

Weddings and Funerals

Chapter One

The teenage trio on the American Legion bandstand took off their plaid jackets, turned up their amplifiers, and blasted the hall with a shriek of feedback.

"Holy Cripes!" old Roberta Chance complained into Irene's ear. "They're turning up the volume!" You're right, Irene thought as she nodded to her mother-in-law, who sat next to her at a center table. The kids and their loud music are taking over. They want the adults to go home.

Then the band began "Jumpin' Jack Flash" with the same corny bounce that had filled "The Hokey Pokey" ten minutes earlier. But by the first chorus, the singer howled into the microphone, the drummer beat hard and fast, and the guitarist cut a jagged edge that echoed through the hall. Irene watched the dance floor fill quickly. Girls dropped their shoes along the walls and hiked up their long skirts to dance more freely. Boys, with loose neckties and rolled shirt sleeves, followed the girls and threw themselves into the music. Couples danced apart, apparently ignoring one another. How can they enjoy that? Irene wondered, they're not even touching!

Irene saw Charlotte, her son's bride, unpin her veil and drape it over a chair. Then she skipped weightlessly to meet Bobby, the boy in the blue tuxedo. And Irene spotted her daughter Cathy, spinning with her arms raised, her glasses missing, and her white corsage drooping on her powder blue bridesmaid's dress. She danced with her brother David. Now free of his jacket, cummerbund and bow tie, he moved with crisp, choppy motions like gym class calisthenics. Scanning the crowd, Irene could pick out three more of her children. Jeffrey (in his mutton chop sideburns) attempted a clumsy jitterbug with his girlfriend Karen. Mary and Joan, the two younger girls, smiled broadly as they danced with mop-headed boys whose jackets flapped loosely on their tall, slim bodies. Even her little girls were growing up, drawn irresistibly away from her. Her children would be gone before she knew it, so she should make the most of nights like these. She remembered that she wanted a family portrait of everyone dressed for the wedding. But time was getting short; she'd better round everyone up before the reception was over.

Irene sighed and turned to her mother-in-law. Ravaged by cancer, Roberta Chance looked 80, though she was only 67. Her cane leaned against the table, and, the corsage of white orchids seemed huge on her sunken chest. Irene thought of her own mother, dead from cancer two years now, saw her pale, wasted figure in a white hospital bed, with a translucent tube coming out of her nose. Missing her mother, Irene reached over to pat Roberta's hand.

Then Roberta leaned toward Irene and yelled into her ear so she could be heard over the music. "This has been a lovely wedding, dear," she said. Roberta's loud, strained voice sounded familiar to Irene. They talked by telephone every Wednesday, and Roberta still thought she had to shout for long distance. "I love to see the young ones enjoying themselves."

"Everyone's having a good time," Irene said. But when she looked across the hall and saw Bobby and Charlotte-- their smooth, round faces flushed from dancing -- she felt uneasy. What are these kids getting themselves into? She shook her head and shouted over the racket to Roberta. "I hope this will give the kids a good start."

"Did they get a whole lot of money?" Roberta opened her eyes wide and smiled broadly to reveal her three remaining teeth.

"Bobby's coat was jammed with envelopes," Irene reported. "And David handed Joe a stack of cards a couple of inches thick. Everyone has been so generous."

"So I'll be a great-grandma by Christmas!" old Roberta laughed, and squeezed Irene's hand with a hot, damp grip.

"No, ma, they didn't have to get married," Irene said and shook her head to defend her son. Then the band stopped playing and the kids filed from the dance floor past their table. Irene lowered her voice and leaned toward Roberta. "As far as I know," she said, "Charlotte's not pregnant."

"I'll never understand these kids," Roberta laughed. "Why don't they wait till they grow up?"

"I'm the wrong one to ask," Irene sighed. "They're in love."

"Oh bullcorn! They just want to sleep together!"

"Ma!"

"Well, make sure I get copies of all the pictures," Roberta said and smacked her lips over her jaws. "You know how I love to keep pictures of everything. I even have pictures of your wedding, Irene, of all those crazy kids at your mother's house on Portage Street, when you and my Joe got married before you knew any better, remember? I love those pictures, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, Ma."

"My favorite is the picture of you with your Dad, Irene. He was so tall and distinguished-looking with that perfectly white hair, even then, and here standing next to him is this pretty young brunette in a wedding dress. You were looking at the camera, Irene, but your old man was looking at you."

"My father loved me in his own way," Irene said softly.

"Of course, he did. In his way. Well, make sure I get all these pictures that fat young photographer is taking. My, doesn't he have a weight problem?"

"Don't we all!" Irene laughed, thinking of herself being photographed at her wedding. She was 17 then and weighed 120, 26 years and one hundred pounds ago.

On the opposite wall, a clock hung from the claws of a gilded eagle. It read ten after ten. The reception would be over soon and the family's first wedding would be just a memory. If Irene was going to have a family picture made, now was the time to round everyone up.

