flying costume was waving to the

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audience while camera crews hauled enormous racks of klieg lights, placing them, shifting them, and replacing them.
Bart Reeder said behind them, "It's like time-travel."
Tommy turned, blinking. "I thought that was you, down in center ring—"
"No, no. That's Willy—my stand-in. There's three of us all done up like Parrish today," Bart said, laughing. He was wearing the identical twin of Mario's costume. His light

brown hair had been bleached blond, and his slim, muscular body was shown to its finest advantage in the silvered costume. For the first time, Tommy was aware of Reeder's tremendous prestige. Not Bart, his friend. Bart Reeder, the star of this movie.
Reeder said under his breath to Mario, "You look wonderful, Matt. If I had any narcissistic tendencies—making love to my own image is an entertaining idea."
Mario said in a low voice, "When I was a little kid, I had an awful crush on Barney Parrish. I couldn't take my eyes off him. You're not an awful lot like him, really—you're probably better looking than he was. But some way, in that outfit, you remind me of him. Maybe you move the way he did, or something. I look at you, and I see Barney walking toward me."
Bart said, "I move the way you taught me, kid. Maybe you picked it up from him. The things that really mean a lot to us when we're kids—" Abruptly he said aloud, the tender, intimate tone vanishing from his voice as if it had never been there, "Thank God for Willy down there. Ten minutes under those lights and I'm sweating like a pig." And Tommy saw that Mason, the director, was approaching them.
"Ready, Bart? I want you back on the set for just a few more shots. Then you'll be through for the day."
Mario followed Bart with his eyes and said, "I feel so damned presumptuous. Wearing Parrish's costume. Doing his tricks."
"The one time he saw you, he thought you were wonderful. If he's anywhere where he could know about it, I think he'd be proud of you. Think of it this way: you're showing people what he was like. People who never had a chance to see him."
A teenage girl with a clipboard came up to them.
"Ready on the set for the flying act."
As they went toward the entrance, Tommy heard Mason exhorting the crowd through a public-address system.
"Now, you people, just behave naturally, do what you'd do at a circus—applaud, talk, move around ..."
But it didn't feel to Tommy like a regular circus audience. And of course it wasn't; it was a group of Hollywood extras earning their pay, except for a group of children in wheelchairs down front—probably borrowed for the day from an

orphanage or school for the handicapped, to give them a treat and provide some normally reacting children for the audience. Probably not more than

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half of the audience had ever seen a regular circus, live. Even the applause had a slightly alien sound. Tommy felt the unfamiliar costume pulling at him in unexpected places, and he could not even tug at it, for the camera's eye might be on him. With a strange sense of detachment, he began climbing the web. He felt subtly wrong and disorganized. The sight of the flyers on the platform, in the unfamiliar silvery costumes, added to his sense of strangeness.

Come on, damn it, he admonished himself, it's just Mario and Stella in fancy costumes! He ran mentally through the routine. Straight cross-over, Stella. One-and-a-half, Mario, Midair pass. And that damned double-and-pirouette. At least I don't have to catch him on a triple today, but that one is bad enough. Later they're going to want a lot of spare flying footage to splice into Bart's scenes, ...

He heard, somewhere beyond awareness, the unfamiliar music of the antique steam calliope they had set up outside. Later, he supposed, they would put in some music specially written for the movie. Stella, on the platform, was reaching for the bar. He lowered himself, head down, gripping the padded supports of the catch trap with his hocks, and the discipline of years took over as he began to swing, timing his swing with Stella's.

Just like any other flying act.

And then the reflexes took over, which had nothing to do with conscious thought.

They went straight through the routine. After a break, they went through it again, for what the director called "protecting shots." Then they were told that the afternoon would be spent getting falls, and as much extra footage as possible, for such last-minute use as the director might determine or the film editors might want. At noon, lunch was brought to them on trays. Bart joined them, still in costume, tucking a towel carefully around his silvered top.

After a time Bart began to talk with Mario of people and events before Tommy had known them. Tommy, listening without saying anything, thought that a listener would have had no trouble making a guess about the two men. Not that they were obvious. They weren't. Is it just that I know them both so well, I can spot the overtones in what they say?

Takes one to know one, I guess. It had been some time since he had seen Mario free of the constant tension, relaxed, laughing; he could not bear to urge caution on him again, see bitterness replace the gaiety in Mario's eyes.

Bart was telling Mario about the filming being done at the main studio. "They have a rig set up on one of the sound stages, a fake rig about eight feet high, platform and fly bar, and a catch trap set up about the same height. We do all our work on that, and by the time they get through editing and splicing, they tell me, everybody out front's going to swear I climbed up there"—he gestured at the one in center ring—"and dived right off into a triple. I feel like a fake, knowing they're going to put my face on that!"

Mario said, laughing, "Maybe you and I together would make a fair imitation of Parrish, at that. Takes two of us to make one of him, though."

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"I don't know," Bart demurred. "Granted, I never saw Parrish when I was old enough to know what I was seeing. But from what people say, you're not such a bad imitation after all."
"Believe me," Mario said quietly, "if you'd seen Parrish fly, you'd know the difference."
"I wish I had, then. Anyhow, Mason wanted to get some pictures of me swinging, up there"—he pointed—"and the producer's representative rushed out and shouted—" He imitated a high, accented squeal: " 'Hey, what's the metter witya? Don'tya know dis guy's face, we got it insured for a hundred t'ousand dollars! Whatya t'ink we got da stuntmen here for—'"
Mario threw back his head and laughed. "How does it make you feel, darling, to know your beautiful face is worth so much?"
Bart said, with an affected gesture, "Really, it makes me feel just too precious for words ... I mean, it's nice to be loved, but this is ridiculous!"
Mario gave him a warning look.
"Watch it, Bart."
"Was I getting a little too—"
"Much too," Mario said in an undertone.
"Sorry. I keep forgetting. I don't usually do that."
Tommy, who had listened to this interchange in silence, suddenly realized that all three of them had forgotten Stella.

Did she know what was happening, or would it pass over her head as the eccentricity of actors? Then he saw her faint, withdrawn smile.
She's wise. Well, hell, she knocked around with a corny when she was a kid. She can't be all that innocent, either. And she must have heard Johnny call Reeder the biggest fag in Hollywood. This means she knows about Matt, too.
And irrationally he was disturbed. He wanted to protect Stella, to shield her from this knowledge. The girl with the clipboard came up to them again.
"Mr. Reeder, on the set, please. Mr. Santelli—" She looked hesitantly from Tommy to Mario and finally decided on Mario. "They want some shots of you two doing the same thing, on the same area." She added to Tommy and Stella, "They're going to want you two later, with Miss Benson and Mr. Haynes."
A makeup man came and fussed over Bart, adjusting his hair, flicking over the corners of his mouth with a makeup brush, sponging a shiny highlight from his nose, fastidiously dusting invisible crumbs from his vest. Bart suffered these attentions with a sardonic grin, then watched the makeup man repeat them on Mario.
Stella watched them go, smiling.
After a minute she said, "They're old friends, aren't they, Tommy?"
"Yes, I guess they met each other when Matt was just a teenager."
"Were they—" Stella broke off, her face under the unfamiliar red hair looking a little troubled. "I don't know how to say this. You know what I mean, don't you?"
In her gentle voice there was not a hint of condemnation, but Tommy lowered his eyes. Finally he muttered, "I guess maybe."

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So Stella knew. At the same time, Tommy was relieved—that, knowing, she did not reject either of them— and disturbed. He faced the knowledge that he had not wanted Stella to think of him that way.
"You know about that, Stel? And you—you don't care?"
"Why should I care?" she asked, opening her eyes very wide. "You're about the best friend I ever had, Tommy. I always felt we were kind of alike, you and me. We were both sort of—sort of lost in the family, different. It's like

you were really my brother, only I never had a brother—or a sister, either. I never had anybody."
"You had me, Stel. Always," he said, covering her small band, so that it almost disappeared within his own.
"I think I kind of fell for Johnny, right at first, because he was the first decent guy I ever met. He wasn't acting decent just to try and con me into—into bed with him. He brought me to his house, treated me like one of the family, like I was a respectable girl, like Liss or Barbie—"
"You were a respectable girl," he said fiercely. "You always were, Stella!"
"I tried. Only I was so young when Dad died, and I had to fight all the time, and when Johnny brought me home, and I was—was part of the family— Oh, I can't begin to tell you what that meant to me! They were all so good to me."
"Stella," he said gently, "you were pretty good for all of us, too. You're the best woman flyer they ever had in the family since Lucia."
"I hope so. I wanted to be," she said. "Only you were more—more like my kind of people. You came from outside, too. Seeing the way they took you in, I could—could believe that maybe someday I'd be part of them. Like that. And do you think I can't see—can't see what it is you see in Mario?" she said, fumbling. "Mario is so special. Oh, I don't know how to say this without you getting the wrong idea. Don't get me wrong—I love Johnny, he's my husband. But what I feel for you is something different, something special, and what I feel for Mario—he's something, something—oh, God, I don't know how to say this without you getting the wrong idea! It's more than love. I—how can I say this?—I adore him. So I guess," she said, swallowing hard, "that I can understand what he is to you. More than anybody else in the world could ever be."
He was still holding her hand; he squeezed it, tight, not knowing what to say. Her hands were flyer's hands like his own, thin and bony and dried with resin. With her hands in his he could forget the bizarre makeup and know only that she was his Stella, his own Stella, more his own than if he had been able to tell her of his love in any conventional way.
"Yeah," he said in a whisper, "I guess you do understand, don't you, Stel?" And he added, in so low a whisper that she

could hear it or not as she chose, "I love you, too, Stella," and knew it was the only way he could ever say it or ever would.
Before long they came to photograph Stella for the long shots, and back shots, on and off the flying rig, with the actresses who were playing Eileen Leeds and Cleo Fortunati. From a distance there was a real resemblance between Bart

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and Mario; they were nearly the same height, and both men had the build and the walk of athletes or dancers. With Mario's hair bleached, it was possible, at a quick look, to mistake one for the other, and when the movie was shown, Tommy would at times be uncertain whether any given shot was Mario or Bart. It would never be possible to mistake the slight, boyish Stella for either of the rounded, bosomy young actresses, except in the most distant shots.
Later she came back, rubbing her eyes.
"What's the matter, Stella?" Tommy asked.
"The lights up there hurt my eyes. And they feel like I got something in them."
Bart said, troubled, "You have to learn not to look at the lights, Mrs. Gardner—may I call you Stella? I'll talk to Wally Mason about having them repositioned for this afternoon's shots. You should have mentioned it sooner."
"I didn't know they could be moved. I'm used to the lights in the top of the tent, but these are so much brighter. I keep seeing them even now, like spots—"
"I'll talk to the director. Next time, speak up if something's bothering you," Bart admonished, and went off to find Mason.
Finally Jim Fortunati came up and said, "Go up and see if the lights are okay now, Stella. You too, Tommy."
Crews of men were hauling the various bars of lights around; long before they were finished repositioning them, Mason was irritably demanding to get started again. "Isn't that all right yet, Miss Santelli?"
"I—I guess so," Stella said doubtfully.
"Okay, let's get on with it!" he called.
"We need some falls," Fortunati said. "Spare footage, protecting shots. A lot of them, so we can pick the ones that look best."
Mario laughed. "The way to get that," he said, "is to have Tommy and me work on the triple. Just work on it, the way

we do at home; I still get it only about two times out of three. If we get a good one you can use it, and you'll get lots and lots of falls."
"Sounds okay to me," Fortunati said. "Okay, just carry on for an hour or so, the way you would practicing, and we'll pick up all the falls you take."
Tommy said, "If Matt's going to be doing a lot of falling, I want that net loosened. A net as tight as the one we've been working with will bounce him right out on the floor."
"If we could get that, it would solve all our problems," Mason remarked.
Fortunati said, "Too loose a net and you won't get any realistic-looking falls at all. It just looks soggy. Anyhow, too loose a net and you get your hands and feet tangled in the mesh and you can get hurt that way. I like to work with a fairly tight net myself, in practice."
Tommy knew this was an old wrangle; each aerialist had his own preferences, and most performances were compromised. Mario said, "I can handle the tight net, Jim."
"Not as tight as that one, Matt. You get the riggers to loosen it some, or I'm not going up there, and that's that!"

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He stood waiting for Mario's exploding rage, and prepared to stand firm against it, but Mario looked at him with raised eyebrows for a minute, thoughtfully. Then he said, "You heard him, Jim. Have them loosen up the net some."

