

CHAPTER ONE

THE DAY IT STARTED TO GO DOWNHILL

Frankie Hoskins was very much in love with his mother, and being sick was almost worth being able to spend the day with her instead of the sixth grade at Ridge Avenue Elementary School. He had a sore throat. His tonsils were swollen. It was Friday afternoon, and he mainly spent it chewing Aspergum, gargling salt water, watching his mother fold clothes and do chores, and listening to records by Marty Robbins, Buddy Holly and Arthur Alexander. Emily Hoskins loved Holly. She and Frankie sang “I Guess It Doesn’t Matter Anymore” together. He insisted even though his throat was sore.

Frankie was about as happy as a 12-year-old with tonsillitis could be. He was the oldest, and his younger brother and sister were off at school. He vaguely recalled how it used to be, back when it had been just the two of them.

Emily couldn’t just sweep Frankie up and hug him anymore. He was a bit on the chunky side and already closing in on his mother in height.

“You don’t have to kiss me, Ma,” he said. “You might catch my sore throat.”

“I’m not worried about my baby’s germs,” she said. “Your germs are descended from me, little man. Ain’t nothing in you that’s gonna do anything but make me love you more.”

It would’ve been embarrassing if Charlie Simmons or Jamie Calhoun had been around. They were Frankie’s friends. On second thought, they loved his mama, too. Everybody loved his mama. She

was beautiful, barely thirty, happily enjoying a rare day alone with her older son. She still looked as if she could step right into the television set and join the teens dancing on “American Bandstand.” Frankie thought his mama looked best simple. She was wearing blue jeans with cuffs folded up. The belt was little more than a piece of rope, and her shirt was one a cowgirl might wear -- red-and-white plaid with pearl-snap buttons. Frankie shared her hair and eyes, but his handsomeness would never match her beauty.

The phone rang, so Frankie went to answer it, leaving his mother in the breezeway.

“Hello.”

“Lawd, lawd, Mr. Frankie, turn on the TV!” It was Louise, the maid, whose day off was Friday. She was undoubtedly calling from her run-down shanty of a house, which was in sight across the front pasture.

“What’s wrong, Louise?”

She was crying, and it was about all she could muster to say, “Just turn on the TV. I can’t talk no more. Bye, bye.”

On the other side of town, Tommy Hoskins was chasing a box of wings from The Big Chick with a few Falstaffs. He’d brought wings with him to Smiley’s Spur, which was barely a gas station at all. Mainly it was just a tiny beer joint with a few pinball machines. It might be a little early to be drinking, but it was, after all, a Friday. Two doctors and a college professor had come to similar conclusions.

“Hell with Kennedy, the Catholic bastard,” Tommy said. “Him and all the rest of the Democrats have done got soft on the niggers. I’ll be damned if I ain’t gonna vote Republican next year. I kinda like that Barry Goldwater.”

“Goldwater will never get the nomination,” said the professor. “The Republicans will nominate Rockefeller. You know it, and I know it.”

“Nelson Rockefeller will never, ever carry the South,” Tommy said. “That’s the only way to beat Kennedy. He’s in trouble here, but

the Republicans can't beat him with some big-thinkin' Yankee. Goldwater can win the South, and winning the South will win the election."

The sound was turned down on the black-and-white television, its broken rabbit ears tipped in makeshift tinfoil. Doc Ramage noticed some kind of special report interrupting "As the World Turns." One minute an attractive woman was holding up a box of Niagara laundry starch, and the next time he looked up, the screen was mainly dark except for print that read, over and over, "CBS News Bulletin."

Pointing at the TV, Doc asked Smiley Howe to turn it up. President John F. Kennedy had been shot. The initial report, merely a voice over the message screen, said three shots had been fired and that "President Kennedy has been seriously injured by this shooting."

For the next two hours, Tommy Hoskins, two doctors, a professor and a bartender watched along with the rest of the world as it became increasingly apparent that the President of the United States was dead. They kept drinking.

"Aw, shit," Tommy said. "I said I didn't like the son of a bitch. I didn't never say I wanted to see the man dead."

"Imagine the phone company," Frankie said.

Emily looked up, taking the Kleenex away from her eyes.