"Excuse me, Ma. Now that the band's taking a break, I'd like to get your fat photographer to take a family portrait for me."

"Good luck at rounding up all them little Indians!"

Irene looked across the dance floor and saw Mary and Joan talking with their teenage dance partners, all arms, legs and wild hair. Mary gathered her full bridesmaid's dress and lifted it off the floor as she smiled, tilted her head and laughed. A lovely young girl with dark, wavy hair and big hazel eyes, Mary held the boys' attention and she knew it. And as usual, Joan was in the background, hoping that the boys would notice her, too.

The white dress with the puffy sleeves was probably the wrong choice for Joanie, Irene concluded. It was too long and shapeless, and made her look like a child compared to her older sister. And it was clear that even the boy who'd been dancing with Joan, a blond kid with braces and entirely too much hair, could not keep his eyes off Mary. Irene's heart went out to the younger girl, and she was glad she was rescuing Joan from this uncomfortable situation.

As Irene approached her daughters, she told herself not to come across like a mother bossing her little girls. Treat them like adults, she told herself, but when she heard Mary giggling, Irene spoke with her natural tone of command, the one voice that would get their attention. "Mary! Joan!"

Joanie pretended not to hear, and glanced to her older sister to see how Mary would react to being interrupted by their mother. Mary, skilled at aggravation, continued talking to the tall boy just long enough for her mother to take another deep breath, but as Irene began to speak, Mary cut her off.

"What is it, Mom?"

"Now that there's a break in the music, I want the photographer to take a family portrait of the Chances."

"Okay, fine," Mary shrugged.

"Well, I need you and Joanie to help round everyone up."

"Why don't you just announce it on the microphone?" Mary suggested, and gave Irene a how-can-you-be-so-dumb look.

"Because the little boys are playing out in the hallway, and Cathy and your big brothers just went into the bar. And I don't even know where your father is."

"But Mom, we just started talking. I mean we were actually having a conversation!"

"Mary, this is important to me," Irene said, then addressed the boys, "You guys understand, don't you? This may be the last time our whole family is all together. You'll let me borrow the girls for a few minutes, won't you?" Trapped, the boys could only nod in agreement.

"Oh, all right. Anything you say," Mary said and rolled her eyes up to the ceiling. "See you guys a little later. Come on Joanie, let's get this over with."

"Okay," Joan said, and as her sister lingered to say a few more words to her friend, Joan was already running toward the side room where the American Legion had their bar, to find David, Cathy, Bob and Jeff.

Cathy sat at the bar between David and his skinny friend Craig Sands. As she put down her beer glass and squinted to bring the 'OLD STYLE' sign behind the bartender into focus, she wondered whether she should break down and put on her glasses. They were right there, in the clutch purse at her elbow; she could put them on and in a second her misery would be over. And who was she with, anyway? Her brother David didn't care what she looked like, and Craig was a geek whose opinion didn't matter to her in the least. So why not be sensible and put on her glasses? Well, for one thing, someone nice might ask her to dance, and for another, she'd feel like an old lady opening her purse and just putting on her glasses when she wasn't even trying to read anything. Except that stupid beer sign. Just keep 'em in your purse, then. They're there if you need them.

Craig Sands was talking past her to David, about how hard the work was at Northwestern's medical school. Cathy couldn't understand how he could have gotten into med school in the first place. His main accomplishment at Central Catholic had been to streak along the sidelines during the homecoming game dressed only in a jock strap, a scapular and a ski mask. And Cathy remembered how David had been the star in those days, all-conference half-back, student council vice-president, and campus heart-throb to boot. Three years behind him, Cathy had been convinced that David would become a brain surgeon or a flanker for the Chicago Bears. How could a guy with so much talent start college pre-med, graduate with a degree in physical education, and end up as a coach? And how could a total jerk like Craig wind up in medical school? Cathy was determined that she wouldn't repeat her brother's mistake. She had worked too hard to get into Radcliffe to blow her chance for success.

By the time Cathy tuned back in, the conversation had shifted to Bobby, her other brother who had blown it.

"How old is Bobby, anyway?" Craig asked. His face was too blurry for her to see his expression, but by the tone of his voice, Cathy guessed he was frowning.

"Nineteen," Cathy answered for Dave. "He won't be twenty until April."

"I can't believe he did this," Craig groaned.

"You're not the only one," Cathy said and drank the rest of her beer. It went to her head immediately, and she decided that she had passed the point of feeling good. Now she noticed the affect of the alcohol, and it bothered her.

"Why did he do it, Dave?" Craig asked. "Why did a bright kid like Bobby get married so young?"

"Bobby doesn't know what the fuck he's doing," David said loudly, and his voice was slurred. Looking at him without her glasses, she saw a big reddish cloud, topped with pale blond hair, above the angular white mass of his shirt. "Bobby's a scared kid," David continued. "He got married because he didn't know what else to do. He screwed up."