Tommy scrambled up to supervise the riggers. After a time he came down and said, "Okay, Matt, check that one."

Mario hauled himself up into the net and checked it by bouncing up and down in it. "Oog," he said, "waist deep."

Mason shook his head. "That won't do," he said. "We need some shots of you flyers falling into it, strung up the same way it was when you came down this morning."

It was another hour before a suitable compromise could be reached between Mason's desire for a tight net that would give dramatic bounces and falls, and one loose enough that Tommy would allow Mario to attempt repeated triples with the inevitable falls. At one point Mason got angry and demanded, "What kind of troublemaker are you? Fortunati told me you people were easy to work with—"

"Listen," Tommy said, climbing down out of the net and facing him, "Matt's not a professional stuntman. I am, and I know what we can handle. Call up a union representative and get him here on the set and ask him!" This was one of

the first things Angelo had told him: that if he doubted his ability to perform any dangerous stunt, he should insist on a union representative to negotiate a safe compromise.

"You union people, all you ever do is hold us up," Mason snarled.

Fortunati said, "Mario, I've seen you work with a net tighter than that."

"In performance, sure," Tommy said, "when he only tried the triple once, maybe a second try if he missed it. This is a rehearsal net, for ten, twenty tries."

Mario shrugged and suggested a compromise. "Look, I'll do it three times the way it is now, fixed for the show. I'll miss once, maybe twice. After that, we fix the net looser for the rest of the falls. Okay?"

Tommy still felt doubtful, but it seemed a reasonable compromise to him, too. It was perfectly true that during the years Mario had worked on the triple, perfecting it, he had learned to fall under any and all conditions. It was better to try it this way than for Mario to work up a nerve storm about it.

He was beginning to feel fatigued himself. The ordinary flying acts were brief; practice sessions could be extended, but not under this kind of pressure.

Mario climbed to the platform and signaled for the first triple.

Tommy began to work up his swing, lowering himself backward, timing himself to Mario's movements. There was complete silence. Mario came off his trapeze, spun over, again, again—before there was time to know it consciously, Tommy sensed that Mario had missed, was falling. For a moment he thought Mario would go past the net entirely and hit the spreader ropes, but at the last fraction of a second, he managed to roll into a tighter ball and skid down toward the center.

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Tommy hoped the cameramen had gotten that and that it was what they wanted. His own breathing was a little ragged. As long as he lived, he knew, as often as Mario missed a triple, he would never, never be able to take it for granted.

Stella was on the platform, her eyes covered with her hands. Hell, are her eyes still bothering her? Stella was so pliant, so used to taking orders, she might not speak up and yell bloody murder if something went wrong. Should he demand another halt? But he was eager to get this sequence over, too. He began to work up his swing again into perfect,

timed phase for the repeat triple. He knew Mario was off and swinging, spinning toward him. Then hands and wrists interlocked, the moment of near-unendurable strain just before the momentum of the trapeze took the worst of the weight. He could just see Mario's face, fuzzy and unfocused, beneath his own. Peripherally he was aware of the knife-edge of the flying bar, of something marginally wrong . . . Mario struck the bar with his head, square across the bridge of his nose, and fell like a stone. At the last minute—more by unconscious reflex than by design—he twisted, managed to land on his back in the net, and lay there motionless, blood gushing from his nose.

Mason was shouting, "Don't cut! Don't cut! Keep it rolling, get it all on film . . ."

Tommy said furiously, "Ghouls!" Mario lay motionless, and Tommy dived down beside him, his heart pounding.

Stella dropped the bar wrong. She never does that, never!

Jim Fortunati ran toward the net, looking scared. "Matt! Tommy, is he all right?"

"Knocked out," Tommy said. "Get some ammonia or something." With the handkerchief in his own belt he pressed firmly against the bleeding nose, pulling the unconscious man upright so the blood would not run down his throat and choke him. At the edge of his visual field he saw one of the cameras still running.

One of the men on the set handed up a glass tube. "Break it under his nose," he said, and Tommy snapped the vial, smelling the sharp sting of ammonia. It reminded him, disconcertingly, of the terrible fall he had taken in the practice room. Mario stirred and pushed it away. The front of the white and silver costume was a ghastly mess of splattered blood.

"I'm okay. What happened?"

"You smacked the bar with your face. Stella dropped it wrong."

"Yeah, poor kid, said she couldn't see what she was doing—" Mario muttered, automatically mopping at the blood.

"Put your head back," Tommy cautioned, pulling a spare handkerchief from Mario's belt and adding it to his own.

Mason came running up. "You okay, Mr. Santelli? You want a doctor?"

"I'm okay. But get me some ice, or something—"

"Go back by the Coke machine," Jim Fortunati said, and

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in a few minutes they brought a bucket of ice and some towels. Mario held it against his face until the bleeding slowed to an ooze.
"Somebody get me a washcloth, to get this stuff off—•"
"You're sure you're okay?" At Mario's repeated assurances, Mason said, "Okay, look, I want you to do one more thing, then. I want you to go up, just like that, with the blood all over your face and costume, and give me something, anything—doesn't matter, just so we get you like that, with the blood all over you."
Jim Fortunati said flatly, "Matt, you don't have to do it. If he wants a shot like that, he can get it tomorrow with fake blood. What are the makeup men for?"
But Mario started upright, his eyes gleaming, with the old devilish grin. "Hell, no, I'll give you your shot!"
Tommy protested, "No, Matt, you'll start bleeding again—"
"Quit fussing, Tom. I told you that a long time ago."
Mario stood up in the net and began to walk jauntily toward the aerial ladder. Tommy sat still, disbelieving, but finally, when it was apparent that Mario really meant to do it, he shook his head in dismay and climbed to the catch trap again. Mario climbed the ladder with his old flair, every movement so precise, so exhilarated that Tommy was baffled; even from here he could see that Mario was riding the crest of one of his sudden, manic, euphoric moments.
Dammit, that's when he does his best flying. But why now?
On the pedestal board he held up three fingers—the signal for a triple.
He's crazy. Did the bar knock all the sense out of him? Or is he so damn high he doesn't care what happens? Tommy shook his head angrily, but Mario repeated the signal, and without giving Tommy time to refuse, grasped the bar and swung out, working up into the extra height of the giant swing.
Tommy began his own swing. It was too late for anything else. To fail him now would be murder.
I've got to be there, to catch him just right, this time. The shape he's in, he doesn't know what he's doing!
Mario reached the height of his swing and spun off the bar. A split-second thought raced through Tommy's mind: Jim Fortunati figured it out once, that when the flyer comes off the bar he's traveling sixty miles an hour, a mile a minute . . . Tommy saw blood break again from Mario's nose.

Their hands and wrists meshed, blood briefly spattered him again, but Mario was swinging beneath him, securely held, smiling in fierce elation, ignoring the blood pouring down his face.
"You," Tommy said between his teeth as they swung, "are out of your goddamn mind!"
But against his will, Mario's elated smile reached him. This was the old Mario; ten years ago, Mario might have done something like this.
"Let me go, Lucky," Mario said. "I'm going straight to the net; Stel's having trouble with her eyes again. I don't think even Mason thinks he can get any more shooting done today."

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By the time they were all down, Stella's _ eyes were red, and she was blinking away tears that kept streaming from the reddened lids. Mario's face had to be cleaned, too, and the bleeding stopped again with ice. Tommy drove them home, but by the time they reached the Santelli house, Stella was frightened, shrunk into a corner of the seat, very pale.
"Tommy, I can't see. I can't see at all! I'm scared!"
"Easy. Easy, honey," Tommy said, and came around the car, picking her up in his arms. "Here, put your arms around my neck." He carried her up the steps. Over his shoulder, he said tersely to Mario, "Go call the doctor. Get him out here right away. Don't take any crap about bringing her in to the office."
He knelt beside her, holding her hands firmly in his own. She was crying, frightened.
"Tommy, I'm so scared! Am I going blind?"
"No, no," he soothed. "Just hold on. The doctor will be here in a little while."
Johnny, summoned from upstairs, asked a few quick, concerned questions. He gathered Stella in his arms, holding her close, soothing hermit's okay, babe, you'll be all right, it's just the lights," he reassured, and turned furiously on Mario.
"Don't you have brains enough to warn her about the lights? No, damn it, I guess you don't—your own eyes are damn near as bad as hers!" he stormed.
Mario's eyes were, red, too, now, and beginning to swell.
"Johnny, I didn't know—"
"It's not all that serious," Johnny said, kneeling at Stella's side, holding her. "A couple days' rest in bed and she'll be

all right. But you better have the doctor look at your eyes, too, Matt. And have him look at your nose."
"Yeah, feels like I cracked the bone this time. I'm not blaming Stel—she couldn't see what she was doing—but I can feel something grating inside there."
The doctor confirmed Johnny's diagnosis of overexposure to klieg lights. "They used to call it klieg eyes. You don't see it much anymore; most people know enough about it now never to look at the lights," he said. "Was this the first time you worked on a movie set, Mrs. Gardner? Somebody should have warned you." He prescribed eyedrops and a few days in bed with her eyes bandaged. He also confirmed that Mario's nose had been fractured, though not seriously, and packed it with cotton, an unpleasant process. When he had gone, after cautioning them both to come in for a checkup in a day or two, Johnny said that they should call the studio at once, and file a claim for the doctor's bill and for compensation for lost time.
"Anyhow," he added, looking down at Stella, who lay with her eyes bandaged on the couch, "this settles one thing. Settles it for good!"
"What's that, Johnny?"
"From now on—" Johnny broke off. Suzy had come into the room and clambered up on the couch where Stella lay. She had to be reassured, tucked up beside her.

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Stella lay smiling, cuddling the frightened child, insisting, "I'm all right, Punkin, I just got the lights in my eyes too bright. Like when you look at the sun. Which you shouldn't ever, ever do."
Johnny moved out into the hall, drawing Mario and Tommy with him, his mouth tight with determination. "From now on, Stella's not going on that damned lot again unless I'm right there to make sure she's okay! You know she won't speak up for herself! I knew I should have come along today!"
Mario laughed ruefully. His voice was thick and muffled through the layers of cotton packed into his nasal passages. "That's fine with me, Johnny. I told you we needed a manager."
"What you need," said Johnny angrily, "is a keeper! One of the little men in the white coats! Why anybody wants to fly is something I can't figure out!"

CHAPTER 16

the rest of the flying scenes were filmed, without incident, a few days later. Their work for the movie was completed, except for the scenes to be shot after the circus opened in Madison Square Garden.
Opening day was less than two weeks away. The first unit of the show was already traveling across country, to be there for final rehearsals in the Garden. One dress rehearsal would be held with the same audience of costumed extras of the Parrish period, with all the acts, for a few shows, authentically recostumed and recreated from the days when Barney Parrish had ruled the center ring.
Randy Starr came to the Santelli house to call on Lucia, and managed to persuade her to travel to New York to see her son open as the center-ring "Star of Starr's"—a position she herself had held for many years.
"I wish I knew Randy's secret," Mario said. "Lu hasn't been on the grounds of a circus for—good God—almost twenty years!"
Mario, Tommy, and Stella were to fly to New York the day before the show opened, for the filming of the final sequences. This would include the triple, against the background of the Garden, a final filming of their "Barney Parrish" act, and the "missed trick" sequences. Mario had been practicing falls again, from all angles, as assiduously as he had practiced the triple when he was a boy.
In his spare moments he worked with the boys, Clay's friends. When Tommy remonstrated, telling him he should save his energy, he said seriously, "No, it relaxes me, to work with the kids. Keeps me tuned up, makes me feel good."
But every night or two, he woke out of nightmare, thrashing around and crying out, and Tommy, knowing his nerves were at fever pitch, was desperately worried about him. Mario, fearless in ordinary flying, still held his almost superstitious terror of stunt work. Tommy had no such fear—he took it as calmly as Angelo—but he suffered with Mario over it. During the day Mario worked doggedly, never sparing himself, taking deliberate falls on the practice-room floor

which frightened even Tommy, but at night his strained nerves took their toll in the nightmares from which he waked screaming, clutching at Tommy.

