

THE FOURTEENTH OF SEPTEMBER

“There will be an answer, let it be.”

Lennon / McCartney

PART ONE

September 1969

CHAPTER ONE

On the second Monday of September, Judy Talton put on the new jeans she had run through three washing cycles and the fatigue jacket she found at the Salvation Army resale shop, went to the Student Union, and, for the first time, took a seat on the freak side of the Tune Room.

She chose an empty table, one of dozens occupied by student radicals and other misfits, against a wall splattered with as many posters *against* the Vietnam War as *for* next month's homecoming game. She glanced across the room's wide central aisle at the matching tables filled with the neat sweaters and slacks of the sorority, fraternity, and other straight types on the Greek side. She watched the entrance as students walked in, paused at the top of a short flight of stairs, then chose their side: Greeks or freaks.

She drew her stack of books close, as people landed at her table spraying drops from shaken umbrellas and complaining about the quick intensity of a storm that had just hit. The room filled rapidly to capacity. Too many people and too much distraction, she thought, watching her plans drip away with the rainwater. She should go. What was she thinking, anyway? That she could just change her clothes, walk in here, and somehow her life would work itself out?

Suddenly, the crowd parted, revealing two guys poised at the top of the stairs, water sliding off their olive drab ponchos.

"Reserve Officer Training Corp, two o'clock," said someone near Judy.

“R . . . O . . . T . . . C, ROTC,” came the murmurs along the freak side, ramping up in volume as some of them elbowed each other at the affront. They pronounced it ROT-ZEE, like Nazi.

Monday was drill day on the Quad, as Judy knew well. These two must have been caught in the rain. Why else would they risk coming here in full dress? She had to get out.

She rose, but her exit was blocked by a tall figure in a long duster and a pancake hat who was moving from a nearby table toward the ROTC guys. She realized she wouldn't be able to leave without crossing between them, so she sat back down. The guys had taken off their ponchos, revealing their full fatigues, and were now sitting on the bottom stair near the Greek side.

“Hey,” said the guy in the duster, “afraid of a little rain? You'll hold up really well in that jungle you're headed for.” A few snickers echoed from the freak side.

The ROTC guys glanced up briefly, then ignored him as they rummaged through their things, sandwiches suddenly materializing from under layers of khaki.

“Any artillery in those backpacks? I thought you all got toy guns to go with those spiffy outfits?” the duster guy said, stopping a few yards in front of them, hands on his hips. “Drop them when the lightning hit, did you? Not very gun . . . g ho, now is it?” He drew out the word “gun” for maximum effect. The snickers multiplied. The rest of the Tune Room quieted down, watching. Soon, the only sound was heavy metal spewing from the jukebox that gave the room its name.

The ROTC guys stared at him, expressionless, as they continued to chew on their sandwiches, one coolly picking wilted lettuce off his lunchmeat.

“Cut the crap, freak,” said a voice from the Greek side. “Let 'em alone.”

“Oh, I get it,” the duster guy went on. “You don’t really need guns, do you? Because ROTC lets you “place out” of the jungle, doesn’t it? Right out of the Gen Ed of the infantry and into the honors officer class.”

Laughter surged from the freak side. “Good one!” a voice yelled.

“Straight to officer school so you can boss around the rest of us when the Draft Lottery sends us off to Saigon.” He turned back toward the freaks, spread his arms wide and took a bow.

“I said let up, smart ass,” said a very tall Greek, standing to support his threat, his fair face pinkening up, color streaking along the part of his short hair.

“I will not.” The duster guy turned toward the Greek. “I’m offended,” he said, dramatically clutching his chest. “I’m deeply offended that these members of the war machine on campus are here, suited up, throwing their dirty conflict in our faces.”

“Here he goes again,” said someone at Judy’s table.

“What do you mean?” she asked, leaning in to hear the girl next to her who was trying to explain.

“David can’t stand ROTC,” she said, pointing to the speaker in the duster. “Says it’s condoning the war. He tried to get it thrown off campus last year, and he’s pissed he couldn’t. He can’t let it go.”

A full-body shudder knifed its way through Judy. She craned her neck to see if there was another way out.

By this point, David and the Greek were standing in the middle of the central aisle trading increasingly heated jabs.

“So, you don’t agree with the war. Fine,” the Greek said. “But these guys are just like us, doing what they think is right, don’t you get that, asshole?”