"That's not the usual direction," Craig laughed.

Ignoring the geek, Cathy said to her brother, "I agree with you. He made a mistake. But I think he cares about Charlotte, Dave. I think Bobby wants to make a life for himself."

"But he's stupid to get married, Cathy. The way they fight all the time? Shit, he's out of his mind," David complained. Cathy put her arm around him and squeezed the thick, hard muscles across his back. Her two closest brothers had blown it; what could she do but sympathize?

"Come on, Catherine," David said. "I'll buy you another beer."

"Well, okay," Cathy said, thinking that it was really Charlotte's dad who was paying for it, "just one more."

"Don't try to keep up with the Coach," Craig Sands laughed, and his fuzzy shape nodded toward David. "He holds the world's record."

"For what?" Cathy asked.

But before she could find out, someone tapped her on the shoulder, a guy with a firm, assertive touch that didn't feel nice to her, and she turned slowly to face him. He was tall, with very short hair and a tan complexion, and he leaned so close to her, she wanted to push him away. The young man seemed familiar, but without her glasses, Cathy couldn't make out his face.

"Oh hi, Barry," she heard David say. "How ya doing?"

"Barry?" Cathy said and grabbed for her glasses. "I thought you were in Vietnam."

"I came back," he said dryly.

"I see that," Cathy sighed as she put her glasses on and pressed them in place with her thumb. It was Barry all right, but he was emaciated, like a drug addict, so thin she imagined she could see his skull behind his face.

"I thought maybe we could dance or something," he said, "once the band starts playing."

"I don't know, Barry," Cathy said, at once relieved that he was alive and terrified that he'd want something from her. Barry had been her boyfriend during senior year of high school. A quiet, gentle boy, he had played Simon and Garfunkel songs on his guitar and had written sweet, awful poems to her. Now he had a crew cut and a dazed look in his eyes. He might have been a different person, but Cathy recognized Barry's style. He was underdressed for the occasion, in blue jeans and a Hawaiian shirt with "DMZ" embroidered in day glow orange on the pocket. Three years ago, his casual clothes would have made a refreshing statement for her, but now it seemed that Barry was making light of Bobby's wedding. She said, "You know I don't like to dance that much."

"You look great," Barry said and Cathy felt embarrassed that David had heard him.

"No, I'm a mess," Cathy disagreed and unpinned the dead orchid from her dress, dropped it in an ashtray and straightened the polyester skirt across her lap.

"I missed you," he said.

"That's nice," Cathy replied stupidly and wished she could run away. She felt his focused gaze, but when she met his eyes, she had to turn away. He was too intense, too demanding. Barry had wanted her to stay in Illinois and marry him. He would have worked at Inland Steel in North Chicago and had picked out a trailer in Park City. And -- except for the trailer -- her Dad had thought getting married was a good idea, because Barry was kind to her and was good with children. If she had gone along with their plan, Catherine would have been the family's first foolish young bride, two years ago.

"Thanks for writing," Barry grunted.

"Your mom gave me your address," she said and knew he was trying to make her feel guilty. She had written to him only twice. Her letters were so short, stiff and formal, she wasn't surprised when he never answered them. But what did he want from her, anyway? She had never said she loved him.

"I'm only home for a week," Barry said. "I go to Camp LeJuene next. I'll train grunts for a while."

"Will you?" Cathy said, not knowing where the camp was, nor understanding what he meant by grunts. She wondered what horrible things he had seen and done in the past two years, but she couldn't bring herself to ask him. Mostly she wanted Barry to go away, and she felt guilty about that, too.

"Glad to see you didn't get shot," David commented, as blunt as ever.

"No, I didn't get shot," Barry said and rubbed his forearm where a bright pink scar underlined a blue tattoo that said, 'ROCK N ROLL.' "But I caught some shrapnel from a rocket."

"No kidding?" Dave asked excitedly, with a boy's fascination for war. "Was it bad?"

"Not too bad," Barry muttered and maneuvered himself into the space between Cathy's stool and Craig's.

"Bartender," David called, "a beer for my sister's friend."

Cathy kicked Dave's ankle and he glared at her in surprise. With her glasses on, she was disappointed to see that Dave --with red eyes and face pouring with sweat -- was too drunk to understand that she wanted Barry to go away.

Cathy turned from Barry to the bartender. Now she could see he was a gray-faced man, a veteran, too, of an earlier, less ambiguous war, who frowned at the young people around him. Was he jealous? Or just sick of waiting on people? He poured a mug of draft for Barry and set it down next to her elbow. As Barry moved to pick it up, she felt surrounded.

"If you don't wanna dance," he said to her, just above a whisper, "why don't we go someplace else?"