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"Matt, why do you do it? Let them fake the damned thing or go without it!"
Mario said, sitting on the edge of the bed, smoking a cigarette, "Look, try to see it my way, Tommy. You reach a spot where you find you're just doing the same thing over and over. Nobody can teach you anything then, because you're already doing more than anybody else has done. I taught myself the triple because there wasn't anybody else who could teach me one. But I've got that now. I have to—to lick this one, too."
Tommy felt cold fingers at his throat, remembering what Papa Tony had said. Was this indeed Mario's salto mortals, the shape of his personal fate? He's way out in a lonely place, and nobody can reach him. Except you, maybe. But even while he wanted to beg Mario not to do this, to be content with what he had done, Tommy realized that this was precisely why he could reach Mario: because he knew enough to let Mario do what he had to do. He could order him around, he could take the initiative, in almost anything— but their reversal of roles went only so far. He was the anchorman for Mario; he could never follow him all the way into the unknown, he could only be there for Mario to reach back, when he needed to.
He said, "It kills me, to see you doing this to yourself," and then realized this was the one argument he could never use. Mario had indeed gone far out into that lonely place Papa Tony had mentioned, where no one could follow. It was within Tommy's power to call Mario back; he alone could do it. But at what cost, what unguessable cost to the thing which Mario had become? That had been Mario from the beginning—always reaching one step further into the unknown, demanding and challenging the limits of the possible —and Tommy could reach him only because Mario trusted that Tommy would always say, as he said now, "Okay, fella, it's your neck. I don't like it, but you know what you got to do."
This was the price of flying; he had known that from the beginning, but it had never seemed like that to him. It had never been a matter of courage—only of discipline, mastery, perfect knowledge of what he was doing. Now he faced not

only the price of flying, but the price he had been paying, all these years: an open mind not only about breaking his own neck, but about letting Mario break his, if he must.
Angelo had been right, after all. He had been too young to fly. Not too young to learn the tricks, but too young to fully understand the price. And now it was too late. Tommy realized that for many years, his real life had been flying. Everything else was just the mechanics of living, going through the motions until once again he climbed the rigging. Everything else in life was drab, colorless, but he no longer wondered what he would do if he chose not to fly. It was too late for that.
The only thing that scares me now is that someday I won't be able to fly. He was haunted, sometimes, by the memory of the little lame man watching Mario do the triple, and he knew now what had been in Barney Parrish's eyes, that haunted look.

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Now, as when they were first working on the midair pass together, it seemed that all the tension between them built and culminated, not to the moment when they moved into one another's arms at night, but to the moment when Mario flung himself from the trapeze into Tommy's waiting hands....
The worst thing was that Angelo continued to watch them, obsessively, standing near the practice-room door. Tommy asked one day, "Does he still think he's going to catch us making immoral advances to the kids, or something?"
"How the hell do I know what he thinks?" Mario asked. "He can watch till kingdom come, for all I care. Maybe, damn it, just maybe it'll remind him of what he used to believe in." He turned toward his own end of the rigging, but Tommy saw the sadness in his face.
It all came to a head one day when Mario had finished with the youngsters in the afternoon lesson. Clay had come late; Mario had promised that he would work with him separately afterward, that Carl and Bobby and Phil were a separate group and should rehearse separately. Tommy knew from this that Mario had begun to think of Clay as at least a future Santelli. He allowed Clay the same privileges that Tommy had been allowed in the last few weeks before he had appeared in public with them.
But this afternoon Clay came in late, and crossed the practice-room floor in his muddy sneakers, leaving tracks.

Not the first set of tracks, either. The floor was not maintained now as it had been in Papa Tony's day; it had probably not been sanded since the last year Papa Tony had been with them. Mario watched him, simmering, coming to a slow boil, but all he said when Clay joined them, wearing his gym shorts, was "What's the matter? All your tights in the wash, or something?"
"Lucia didn't get them dried."
Mario said caustically, "And of course you don't know how to take a pair of clothespins and hang anything on a line? It's a complicated maneuver far beyond your feeble brain?"
"Lay off, Matt," Clay said sullenly. "Does it matter? Lucia tells that story about old whoever-it-was losing his costume and doing his act in his red flannel long Johns. Why raise hell about my gym clothes?"
Mario swung around on Angelo and said, "And will you put out the damn cigarette?"
Angelo frowned and ground it out. "What's gotten into you today, Matt?"
"What the hell are you doing in here, anyway?"
Angelo shrugged. "Damned if I know," he said. "You want to make a scene and put me out?"
Mario turned away, raging. "Do what you damn please. Things sure are going to hell around here!" But by the time he reached the platform he was in his usual good humor again.
No matter what shape he's in, Tommy thought, climbing the ladder always does that to him.
He looked at Clay's sullen face. Mario must have looked much like this to Angelo when he was working on the triple —an intense, serious youngster,

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whiplash thin, dark hair hanging in loose curls over his forehead. Tommy arched his back, automatically pushing his own swing higher to compensate for the boy's shortened swing. He caught Clay's thin wrists, then flung him back to the bar. Later, sitting upright in his own trap, he listened to Mario, criticizing.

"But you're still not hanging on long enough, Clay. The trouble is, you don't really leap at all—you let Tommy pull up and scoop you off the bar. Try it again, and this time try to get off the bar under your own steam. You're supposed to leap off, not fall off."

"Yeah, but you're all the time telling me not to grab at the

catcher," Clay argued, taking the taped bar from Mario's hands.

Why the hell does Mario let him talk back that way? If I'd given him that kind of back talk, he'd have run me off!

"All right, wait a minute, wait—go!"

Clay went off the board. "Pull up, pull up," Mario called. "Point your feet—all right—now!" Clay tumbled toward Tommy. Again, judging the loom of the hurtling body, Tommy pushed forward slightly, and again his hands meshed around Clay's wrists.

"You're still hanging on too long. Tommy had to pull up for you. Tom, next time he does that, don't allow for him, just spill him," Mario called. "Now shift around—easy, easy—all right, let go—grab it!" As Tommy released Clay's wrists the boy reached for the bar, barely getting his fingertips on one edge of the trapeze, then dropped and sank toward the net. "Roll over," Mario and Tommy shouted together, and Clay, turning catlike in midair, bounced easily into the net.

Mario dived down beside him. On the floor, he said angrily, "Look, you hung on too long again—you did it coming and going!"

Clay regarded Mario with his chin thrust out. He said, "You dropped the bar too fast, didn't you, Matt?"

Tommy, sliding down the rope, nearly fell off in amazement. Mario's face darkened.

"I dropped the bar too fast?"

"What's the matter," Clay demanded, "you think you're perfect or something? Sure you dropped it too fast!"

Mario advanced on him, his face drawn, so menacing that Tommy knew that if Mario had ever looked like that at him, he would have turned tail and run. He said, "Clay, you know what's the matter with you? You've always got some alibi! If something goes wrong, it's Tommy's fault, or it's my fault. Never yours. There's no room in this family for that kind of stuff. You think you're pretty darn good, don't you?"

"Johnny didn't complain."

"You couldn't even go over to the catcher if Tommy wasn't correcting for all the damn stupid things you do!"

"Sure," said Clay with an insolent smile, "we all know Tommy can do no wrong around this place. Especially where you're concerned."

"At least at your age he knew enough not to talk back,"

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Mario said angrily. "If it was up to me, you wouldn't be flying at all!"
"Well," Clay said, still with that insolent smile, the childish smile that made Tommy itch to slap him across the mouth, "is it up to you?"
Mario opened his mouth and shut it again. He looked at Angelo, standing impassively beside the door, smoking. "Probably not. Go on, run along upstairs and get dressed."
"Mind if I get my shoes first?" Clay demanded.
Mario stalked into the change room, caught up Clay's muddy shoes, and, holding them at arm's length, handed them to the boy. "Don't wear them on the floor."
Clay said, "Oh, nuts! Fuss, fuss, fuss—you're turning into a regular old woman!" and sauntered out of the room.
Angelo went after him, and Tommy burst out, "Damn it, Matt, if I talked to you that way when I was Clay's age, you'd have knocked my block off!"
Mario stood hunched over, scowling. He said, looking bleakly around the littered change room, where the boys had tracked mud on the floor and left a heap of tangled tights and dirty towels, "Angelo's got me so damn self-conscious about the kids now. I'm scared of what he might have said to Clay, to make him think he can get away with talking that way to me."
Tommy, biting his lip, picked up Mario's sweater off the littered bench and draped it around Mario's shoulders. "Put it on. You're going to catch cold, standing around in your sweaty tights like this."
Mario exploded. "Now you start in ordering me around?"
Tommy turned his back on Mario. "Suit yourself," he said, and slammed the change-room door behind him. It didn't take two to make a fight when Mario was like this.
While he was in the shower, he heard Mario come up the stairs, pause at the door of the bathroom, and go on. There had been a time when he would have come in and joined Tommy in the shower. They hadn't done that for a long time. Not since Angelo had discovered them. He heard Mario go away, and when he returned to their room, Mario wasn't there. Tommy supposed he had gone into the other wing to use Lucia's bathroom.
Tommy had finished getting into clean jeans and a knitted shirt when Mario came back, wearing his old black slacks and sweater. He stood before the mirror combing his hair,

and Tommy noticed that the gray streaks had spread, were more noticeable.
"Let's go out for a walk, Lucky."
Tommy glanced at the window. "Isn't it raining?"
"Drizzling. I don't care. I don't guess we'll melt. And I don't feel like talking here."
Meeting his eyes, Tommy knew precisely how he felt. The house was stifling them. It was worse than that season with Lambeth, when they had had to sneak around, take idiotic risks, scheme to find twenty minutes free of interruption. Yet even the lies, the bitter brutal fights boiling up out of their tension and frustration, had been better than this. Even in their own room

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with the door locked, Tommy had that dreadful sense of being watched, spied on.

I did it. It's my fault. I could have conned Angelo into thinking he didn't see anything to worry about. I just got so goddamn sick of lying to him. With one giant stride he himself had cut Angelo's acceptance away, and he and Mario had to live with it, from now on.

They went out of the house, into the light rain. Mario sniffed. "Spring. Smells good. And in a couple of weeks—no, only about a week now—we'll be opening in the Garden."

"If we can hold out that long," Tommy muttered.

"Lucky—" He reached for Tommy's hand in the dusk, but Tommy pulled away.

"Matt, there was a time when you wouldn't compromise. Not to avoid trouble with Angelo. Not even for me. Remember—remember Lawton, Oklahoma, and—and everything there?"

Mario said softly, "You think I'm ever going to forget that?"

"Just the same, that same week, you bawled hell out of me, in front of every workhand on the lot, just for turning out ten minutes late for practice, and with my tights not mended. No matter what there was between us, you never went soft on me when it was a question of flying. But you let Clay sass you back because you're scared of what he might have heard from Angelo."

"I suppose you're right, Lucky. I shouldn't be easier on the kid than I was on you."

"That's not the point. It's that you'll compromise at all. We've got to get loose, find someplace where you're not going to be on the defensive all the time. I—" Tommy heard

his voice catch, stopped till he could steady it "It's not me. It's what it's doing to you."

Mario strode along in silence for a few minutes. Then he stopped and turned. The dampness made his hair cling in tight curls to his forehead.

"Look, Lucky. Remember when we decided we'd—we'd try to build it into our work, make ourselves so good together that they wouldn't want to split us up because they wouldn't want to spoil the thing we were together?"

Tommy said bitterly, "God, were we young and naive then! We actually thought we could do that!"

"No, damn it, we've done it. You had more nerve than me. You told Angelo—"

"I knew you'd throw that up to me someday!"

"Easy, easy. I'm not blaming—I just said, I never would have had the nerve. I knew all along you had more guts than I do. But I went along with it, and now we have two choices."

"Sure. Stay together, or let them break us up."