“There’s *nothing right* about this war and *no one* should be fighting it, don’t you get THAT!” David sneered back.

Cheers rose from the freak side.

A few paper cups and other debris flew from one side of the room to the other.

“You’re just against them because you’re yellow,” said a guy in a letterman’s jacket, stepping up next to the tall Greek.

A projectile in a bun hit David in the back, sliding down to leave a trail of mustard on his coat. The Greek side howled, some of them standing and throwing whatever vending machine food they’d been eating at David.

“War lovers,” he yelled back, twirling to avert the rain of bread, meat, and condiments. His hat was knocked off his head, revealing thin dark hair hanging just shy of his shoulders.

“Screw you, longhair,” said the Greek, advancing closer to David, pointing his finger like a weapon. “America is a free country and ROTC is their choice. Let ’em do what *they* want, not what *you* want.”

“Their choice? That’s funny.” David said, pointing to the ROTC guys. “They can’t even vote yet.... *We* can’t even vote yet. Go ahead defend them,” he waved them off with a limp hand gesture. “Sounds you’re all dying to go to Vietnam with them anyway.”

“Yeah, dying,” came another voice from David’s side. “And that’s just what you’ll do.” The freaks shrieked with glee.

“That’s all this war is about anyway,” David went on, standing his ground. “Some old guys play politics while we die. ROTC is their way to suck us into it right here on campus...and you want to let them keep doing it.”

The rain of food slowed and there was a strained pause, as if the crowd was trying to grasp what David had just said.

“Someone has to fight for our freedom,” blurted the Greek, his face now as bright as his red sweater.

“I . . . fight . . . for . . . peace,” David said, stabbing his finger at his chest with each word.

“Oxymoron, freak. You even know what that means?” the letterman said. “Or do you just get the ‘moron’ part?”

With this, most of the guys on both sides of the Tune Room leaped to their feet, cheering on their champions in the center aisle.

“Choosing ROTC is free speech,” said the Greek, nearly spitting his words.

“Yeah, free speech, and this is mine.” David raised his fist, chanting, “Hell No, I Won’t Go!”

“Then don’t go . . . but you have no right to stop them.”

“I can try,” David said, with a sneer. “Like you said, it’s a free country.” He changed his chant to “Free Country,” rhythmically punching his fist with each repetition. Two other freaks stepped into the aisle and joined him.

“It’s only free because they’re willing to fight,” said the letterman, shrieking over the chanting.

At a gesture from David, a few of his cohort stood and picked up the chant “Hell No, We Won’t Go!” In response, the Greeks pelted the other side with foam dishes and spitballs. Soon, a shower of the tin ashtrays that covered each table followed, scattering cigarette butts into rainwater footprints, puddling down into the aisle’s slick wood flooring.

Most of the room was in on it by this time: from one side yelling at David, from the other egging him on, chanting louder and louder. A beefy Greek tore off his jacket and stepped into the aisle, fists raised, but he slipped in the watery ashes and skidded, nearly clipping David and another freak. Judy cowered, waiting for the punch, as he scrambled to his feet.

At that moment, the tall Greek started singing “My Country, ’Tis of Thee,” joined immediately by most of the other Greeks, even the girls. Everyone still sitting on both sides now sprang to their feet, vocalizing loudly, trying to drown out the others. Judy’s table was up. She felt she had to rise with them, softly joining the “Hell No” chant. An orange peel grazed her shoulder.

The ROTC guys were sitting quietly, heads bouncing back and forth, following the action. Judy lifted herself up on her toes to get a better look over the heads in front of her. They were now wiping their mouths and gathering up their sandwich wrappings. One crushed his bag of chips in a single hand and stuffed it into his backpack. The other stood and walked slowly and deliberately toward David.

“They’re going to go at it,” said the girl next to her.

“They can’t fight in uniform,” Judy said, before realizing she had spoken out loud.

“Get your outfit and your buzz cut out of my face,” David said.

The ROTC guy stopped, took off his cap, and down tumbled thick, shoulder-length hair which he shook with delight. David stopped mid-shout. Even from the back, Judy could tell he was shocked silent, frozen to the floor. The whole room seemed to gasp, then exploded into laughter as the ROTC guys walked out together. At the door, they passed the campus cops, arriving late to break up the brawl.

Judy slipped out, unnoticed but shaken. The rain had stopped. She went to the Quad and climbed up the stairs to the statue of the university's founder. She looked across campus for the two ponchos and watched the recruits as they walked along the path toward the dorms, both with caps off, long locks bouncing to their stride.