"Our phone's ringing off the hook. Imagine what that means. Ever since the president got shot, everybody's phone is like that."

"Phil and Becky will be home soon," Emily said. "Go out and be there when they get off the bus. I've got to go find your daddy. He hasn't called."

"Ain't he at the Roundup?" The Roundup was the steakhouse Tommy Hoskins ran. It was next door to the motor hotel, which was owned if not actually run by his partner, Dr. Boyd Ramage.

The phone rang again, and Frankie listened to his mother consoling her mother for the third time.

"Everything'll be all right, Mama. Just sit down and relax. ... The

whole world's upside down, Mama. ... I'll be over to see you as soon as I can get supper in the stove and find Tommy. ... No, Mama, I've never heard of such a thing, but it's happened and the world's just gonna have to keep on turning. It's just like what you said about how you felt when Daddy was in the war. ... No, Mama, I don't remember. I was just a little thing. ... All right ... I love you, too, Mama. Don't cry now. ... I've got to go find Tommy, Mama. ... Bye now."

"Ain't Daddy at the Roundup?" Frankie asked again.

"Isn't Daddy at the Roundup," she corrected. "No, he's not there. He's off running around somewhere. I've got to find him. Will you be good and make sure your brother and sister are all right? Can you fix some soup, or some sandwiches, if they're hungry?"

"We gotta all pull together, all right?"

"Sure, Mom. You can count on me."

"I know I can, sweetheart."

The first place Emily Hoskins went was across the pasture, though she had to drive the station wagon down the blacktop a quarter mile and then up the narrow lane to the two shanty houses on the hill. There she walked right in, noticing immediately the pungent smell of a coal furnace, and consoled Louise Vance, who was a close friend as well as the family maid. Louise's husband, John Henry, was working in the cotton mill. Like Emily's husband, John Henry Vance was "bad to drink." The pretty white housewife and the lanky black maid had more in common than most folks new.

Framed and lighted portraits of John F. Kennedy and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. hung on the cracked wallpaper of Louise Vance's living room. Emily went to Louise's side before she sought out her husband because she knew how much Louise adored President Kennedy. Louise cried, prayed and sang hymns, but the evil could not be undone. The president was dead. Emily broke down, too.

Then, at last, she went to find Tommy. The first stop wasn't the

Roundup, though. She figured he had to be somewhere else, not to have called. Surely he knew Kennedy had been assassinated. Emily drove right past the Roundup and pulled through the parking lot of Smiley's Spur. Tommy's truck wasn't there.

The two-tone Ford F-100 was, in fact, at the Roundup, but when Emily walked into the kitchen through the screen door, she found no sign of him. The place was open for lunch from eleven to two and then again for dinner from five thirty to eleven or whenever the last patrons left. In the daytime, the Roundup was just a meat-and-three-vegetables joint, but at night, it was a steakhouse, which meant the lights were softened and a lot of Nat King Cole and Ray Charles played on the record player. People "brown-bagged," which meant they could legally bring in their own liquor, purchased elsewhere. So-called "liquor by the drink" was illegal, but restaurants could provide set-ups for patrons who brought booze with them. The only soul in the place was a tall black teen Emily didn't know. He was mopping the floor between the grill and the grease tank and said he had no idea where Mr. Tommy went. Emily asked the boy, who said his name was Ralph, if someone had come by to see Mr. Tommy. He said not to his knowledge.

Frustrated, Emily walked through the swinging doors to the cash register, picked up a set of keys from beneath the counter, unlocked the front door, walked out and set on the brick ledge that ran along the front of the Roundup. She glanced to the right, where, in the parking lot of the motor hotel, she noticed a yellow Chevrolet coupe.

The waitress's name was Jennifer, and her dyed blonde hair reminded Tommy of Marilyn Monroe. Tommy had taken some special pride in fucking her because he figured Kennedy, the son of a bitch, had been fucking Marilyn Monroe and probably had something to do with her death.

Now he was getting over his fake remorse at the president's death.

"I don't give ... a fuck ... about Kennedy!" Tommy muttered, gritting his teeth, as he rode Jennifer Cunningham and thrust his member into her.

"Oh, God, oh, God! Christ!" Jennifer wailed. "Fuck Jack Kennedy. ... God ...damn ... so he's fuckin' ... dead! Big ... fuckin' ... deal!"