"No, Lucky," Mario said gently. "We haven't got that choice anymore. We tried it once. Apart, we're nowhere, nothing, we're a couple of nothing men. The choice we've got now is we keep hiding even from the people who love us—we pretend to be something we're not so they'll let us stay together—or else we stop running. We say, 'This is what we are, this is why we're the kind of team we are. Take it or leave it, and the hell with all of you!' "

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Briefly, their hands touched, then fell apart. They walked on, shoulder to shoulder.
This is what he meant. We're part of the same thing. And it all comes from the same place inside us. Not sex, but it comes from the same thing that makes sex work. What we are to each other.
Finally, as they turned into the iron gates that shut the house away from the street, Mario said, "I know how rough it is. But if we run away from Angelo—and he's a Santelli; he knows what we are and what we can do together—we're going to be running way for the rest of our lives. And we'll wind up running away from each other. Who can we face if we can't face Angelo?" And as Tommy nodded, Mario added, "And Clay. I'm through running way from that little punk."
Inside the hall, the good smell of cooking' reminded

Tommy of his first day here, of Papa Tony welcoming Mm.
You cannot be a stranger here or a guest. You must be part of us, a good obedient son and a younger brother . . . Only now he was not a younger brother anymore, but an older brother, not to be disciplined, but to discipline.
Mario said, "Wait here," and ran up the stairs. After a moment he came down again, something in his hands. "Come on down to the change room, Tommy."
Inside the change room, on the empty, dusty bulletin board, Mario fished out some thumbtacks from his pocket.
"What you got there, Mario?"
"Old Mario di Santalis made these rules," Mario said, tacking the faded page up on the bulletin board. Beneath it he tacked up the typewritten translation. "Lucia had them put away in her room."
Tommy read aloud, slowly, "The observance of discipline is the mark of the artiste. ..."
"Yeah," said Mario slowly, looking around the dirty, littered room that smelled of sweat and dirty tights, "things have been going to hell around here, and I've been afraid to stop them."
When dinner was over, Tommy headed for the stairs leading down to the old ballroom, intending to clean up the change room. But Mario came after him. "Come into the living room, Tom. We've all got things to talk over."
When Tommy followed him into the big room, he realized they were all there. Angelo, kneeling at the fireplace, was lighting a driftwood fire. Lucia called from the doorway, "Don't go upstairs yet, Clay. We want you in here."
"I got homework to do, Lucia."
"It can wait. This won't," Lucia said in that cheerful, brisk tone of command no one ever disobeyed. "In here, Clay."
There was a brief illusion, again, of the past, of Tommy's first day in this room. They had all been so young then! Stella was hemming a dress for Suzy, while Suzy herself had climbed into Mario's lap. Tommy took a seat on the stone hearth, near Stella's chair. Johnny sat across the room from them. Lucia came and sat in her hard straight chair, and for the first time Tommy

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wondered if its apparent upright austerity was simply necessary support for her bad back. She took some needlework out of a carpetbag. Costumes for

the season? No, it was pale pink. Something for Suzy, then, or Tessa.
Joe was sitting in the old armchair once reserved for Papa Tony. Sure. He's the head of the family now. Even looks like him. When Clay came in, Joe said, "Come here, young man," and pointed to the carpet in front of him. "Sit down."
Clay folded himself up at his father's feet. Peripherally Tommy noticed that he had changed the muddy sneakers for house shoes. He might defy Mario's rules about the floor in the practice room, but Lucia's carpets were another thing.
Joe asked, "Son, what's your name?"
"Huh?" Clay stared up at his father. He had, Tommy noticed, Mario's slanted, rakish eyebrows. "What do you mean, Dad?"
"I just asked. Do you happen to remember your full baptismal name?"
"Joseph," Clay said, frowning a little in surprise. "Joseph Antonio Santelli."
He gulped and after a minute said, "Sir."
"Something else. Did you forget?"
"Junior," he said, after a minute.
"Junior," Joe repeated. "Now look, Clay, there's one thing we've always done in this family. We learn where our place in it is. You've been learning to fly, huh?"
"You know that. Look, Dad, I—"
"I'm doing the talking, this time," Joe rapped, and the genial voice was suddenly formidable. "You've done yours already. I hear you've been giving Matt some back talk, some kind of argument about how to do some catch or other. Out of your great wisdom and experience, no doubt?"
Clay swung around angrily to Mario. "So you went and tattled on me, like Tessa would!"
Angelo straightened up from the fireplace, turned around, and said, "That'll be enough of that, Clay. Flying isn't a kids' game with kids' rules. You broke discipline, and got reported. You have to listen—"
"And you're not my father! I don't have to—"
Joe Santelli said curtly, "None of that, either, Clay. You flyers make the rules for each other, and you stick to them, or you stay on the ground. Understand?"
"I didn't—" Clay looked uneasily from his father to Mario. At last he said to his cousin, thrusting out his lip in childish defiance, "Heck, can't you take a joke?"

Mario shook his head. "Not about flying. Clay, you want to fly?"
The boy lowered his head and stood twisting his hands. Finally he said, gulping, "Yes. I do. Honest, I do, Matt. I'm sorry. I'll do what you fell me. I promise."
"You'd better," Mario said harshly, "because the next time you give me any back talk, you're out. Understand? Out. Tomorrow, you go downstairs, before

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school, and you clean up that ungodly mess you and your friends made in the change room. There's no reason Tom and Stella and I should have to work in that kind of clutter and junk. And something else. Before you go to bed tonight, you go down there and read the rules I put up on the bulletin board. Read them good. Because from now on, nobody goes in there unless they're going to stick to them, and if I catch anybody breaking them—wearing shoes on the floor, smoking in the practice room, going on the rigging without somebody there to watch—I am going to raise Cain. Understand me?"
Lucia said clearly, "Hear, hear."
Mario said, "That goes for you, too, Tessa. From now on, if you want to come in and watch, you ask first. Understand? And if you disturb anybody who's on the rigging, next time I'll spank you first and tell Lucia afterward." He set his jaw and added, "And that goes for you, too, Angelo. You're welcome to come in and watch any time you want to. But you kept the rules all your life. No reason you should get away with breaking them now, is there?"
"Good God," Johnny said, laughing, "what set you off all of a sudden, Matt? You trying to put the old Flying and Reform School back in session again?"
Lucia said, "He could do a lot worse."
Unexpectedly, Stella said, "I think he's right."
"You would!" Johnny said sarcastically.
Joe said, "Johnny, you started all this, didn't you, by letting Clay talk back and argue with you, by letting him break all the family training rules?"
Johnny set his mouth. "I run my act like a team. Always have. If Matt wants to play dictator on his, that's fine. He broke Tommy in like a tame cat—snap the whip and he jumps. But I don't train my boys by kicking them around. I don't maul 'em and manhandle 'em. I don't work that way."
"You don't train them, period," Angelo broke in. "You like to play with the kids—I saw the way you messed up

Matt when he was starting to teach that bunch of youngsters. You haven't got the patience or discipline to work with them, you never have, and you never will! So from now on, you keep out of it! Clay"—he turned on the boy—"you take orders from Matt, not Johnny, or you stay on the floor. The minute you step on the aerial ladder, you lose all your privileges as the spoiled brat of the family, and you take orders. No arguments."
Johnny said, "I still don't see why this is necessary."
"No," said Angelo heatedly, "You wouldn't. You were the spoiled brat of the family in your day, and you walked out because you couldn't take orders."
Johnny turned on him angrily. "Damn right! I got fed up with that stuff before I was sixteen years old! You're living in the past, all of you! Is it any wonder I want to get out of it all, get into some line of work where I won't have to take all that crap? You're all like fossils in a museum, and you don't even know it! You're all set to do it to Clay just the way you'd have done it to me if I'd let you! You never change!"
Lucia said, "You know nothing about it. Papa told me that when he was a little boy six years old, in the old country, Grandfather di Santalis balanced him on

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a wire and told him that if he fell off, he would be beaten. And, of course, he did, and he was. Papa never treated any of us like that."
Joe chuckled. "Papa never laid a finger on you, did he, Lucia? Sending you to bed without supper was the worst you ever got, you spoiled little prima donna, and then only for crying when you took a fall! But when I started ground training as an acrobat, I made my first back somersault with the teeth of a garden rake six inches behind where he told me to land. Man, was I careful!"
Johnny snapped, "That kind of brutality doesn't get you anywhere!"
Joe said, honestly puzzled, "Brutality?"
Almost at the same moment, Angelo said, "It got the Santellis star billing, Johnny. Including you." He looked at Clay and said, "Some kindness is just softness. Johnny isn't any good as a trainer because he forgets he wouldn't be any good without the rough training he got, and he thinks he can get the same results without it. Our family's business is danger. You live with it, and sometimes you die with it."

"Or worse," Lucia said, but under her breath, and Tommy wondered if anyone had heard her.
"There's no room for softness," Angelo said. "Papa was a tyrant to us, yes. Because he had to be."
Lucia said, "Johnny—you too, Clay—there is a kind of discipline that demands real love." She glanced around the big, crowded room. "It is so easy to be kind and soft, Clay. So easy, to kid an amateur along, and let him fool himself. But the closer we are to each other, the more we insist on honesty. That's why we almost never work with anyone outside the family. And why everyone in a family act has always had to be family. Like Stella," she said, with a loving glance at the girl, "and"—she hesitated—"and Tommy." Looking across the firelight at Tommy, she smiled, and suddenly she blinked. Tommy could see knowledge dawning in her eyes as she bracketed their names like that, for the first time. Stella. And Tommy. She turned over the flutter of pink in her lap, and for the first time in all the years he had known her, Tommy sensed that Lucia was faintly disconcerted. Then she took up a needle and said, "My eyes aren't up to this kind of thing anymore. Tommy, you've got good eyes—will you thread this for me?"
"Sure," Tommy said. Feeling his breath catch in his throat, he came and knelt at her feet, taking the needle and the length of pink thread from her.
Lucia continued quietly and without emphasis, "We don't give that kind of thing to outsiders, Clay. You get it because you're ours, and we love you. And it's that, the willingness _ to accept that kind of discipline, that sometimes makes an outsider one of us. And you know it, Johnny," she added, turning to her favorite son. "That's why Stella—or even Tommy—is more a member of the family than you are. You're an outsider, because you wanted to be!"
Johnny said, lowering his head, "Lu, that's a hell of a thing to say to me!"
"It's true, just the same," Angelo said. "Papa taught me, and Joe, and Lu, just the way he'd been taught. Not quite the same, maybe; maybe every father is a little easier on his kids than his father was on him. I know I'm not going to be

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as tough on Tessa as Lucia was on Liss. Times do change, but some things don't. I tried to teach Matt, when we were working on the triple, the same way Papa taught me. And I saw Matt teaching Tommy, just the same way. And

now"—he laid his hand on Clay's shoulder—"he's giving you the same kind of opportunity, the same kind of training. And you ought to get down on your knees and thank God for it."

Clay stood up and looked into Angelo's face. He said, still with that note of defiance in his voice, "You told me all about how Matt trained Tommy, Uncle Angelo. Remember?"

Tommy, kneeling on the rug before Lucia, handed the threaded needle back to her. He did not dare to move. That rotten spoiled brat, he thought. I could kill him. He's going to give Angelo a chance to bring it all out here, right in front of the whole family. Stella leaned forward, her mouth open. Tommy did not dare to turn in Mario's direction, but after a moment he felt Lucia's hand on his shoulder, firm and unyielding, lending him strength and reassurance. She just said I was family, and she meant it.

The silence seemed to stretch, endless, so that it seemed everyone in the room had had time to react to Clay's words.

Then Angelo drew a deep breath. He said, "Have you watched Matt and Tommy flying, Clay? Really watched them? That will tell you what that kind of discipline can do for you. Yeah, yeah, sure, I told you a couple of other things, too. I'm not taking back what I said, but that's got nothing to do with what I'm talking about, not a thing to do with it. Sometimes you have to judge things by results. Matt and Tommy make one hell of a team, flying. About the rest, I don't know, Clay; I'm not saying anything about that." He turned back to the fire, poking at the sticks of burning wood. "I'm saying, they're the Flying Santellis; they're better than they were when I was in the act. That's what a family tradition is, each generation being better than the one before, and if you stick with it, maybe you'll be even better than that, because you can build on it. Who knows? You have to judge things by results, Clay."

Tommy heard his breath go out. Papa Tony's words, repeated by Mario: I can't say I like it, I can't say I understand it, but . . . That all-important but. He had understood that it did not change what Mario was. Angelo, too, was willing to judge them by what they meant to the family, and the family tradition. He did not, he could not, approve of them personally. But he could accept that they were no less Santellis.

Lucia, breaking the tension, laughed and turned over the pink ruffles, thrusting in the needle and thread. "Joe," she said, "do you remember the time I stuck out my tongue at the audience behind Papa's back, and he turned around and saw me? You said he never laid a finger on me? That time, he shook me till my teeth rattled!"