CHAPTER TWO

Judy was up all night gathering her courage to try again. If she waited too long, she knew she would lose her nerve, and she had promised herself she would finally do this now, on her birthday. She walked back into the Tune Room the next day and again took a seat on the freak side.

She was thankful the room was relatively quiet, with only about a third of the tables occupied compared to yesterday's crowd. She tried to appear casual, focusing her attention on a copper-haired guy in a fringed jacket struggling with the collapsing corner of the banner he was trying to hang. STUDENT MOBILIZATION COMMITTEE TO END THE WAR IN VIETNAM. JOIN SMC NOW. She wondered if she should offer to help, or if that would be pushing it.

Relax, she told herself. This could take hours, or many visits, or maybe nothing would happen at all and maybe, just maybe, that would be best. She opened her biology book and slowly flipped the pages, as if she were studying, looking up every now and then to see who had come and gone or changed seats. She felt claustrophobic and fanned herself to brush away the smell of steamed meat, strong coffee, and cigarette smoke. At one point, she noticed the banner was in place and the guy had disappeared. She swiveled to see if she could spot his red hair in the crowd.

A clipboard suddenly appeared under her nose.

"Sign this," a voice said. "It's important."

She looked up. It was that girl from her dorm in her usual leather headband, perfectly faded bell-bottoms, and braless top, her nipples impossible to miss in the chilly room. Judy planted her feet to steady herself.

“We can’t let them fire Swanson,” the girl went on. “It’s a farce. We know the real story. They need to hear from the students.”

“Shouldn’t I read it first?” Judy asked, feeling she should say something like that to show she wasn’t a pushover. She hoped her voice sounded even.

“You don’t know about Swanson or you don’t support him.”

“I—”

“You have to choose, you know,” she said, tapping her pen against the metal clamp of the clipboard. “Or are you going to tell me you’re apathetic?” The girl sat herself down, happy for the opening. She dropped the clipboard on the table and leaned in close, emitting a wave of warm patchouli. Judy felt a little sick to her stomach.

“Let me explain.” The girl lit a cigarette and pointed it at Judy to emphasize her words. “It’s such bullshit to claim it’s Swanson’s teaching methods. They could at least have the guts to admit they want him out because he’s an activist.” She slapped a hand on the table. “So, we need to vouch for what a great professor he is, and they’ll have to keep him. You get it now, right?”

She shoved the clipboard across the table. It hadn’t occurred to Judy that she might be asked to sign something. She made her signature as illegible as possible, using a modest public-school *J* versus her usual initial plume.

She had seen the girl many times before, always in the thick of campus antiwar activities, often with Professor Swanson. She envied her looks—an incredibly right combination of Cher and Grace Slick—and admired her ability to punctuate a sentence with a dramatic flourish of her cigarette, as well as the way she sang out “Oh, wow,” when impressed or excited. From a distance she seemed intimidating, even scary. But now, as she ran her index finger down the full

length of her substantial nose, leaving an ink trail that caused them both to giggle, Judy was charmed.

“I’m Vida,” she said, wiping her stained finger on a piece of Judy’s notebook paper. She took a long drag and tilted her head back to watch the smoke as she exhaled. “I knew you’d get here eventually.”

“What?”

“I saw you sitting in the back at the SMC forum at the beginning of the semester, and at the Lottery Countdown meeting at the dorm last week. I even saw you sneaking out yesterday after that great anti-ROTC action. Wild, wasn’t it?”

Judy inched her seat back. Why was Vida watching her?

“It was just a matter of time.” The girl leaned back and raised her chin to blow another trail of smoke. “Everyone who *knows* ends up at the Tune Room,” she paused, “at least this side of it.”

Who *knows*? Judy struggled for an answer.

“So, what’s your name, anyway?” Vida finally asked.

“Judy,” she answered, adding quickly to take the focus from herself. “I’ve never heard the name Vida before.”

“It’s Albanian, next door to Greek. Isn’t that a riot? Greek without the matching sweater set, I like to say.

“I used to hate the name, but now I like that it’s different. Gives me distinction, along with my nose.” She offered her profile and grinned.

Judy couldn’t believe she was so friendly.

“You a freshman?” Vida asked.

“No, sophomore.”