"Barry," she said, "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Cathy, if only you knew--"

Then Joanie squeezed through the crowd at the bar, a shoulder-high figure in a fluffy white dress. Her shrill, surprised voice called to Cathy and David. "Hey guys, there you are!"

"Oh, hi, Joan," Cathy said in relief as she jumped from the barstool and away from Barry. "Do you want a Coke or something, Sweetie?"

"No thanks. Mom wants us all on the dance floor right now. The photographer is going to take a picture of all the Chances."

"What a great idea!" Cathy exclaimed over-dramatically and tugged David's arm. "Let's go, Dave. We can't keep the photographer waiting. Excuse us, Barry. It was nice seeing you."

At a table along the wall, Bobby knelt on a chair and talked with six heavy, middle aged women. They were aunts, neighbors and friends with stiff new hairdos in white, gray, blue or henna. All of them smiled, enjoying Bobby's attention.

"I'm glad all of you could come," Bobby said, "I hope everyone's having a good time." After champagne and whiskey and beer, Bobby felt light headed, detached from the scene. It was like a dream in which he was wearing a blue tuxedo at his own wedding, and somehow he was floating in mid-air between the furniture and the ceiling.

"That was a pretty short wedding, Bob," his dad's Aunt Eleanor complained good-naturedly. "Holy Jesus, why didn't youze have a Mass!"

"It was too hot," Bobby answered and blinked slowly in an attempt to look sober. "Did you feel how hot it was in that church?"

"It wasn't hot, Robert," Mrs. Kendall, a neighbor, added with a giggle, "you were just squirming, poor dear."

"It must be the tuxedo," Bobby laughed.

"I still think you're only half married because you left out the Mass," Eleanor pressed him. "You little devil, you've always had trouble on your mind."

"If you remember your catechism, Ellie," her younger sister Roseanne pointed out and puffed her round cheeks with authority, "Matrimony is a sacrament by itself."

"Rosie, you spend too much time cleaning churches with the Altar and Rosary Society!" Aunt Eleanor complained. "You know all the rules, but you never have any fun."

"Ellie, you're full of baloney!" Rose laughed.

"Rose, you're boring, you always were!" Eleanor said, then turned to Bobby. "We're all interested in you, Robert," she said. "We've all got one question that we're dying to ask you, even my sister Roseanne, and I'm the only old bitch out of the bunch who's brassy enough to ask you."

"Oh yeah? That sounds like some question. What is it?"

"Robert," she said and raised her eyebrows to tease him, "are you still a virgin?"

This brought laughter from around the table, and Bobby blushed hotly. If the back seat at the drive-in movie counted, he was no virgin. But he had pulled out before he came, and shot sperm onto the seat. Any day now Dad would ask him about the spot on the upholstery.

"Why no," Bobby said at last, and cleared his throat, "not exactly."

"Not exactly!" the women around the table exclaimed and clapped and giggled hilariously.

"Just what I thought!" Eleanor concluded. "A virgin."

"I didn't say that," Bobby said and tried to leave, but his great-aunt was holding hands with him now, patting his wrist, too.

"You didn't have to, Robert, you poor thing. Your dear Aunt Ellie can tell a helpless virgin a mile off. And on your wedding night, too. It's just so sweet."

"I'm looking forward to it," Bobby said.

"Well, I have some advice for you," Aunt Ellie said, pulling him down toward her ear. "Put that drink down and don't have any more tonight."

"Why? It's my party."

"Drinking may help your desire, kiddo, but it doesn't do a thing for your performance. I know from experience with my late husband, God rest his soul."

"Okay, okay, fine," Bobby said and put his drink down.

"Wonderful. You learn quick, boy. You remind me of your dad."

"Thanks."

"My second piece of advice is to go slow. Charlotte won't appreciate a quickie, if you know what I mean. She won't appreciate three or four quickies as much as once when you take time to really enjoy it."

"Really?"

"A woman knows."

"Thanks. You wouldn't be trying to trick me, would you? You've tricked me before with the soap that turned black, remember. Before I knew it, my hands and face were black."

"That's what you get for coming to my house on April Fools. But believe me, I'm not fooling around tonight, Robert. And another thing, you shouldn't rush into having a family too quick. Don't make the same mistake we all made! No matter what the Holy Father says, you don't need to make things hard on yourselves from the beginning. If you don't have any rubbers ask your brothers. They're probably carrying a drug store full. Or is Charlotte on the pill yet? Is she?"

"Ellie, you're shameful!" Aunt Roseanne squealed. As Bobby turned away to hide his embarrassment, he patted the package of condoms in his jacket pocket, a gift from David, who presumably had gone through many such packets since he'd left home.

A minute later, David appeared beside Bobby, put his arm around his shoulder and squeezed him. "Don't worry, Bob," he said sympathetically, "things will be okay."

"Who's worried?" Bobby shrugged and turned from Dave's flushed face to see Cathy right behind him, leaning forward and staring with concern over her glasses.