For an hour or two after that it was like old times, with Joe and Lucia telling stories of the old days under canvas. Angelo contributed anecdotes of the Mexican circus he had managed for a while, and even Johnny told stories of his years knocking around in the strange, highly colorful, and disreputable

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world of the carnival midways. Later Suzy fell asleep on Stella's lap. Stella got up to carry her to bed; then she turned back for a moment.
"Please, everybody, don't go up yet," she said. "I've got something to say to you, once I put Suzy down."
After a moment Johnny sprang to his feet and hurried after her. "The kid's too heavy for Stel—I'd better carry her."
"Tessa," Lucia said, "you should be in bed, too. School tomorrow."
"Stella asked everybody to stay," Tessa said mutinously. "I'm a Santelli, too, aren't I, Aunt Lucia?"
Lucia rummaged in her sewing basket. "If you must stay, there is no reason to sit idle. Here—hem the skirt of your uniform, then."
Tessa thrust out her lip, sulking as she began pinning up the blue serge of her school uniform. "I hate this old uniform! Papa, can I take ballet lessons next summer? All the girls in the family have always studied ballet—Lucia, and Liss, and Barbara."
Angelo said, "You don't have to do things just because everybody in the family has always done them, kitten."
"It's a tradition," Tessa said, making a large clumsy stitch. "You just got through saying tradition is a good thing, Papa."
"What about it, Lucia, shall we let her study ballet?"
Lucia said tartly, "If I had been consulted, she would have begun at seven. It cannot do her harm, and it might be useful."
"In my gym class I learned a lot about tumbling," Tessa said, "and Sister Mary Veronica said I was a natural dancer."
"Well, of course!" Lucia said. "You are a Santelli."
Angelo chuckled and said, "Tradition wins out again. You

call the ballet school, kitten, and find out about hours and classes."
Lucia looked down severely at Tessa and took the blue serge from her hand. "And speaking of traditions, don't they teach you to sew properly in the convent anymore? If I had sewed a hem like that, even when I was seven years old, I would have had it ripped out, and had it to do over."
From outside in the hall, they could hear Johnny saying angrily, "For God's sake, Stel, won't you listen to me? This isn't a family matter; this is private. Can't we settle it between us?"
"No," Stella said, pushing the door open, "we can't. Johnny, we've tried and tried—we've been fighting over it for a month now. It's got to be a family thing." She moved away from him and went to the fireplace. She turned to face them all, and her voice was trembling. "I want to talk about— about this summer. The—the Flying Santellis have signed a contract with Starr's. And Starr's wants Johnny, too, to manage the aerial wing, whether or not he wants to fly with us—"
"I don't," Johnny said. "I told you and told you. I want to get out of flying. That's the past, and I'm looking at the future. When I was in Dallas, I got this offer from one of the big network people—he flew down just to see me. He wants me to produce a television show, steady. A series. The money's good, but we could settle down, raise our kid, forget about the circus—"

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"And that's not what I want," Stella said, her voice shaking. "I want to fly! It's center ring at Starr's—"
"Stella—babe," he said. "I told you. The circus is dead. This is where the future is."
Lucia said, "I do not believe that, Johnny. If you do not want to fly, what is wrong with going into management?"
"Nothing," he said. "It sounds like a great job. I had a lot of good ideas for it. I was thinking maybe we could even reform the old-style hayseed circus, make it a real modern show, bring it into the twentieth century. But I've got to think about myself, too. Ten years from now, people who get in on the ground floor of television, they're going to be on top of the world."
Joe asked, "What kind of show do they want you to produce, Johnny?"
"Some kind of game show," he said, "where people win

lots of money, big prizes, and the audience gets into the act. That kind of thing goes over real big."
Joe laughed scornfully. "You know what that reminds me of? A carny pitch. We got a hundred of them out at the park. Small-time ones. That's your ambition for the future —to be a big-time carny pitchman instead of a small-time one? Telling all the suckers on the midway to walk up, walk up, get rich quick?"
Johnny was so fair that he looked sunburned when he turned color. "Look, it's only a beginning. Sure, it's a crummy show, but I could go on to a better one."
"I'm not so sure," Angelo said. "You make your reputation in television doing that kind of carny-pitch crap, and I bet you'll get stuck doing it."
"That's what I keep telling him," Stella said vehemently. "We are the Flying Santellis! I don't want him to be anything less than that! And now he's got a chance to be more. He could manage the whole show someday!"
"Stel, Stel, I just want to move into a different field—"
"And what am I supposed to be doing when you are doing this?" she flared at him. "I am one of the Flying Santellis, center ring—"
"Babe, you don't have to do anything! We're not in the old country now—I don't have to put my wife to work to bring home the bacon! Don't you think Suzy deserves a full-time mother? Matt can get other flyers for the act—they don't need you!"
"Now, wait a minute," Mario said. "We open in the Garden in center ring. We've got a contract! What the hell do you mean, we don't need her? Sure, there's other flyers, but they're not Stella, they're not Santellis! It's going to be years before Clay—"
"Look, I know you have to finish the movie work. But afterward—"
"Afterward, I'm going right on and finish the season with the Flying Santellis!" she insisted. "All my life I've worked for this, dreamed about it! Don't I have a right to success, too? And we could both have it, with me in center ring and you managing the entire show. I know you want to get out of flying, I know you want to get into management. After all, you never were that much of a flyer—"

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"My God, Stella!" He stared at her, betrayed, ashen. "How can you talk to me this way? You never did before!"

"No," she said, her voice shaking. "Maybe I should have. A long time ago."
He swung around to face Mario. "This is your doing! You've got her so hopped up on flying, so obsessed— My God," he said again, "my own brother, and you could do this to me!"
Mario's voice was muted. "Stella's got the right to make up her own mind what she wants to do."
"But she's my wife! It's up to me to decide for us, isn't it? Or do you want me to hand her over to you?"
"Johnny, oh, Johnny, please—" Stella was crying now, noiselessly, the tears running down her face, but Johnny ignored her, turning fiercely to Lucia.
"Damn it, you had to do this, too, didn't you? Flying has destroyed every marriage in this family, hasn't it, starting with yours? You and my father, Angelo and Teresa, Liss and David came close to breaking up over it, Matt and Susan —you won't be content until this one is on the rocks, either, will you, you meddling old—" His broke off, but it seemed as if the unspoken word would choke him. There was -a moment of shocked silence in the room, and then it seemed to Tommy that everyone was talking at once. Mario's voice emerged first from the clamor.
"No, Johnny. It wasn't flying broke us up. That was the one thing Susan and I did have going for us. I never should have married her. Or anybody. And you know it as well as I do."
Angelo sighed and looked down at Tessa. "If I'd listened," he said, "really listened, when Terry told me how much flying meant to her, she could have been alive today. Johnny, you are going to do to Stella what David did to Liss—what we all did?"
"I just want my wife to stay with me, with my career," Johnny said angrily. "I want loyalty! Is that too much to ask? At least you had the decency, when you saw it was breaking up Liss and David, to tell her what the right thing was to do, that her first loyalty was to him! Have that much decency, at least—tell Stella that her duty is to me!"
"It's too late for Liss," Lucia said, and she, too, was deathly white. "I should have stood by her. I should have known. Oh, Stella—" She made a strange, stifled little movement. "Stay with it, make up your own mind. Don't let him talk you out of doing what you know you have to do. Leave

him if you have to, but make up your own mind. Don't let anybody else make it up for you. Not me. Not Johnny. Do what you want to, Stel. What you want to. Not what somebody else thinks you ought to do. I couldn't say it to Liss. But before it's too late, I'm saying it to you, Stel. It's not too late for you!"
She put her hands over her face and shrank into her chair. For the first time in her life, she looked old, old and broken. Tessa, frightened, put her arm around her, and Lucia bent, burying her face in Tessa's dark hair, her shoulders shaking.
Betrayed, Johnny stared from Lucia's hidden face to Mario.

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"So that's all loyalty means to you," he said in a whisper. "Loyalty to the goddamned act! Signor Mario . . . he's the star, so now it has to be what Matt wants, all the way, huh? But I couldn't believe you'd do this to me, Matt," he said. "I couldn't believe it, just to get a partner for the goddamn act! It isn't enough that you got the star spot, that you got my mother turned against me, you had to have—" He broke off, clenching his fists. "You had to have my wife, too, didn't you? You even gave her the one thing I couldn't—you gave her a kid."

"Johnny, that's not fair," Stella said. Her face was swamped with tears, but she made no effort to check them or wipe them away. "You could have given me yours, Johnny. That was what I wanted, then."

"Stella. Stella, baby," he said, and his face crumpled. But she stood like a stone.

"What else have we got, Johnny? Only the family, only— only being a Santelli. You wanted me to fly. That meant more than anything else to you then, more than—more than our baby. So I made myself want that, too. To be a Santelli, to be one of the Flying Santellis. And now I am, and that means more to me than anything else in the world!"

It was as if they were alone in the room.

"Why do you think I stayed with you? The family, it was all I had, all -we had! And now you want to walk out on all that, for some cheap, crummy television show? Well, go right ahead," she flung at him, "but go without me! Lucia said you were an outsider, that you didn't belong! Well, I do, Johnny! The family, that's what means more to me than anything, and now even you can't take me out of it! I'm a flyer,

Johnny! I'm a Santelli! You can be anything you want to! But that's what I am, and what I want to be—a Flying Santelli!"

She covered her face with her hands then, and sobbed.

Johnny said, "Stella, Stella." He turned her around so that her face was against his shoulder. "Stella. Babe." He had to stop. His voice would not carry. Finally he said, "Okay, Stel. Anything you want, baby. What I wanted—it was for you, believe it or not, only I guess I didn't know how to get it across. But what I want, more than any of that, is for you, and me—and the kid—to stick together."

He raised his eyes and stared at them all over Stella's bent head. Her arms went around him, without another word, and they clung together. He said, and Tommy heard the desperate bravado in his voice, "Hell, I'm a Santelli, too!"

CHAPTER 17

As always, it seemed that there was not nearly enough time for everything that had to be done. And also, as usual, they learned, at the edge of departure, that everything had been done, and that they even had time on their hands to become restless.

This time there was no final family performance in the practice room. Johnny had to leave with the first section of the Starr Circus, traveling across country

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with the circus train. Stella and Suzy elected to travel with him. Mario and Tommy would fly to New York two days before opening night.
"He says nothing ever changes," Mario said to Tommy as they were packing their costumes, "but he's changed plenty."
"He hasn't changed this," Tommy said, folding away one of the green-and-gold satin flying cloaks. They would open at the Garden wearing the movie costumes, the silver-and-white costumes identical with those Barney Parrish and his act had worn, and continue to wear them for the remainder of the Madison Square Garden engagement, but on the road with the circus they would return to the Santelli green and gold.

"You know," he said, "I never liked green and gold all that much, either."
Mario laughed. "As a matter of fact, neither did I," he said, "but it was just part of the Santelli tradition. Trust Johnny to change it if it can be changed any way at all, though! If he can't change it, it can't be changed!"
Lucia and Angelo drove them to the airport. She gave Mario a hearty hug and kiss, and after a moment stood on tiptoe and kissed Tommy, too. She said softly, "I wish—oh, how I wish Papa had lived to see the two of you. He would have been so proud, so happy!"
Angelo said generously, "You said it, Lucia. We haven't had anything like them in the family for twenty years. I was never in that class, or any of us."
Mario, exuberant, flung his arms around Angelo in the old careless way. Angelo smiled a little stiffly, but he didn't return the gesture, and after an awkward moment Mario let his arms drop. Tommy realized that as flyers, he could accept them. But that was all. Well, that ought to be enough.
Only it wasn't enough for Mario. Settled in their seats on the plane, he said, despondent, "Damn it, Tommy, Angelo brought me up! Can you blame me?"
"Who's blaming anybody?" Tommy leaned back in his seat. After a moment he said quietly, "I can't take your falls for you, Matt. There's just one way you could have Angelo back on the old terms. You said we can't break up. But if we did, Angelo would be just like always to you, within a week—until you got yourself another boy. He ain't low enough to say, choose between Tommy and the family, and anyhow, he knows Lucia wouldn't listen if he did. And he'd go away like Judas and hang himself before he'd say, choose between Tommy and me. Now that he knows what it was..."
Angelo's jealous. But he can't ever admit It, not even to himself, or it would wreck him inside. Everything he is. And now I've got what Angelo used to have, and didn't know he wanted, till he lost it. Angelo had had that, and could have had it for always....
Mario looked around the aisle of the plane. People were noisily coming and going, and no one was paying the slightest attention to them. "You don't mean that Angelo—"
"No, no. I don't mean that. You said it yourself—with Angelo it's all unconscious, and if you ever brought it up to

the surface you'd wreck him. I don't meant that. I just mean, Angelo's saying, you can be queer, or you can be our good boy and we'll all love you. Not both."

