

CHAPTER ONE

Yesterday, I received a clipped-out newspaper article at my psychiatric clinic. With it was a brief note from a neighbor who lived along the road adjacent to the farm on which I grew up. It said, "Dear John, I thought you'd like to know. Had to look you up in the Chicago phone book at the library. Yours truly, Harold Panzerov." The subject of the article was my best friend, C.K., who was sixteen the last time I saw him. The clipping was from last week's *South Bend Daily News*. It reads as follows:

Clive Kendrick Bookout, 45, a former resident of South Bend, with one week left on death row at the Indiana State Penitentiary, is scheduled to be put to death by lethal injection a week from today for the murder of a 12-year-old boy. Known as C.K., Bookout has two prior convictions for molesting a child when he was 18 and has been implicated in as many as 19 other sexual assaults against children. Five years ago he was convicted of molesting seven Indiana boys under the age of six. He was taking part in a work-release program when the murder occurred last year. He was born July 20, 1978 to Gloria Bookout Davis and Walter Bookout. Walter Bookout has been attempting to secure a Governor's pardon for Clive, but at this point he has been unsuccessful. Bookout is to be put to death at 7:20 AM next Tuesday, November 18th.

The first time I met C.K. was the most joyous day of my childhood. We were both pure, innocent, and unaware of the harm that had befallen us, I because I didn't remember and he because he didn't care.

I was six and a half years old in 1985, an only and lonely child. We lived on a small horse farm in northern Indiana, and my parents were both professionals, my mother a philosophy professor at the university and my father a clinical psychologist in Chicago. He commuted just twice a week, staying several nights at my grandmother's home in a Chicago suburb. I watched all the educational TV programs for kids, and although I was considered a precocious child, able to read before age four and capable of conversation with any adult, I recall longing for a brother, a close cousin, a neighbor, or even, God

forbid, a sister if she were my own age. Most of the children on *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*, and *The Electric Company* were accompanied by other kids during their activities. I wanted that too.

"It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood," sang Mr. Rogers on the TV. He was talking about pet rats. A skinny lady told him how smart they are. I wonder why he talks so slowly, I thought. I wanted to watch him forever.

I sat at Daddy's feet. He sat on the couch and read the Sunday paper. Mommy was supposed to be fixing breakfast in the kitchen, but I could hear her talking on the phone in there. I heard her hang up. "Oh, no! That was our last hope, and they—the Nicholoses—are going away for the day and can't take him either." She stood in the doorway with a pancake turner in her hand.

I'm bad. But that's good.

I wanted to be gone and wished I were at Grandma's house. She always wanted me. Mommy was beautiful with her long yellow hair. She had on jeans and a tee shirt. She looked mad, and I knew it was my fault. Gosh darn it. I knew I was bad. I squirmed. Maybe Daddy would know what to do.

He brought the newspaper down real slowly. He smiled a little. Then he nodded his head once. "Guess we can't go, then," he said and put the paper back up.

"Do you think we could take him along? I mean, if Ted and Judy wouldn't mind. But they would mind, huh, since they don't have kids?"

Daddy brought the paper down again. "How ridiculous. Expect a six-year-old to tag along for eighteen holes of golf?"

"Since I've never played eighteen holes of golf, I don't know. Couldn't he just walk along with us? Collect balls or something? I don't want to cancel this. It's our big chance to try golfing for real, not just the lessons. And with some very interesting people. What do our horoscopes say for today? Find them. In the entertainment section."

"That's where they belong," Daddy said. He smiled at me. "Let's see here. Leo, right?" Mommy sighed hard. "Plans with acquaintances go awry today. Make the most of time with family members, especially children. Jupiter in Virgo brings unexpected benefits." He winked at me. "Better call them and cancel. We'll do something else, just the three of us." He put his hand on my hair and messed it all up.

Looking back, I'm still amazed that my mother, with a doctorate in philosophy, let herself be influenced by daily astrological predictions, and further, that she didn't catch on that my father had made that one up. I could tell. But she took a deep breath, clenched the pancake turner, and returned to the kitchen phone.

Big, black Tucker came over to me and leaned his soft hard body against me. I fell over with him and hugged him. He licked my face real slow. He loved me and I loved him. *Black is the best color.* I wiped the dog spit on my shirt. I put my cheek against his neck. He rolled over so I could rub his belly. The fur was thin and soft. I found the right spot and rubbed faster. His back leg started to go. This always made me laugh. My mother said dogs think they're scratching their own itches.