"You'll make it," Cathy nodded.

"Make what?" Bobby asked and smiled uneasily.

"Hey," David said and waved a bundle of envelopes in his face, "what do you want me to do with all these cards?"

"I don't know, Dave," Bob shrugged. "My pockets are stuffed already."

"Do you want me to hold onto them?" Dave asked.

"No way! We'll need that money on our honeymoon," Bob said. "Why don't you open them and just give me the cash."

"Good idea," Dave agreed, shoved the stack between his knees, extracted a single envelope, and started to tear it open.

"Hey wait!" Cathy called and snatched the card from David's hands. "You can't do that! You'll have to write thank you notes, Bob. How are you gonna do that if you don't know how much they gave?"

"Right, right," Bobby nodded.

"Come on, Dave, gimme those," Cathy insisted. "Look, he's still got room in his pockets. I'll make these fit."

So Catherine took the envelopes and jammed some of them into the hip pockets on both sides of his jacket, stretching the fabric and mashing his condoms. Then she reached inside his coat to cram more cards into the pocket above his heart.

Then Catherine hugged him, kissed his cheek and sighed into his ear. "Good luck, Bobby," she said. "If there's anything I can do, please call me." When she pulled away from him, she patted his shoulder nervously, took off her glasses and snapped them into her little white purse. Bobby saw that Cathy had tears in her eyes, which surprised him. She didn't usually cry at weddings.

"What's wrong, Cathy?" he asked.

"I never expected you to be first," she said and fought to keep from crying out loud.

"Are you jealous?" he laughed and made her smile with him.

"Not exactly," she said and shook her head as she kept smiling. "Hey, Mom wants to take this picture of everyone. I gotta go comb my hair."

"Good idea," he teased her. "You're a mess!"

As Cathy and Dave left Bobby, Irene came up behind him. "Come on, Bobby, I'm trying to round everyone up for a family portrait."

"Sure, Mom," Bobby said and when he turned to greet her, he smiled from ear to ear, relieved that his brother and sister had moved on. "How do I look?"

Irene held her son by the shoulders to see how she could make him look better in the photograph. His abundant brown hair was wild; no trace of his part was left. His bow tie was twisted out of alignment, and the pockets on his blue jacket were so filled with envelopes that they bulged out around his hips and made him look as clumsy as a kid in his first set of football pads. Most of all, he looked young to her. It had only been a year since he'd taken Charlotte to the senior prom, and he didn't seem any more mature or self-confident in the tuxedo now than he had then. Irene knew she should be happy for Bobby and Charlotte, but as she saw how boyishly attractive he was, her strongest emotion was fear. What are these kids getting themselves into?

"Let me fix your hair," Irene said, and began combing it with her fingertips. As she worked, he batted her hand away three times, as if he were shooing a fly, but she kept raking with her nails and finally restored his part. "Your dad used to have hair like that," Irene said and remembered Joe's wavy forelock, suspended over his face with a dab of hair cream.

"Not likely," Bobby winked as she leveled the ends of his tie and pulled his lapels straight down along his chest.

"Can you do something about those pockets?" she asked. "My, you got a lot of loot!"

"They won't show up in the picture," Bobby said. "Not with everyone else crowding around."

"I suppose you're right. Now hurry, Bob. Let's get everyone together before the band starts playing again."

Irene spotted Jeffrey and his girlfriend Karen, a few tables away, listening to Irene's older brother Charlie.

"I came this close to dying yesterday," Charlie said, held up his thumb and forefinger, a millimeter apart. "A kid in my sixth-grade science class pulled out a gun and fired a shot at me. Blasted a hole as big as my fist in the blackboard right next to my head. My ears are still ringing. Put a crater right in the middle of my diagram of the solar system. Lucky he only had one bullet. He kept pulling the trigger, maybe ten times, then he broke down crying. The other kids ran out of the room and Pablo was crying. I took the gun from him, had him sit down. He was still crying and I didn't know if he was upset about trying to shoot me or because he'd missed."

"Why'd he shoot at you?" Jeffrey asked.

"I don't know. Pablo is a good student. I thought he liked me. I taught three of his brothers. I don't know why he wanted to kill me."

"Is he in jail?" Karen asked.

"No. Juvenile authorities gave him back to his parents."

"Sorry to interrupt," Irene said, leaning to tap Jeff on the shoulder. He wore a shiny gray suit given to her by a neighbor. Irene thought it looked very nice on him, but Jeff had complained about wearing hand-me-downs. "I'm trying to get all the Chances out on the dance floor so the photographer can take a family portrait."

"Irene," Charlie said, grinning with a full set of smoke-stained teeth, "I want a copy of that picture to remind me how wrong I was."

"About what, Charlie?"

"I never would have believed that you'd make it this far with the ten little Indians. I didn't give you a prayer ten years ago."