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Mario suddenly laughed, fastening his seat belt. "What you're saying is, we made our bed and we'll have to lie in it."
"Well," Tommy said softly, "I can remember a time when we'd have been glad to settle for that."
Three days later a cab dropped Tommy and Mario in front of Madison Square Garden, which was plastered with circus posters. From a little distance they looked like the ones Tommy had seen when he was a child, but on closer inspection, Tommy could see that they were only a clever imitation. The colors were brighter, the drawing better, more sophisticated. Johnny had said that the old circus was dead, and in a sense he had been right. If its modern incarnation was to survive in a world of cold war, atom bombs, and television, they would have to change.
But some things would never change. . . . Tommy knew that in a special sense, their whole lives would be a compromise between what could not be changed and what must be changed. And some changes—such as a change in society, which would let them be, openly, what they both were— would come too late. In a sense, for them, it was already too late; their lives had been shaped by the need for secrecy, the struggle against compromise. Twenty years later Tommy would look at young men who had been able to grow up in an atmosphere of permissiveness, able to accept what they were from childhood, and feel only scorn for how easy life had been made for them, without the need for the discipline of strength and secrecy.
Inside, girls from the aerial ballet were clustered together, drinking coffee out of paper cups from a machine and talking in high-pitched voices. Fragments of conversation reached their ears, conversation which would have told them immediately where they were.
". . . so he told me there were going to be six talent scouts from Broadway shows here the first night looking for chorus girls ..."
". . . fell straight off and hit the wire sideways and cut a slash an inch deep on her ribs ..."
". . . shot out of a cannon? I told him, 'What do you

think I am, anyhow?' So he said, 'Honey, as long as you're in my act. ..' "
". . . exploded a flashbulb in Dino's eyes just as he let go the knife, and the next thing I knew there was blood all down the front of my blouse, and the whole audience was goggling, and I just said, cool as you please, 'Finish your act, ragazzo . . .' "
"... I don't care, I won't ride an elephant in the spec. It gives me asthma, and I've got a doctor's certificate to prove it..."
A couple of the women turned their heads to watch them cross the lobby, and Tommy heard it among the murmured conversations: "Santellis : . . the new Parrish movie." There was even a whispered "Isn't the redhead handsome?" but he was used to that, too, and knew that sooner or later among the rumors there would be another whisper: "Don't waste your time on that one." The girls in the aerial ballet and the show girls always knew everything.
A man in overalls crossed the lobby in a rush, with a rabbit under one arm and a bucket of paint under the other. In the very middle of the lobby a man

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on a folding chair was checking a seemingly endless list on a sheet of paper three feet long. A very fat man was screwing the mouthpiece into some kind of horn.
Beyond three sets of wide swinging doors, a confusion of noises came: repeated blasts on a whistle, random toots as if an orchestra were tuning, someone with a marked French accent counting in a monotonous voice, "Wan, du, wan, du, allez-hop!" And from somewhere the shrill sound, like no other on earth, of an elephant trumpeting.
The rings had been laid out, and in what would be center ring, a flying rig was being set up. Johnny, identifiable even at this distance with his fair hair and dark glasses, was standing at the foot of the rig, hands in his pockets, head tilted back, and shouting, "Not like that, you jerk! Damn it, you want me to come up and do it myself? Don't think I couldn't, either!"
Tommy laughed, and Mario said, "Yeah, some things don't change. You want to find the Santellis, just listen for somebody yelling."
"And there was a time when he sneered at the notion that you were going to be a new edition of Papa Tony right off the

old plates," Tommy said, and they went toward the foot of the rig.
Johnny turned around before they got there, giving them a brief nod of acknowledgment.
Mario nodded in return. "Where's Stella?"
"Hotel. She got a sitter for Suzy," Johnny said.
"Listen," Mario said abruptly, "I want you to adopt Suzy. Legally, that is."
Johnny blinked. He said, "Stel wants to, I know. But why is that necessary? Why not keep the courts out of it?"
"Because," Mario said, with a glance at the flying rig, "if anything happens to me, Lucia's too old to manage."
"Sure, fella. Anything you want. But Center Ring, right before a show, isn't the time or the place for discussing that kind of stuff. Listen, Matt, we'll all be having dinner with Lucia—she did get in to town all right, didn't she?"
"Sure, at our hotel."
"Good. We'll discuss it then. Jim Fortunati's back with the movie people, and he's been hunting you all morning. Go back there and protect the Santelli reputation for being on time, okay, while I find a man who can tighten up a couple of screws without me standing over him! We've only got about—what is it?—eighteen hours to opening, and my wire act isn't here yet. They were supposed to be flying in from Rome—they're probably marooned out at Idlewild or somewhere."
Leaving Johnny to his fretting and hassling they went out the big bay doors. In the enormous back of the building, on the second floor, one of the rooms had been set up as an office marked Shalimar films, inc. Wally Mason, the director, was there with assorted cameramen, advisors, and everything else for a crew on location. Jim Fortunati was there, too, and talking to him was a thickset, familiar form; for a moment Tommy thought his eyes must be playing tricks on him.

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Angelo! What the hell is he doing here? Tommy's jaw tightened. Is he still spying on us? Three thousand miles from home? But it was Mario who put the question:
"What the hell are you doing here?"
"In case you didn't know," Angelo said, "I'm an officer of the union. I'm here to look out for your interests."
Tommy said, in no friendly tone, "I thought Broadman was our union rep."

"Broadman thinks a catcher is something that pays for the Dodgers," Angelo said. "I bumped him off the job for incompetence."
"The hell you did!" Mario exploded. "You just couldn't let anyone—"
Tommy raised a hand in warning. "Hey, hold it!" Mario turned his back abruptly on Angelo, pasted on his best professional smile, and went off to say hello to Jim and the movie crew. When they had dragged Mario off for a conference with the stand-in, Jim Fortunati drew Tommy aside.
"What's going on? I don't want to butt in, Tom, but, damn it, kid, I can't imagine this happening in the Santellis. Tonio would never have brought his act here in this shape. What's wrong? Is it just nerves? I know what Matt's nerves are like. I wouldn't blame him, with that damned missed trick hanging over his head. But Angelo? He's usually completely calm —the soul of patience. Always has been. What's eating him now?"
Carefully, Tommy said, "As you can see, Matt and Angelo aren't—aren't on the best of terms these days. It's never been quite the same since Angelo quit the act. But it'll blow over before we get to work."
Fortunati gave an expressive shrug. "It better," he said, and went away.
Dinner was an ordeal. They went to a place in Greenwich Village called Mamma Vestri's, a well-known restaurant run by an old friend of Lucia's from thirty years before. Mario had wanted to talk about Suzy, but the noise and explosive camaraderie of the place made serious conversation impossible. The billowy gray-haired woman who ran the place had once been a circus star herself—it seemed impossible, when you looked at her—and she hovered over them, especially Lucia, and had to be brought up to date on every grandchild and third cousin. Tommy, squeezed into a corner beside Mario, could feel Angelo's eyes on them, and was almost afraid to move.
In God's name, does he think we'll hold hands in public, or something, embarrass Lucia in a place like this?
That night he woke out of a fitful sleep, hearing Mario cry out. Instantly Tommy was across the narrow space between their beds and at his side. Mario was sitting bolt upright, staring straight before him. Tommy spoke to him, but he seemed not to hear, striking out with his hands as if

thrusting them out in the last-minute gesture to ward off a neck-snapping blow.
"No," he whispered, a shattered, ragged sound, "no, I can't—"
Tommy shook him hard, and he blinked and came all the way awake. Tommy knew better than to ask about the nightmare; those nightmares were all too familiar to them both by now. But he feared this one might be a storm

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warning for another fit of acute depression settling down on Mario, and he couldn't afford that. Not now.

"Get me a cigarette, Lucky," Mario said with a long, expelled breath. Tommy rummaged in the night table for a pack and threw it at him. On second thought, he came and sat on the edge of Mario's bed, lighted one for himself from the glowing tip of Mario's, and shoved an ashtray at him.

"Take the ashtray, damn it. Smoking in bed is how people get killed."

"That isn't the way either of us is going to get killed, and you know it as well as I do." In the pale light of a blue neon sign across the street from their window, Mario's smile was only a strained grimace. He dragged at the cigarette, the tip glowing and brightening, then fading, for a minute or two. Then he said into the darkness, "I dreamed I was on the rig. Not the one we've been using—the old forty-foot one we had with Lambeth. I was going for a triple, and somebody was using a slow-motion camera, and for some reason it made me move in slow motion. Like they were beaming it at me with a slow-motion ray or something."

It was dark, but Tommy could feel through the bedclothes his convulsive shudder. "And when I was close up—it took me forever to get around for all three turns, slow motion, like I said—I realized it wasn't you, or even Angelo, in the catch trap. It was Lucia, and I knew I couldn't grab at her like that. . . ." His voice trailed off into silence. "Hell, I can't imagine why it scared me so. But it did. It did."

Tommy leaned over him in the darkness, not knowing what to say. Hugging him close for a moment, he could feel that Mario was still trembling.

He shouldn't be in this kind of shape just now. Was it all that family stuff last night, or Angelo turning up? After a moment he let the hug move into another touch, a caress which over their years together had become an invitation.

But Mario only sighed, a deep sigh that seemed to be dragged up from the deepest part of him.

"That used to solve damn near everything when we were kids, didn't it?" The ragged tremor was gone from his voice. "We ought to get back to sleep, if we can. It's going to be a rough day." But when Tommy had clambered back into his own bed, Mario reached out in the darkness, as he had done in the old days, to clasp hands across the narrow space between their beds. He said into the darkness, "I was thinking. About the—the Greeks. And the way they were. You were only supposed to go so far, or the gods didn't like it. If you did more than that, they called it hubris and they struck you down. I wonder. How far can I go? Those old gods don't mean anything to me." His hand was warm in Tommy's; it reminded Tommy, somehow, of the days in the Santelli trailer. They fell asleep that way.

He woke up, in gray dawn light, to find Mario's bed empty. Across the room, Mario was sitting at the dresser, writing on hotel stationery. Rubbing his eyes, Tommy demanded, "Who are you writing to? Damn near the whole family is here, aren't they?"

"Johnny and Stel, mostly. We didn't get to talk last night. I want to put down everything in writing. Just in case."

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When Tommy left, the wastebasket was filled with crumpled drafts, and Mario still hadn't shaved. On the top of one of the loose sheets, Tommy could see Mario's scrawled writing, Dear Liss, but he didn't say anything.
"You go ahead, Tom, tell them I'll be along. It's almost six in California. I want to make a phone call. Then I think I'll ring Stella's room and get her to come and sign this before I go down."
Tommy stood with one hand on the doorknob, feeling more helpless than he had ever felt in his life. He could not think of anything to say that would not trigger one of Mario's storming rages, and Mario, facing the ordeal of a lifetime— for, however it turned out, the missed trick sequence was going to be delicate and dangerous-—could not afford any more strain on nerves already as raw as the skin on his bad wrist. Tommy went out, grabbed a bite of breakfast alone, and went straight to the Garden.
At any other time it would have pleased him to note that they had been allotted the star's dressing room, the same one

usually given to the world's heavyweight boxing champion. Now it barely skimmed the surface of his preoccupation.
He watched his unfamiliar face in the mirror as the makeup men transformed him into a reasonable replica of Reggie Parrish, with the mustaches that had been the earlier catcher's trademark. Even through his deep preoccupation he watched the change with professional curiosity and interest. But he felt strangely depersonalized. He no longer knew who he was. Was there any such person as Tom Zane? Had he been entirely swallowed up in Tommy Santelli? He wasn't quite himself, nor quite Reggie Parrish, either. Was there anyone in the mirror at all? Who was that strange face in there?
A catcher. Any catcher. No, not any catcher. Mario's catcher, who, like Reggie Parrish before him, was bearing a dreadful responsibility.
His life is in my hands.
But it always has been. Everybody's life is in everybody else's hands, on the rig. I've always known that. Why is it hitting me now, all of a sudden?
Bart Reeder's words about suicide among their kind came back to him. Mario couldn't be planning anything like that. Not consciously. He might make scathing remarks to An-gelo about his church, and he never went to confession anymore, but inside, where it counted, Mario's conscience was pure Catholic. Some things never changed.
No, he's not planning suicide. But maybe he's hoping. A chill iced Tommy's blood, because he had caught himself thinking, Maybe we'd both be better off. No. He couldn't afford that kind of thought. Not for a minute. Not for a second.
I've got to do something. But, dear God, what can I do? It was the nearest thing to a real prayer that Tommy remembered in his whole life.
Mario was late, later than a Santelli would ever have been. He and Stella joined Tommy, fresh from the makeup men and in their Parrish costumes, at the foot of the rigging only moments before the lighting men finished working with the stand-ins. Angelo, sitting on the fly bar and swinging gently back and forth, was also wearing the silver and white of the Parrish troupe, and