Someone knocked on the door.

"Well, shit," said Tommy, expending himself, sweating, gasping for breath. "Shhh. Be quiet. Try to catch your breath."

"Ignore it," Jennifer said, and Tommy thought, well, OK.

But whoever was knocking on the door hadn't given up. Now they were more than knocks. It sounded like the door was being punched. Tommy looked up and saw the wooden door flex, ever so slightly, with each rap.

"Goddamnit, goddamn, hold on," Tommy yelled. "I'm coming."

Though, actually, he had finished. Tommy shoved his pecker back in his shorts, pulled his blue jeans on and staggered to the door, shirtless.

"Who the fuck? ..." He opened the door. There was Emily. She was supposed to be home, tending to Frankie, Phil and Becky. He hadn't anticipated that something like, oh, the assassination of the president, might change his tranquil wife's plans.

Emily took a step inside, saw Jennifer Cunningham halfheartedly covering herself, her husband's giz still smeared across her chin. She glared at the girl, perhaps twenty-one, and said what immediately came to mind. "For God's sake, wipe your fucking face off."

She said not a word to her husband, only turned around and marched back out the door, turning left toward the steakhouse and the lot where the station wagon was parked.

It occurred to Tommy that he had never heard his wife use such language before. It's been a hell of a day, he thought. First Kennedy gets shot, and now Emily catches me fucking Jennifer.

Things changed. Emily Hoskins remained a kind, caring woman,

but she hardened. Her interest dwindled in the outdoors. She wasn't interested in horseback riding anymore. She stopped doing much except read books and tan herself on the lawn furniture. Almost overnight she started smoking and developed a bit more taste for rum and Coke.

She and Tommy went through a period of uneasy truce. They didn't talk to the kids about what had happened, but it wasn't necessary. They knew from the shouting matches.

One day, Emily and Frankie were watching the CBS Evening News together. Frankie had just come home from feeding the cattle with his father. A report from Alabama showed policemen beating Negro protesters and turning fire hoses on them. Frankie was shocked by the violence, a bit scared, even.

"You know what?" Emily asked.

"What?"

"It's a damn good thing I wasn't born black."

"Yeah," he said.

"Because if I had been born black," she said quietly, "I'd be the goddamned biggest militant there ever was."

Frankie gulped and never forgot it.

Tommy took his shame out on the two boys, one of whom seemed to growing ever closer to his mother and the other who seemed to lose most of the ability or willingness to show emotion. Phil Hoskins, four years younger than Frankie, was vastly different. He was a fine, natural athlete, though for quite some time he kept it hidden. He and the older brother played catch in the front yard, but Phil stopped playing little league. He had no interest in riding horses, which set him apart from his brother and sister. Unlike Frankie, he had little interest in reading or excelling in school. Mostly he spent his time playing with little Tonka trucks, pushing them patiently beneath the shade trees in the back yard, stacking them with little pine sprigs and loading toy horses to take to imaginary auctions.

Becky, though, was the most affected. She developed an

almost mystical knack of getting along with animals. She could stand on the back of a quarter horse and canter in graceful circles around the yard. The cat was hers and hers alone. It adored her but scratched and hissed at anyone else who tried to pet or feed her. Tommy adored her as much as the cat. He terrorized the boys and spoiled the girl. Sometimes it seemed as if Tommy loved his daughter in his wife's place. Frankie matched up with his mother, with whom he shared the same brown eyes and almost-black hair. Becky had her father's blue eyes and sandy brown hair. Quiet Phil had his own adoring parent, though in an unofficial capacity. Louise, the beloved maid, called Phil her golden child and, in her own way, understood him more than either of his real parents.

Family life had its tender moments, but nothing was ever the same after November 22, 1963. They all still got together to watch "Bonanza" on Sunday nights. They all went to Myrtle Beach for a week every summer. They went as a family to football games in the fall. The Roundup prospered and Tommy built a collection of registered quarter horses and Appaloosas and a herd of Charolais cattle.

It just took a decade or so for everything to obviously fall apart. No one really noticed while it was happening. Everything was changing, and it was easy to miss the family coming unraveled because of the preoccupation of what was happening in the world around.

Which was the same thing.