"I didn't think you prayed, Charlie."

"Well, no, of course not, but you know what I mean. You've done the impossible. And if Mom were still alive, she'd be filling out applications for your sainthood."

"Charlie, did you fall off the wagon again?"

"No," he shook his head and lifted his glass. "Pure Coca-Cola!"

"Well, I've got to round up the rest of the kids," Irene said, turning away quickly, annoyed that he was using their mother's memory to mock her. Charlie had always helped Irene, with money, a used washing machine, and once even a side of beef. And Charlie had taken care of Mom, had given her a place to stay, paid her bills, and brought her to the doctor before she died. But Charlie did not understand Irene one bit, and when he talked so sarcastically, she was sure he resented her success at raising a family.

In the hallway, Joanie found Billy, Frank, Tom and Jimmy sliding on the linoleum in their socks. Their cheeks were flushed, their clothes were twisted and coming loose, and they all had circles of dust on their knees.

"Come on boys, get a move on!" Joanie called in a fair imitation of their mother. "Put your shoes on this instant. We have to get our picture taken!"

"In a minute," Billy puffed, out of breath. "When the game's over."

"Yeah, Joanie," said Jim, as he ran down the hallway, dropped into a skier's crouch, and slid across the tile until he nearly hit the wall. "See ya beat that, Frank."

"Come on, guys! Mom's waiting!" Joan insisted. "Where did you put your shoes?"

"They're in the boy's bathroom," Billy challenged her. "Try and get them!"

"You little creeps are gonna get it!" Joan shouted, and paced in front of the men's room door, wondering if she should go in to retrieve the shoes. She was about to go back to her mother to tell on the boys when the ladies' room door opened behind her, and she heard Cathy ask, "Hey, Joan, what's the problem here?"

"Cathy, Mom wants everybody for a family picture--"

"I know. You told me already, and thanks a lot!" Cathy laughed in relief and looked around to check for Barry.

"The little boys won't listen to me, Catherine," Joanie said and clenched her fists with frustration. Joan looked cute in her anger and Cathy remembered how frustrated she would get with David and Bobby. Once they had built a tree fort in the woods across the street, then declared that no girls were allowed inside it. When the boys climbed onto the platform of two-by-fours, they pulled up the rope ladder so Cathy couldn't join them. "No fair!" she had shouted, but the louder she complained the more acorns her brothers dropped on her head.

"We'll fix that," Cathy said, and turned to her four little brothers as they slid on the tile. "Hey you guys, time out!" she spoke sharply and snagged Tom by his earlobe is and applied pressure with her thumb. "Tom, go in the bathroom and get those shoes."

"Hey, quit it!" Tom shouted and swatted her hand away. Released, he hurried into the bathroom. (I'm on the home stretch, Catherine told herself. The summer's almost over. Two weeks from now I'll be in Cambridge!)

"Just one more game, Catherine," Jimmie said, ran down the hall, then slid on the tile until he hit the wall. "Oops! Too far."

"Okay, that's enough. We're supposed to take a picture," Catherine reminded them, lifted Jimmie from the floor and dusted his trousers off with quick swats from her hand. He was almost too big for her to lift that way, but he was still her baby brother, so Cathy hugged him for a second, then slapped his backside.

Meanwhile, Tom emerged from the lavatory with an armload of shoes and dumped them on top of Cathy's feet. As she hopped clear, she ordered her brothers, "Put your shoes on and let's go! You too, Billy. Tom. Francis."

"Frank's the name. Not Francis."

"Okay. Tie up those laces."

"It's no fair," said Billy, the oldest, the tallest, but the least self-assured of the little Indians. "I was winning, and you stopped the game!"

"Big cheese!" Frank teased, "You're an all-star floor slider!"

"It's no fair," Billy growled. "I was winning!"

"I'm sorry, Bill," Cathy said and regained her composure enough to at least sound sympathetic. She vented her annoyance by buttoning his shirt and tucking it in. "This picture is important to Mom," she reminded him. "Come on, let me comb your hair."

Cathy opened her purse and pulled out a long white comb and reached awkwardly to straighten Billy's thick brown hair as he tied his shoes. Then Cathy stood beside Frank and combed his hair, which was as light and fine as corn silk.

"I can do that myself, you know," Frank said and looked up at her with a disgusted frown. Of course he could comb his own hair, he was starting the third grade.

"Okay, here," Cathy said, and handed her brother the comb. "Tom, stand up and tuck in your shirt. Let's not look like orphans, you guys. That's it, you're catching on."

Now all four boys were pushing the shirt tails into their slacks, and Cathy winced as she noticed the places where they had spilled food and soda on their shirtfronts. Who would have guessed the clothes were new? Yet Cathy and her mother had bought them all new outfits at Sears that week, for the wedding and to get them ready for school.

"Okay, are we ready guys?" Cathy asked and gave them the thumbs-up sign.