Mommy brought breakfast out, so Daddy and I went to the table. She still looked mad, so I ate all my pancakes. I cleaned up every last piece. When she picked up my empty plate, she didn't notice how clean it was. I really was good. *We like you best when you're bad.* She started to walk away. Gosh darn it! Then I knew how to make her happy. I said, "Let's go for a walk down the dirt road. I'll ride my bike!"

My mother loved going for walks down the dirt road, which was really a country gravel road that was about two miles long and went past the north perimeter of our farm. It led past a couple of old cattle and sheep farms and a few newer houses, and ended at the four-lane bypass. Very few of the neighbors knew one another because our houses were so far apart. When we did encounter a neighbor, very little was said about the nearby town or what was going on in it. It was as though each family out here lived in its own little world.

I believe I'd just learned to ride my bike a week or so earlier. My mother had shamed me into doing it by proclaiming that most kids could ride a two-wheeler in kindergarten, and here I was about to enter second grade and couldn't do it yet. A whole week had gone by, and I hadn't ridden it a second time. I much preferred going to the library, working puzzles, and watching TV.

Mommy stopped. She had the plates in her hands. Her mad face started to smile. "Really?" she said. Her eyes got soft. "You want to try your bike again?"

I nodded hard. My stomach started to glow. I jumped up and down. She smiled bigger and got taller. "Leland, you'll come along, won't you?" I kept jumping. "Why are you so excited?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I said.

"Leland, Johnnie wants to try his bike again. Let's go!" She bounced into the kitchen. She bounced through the house and got everyone's shoes. Tucker started bouncing too, so Josie and Tilly woke up and bounced. They always knew when we were going out. Daddy still sat and read, but he was turning the pages faster. Mommy came

back and dropped Daddy's shoes by his feet. I was the first to have mine on. Velcro is faster than laces. Daddy set the paper down, but he kept reading it while he put his shoes on.

"Let's go, Leland!"

"Let's go, Daddy!"

The dogs ran to the front door, then back again. They whirled and twirled and ran to the door again. Mommy and I went to the door. Tucker was first in line. His tail wagged so hard it hit Josie and Tilly in their faces. Josie's and Tilly's tails whacked Mommy's legs. Daddy came down the hall. He tried to smile.

Mommy opened the door and the dogs ran out. The sun made sparks fly from their black coats. They whirled and twirled some more. Mommy got my bike out of the garage and we walked over to the dirt road. Daddy walked slower behind us.

"Here, Johnnie. Daddy and I will stay on either side of you until you get going." She held my bike for me. I got on. The gravel looked mean. I pushed on the left pedal, then the right one. Mommy ran sideways with her arms out, and so did Daddy.

I recall that my parents looked like some tropical birds performing a mating dance. Their arms were stretched out like wings, and they ran faster and faster as I picked up speed on my bicycle. When I hit the deep gravel on the edge of the road, the handlebars turned perpendicular to my forward direction, and I crashed to the ground.

My parents instructed me early on that I was never to swear. However, they said that if I was pretty angry, I could say, "Darn." If I was angrier yet, I could say, "Gosh darn." And if I was as furious as I could get, I could say "Dagnabbit." which was the cuss word used by some octogenarian cowboy in old westerns. Why they thought "dagnabbit" expressed more anger than "gosh darn," I don't know. They did explain that all three were derivatives of "damn" and "God damn," neither of which I was ever to say until I turned twenty-one.

"Dagnabbit!" I said. *I hate you, Jack.*

Daddy picked me up and held me. "Everyone falls down when they're learning," he said.

"Try again, sweetheart," Mommy said. She picked up my bike and held it for me. I didn't want to get on again, and my knee hurt.

"I want to go back home." I felt like crying, but I knew she'd be sad about the walk down the dirt road. She frowned. "No, I'll try again," I said.

We did the same thing, and they did the bird dance again. I went farther this time because I stayed up longer. The road started going up, and my legs got tired. I stopped. "I'm tired," I said to Daddy.

"We can leave the bike and just walk," said Mommy. She smiled big.

"Do you think that's fair, Christine?" Daddy asked.

"It's okay," I said. I didn't want to be bad.

"C'mon, Leland. How about just to the pink house and back?" Mommy looked at me.

Daddy took my hand. "You know how much Mommy loves walks down the dirt road."