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Tommy saw, startled, that his hair, too, had been dyed to the pale blonde of the stand-in's. He called to the lighting man, "Okay, that does it. Don't

you move that bar half an inch either way, or I'll hold you responsible!" He rolled over the bar and dropped neatly, but not stylishly, into the net. He waded to the edge and vaulted down over it.
"Good evening, Signor Mario. It's about time you showed up."
"I'm here, I'm here."
Mario fiddled with the tape at his wrist, and Tommy said, "Here, let me fix that. You never get it tight enough." He bent to the job, and it flashed over him that it was this, more than anything else, that he had remembered during his Army years, the small routine job, before every show, of making sure that Mario's vulnerable wrists were securely strapped. "Clench your fists," he said, but he could feel An-gelo's eyes on them, and fumbled with the tape.
Angelo came over to them, wearing his professional face.
"Okay, Matt, here's the story," he said briskly. "I was up all night on the phone to California. It's all set up; they're all fixed, out there, to fake that missed triple and bounce-out sequence in the lab. We've got plenty of footage on missed triples, and I've got the bounce-out from the spreaders, and the fall."
Mario opened his mouth to protest, but Angelo said, "It's done. I did it three times this morning onto the mats, so it's already in the can with plenty of protective footage. It's all set up, Matt, so you can quit worrying about it."
Mario jerked his wrist free of Tommy's hands and opened his mouth in outrage, but Angelo gestured him to silence. "No use talking about it, kid. It's already done, finished up, in the can. Nothing more for you to worry about. Nothing to it."
Mario glared at him, a loose end of the tape dangling grotesquely from his wrist.
"What the hell is this, Angelo? Are you so jealous you can't even let me have this? Or do you think I'm afraid?"
"Sure you're afraid," Angelo said stolidly. "You've always been afraid of stunt work, and when people get scared, they get killed. I know all about that, remember? Don't be a damn fool, Matt. This isn't some kind of endurance contest, a test of courage, that kind of bullshit. It's my job, and I did it. Now you get on with yours and no more prima donna stuff, okay?"
Tommy, watching, thought, Oh-oh, that does it. Angelo's matter-of-fact statement had been worse than any taunt.

Mario was dead white under the makeup. He said, 'To hell with you, Angelo! It doesn't need to be faked! Parrish did it, I figured out how to do it, and I'm going to see that it's done right—no fakery! Get out of my way, Angelo! I'm not afraid, and I'm going to prove it to you once and for all!"
"Oh, for Christ's sake, Matt, I tell you I already got it in the can—" Angelo began, but Mario seized the aerial ladder and started to climb. Angelo pulled him roughly back. By this time they had collected a crowd. Mason came from behind the cameramen, hands on hips, scowling.

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"What is it this time, Angelo? You union bastards wrecked the other Parrish film. You going to wreck this one, too?"
Still holding Mario's arm, Angelo said grimly, "This man is not a competent stuntman. I have a right to refuse to allow anyone to do a trick for which he is not competent."
"Good God, he's the best flyer in the business—you told me that yourself!" .„-
"He is. The best flyer. I trained him, and I know what he can do and what he can't. He was hired to do the flying in the film, not to double in the stunt falls. That's my business, not his—"
Mario tore his arm free and squared off against Angelo. "Where the hell do you get off, telling me what I can and what I can't do? You're not even in the act anymore, you bastard!"
Angelo's eyes flickered rage, but his face was set like iron. "You're in my union now, Matt, and in my profession you're not even a good amateur. And I'll tell you what you can and what you can't do. You stick to your flying." He turned to Mason and said, "You can check with the California union office by phone, if you want to. I spent three hours at it, last night. It's all fixed up out there, to do it in the lab—" Mario got a grip on his temper. Tommy, watching, not daring to put in a word, beard the old deadly calm at the center of his rages, the calm that signaled bone-deep storms below.
"Angelo, they can't fake this thing. It wouldn't be right!" "What do you mean, they can't? I tell you, they've done it—it's all in the can. When they get it printed, even you aren't going to be able to tell the difference, kid."
"You don't understand," Mario said in quiet desperation. "This is the one thing that can't—no, that mustn't—be faked! Have you read the script? Angelo, this isn't a bunch

of stunts—it's a life we're doing here, and this was the crucial moment in that life, the thing that determined what he was! Don't you realize that? So far, everything we've done on film has been absolutely authentic, and now it's got a life of it's own. It's art, not fakery—can't you tell the difference? Haven't you been in to see the dailies? Can't you feel the spirit of this thing? It ought to be Parrish's own fall, the big stunt, just the way it really happened, all in one continuous shot, the way it really happened, the camera right on it, no faked shots and switches— Angelo, can't you see? It's art, not a fake—it wouldn't be right!"
Tears were rolling down Mario's face, but Angelo's had gone to stone. "You were always the family expert on art. I never did know what the hell you were talking about. There's no art in getting yourself killed on camera. All I know is, I'm a stuntman, and a union man, and my job is to protect the workers on this lot, and that means you, too. You stick to your flying. That's what you're getting paid for." There was open contempt as he looked at Mario's tears, and it seemed to Tommy that there was embarrassment, too. "Matt, for God's sake, get hold of yourself!"
Mario said, his voice low and dangerous, "I'm not taking orders from you anymore. All my life, yes, but not now. I'm going to do this, and you're not going to stop me."

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"Oh, yes, I am," said Angelo. He took Mario's shoulders firmly in his and pulled him physically off the aerial ladder. He said, "What you think you're going to do is impossible. That's it, period, that's all there is to say about it. We fake it or it doesn't get done at all."
"I don't accept that anything's impossible," Mario said. His voice was low and shaking. "I know you want to think I can't do it, but I'm not going to let you—let you tell me, anymore—"
Even Tommy, who was closest to them, did not see what happened next, or hear what Angelo said, but there was a short, sharp struggle as Mario tried to pull away from him, the aerial ladder twisting. Mario hit him, hard, and Angelo stepped back, blood breaking from his swollen lip. He shook his head, looked at Mario, and said, bitter contempt in his voice, "I expected a lot better than that."
Mason, exasperated beyond endurance, called, "Kill 'em! Take fifteen, everybody!" as he looked at Mario's white and shaken face, Angelo's bleeding mouth.

Stella said quietly, "I'll go and get you some coffee, Matt," and went toward the machine in the lobby.
Angelo strode away. Tommy, after a moment of motionless shock, ran after him. He caught up with him in the dark hallway outside the office assigned to Jim Fortunati. He grabbed Angelo's arm and spun the bigger man around.
"Don't you dare run out on him now, you bastard! What do you think you're trying to do, get him killed?"
Angelo wrenched away from Tommy's grip as if it soiled him. He said between his teeth, "Take your hands off me, you goddamn little—" He bit off the words between his teeth. "I'm trying to make sure he doesn't get killed, with all that crap about art! I ought to break your neck!"
Tommy felt the childish retort on his lips, You an' what army? But that would do nothing to defuse the real confrontation, between Mario and Angelo,
This is between them. It has nothing to do with me. That's what I've never understood before.
"Break my neck? You just try it! But not till I give you a piece of my mind! And you better listen, and listen good, Angelo! I'm no Catholic, but I've heard enough out of Tessa's catechism to know there's something called sins of omission, and if you don't listen now, your own goddamned God will hold you responsible for his murder. Yes, I said murder!"
"Look, you got no right to talk about my religion—"
"Right, be damned! Angelo, Papa Tony told me a long time ago. He said Matt's way out in a lonely place, driving himself, needing to do what nobody's ever done before. Papa never knew why it was that way with Matt—" "And I suppose you do?"
Tommy took no heed of the interruption. Words poured from him without thought. He had no idea of what he would say next, but the words came, almost of their own accord.
"Papa didn't know, but he accepted it, that's the thing. He knew what Matt had to do, and you've got to accept him, too! Don't you know—God damn it,

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Angelo, don't you know you're all the father Matt ever had? You raised him, you made him what he is now, even if you don't like it. You're all the father he has and—and you know Lucia—all the mother he ever had, either. Everything he is—yes, damn it, everything—he's that way because you made him that way, whether you like it or not now—"

"There's one thing I didn't make him, Tom. He sure as hell didn't get that from me," Angelo said, raising a hand in protest.
But Tommy flung at him, "Don't you kid yourself! That, too! Don't you know his whole life is hanging on getting your approval—your acceptance—your love? He needs to know —he can't live without knowing—that the one who means most to him cares about him, approves of him—accepts him, whatever he is—"
"Seems to me like that's your job, kid," Angelo said with a cold, disgusted glance, but Tommy swallowed hard and shook his head.
"I wish to hell I could. I try. But I came too late. Sure, I love him—no, damn it, Angelo, I'm not talking about what you think I mean; that's only a—a part of it, and it hasn't got anything to do with what I'm talking about. Christ, Angelo, will you stop kidding yourself? You love the guy just as much as I do, and for just about the same reasons, and you know it!"
Angelo's face was convulsed. He said, "Damn it, Tommy, I'll kill you—"
"Just you try it," Tommy said, his fists clenched, "but some other time. Not now. Damn it, for once you're going to face up to it if I have to dump you on the floor and sit on you! You got me wrong, Angelo. You know as well as I do what I'm talking about! You were his catcher, too! You know what it is, like when you meet in midair, hands and wrists and—and everything meshing, perfect, like you were the two halves of one thing, and something happens inside you—Christ, Angelo, I'm not talking about the sex thing! Don't be so goddamn scared to listen to what I'm saying to you!" he begged. It felt as if he were turning himself inside out. "Something else. Something inside. Like you had only one heartbeat, and something happens inside your—your soul. Angelo, you've got to know it, you can't kid me into thinking you kept on flying all those years just to make a living. You did it because you had to, even if you can't admit it to yourself—"
"Look—kid—" Angelo said. He sounded shaken. "I don't see what the hell all this has to do with the stuff about the union. Even if some of what you say is true, I don't see—"
"No, you don't see, and that's what's going to kill him," Tommy said, rushing on without taking a breath. "Don't

you even know why he had to get that goddamned triple, why he had to drive himself so hard? All his life he's felt that if he only did enough, someday you'd have to admit to him how much you cared about him! When did he start working on the triple? Yeah, that's right—just about the time you made him feel he wasn't fit to live! Just because he happened to like screwing men instead of women, you made him feel like he was a leper or something—"

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Angelo raised a hand in protest again, but Tommy rushed on: "He's going to kill himself out there today, trying to prove he's worthy of your—of your love and affection, your respect..."
Angelo caught his wrist. He said urgently, "Listen to me, Tom! Christ, slow down a minute and listen, willya? I do respect him. I do"—a long beat—"I do care about what happens to him."
He couldn't say it, Tommy thought. He still couldn't say it or even think it.
"Christ, Tommy," Angelo said, "do you think I want him to break his neck? Why in hell do you think I stopped him from climbing that goddamned ladder out there? I didn't want him to get hurt!"
"But he doesn't believe it! He doesn't think it's because —Angelo, do you know why he was late this morning?" "No, damn it, I don't. Why?"
"He was making his will. Providing for Suzy. He's going to do this or die trying, and if he does survive it, he'll go on, trying more and more crazy challenges—that three-and-a-half Barney Parrish was talking to him about, a triple forward. He still believes, down inside where he doesn't know it himself, that if he's brave enough, you'll have to admit that you accept him, that you respect him—that you love him. He can't do like Liss, get himself pregnant so he can have a good excuse to stop trying. But he can do what Lucia did, get himself smashed up—kill himself trying—" Tommy stopped. He had had no notion what would come pouring out; he realized he had gone too far even for this moment of truth.
"I may not be a real Santelli. I may not even come out of your big loving family tradition! You've done this to Matt, and you don't even know it—that's the hell of it. If you'd done it on purpose it wouldn't even be so bad, but you don't even know—" His voice broke. Angelo was dead

white, shaking, but his fists were clenched as if to take a swing at Tommy right then and there. But down the hall Jim Fortunati had come to the door of his office.
"Angelo? What the hell is all the racket? Are they done filming yet? We've got to set up for the matinee! We don't want this thing to go another day—"
On the very edge of violence, Angelo turned and went, stiff-legged, toward Fortunati. Tommy stood dead still, watching him stride away. He felt sick, and felt the sweat cold and clammy through the unfamiliar white tights.
What have I done? How could I use words like love to Angelo? Have I said anything that will make him understand? Or did it all go right past him, past that damned closed mind of his? As he made his way back to the arena, he knew that Jim Fortunati must have heard everything they said. He felt his throat was raw, and wondered, vaguely, Was I shouting?
Mario was back in the dressing room, sitting before the lighted makeup mirror. Stella had her arms around him, and his head was turned so that it rested against her shoulder. She was looking down at him with infinite tenderness, just as she looked at Suzy.
It's too late for that. Tommy knew there had been a time when Lucia could have gotten through to her son. But Lucia, submerged in her own torment, her own struggle, had never had time or emotional energy for the children

