

Prologue

Fire, fire/Flames get higher. Fire, fire/Flames get higher.
Ian closed his eyes and jumped.

Chapter One

A hot wind blew,

ruffling the leaves of the sprays on the two caskets. Ian's summer wool suit pants itched, and the new dress shoes he wore, bought that day by his great-aunt Jo, had already rubbed a blister on his left heel.

His bony frame didn't wear the suit well. He felt as if he had been placed in a large sack and was being challenged to punch his way out. The new haircut made his neck feel prickly too. With that and the wool and the shoes, he couldn't remember ever feeling so uncomfortable. But his discomfort served as a distraction, for which he was grateful. *Itchy clothes/So it goes*, he said to himself.

He had only met Aunt Jo two days before. He knew she existed, though. She had sent him a ten-dollar bill for his tenth birthday last October. Of course, if Ian hadn't retrieved the mail every day from the mailbox himself, he might have never gotten it, he figured. Maybe Aunt Jo had sent him other gifts, gifts that he'd never received, gifts that

his parents had intercepted through the years. Since he had started doing everything around the house himself, he was finding a lot of things he had never known before. He had learned to cook, to clean, to do laundry, and to be very quiet when his parents were drinking, which recently had been most of the time.

Ian gazed at the two coffins in front of him. They were smooth and shiny, almost pretty. He was suddenly glad that his parents' final rest would be in a place so lovely and not littered with whiskey bottles, cigarettes, and the stench of their own bodies. He wanted to touch the coffins, like one final caress of his mother's hair, one farewell pat on his father's back. He didn't dare, though. He couldn't remember the last time he'd touched them or been touched by them tenderly. *A final touch/That's too much.*

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," the pastor said piously. Ian snapped back to the sound of the minister's voice. *Ashes!* He almost laughed. It was an ironic eulogy for his two dead parents. If they'd died in an auto accident or by natural causes, it would not have seemed amusing. But these two had perished in a house fire. Ian looked up at the reverend and at the faces of the small somber group: Aunt Jo; Nick and Trooper; two drinking buddies of his parents; the reverend's wife, and the reverend himself. No one else had caught the joke.

Ian's parents, Ed and Mary Lane, had never set foot in the pastor's church, and they had made no secret of their distrust of organized religion and the clergy. The pastor's occasional visits to the house were usually met with drunken ramblings or angry curses. Ian knew that this man's services and last words at their funeral were strained and obligatory.

Sweat trickled down Ian's face. Or was it a tear?

Ian hadn't talked to anyone about that night. He had

only remembered some of it. No one had helped him fill in the empty spaces. All he knew was that his parents were dead, his heel throbbed, he itched all over, and he would probably go to live with his aunt Jo in another town.

Ian tuned out the next recitation of Scripture. Instead, he remembered a poem he'd had to memorize at school, "Where Go the Boats" by Robert Louis Stevenson.

*Dark brown is the river,
Golden is the sand.
It flows along for ever,
With trees on either hand.*

*Green leaves a-floating,
Castles of the foam,
Boats of mine a-boating—
Where will all come home?*

He loved the sentiment, the idea of drifting away on a river going somewhere, anywhere. It painted pictures in his mind of endless miles of escape to grand and glorious castles. He loved the way it felt to think of it. But Ian loved the rhyme and the meter of poems too, and he often made up his own poems to certain rhythms. Sometimes it was to his walking pace or to the cadence of his endless cleaning chores in his own house. Scrubbing the bathtub, he'd say, "Scrub, scrub/Scrub the tub/This is the way/We clean today/Sponge, sponge/Get the grunge/So Mom and Dad/Won't get so mad."

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me/Let me hide myself in thee" the pastor's wife's contralto voice began with a hard vibrato. Though he'd never heard the song before, Ian liked the rhyme. He made a promise to himself to find the place to