The dirt road led past a cow farm, over a one-lane railroad bridge, another small farm, and then an abandoned, pink Cape Cod on the right. During the two and a half years we'd lived there we'd never seen anyone at the pink house. The paint was past fading, most of it had peeled off, and the windows were very dirty with the old white trim

exposing bare wood. Behind the house was a small cow barn with large holes in the roof. To the side stood a faded, pink, two-car garage with no doors. Inside, debris was stacked high against the back walls. Piles of junk lay scattered around the yard, and the grass was tall and seedy.

Guilt abided in me strongly in those days because I'd been conditioned by some previous events to believe I'd been a "bad" child, and I remember suggesting we walk to the hill beyond the pink house to please my mother. She and my father didn't even look at the house as we passed, but I saw an old brown pick-up parked in the back. The truck's dreariness blended in so well with the buildings and yard, I never really turned my head to look at it. I was looking at the hill beyond it, anticipating the beginning of the end of the walk down the dirt road.

At the base of the hill beyond the pink house was a small valley with a pond on the right and a swamp filled with cattails on the left. Tucker, Josie, and Tilly leaped into the pond, flushing several quacking mallards, and a great blue heron lifted itself out of the edge of the cattails with its gigantic wings. We stood and watched as it labored into the air.

Mommy said, "You must be tired. Let's head back." She leaned down and gave me a hug. She said, "Thank you." I squeezed her hard and didn't want to let go. Her cheek on my cheek felt good. Her arms and her body felt like warm magnets. I wanted to stay that way. She let me go and my arms slid off her. She took my hand and began walking.

We walked back toward the pink house. Daddy walked beside Mommy, and Mommy held my hand and Daddy's hand. I looked at the pink house and thought about the pick-up truck. Now, a small black car was in the driveway.

"A car," said Mommy. We walked faster.

A lady was in the front yard, raking. She looked kind of like Mommy, but she was short. She had curly hair. She didn't see us. We watched her, but she didn't look up. I

looked at the yard. Mommy and Daddy looked at the yard. We kept walking, almost past the pink house.

"A boy," said Mommy.

We stopped.

"Johnnie, it's a boy," she said. We walked back to the pink house.

He was kicking at a clump of dirt. He didn't see us, and I just watched him. His hair was straight and long and almost white. His jeans and his red tee shirt looked too big for him.

"He looks about your age," Mommy said. "Why don't you go say hello. See if he's going to live here." She sort of pushed me at him. I didn't like that, so I didn't go. My chest was pounding. My head felt funny. I wanted him to like me, and I wanted him to live here. I wanted a neighbor to play with. So, I started walking to him.

He looked at me. He didn't smile or anything. His eyes were blue like the sky. Then he grinned. Big. I looked into his eyes.

He is across from me, crying. We are at Little Friends Daycare Center, at the long lunch table. But it's not lunchtime. All the children are sitting there. Scared. Tears run down his face. He sobs, looks at me. All the children have bowls. Mine is coming. Liquid, with rabbit. Pieces of fur. It's Fluffy. We're all bad. The hand comes to me with the bowl. My pet bunny! The bowl is in front of my face. Smells sick. He watches me. The hand sets the bowl down. I open my mouth to scream.

"Hi. Who are you?" he asked me. His face was blurry. I couldn't get air. I sucked in. I wanted him to like me. I made his face be clear.

"I'm Johnnie," I said. I live down the road. At the horse farm." I pointed. My arm was shaky.

"The horse farm?"

"Uh huh," I said. I swallowed. My throat was all dry.

"I'm getting a pony as soon as we move in," he said.

Yes! It was true. A friend. A neighbor. I liked looking at him. "When?" I asked.

"I ain't sure," he said. He looked at his mother. "I think in a few weeks. Ma!

When're we movin' in?"

Mommy came up. "Hi! What's your name?" she asked the boy.

"C.K," he said.

Seekay, I thought. I liked the sound.

"What do the C and the K stand for?" Mommy asked.

"Clive Kendrick," C.K. said. He sounded very polite. I thought his real name was ugly. I liked "Seekay," though.

"Oh," said Mommy. She acted impressed. "Is Kendrick your last name?"

"No. Bookout is."

"Oh, so you're C.K. Bookout?"

"Uh huh," he said and looked at his shoes.

His mother came up. She was friendly. She said, "Hi! Do you live along here?" I liked her smile. She looked like she was laughing, but she wasn't. "I'm Gloria Bookout." She shook hands with Mommy. Daddy was there now too. They all shook hands and said their names. Mrs. Bookout wiggled a lot.

"Come meet Walter," she said, and Mommy and Daddy followed her to the back of the house. Mr. Bookout was rolling up a big piece of wire fence. He was taller than Daddy and had light brown hair.