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she had not wanted. Liss, too, had found the struggle too great for her. Maybe, if Susan hadn't been such a bitch—but Mario's face was calm, dead stony calm, and as Tommy came in, Stella shrugged silently, helplessly, let her arms drop from Mario's shoulders, and went out of the room.
Mario ground out his cigarette in an ashtray. He got up with one fierce catlike movement and took Tommy by the shoulders.
"I don't care what Angelo says! I'm going to do it just the way I planned it! The way Parrish did it, the way it's got to be!" His hands came up to close around Tommy's neck, half threat, half caress. "Don't you dare tell me I can't, Lucky! Don't you dare!"
Tommy twisted away. He said, "It's not for me to say you can't. But not right now. You're guyed-out, Matt, tight as a tent. I've seen you go for a one-and-a-half and miss it when you're all tied up in knots like this! Just sit down and

get hold of yourself. Why the hell are you letting Angelo do this to you?" he flung at him. "He isn't worth it!"
All those years. I've been with him all those years. And it's still Angelo's approval he needs. Angelo's love.
As if the words, unspoken, had reached Mario, he flushed. "Angelo can go to hell," he said. He put his arms around Tommy. "Remember the first time you went on with us, Lucky? The first time I ever did the triple in the ring. Angelo didn't want me to try that, either!"
"Sure, I remember." But Tommy turned, catching Mario's wrists and firmly planting them at the older man's sides. "But I remember what Angelo said that night, and he was right, too. He said, 'You sit down and calm down, do some deep breathing exercises or something, or I'm not going to let you try it.'" He pushed him gently down before the makeup table.
"Who the hell do you think you are, ordering me around?" Mario flared.
Tommy looked him straight in the eye.
"I'm your catcher. That's who I am. Let me see those wrists. The makeup men don't know what the hell they're doing. Clench your fists, or this tape will cut."
Yes. This was the essence of what he was, everything that was between them. I'm your catcher. That's who I am. Their eyes met for a moment in the mirror, and in spite of the strange makeup, Tommy once again recognized himself, knew, with a sure sense of identity, who they were. Flyer and catcher. That said it all.
There was a tap on the door, which, loosely latched, swung open, and a strange voice called, "Santellis? Ready on the set."
Harshly Tommy whispered, more plea than command, "Andiamo!"
Mario gathered himself, a brittle facade of normality.
"Okay. Here goes."
The Santellis are always ready. .,.
Angelo was waiting for them at the foot of the rigging. He looked limp and shaken, and for some reason Tommy thought of the way he had looked after Papa Tony's death. Washed-out. Mario brushed past him, not looking at him,

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as the klieg lights flared around them and cameramen put aside coffee cups, crushed out their cigarettes, and prepared

to work. Angelo put one foot on the aerial ladder, both steadying it for Mario and effectively preventing him from climbing. Tommy, about to go to his own end of the rigging, stopped close to them, apprehension shaking him. More trouble? I just got him calmed down—does he want to kill him?
Mario said between his teeth, "Get out of my way. I'm going up."
"Listen, Matt, you got me wrong," Angelo said. "You can't do my work any more than I can do yours. You think I could hold you on a triple now? Not if they gave me a million dollars cash. And I'd be too scared to try. You know why?"
His voice fell to a whisper which only Tommy was close enough to hear. "I'd be scared to lose you—the way I lost Papa—or worse. By some mistake of mine. I never was all that good as a catcher, kid. I was never in your class. And you're all that's left—you're what the Santellis are all about, you and Tommy. You're all I've got left. Don't do this to me, kid. Ragazzo . . . Matteo . . . tu set ... sempre . . . e ancor . . . fanciullo mio . . . figlio mio . . ."
His face worked. He swallowed and swallowed again.
Mario was as pale as the white costume. Blindly, he put out his hand to Angelo; Angelo gripped it, automatically, around the wrist. His voice was—almost—under control again.
"Look, ragazzo. Remember what Barney used to say— you've got to have an open mind about breaking your neck. An open mind, kid. You can't do anything with this—this art of ours, if you got your mind made up you got to break it. You can't—can't survive that attitude, any more than— any more than Terry did. You listen to me, fanciullo—did I ever steer you wrong? Come on, now—did I?"
Mario shook his head. His hand was still gripped around Angelo's wrist. The older man gave it a gentle shake.
"A Santelli doesn't take chances or play silly-ass games with getting killed. What would Papa Tony say about that? If I taught you anything at all, Matt, I hope I taught you that. It's got nothing to do with how brave you are, figlio. Christ, do you think you have to prove anything about that —to me? To me, fanciullo, after all we went through on the triple?" Right there in Center Ring, with Mason shouting to clear the set, Angelo pulled Mario close and rubbed his cheek in a rough kiss. "Andiamo," he said, boosting him to-

ward the ladder. "You get yourself up there and give us the best damn triple we ever saw. That's your job, figlio, and there's nobody else can do it. You got to be there to do that."
Stunned, Tommy turned toward his own end of the rigging. What in the blazing hell had Fortunati said to An-gelo, anyway? As he climbed the rope, Tommy knew he would never know.
Is it going to work? Is he going up there and get himself killed, trying to prove he can still do the impossible? In the stare he's in . . . But then he looked back toward the aerial ladder and saw Mario stepping off on the platform, giving

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the sweeping, exaggerated wave to the audience. Down in the seats the audience of costumed extras was shouting and clapping.
Mario swung out, in the first of the enormous warm-up swings with which he always started a day. Tommy, sitting upright in his own trapeze, watched him, turning around the bar, swooping out again, the delicate precision of every movement. Perfect, soaring grace.
It's okay, it's okay! . . . Man and trapeze seemed to fuse, to be a single joyous entity. Mario moved on it like a child; swooping on a swing for the sheer delight of it. Dropping off on the platform, gently moving aside for Stella, Tommy saw the instant of smiling interplay between them. Bart had said it, once. If I hadn't known better, I'd have sworn you were lovers. No wonder Johnny had been jealous. But Johnny didn't need to be jealous, not on that level, not at all.
Stella gives him all he can ever have, anything he needs, all he wants from any woman.
Mario flung up his hand in the signal for the triple. Tommy, without even thinking about it, dropped back to hang by his knees. He caught the bar between his legs, wound his legs tight and precise about the padded supports. Mario was off the board and swinging, driving higher and higher, and Tommy accelerated his own swing to match, precisely, Mario's rhythm. Out, and back, and out again . . . precise, together, joined, locked in a dual rhythm. Like foreplay, rising to mutual excitement, fever pitch, tension building between them.
Not yet. Not quite, not yet. One more swing . . . Random thoughts, thoughts he would never remember, later, skittered across the surface of his mind. What we are together, on the

trapeze. Almost a form of lovemaking. Awfully public love-making. From the same place in your guts.
Salto mortale. Nothing in excess. The perfect predetermined shape of fate . ..
He could not precisely see Mario. He was aware of him, of the other trapeze, locked, meshed, a single heartbeat. Mario was driving higher in the last swing, as if his tense body must break loose and fly outward and upward, free of gravity, never to return . . . back and back, above the braces; skimming almost to the tie lines. Tommy's hands went out, on the backswing, even before Mario came off the bar like a cannon shot, spinning over, incredibly higher on the second turn— Their hands locked, jolted with the weight, before the Now! in Tommy's mind could reach words. Not until they were swinging, hands and wrists locked, did Tommy realize that he had been braced to see Mario, like Papa Tony, go down for the last time. Mario's eyes, below his, were filled with gaiety and the old excitement.
"Okay, Lucky? Okay," he whispered.
And he was gone again, arrowing back to the platform, dropping off beside Stella, sliding the bar into her hands, flinging an arm carelessly around her for balance, raising his hand in an exaggerated, sweeping gesture, finale, appeal to the audience.

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And then it came. Spontaneously, the sounds held all those breathless moments, rocked the Garden.
No paid admission here. No thrill-seeking audience. Fellow professionals, actors and circus people alike, giving their approval to their own, the greatest tribute in their power to the greatest of their own. Tommy, pulling himself upright in his trapeze, holding up his hands to acknowledge it, knew deep down that it was for him, too.
He made them forget they were just extras! He got them to applaud!
And then they were all on the floor again, bowing, bowing again, acknowledging the applause that seemed endless. Mario's hand clasped Tommy's, briefly, and he met Tommy's eyes in a smile that was all sunshine.
He's exorcised his ghosts. I can hold him on anything, now. He's all mine now.
Mason was shouting and waving to the cameramen. He turned briefly to look at Mario and said, "Okay, that does it.

We can print that. I guess we don't need any retakes, this time."
Jim Fortunati came up and took Mario's hand. He said, in a low voice, "Matt, I never saw anything like that. Nobody ever saw anything like that. You're the greatest flyer in the world. I'm sure Barney Parrish, wherever he is, is watching over you—and he's proud of you."
Mario's smile was luminous, brilliant, as if an old burden had been lifted forever. "Yeah," he said in a whisper, "maybe he is, at that!"
Johnny boiled out into center ring, charging, excited. "Mason, you folks finished? Does that wrap it up? Damn it, we've got a matinee to do today—can you get all this crap out of center ring?" With a sidewise grin, he looked up at Mario and said, "Nice work, big brother." Briefly, he tightened an arm around his shoulders and let him go. "Now, will you guys get all these cameras and stuff the hell out of here? The box office is going to be open inside two hours, and your contract says—"
Mario laughed as they moved away. "One thing never changes. You want to find the Santellis, listen for somebody raising hell," he said.
Angelo was standing at the edge of the ring. He stepped forward and held out his hands, and Mario grasped them, the old reciprocal hand-to-wrist grip, for a moment. Angelo's grin was enormous, proud. Tommy thought, Hey, he looks a little bit like Papa Tony, too.
"Nice work, ragazzo," he said. "I wish Papa could have seen that. My heart damn near stopped, though. You scared hell out of me!"
Mario smiled at him, locking his eyes with Angelo's in teasing intimacy. He said, "I always did scare hell out of you, Angelo, didn't I?"
"Yeah," said Angelo, drawing a deep breath and letting it go. "More ways than one, kid. That was all the trouble. Hey, you go and get a towel or something—you're going to get chilled, and you got a matinee to do. See you later, kids."
And he was gone, leaving the three of them alone together, isolated in all the ferment of the circus.
Mario turned around to Stella. Smiling up at him, she said softly, "That was beautiful, Mario," and he touched her cheek lightly.
"Thanks, sweetie. From you, that means a lot," he said.

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"Listen, why don't you get hold of Lucia? Get her to bring Suzy down for the matinee." He laughed aloud in sheer exuberance. "I think she'll do it, if you put it up to her like that. Suzy's a Santelli. She might as well see the family business. She's going to be up there someday, too, so she might as well find out what it's all about."

"I'll do that," Stella said, smiling, and hurried off toward her own dressing room.

Then they were alone together, and for a moment the gaiety slid off Mario's face. He said gently, "I scared you too, didn't I, kid? I'm sorry, Lucky." He hesitated and smiled, the rare smile, the different smile that made him, once again, the shy boy Tommy had first known.

He never lets anybody else see that. Not anymore. That's my responsibility. I'm his catcher. I can hold him, now, on anything. I know, now, who I am, too.

"It's okay," he said, linking arms with Mario, careless of who might see. "It's okay, Mario." Together they went down the corridor toward the dressing room, but Tommy knew, now, that they were going toward the future. As he had said, now it was okay.