“Really? Well, I’m definitely the oldest sophomore on campus. I took a semester off to help the national SMC get its act together and some other shit. So I’m twenty.”

“I just turned nineteen . . . yesterday.”

“Interesting,” Vida said, raising an eyebrow. “A kick-ass time for a change.”

Judy stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe I’m clairvoyant,” Vida winked. “Or maybe it’s not too hard to figure out that you showing up here on your birthday might mean something.”

Maybe Vida knew more than she was letting on. “It’s actually the day *after* my birthday.”

“Details.” Vida dismissed the fact with a flip of her hand. She took another drag. “My boyfriend has the same birthday as you, and he’s trying to pretend it isn’t important, either. Really sticking his head in the sand.”

“How so?”

“Hello! The lottery? They’ll get their numbers by their birthdates? It’s not a problem, though. If he gets a low number, he’s going to Canada. I’ve checked it all out. I’m a poli sci major.”

“Doesn’t show a bit,” Judy said, with a smile.

“You?”

Judy gave the answer she had rehearsed. “I’m science.”

“No shit. I wouldn’t have guessed it. What kind of—”

“Just science. Pretty boring,” she said quickly, pointing to her biology book. She needed to change the subject. “So, you said everyone who *knows* comes here. What does that mean?”

“You can’t define it,” Vida said. “If you *know*, you just do.”

Judy felt flattered, though she wasn’t sure exactly why. She allowed herself to relax and joined Vida in surveying the scene.

She was aware the Tune Room was a converted bowling alley here in the Union’s basement, but now, looking around, realized how perfect the layout was for the Greek/freak divide that had begun to separate the campus since the announcement of the pending National Draft Lottery. The entrance, once used for concessions and shoe pick-up, was a great no-man’s land. The wide set of stairs offered a perfect stage to pause and check out the scene before stepping down to the lower level and choosing to sit on your preferred side of the two-alley-wide aisle that had been the focus of yesterday’s near riot. The long aisle led all to the jukebox and a wall of vending machines at the far end of the room, where the pins would have been.

She used to think it silly to call this place the Tune Room, like on *American Bandstand* or something. But sitting here now as the music played, watching feet keeping time, fingers tapping against textbooks, lips mouthing the words to the latest Blood, Sweat, and Tears song, her own leg now bobbing up and down, she thought the name was just right.

She felt an elbow against her ribs.

“David’s here. Center stairs.” She followed Vida’s pointed finger to a tall guy poised, scouting the room. The navy-blue pancake hat and the long olive-green coat that trailed behind him were unmistakable. He was the jerk who had heckled the ROTC recruits.

“Over here,” Vida shouted.

David halted, then spread his arms wide, calling out, “In-A-Gadda-Da-VIDA!” as he headed down the stairs to their table.

He hugged Vida, and with his face still tucked over her shoulder, gave Judy a full, head-to-toe scan. When he took off his hat, his hair fell over the top half of his face and he shook his head to fling it back. Judy had to catch her breath.

“Meet Judy,” Vida said, as the two of them drew apart.

“Judy Blue Eyes,” he said.

She smiled in surprise at the recasting of her dull name, but lowered her head. It was a reflex. Her eyes had always attracted too much attention. Large and teal, they were ringed with dark, heavy lashes, a surprise since her blonde-brown hair was on the light side of dishwater.

“Judy Blue Eyes,” David said again. “Look up.”

She raised her eyes without lifting her head and realized David had bent toward her, expecting her to say something. He smiled, and she noticed his bottom teeth were crooked, but in an appealing way. She wasn't prepared to like him.

“Hey, man,” a voice called, and both Judy and David turned toward it.

Standing before them was a huge guy she would have bet played football in high school before he went shaggy, with bushy sideburns and an attempt at a moustache.

“Howie,” David said, shaking one hand firmly with thumbs interlocked, grabbing his forearm with the other.

“Meet Judy Blue Eyes.” David waved in her direction.

Howie grinned and launched into the chorus of the new hit song, “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes.”

“Dew do do da dew, DO do dew do da dew.” He played an imaginary guitar to accompany himself, fingers following the notes he sang up and down the scale on phantom strings.

David joined him. Judy looked down again, embarrassed, but couldn't help smiling into her chest.

After two choruses, Vida interrupted. "It's Judy's birthday."

"Ah," David said, "the fifteenth, the Ides of September, are you an omen?"

"Ha!" cracked Vida, "Hitting on her with Shakespeare? Is nothing sacred?"