"We have kittens," said C.K. He raised his eyebrows.

"Really?" I answered. "Where?"

"C'mon," he said and ran toward the barn. I followed as fast as I could, but I couldn't keep up. I felt wobbly.

"How old are you?" I asked. I was breathing hard. We stood in the big doorway of the barn.

"I'll be eight next month—July 15th. How old are you?"

"I'll be seven in January." I didn't want to say "six and a half."

"Oh," he said. He sounded disappointed. I was embarrassed. I wanted us to be the same age. I think he did too.

I followed him into one of the stalls. He stopped and pointed at the corner. We tiptoed the rest of the way to the kittens' nest. He kneeled down in front of them, and I looked over his shoulder. The brown mother lay on her side. She curled her paws and let them go. She kept doing this and purred real loud. Eight tiny kittens drank from her belly. Their heads were very big and their bodies and feet were small.

"Their ears and eyes is still closed," said C.K.

I could see that their eyes were closed. "How can their ears be closed?" I asked.

He pointed to one tiny ear. It looked thick, like there was no hole. "See?" he said.

I nodded, even though I wasn't sure.

"They's just two days old," said C.K.

"They're," I said.

"Huh?"

"*They're* just two days old," I said. Mommy said people who talked like he did weren't educated. I wanted to help him.

"That's what I said," he said and laughed a little.

"*They're* not *they's*," I said. Then I got real scared because I thought he might get mad at me.

He looked at me. "Whatever. Ain't they cute?"

"They really are," I said, and I kneeled down next to him. I stared for the longest time. There were hundreds of pink paw pads. The whiskers looked like glass threads. Two days old. They were brand new. The mother cat stopped purring. She looked at us, and I could tell she didn't like us. She stood up all of a sudden. Some of the kittens hung on with their mouths. When they fell off there were a bunch of little suction sounds. They all started mewling with tiny voices. All of them together. It almost hurt my ears. The mother ran out of the stall fast. We looked back at the noisy kittens. Their heads bobbed up and down. When one kitten's mouth touched another kitten, it went poke, poke, poke at it, and then the kitten mewed some more.

C.K. said, "I guess she didn't like us starin' at her babies. Is them all your dogs, the black ones?"

"Yes. Flat-Coated Retrievers," I said. I liked my dogs and I liked to tell people what breed they were.

"Black-coated retrievers?"

"No. Flat," I said. It was hard to say "flat" real loud without spitting on him. Mommy said that was always a problem for her at dog shows. Most people didn't know what kind of dogs they were.

"I never heard of 'em. We have a Golden Retriever, but she's crazy. Ma and Pa keep hoping she'll run away. She jumps on everybody, and she's real nervous."

C.K. looked at the kittens again and picked one up. I picked one up too. It was ugly when I looked at its face. Its head was big and its body was tiny and squirmy. It was very light and had the softest fur. I held it up close to my eyes and watched the wrinkled face nod and bump my thumb. I didn't like it. It sort of scared me because it was so ugly. I wanted to throw it back in the nest. I looked at C.K. He was holding his kitten's body in one hand. He held its head in the other hand.

"I wonder how far we can twist their heads around without killin' 'em," he said.

"Yeah, I wonder," I said. I started to twist mine, slowly, and he began to twist his. *The younger the animal, the closer it is to God. It's best to kill the youngest ones.* So far, nothing was happening. We looked at each other's kitten, and then we looked into each other's eyes. He smiled and I smiled. We started to laugh. I felt so happy. He looked happy. We continued to twist, real slowly. Nothing happened. For the longest time. Nothing. Even though we kept twisting. Slowly, real slowly. He stared at his kitten and stopped smiling. I stopped laughing and just watched mine too.

When I felt a crack, the tiniest little crack, I screamed and threw the kitten back into the nest. I leaped up and wanted to run out. But C.K. was still twisting and didn't look at me.

"You're going to kill it!" I said.

He looks up at me. His face says nothing. Then, he twisted the head hard. When he opened his hands, the kitten was dead. I watched for it to breathe or squirm, but it didn't. I looked into the nest to see if I could see my kitten. I was afraid it would be dead too, but all of them were squirming and mewling, and I couldn't tell which one was mine.

C.K. was still kneeling. He looked down at the dead kitten. I didn't know what to say, and he didn't move. Then he started shaking a little. I just looked at him, but I couldn't see his eyes. He shook harder, and then he looked up at me. His face was all scrunched up, and tears ran down his cheeks.