"Yeah, we're ready." Four small thumbs in the air.

"Do they pass inspection, Joanie?" Cathy asked her sister.

Joan shrugged, pouted her lips and gave a reluctant nod. "They look all right."

"Great. Now, let's march into the next room."

"March?" Jimmie laughed. "Come on, guys. Let's race. On your marks--"

"No," Cathy insisted, "walk."

"Get set. Go!"

And the four boys tore down the corridor, slapping their shoes on the floor, then swung on the door frame into the reception hall.

"I'm sorry, but my brothers drive me crazy," Joanie confessed. "If I don't grow up fast, they'll put me in the loony bin."

"Don't grow up too fast, sweetheart," Cathy said, then used the comb to adjust Joanie's hair before they went back into the ballroom.

In the reception hall, Joe Chance made small-talk with Bobby's in-laws and tried to judge how his son would get along with these people. Joe himself was having a hard time with the Denbys. After five minutes, they had run out of things to say.

"Well, the Cubs look like they're choking again," Henry Denby said at last, but he smiled and nodded with understanding, a true Cub fan.

"I almost gave up on them last year," Joe said, relieved that the silence was broken. "When the Mets caught them from behind, I knew they were hopeless. Doomed to lose."

"They'll win," Denby laughed philosophically, "before we die they'll win another pennant."

"I don't believe that," Joe said and watched as Denby finished another drink. The guy had been tossing down one gin and tonic after another all night. Beads of sweat had broken out on his forehead, a pinkness ringed his eyes, and he sprayed saliva when he spoke. Denby wasn't a mean drunk, a little messy, sure. Still, he was pretty darn drunk and on his way to getting a lot worse. But who cared anyway? The guy's daughter had been married today -- a shock enough-- and he was paying a small fortune for this reception. He deserved a few drinks...But they were talking about baseball, weren't they? Joe said, "The Cubs won't win a pennant until they put lights on Wrigley Field."

"Well, you're right, lights would boost their attendance," Henry nodded. "But night baseball would take the thrill away. Now going to ball games is like playing hooky. When you sneak off for the afternoon to see the Cubs play, it's a real escape. Suddenly, you're free!"

"You do that?" Joe asked in disbelief. "You leave work and go to the ballpark?"

"Henry has a pair of season tickets for the Cubs," Dorothy Denby informed him. "For his business."

"Any time you want to use my seats let me know," Henry said without enthusiasm.

Joe Chance knew the offer was a hollow one, mandatory because Dorothy had stupidly mentioned the tickets. "Thanks," Joe nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Of course, my salesman keeps the seats filled with customers on weekends," Denby continued, confirming that a harmless discussion about sports had wandered into forbidden territory. "But any time during the week you want them, they're yours."

"Sure, sure."

"I'm serious," Henry said, "just give me a call."

"Next time I have some vacation--"

"Great, Joe," Mrs. Denby gushed. "We love the Cubs. Oh, here comes Irene!"

"Oh, there you are, dear!" Irene called to her husband. "I've been looking all over for you. I'm trying to gather up the kids for a family portrait."

"We should have taken that picture four hours ago, before the Indians messed up their clothes," Joe said.

"So why should today be any different?" Irene laughed. "Come on, you get up too, Joseph Alan."

"No problem. Was I arguing, dear?"

"Hello, Irene," Mrs. Denby said, finding a break in the conversation, "are you having a good time?"

"Yes. This is a great wedding, Dorothy. You planned it just right. I'm afraid my banshees ate you out of house and home."

"There was plenty of food for everyone," Dorothy said. "Did you get some wedding cake? Be sure you get plenty of pieces to take home."

"Thanks. I've been too busy yacking to even think about cake," Irene said.

"Take lots. There's plenty," Dorothy repeated.

"And it's already paid for," Henry said. "Don't let it go to waste."

"Oh, there's Cathy and Joan," Irene said as she saw her daughters emerge behind the boys from the relative darkness of the hallway. With short commands and hurried snaps of her fingers, Cathy herded the boys through the crowds to the dance floor. Then she walked along the front row of tables to Irene.

"That's about everyone, isn't it?" Cathy asked her mother.

"Almost," Irene said. "Thanks for rounding them up, dear heart. What happened to your glasses?"

"They're in my purse, Mom. I just took them off," Cathy insisted.

"Well, at least they're not lost, dear," Irene said, and then put her arm around Cathy's trim shoulders. "I'm really going to miss you when you go back to college," she continued. "You've been a big help to me all summer. I really appreciate it."

"Don't mention it," Cathy said and hugged her mother. As always, Irene was big and soft, and she seemed to enjoy the hug.