"It was yesterday, actually, the fourteenth," Judy said, excited at the attention.

"Sorry, that date's taken," said a John Lennon look-alike, who put his hand on Vida's shoulder. "I seem to remember a big party in my room last night with a sign that said HAPPY BIRTHDAY, WIL that proves it."

Two guys came to the table with big grins.

"Thought your teeth were going to drop out of your mouth yesterday when that recruit took his hat off," one of them said, laughing, while the other whacked David on the back. "A military freak. No way you saw that one coming."

Judy put her hand to her mouth.

"Two-faced bastard," David said, shrugging the guy off. He slid his chair back, annoyed. "He can't have it both ways." He pounded his fist on the table. "ROTC is the war machine. If he's in it, he's complicit. Period." He stood up. "Pardon me while I get some actual organizing done."

"Vida." He angled his head, suddenly very official, and they took off to talk to people at a nearby table. The two guys followed them.

Judy's head was spinning with the boomerang of David's shift—from jerk to nice guy, then back to jerk again. She realized she still had her hand over her mouth. She fanned her fingers and curled them off, one by one, in a gesture she hoped would look casual.

“You don’t mess with David and ROTC,” Wil said, sitting down next to her.

“Those guys are probably just in it to pay for school,” she said.

“We know that, but it’s hardly the point at this stage of the war,” he said to her, but his attention stayed on Vida at the other table. He watched her with wide-tracking eyes, head bobbing to the conversation she was having, though he couldn’t possibly hear what was being said. His arms worked their way around to cradle the clipboard she had left on the table. He no longer seemed to remember Judy was there. She realized it was up to her to break the silence.

“So, it’s Will, right?”

“That’s Wil with one *l*,” he specified after a long pause. “Wilfred, as in Owen.”

“Are you related?”

“In my mom’s head.”

“Are you a poet?”

“I wish.”

Judy wondered if she would be able to get a full sentence out of him. “Vida says you’re planning on going to Canada if you get a low lottery number.”

“Vida says a lot of things.”

More people gathered as the morning went on, pulling up chairs and joining the ever-growing collection of tables, jamming them close together. By early afternoon, the many people who circled around Vida had come and gone and come again, the Tune Room their base between classes. There were faces with catchphrase names: Wizard, who “played a mean pinball,” as he demonstrated on the Union’s two machines; Fish, who was Tom Fisher; RoMo, who was Rosemary Molotsky, the girl who had been at her table the day before; Achilles, who had a last name ending in “opolis”; and Meldrich, who just went by Meldrich. Howie’s girlfriend, Marsha,

also joined the group but seemed out of place in a crisp, collared shirt and a necklace that looked like it might be real gold. She was very pretty but kept pulling at her hair, fingering the strands from ear to shoulder and checking the lay of her bangs against her forehead.

It was dizzying trying to remember everyone, and Judy appreciated how often Vida salted her name into the conversation. Amazingly, they all seemed happy to meet her and add to the chorus of “dew do do da dews.” Maybe the trite flower-power slogans she had heard since the Summer of Love were true after all, and the freaks accepted everyone. Or maybe Vida was right and she really did *know*. It didn’t matter. It was all going much better than she ever imagined. She was so glad she came back after yesterday.

And she was having fun. They were witty, quick with a quip, or a clever way of putting things. It was as if it were a contest among them they enjoyed tremendously, especially Vida, who continued to banter with David about Judy’s birthday.

“*Et tu, Judy?*” David asked when Judy agreed with Vida about the Ides being only in March. She had no idea, really, but it was fun to gang up on him; so much so, she didn’t realize she had missed half of her one o’clock chemistry lab until just before two, when Vida stood and gathered her books.

“We can’t cut Swanson,” she said to David and Wil. “While this petition is going around, we need to be sure his class is packed so they’ll think he’s the most popular teacher on campus.” She tucked her clipboard under her arm. “I’m going to get every student there to sign it.”

“See you tomorrow, Judy Blue Eyes.” David grinned at her, showing his askew teeth. She felt her face heat up. As he walked away, she noticed a long dark spot down the back of his coat.

She was sorry her section of Swanson's class didn't meet until the next day, but realized she could still catch the end of her chem lab. On the way, her pace approximated the three-step of a cha-cha-cha to the "dew do do da dews" running through her head.

Maybe she could pull this off after all, she thought. Maybe she really could.