I put my hand on his shoulder and said the only thing I could think of. "Let's bury it. We can have a funeral." I had just been to my grandpa's funeral, so I knew all about them. He nodded and stood up. He wiped his face on his sleeves.

"You got a shovel?" I asked.

"Yeah, this way," he said. He walked out of the stall. I followed him. We'd forgotten about our parents. When we walked out the barn door, we saw them standing in the back yard. We hurried back into the barn. C.K. held the kitten close to his belly so they wouldn't see it.

"Johnnie!" Mommy called. She'd seen me. "We're going now."

C.K. and I looked at each other for the longest time. I wanted to run into the barn and hide. And I wanted to run to Mommy and Daddy at the same time. I couldn't decide which to do. So, I just stood and stared at C.K. and the kitten at his belly.

C.K. started looking all around the barn. He ran over to some big barrels. They had lids sitting on top, loose. He pulled a lid part way off and said, "We'll put him in here for now."

I had to stand on my tiptoes to look into the barrel. It was very dark and looked empty. I didn't want him to drop the kitten in because it would hurt the kitten. "Wait!" I said. I saw a pile of loose hay. "Let's put some hay in first." I ran and grabbed a bunch of it. He pulled the lid all the way off and stood back while I dropped the hay in. "There," I said.

"Johnnie!" Mommy called.

C.K. dropped the kitten in. We lifted the lid together and set it on top real quietly. Then we ran to the barn door. We walked out of the barn together like nothing had happened.

The four parents were talking, and Mr. Bookout was throwing sticks for Josie.

"What are the dogs' names?" asked C.K.

"That's Josie," I said. "The big one is Tucker, and the other one is Tilly. Josie is the mother of both of them."

"Oh," he said. "They all look the same to me."

We stood halfway between the barn and our parents. Mommy had started taking small steps backwards. "Let's go, John," she called.

I was a little shaky, and I think C.K. was too. We walked, slow, towards them. We pretended we were bored. But we didn't have to pretend very long. They kept on talking and talking, and they didn't pay any attention to us. We stood and listened to them talk.

Mrs. Bookout said, "C.K. will be in fourth grade this fall. How about Johnnie?"

I held my breath and hoped Mommy would lie. "Second," she said. I wanted to hide. I didn't want C.K. to know I was so far behind him. I wanted to hit Mommy. I wouldn't look at C.K. "His birthday is January first, so we had to hold him back. It's too bad because I know he'd be happier doing third grade work. He reads at the seventh grade level already. At least that's what his test scores indicated." That was better. At least C.K. would know I was smart. I looked at him to be sure he was listening. He was. "So, if you've been working at the plastics factory for twelve years, what did you do with C.K. when he was little?" Mommy asked.

"Daycare," said Mrs. Bookout. She started swaying back and forth.

"Where?" Mommy asked. "I guess that's a silly question since there's only one daycare center in town."

"Little Friends," said Mrs. Bookout. She had a funny look on her face.

"Johnnie went there, too," said Mommy. Her hands were in fists.

"Do you believe what they say happened there?" Mrs. Bookout asked. She swayed harder.

"Yes," said Daddy. He sounded mad. He looked at C.K. and me. We looked at him. "We ought to talk about this another time."

"Did the police ever call you?" asked Mrs. Bookout.

"Another time," said Mr. Bookout. He sounded quiet and mad. He looked disgusted. Tucker leaned against him. I thought he was mad at Tucker, but he was stroking Tucker's head, hard and fast.

The four parents looked at the ground for a long time. C.K. and I watched them. No one said anything.

Finally, Mommy said, "When will you be here again? Maybe the boys could play some more."

"Every evening and weekend till we move in," said Mrs. Bookout. "We usually have pizza. Johnnie could join us."

"Okay," said Mommy. "I could walk him down tomorrow evening. How would 6:30 be?"

"I may need you to be at home for a phone call then," said Daddy. "Let's make it tentative," he said to Mrs. Bookout.

Gosh darn! Mrs. Bookout looked hurt. Mommy said, "I'm sure he can come down even if it's a little later." She smiled at Mrs. Bookout.

I looked at C.K. and he looked at me. We jumped up and down for a while, then we ran away and hid behind a big tree. He looked at me with a serious face. "We can bury the kitten tomorrow, okay?" he whispered right in my face. I nodded my head once. He held out his hand. I grabbed it and shook it hard. Then we both ran back.

Mommy and Daddy had started walking home, and I ran to catch up. I turned back and waved at C.K. He waved at me.