"You don't know how much I've enjoyed our talks," Irene said. "When you're not around, I never have a chance to discuss books or ideas. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too, Mom," Cathy said and released her mother. Somehow because she had been away at school, Cathy's relationship with her mother had changed for the better. They exchanged books and talked for hours about Dostoevsky and Pearl Buck. Catherine most enjoyed the talks when they disagreed about how women should lead their lives. To Irene, marriage was the central fact of her existence, while Catherine found it hard to believe that two people could love each other for so long without drifting apart. Religion was important to Irene, too. She followed all the rules of the Catholic Church -- her tradition -- even though she frequently doubted the existence of God. Catherine had argued that organized religion was controlled by men to deprive women of dignity and power. ("Oh, come on!" Irene had laughed). Irene thought Women's Lib was worthwhile. Her daughters should have every opportunity her sons had, but to her there was no job on earth more important than raising children. For Catherine, motherhood wasn't enough. When your kids grew up, what would you do with the rest of your life? Clean house? She had done plenty of that this summer, too. Along with the laundry, cooking and her job as a waitress at Anthony's.

Now Cathy was glad she had her separate life at school. She imagined herself sitting in Lowell House at her big wooden desk, looking up from her typewriter and out the window to watch two boys play Frisbee over the fallen leaves in the courtyard. Bach's Brandenburg concertos played on her roommate's stereo, and she was writing a paper about Jane Austen's book EMMA (which she hoped to read this fall).

"Well," Irene said, "I'd better drag your father over there for the picture, the old stick in the mud!" Then she tugged Joe's arm. "Come on, Joseph."

But he refused to be hurried, held back so she had to tug him toward the dance floor.

"Oh, I'm so glad we're taking this picture," Irene said. "With the kids going their separate ways, who knows when we'll all be together again?"

"We'll have plenty of times like this," Joe said. "Nine to be exact. Bobby is the first one to lose his mind--"

"The way you talk, everyone would think I've been horrible to you, Joe. Have you seen the photographer? I forgot to talk to the photographer! What's happening to my mind?"

"Well, Irene, why did you make us all jump up," Joe griped, "if you haven't even mentioned it to the photographer?"

"He's still here, I'm sure, Joe," she said uncertainly. "I'm sure he'll turn up."

Then David, red-faced, muscular and sweaty, came out of the bar room, towing the photographer by his camera strap through the thick, smoky air. The photographer was a tall man, with a physique like a giant pear, a dark, scraggly beard, and heavy black eyeglasses. He stumbled behind David and cradled a Hasselblad with both hands, as if it were filled with nitroglycerin.

"Thank you, David," Irene cried in relief and joy. "I was looking for the photographer."

"I was loading my camera," the photographer grunted and belched quietly.

"And drinking whiskey through a straw," David said.

"No harm in that. It's a wedding, isn't it?"

"I just hope you can hold the camera steady."

"I beg your pardon!"

"Don't mind him," Cathy intervened, with her own beer-thick voice. "He's drunk. What a neat camera!"

"Thanks. It was my Dad's."

Irene waved her big, rounded arms, her chapped hands with the single ring, and she called out to her children. "Come on, older kids, you get in back. Mary, Joan, little boys, you stand in front. That's it. That's great. Joe, you stand with me over to the right."

"That's left," Joe corrected her.

"Right. The left. Fine," she said but felt a void as she squinted toward the clumsy photographer who held the box-camera against his belly. "Someone's missing. Who's missing?"

"Charlotte's missing," laughed Joe. "That's who."

"Who's missing?"

"Charlotte."

"Of course! What's happening to my mind? Charlotte! Where's Charlotte?"

"Over here!" a voice called out, and a slim-figured girl in a white cloud of fabric waved from the other end of the hall. She was leaning over her great-grandmother, a woman so doubled with age that her head was barely visible over the table, a gray sphere above the white paper tablecloth.

"We need you for the picture!" Irene called in her long distance yell, and her children, unsynchronized, yelled "Charlotte!" at least ten times.

"Coming!" Charlotte kissed the old woman's cheek, then lifted her skirt above her ankles and ran between the tables, burst onto the dance floor, and joined Bobby in front of the group. They clasped hands beneath their faces, looked into each other's eyes, bent to kiss, hesitated, then kissed anyway, full and hard, as the Chances whistled and applauded.

"I know just where you two fit in," Irene said and took one newlywed in each hand. "Right here in the middle. Between Jeff and Dave. Nice." Irene nodded as she stood in front of her family, feeling that

she belonged with them. This was her family, her life. "It's not what I imagined it would be," she said. "But it makes a very nice picture."

"But you're not in it, Mom!" Bobby called, and as her children laughed, Irene moved into place beside her husband.

"That's great, hold it," the photographer said, braced his Hassie against his gut and took three frames in quick succession. "Got it!" he said. "It's on film."

"Thank you. Thank you so much!" Irene said. And with a warmth of feeling she could not explain Irene kissed the photographer's cheek. He seemed used to being kissed at weddings and he hugged her graciously. Then Irene turned to her husband, ready to go home.