

# all AMERICAN<sup>★</sup> boy

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Tom Schaefer, tall, tanned and twenty-two years old, charged over the top of a boulder, dropped to the other side, and crouched there with his head between his knees. The languid July afternoon floated quietly on for a moment, then the air was suddenly filled with the boom of an explosion. Dirt and rocks shot out from the blast and choked the day with even more dust and heat; Tom remained crouched where he was for a minute, somehow feeling that if he moved he wouldn't be able to breathe. Suddenly a grating voice jarred him into motion.

"All right, you guys, we're not playing hide-and-seek, ya know. Get over here and start diggin'." Tom stood slowly and began methodically to brush the dirt from his shoulders and head. Ventries, the foreman, stood on top of a flat rock, watching him.

"Come on, Schaefer, get diggin'. You're no better than us, ya know," he yelled. Tom sullenly shouldered his shovel and moved towards the blast site with the rest of the crew. Wearily they began to shovel away the debris from the rock they'd just shattered, their backs already wet in the heat of Maine's afternoon sun.

Always somebody telling me what to do, Tom thought, viciously jamming his shovel under a rock. Four years of it at that crummy Academy, and now this dumb foreman who probably never even got through the fifth grade. This job was almost more than he could take, and if he hadn't needed the money for his alimony payments, he would have walked out in a minute. Every time he thought about where he should be right now, he almost left anyway. On a cutter out of Boston—that's where he should be, or on a PT in the Bay of Tonkin—anyplace but in Topsham, Maine, working for the goddam Ventries Construction Company at \$2.83 an hour, with stinking time and a half for setting explosives. He still couldn't believe it had really happened—it had been so close to the end. In just five days it would've been over—he would have been out, with his commission and his degree and everything would have been ok. He'd even started to relax a bit when June Week started—after all, he'd made it since January with no trouble. And then they got the

phone call. It must have been Barbara, or maybe her father—he was pretty sure the two guys at the Academy who knew wouldn't do it. God, he just couldn't believe that in four hours they could wipe out all he'd done in the last four years and all of his plans for the next four. They'd called him to the Admiral's office at 900 hours that day. He'd had a pretty good idea of what was coming when he'd gotten the message, but the Admiral had been such a pompous ass about it that it had been almost funny.

"Hurumph—Mister Schaefer, we have—hurumph—received a telephone message from an unknown informant stating that you—hurumph—have been married since December 26. Is that true, Mister? Yes, well, do you care to make a statement, Mister? As you wish, Mister Schaefer. I've decided to give you the privilege of—hurumph—resigning, Mister. In any case, you will be off the Academy grounds by 1300 hours today—is that clear? Hurumph. Well, then, goodbye, Mister Schaefer." Just like that. After four years of taking unbelievable crap from every direction, four years of playing by their Mickey Mouse rules, four years of that God-awful town—then nothing. Of course, he'd known it would happen if they ever found out about Barb, but it was so close to the end—that's what really ticked him off. And then when he got home and discovered that that bitch he'd married was divorcing him, he almost blew his mind. For non-support she divorced him! She must've been crazy—she knew he couldn't send her money for the kid while he was at the Academy. He'd told her over and over that as soon as he graduated they'd get everything straightened out, but she just wouldn't listen. Said she didn't love him—never had. She wouldn't even talk to him any more. He figured it was her father—he had her wrapped around his fat little finger—could talk her into anything. Besides, he'd never liked Tom anyway. Probably was him who'd called the Academy. It was the kind of thing he'd do. Well, damn them all—he didn't need them. They could burn in hell as far as he was concerned, including the kid. They'd ruined his life; they didn't deserve any better. First Barbara had tricked him into getting married by getting pregnant, then they'd ruined his career, then she'd divorced him so that by the end of the summer he'd probably get drafted and get killed in a rice paddy or something.

The screech of the four o'clock whistle ended Tom's thoughts, and he slowly lowered his shovel and began to collect his tools. He lingered behind the rest of the crew so that when he finally reached

the equipment shed, they were gone. He glanced around quickly, then entered and shut the door behind him. Dropping his tools on a pile of others on the floor, he took his still-new, black lunch box from a shelf. In a dark corner of the shed stood a small metal footlocker, on which was printed in large red letters "EXPLOSIVES—Keep Out!" Tom swiftly opened it, took out two red sticks of dynamite, and wedged them into the lunch box next to his thermos bottle. Closing the locker, he stood up just as the door creaked open and Ventries entered. He eyed Tom closely, then walked to the box to lock it; Tom nodded curtly at him and left.

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The afternoon had cooled off by the time Tom, shaved and showered and with a brown shoebox under one arm, left his house and drove thirty-two miles to a Portland wharf. There he boarded a fat black and white ferry bound for Peak's Island and stood at the rail for the twenty minute ride, grateful for the rush of cool air past him. A small smile appeared on his face as he stared out over the harbor. Barbara'd need a rest after the trial, they'd said—that's why they'd left Topsham to come to the Island. He knew why they'd left—because her mother couldn't stand the gossiping and the sly looks she got whenever she left the house. In Topsham, where nothing ever happened, the divorce had caused a juicy scandal and created a new diversion for the local housewives: expounding on how the All-American girl and boy could go wrong. He was glad they'd left—make them look bad instead of just him for a change. And after all, they were the ones to blame, anyway—everything would've worked out if they'd just kept quiet. They'd deserve what they got. All except Tommy, Barb's little brother. He'd always kind of liked the kid, but it couldn't be helped. As for the rest, he'd be glad they were gone. Funny, though, he'd never even seen his baby. They said his name was Oscar—after his grandfather. Poor kid would be better off this way. Maybe his life would be better afterwards, too. Maybe he could transfer some of his credits and go back to school, or . . .

The ferry bumped the pier and nearly sent the shoebox over the side. Tom gripped it tightly and strode off the gangplank and up to the pier to the island. It was a small island—hardly two miles across—the last in a chain stretching out from the harbor. Actually it was just one long hill covered with pine trees and blueberry bushes. There were mostly only summer people there—a lot

of cottages facing the bay, close to the ferry landing, and a few on the other side of the hill. That's where the Schoonmans was—facing the ocean. Tom turned onto a dirt road that skirted the shoreline and struck out briskly. After about ten minutes of walking, he left the road and began clambering over the huge chunks of granite that were strewn along the water's edge, jumping from one to another with graceful leaps, his shoebox held gingerly at arm's length like a football. The tide was low now, and the waves rolled in gently and sloshed listlessly against the rocks. The only other sound was the cry of gulls as they scrounged along the shore looking for food.

Finally Tom halted on a large flat slab of granite and looked up the hill to his right. Directly above him, nestled in among the pine trees, was a brown shingled cottage surrounded by a wide porch. The windows all glowed yellow in the growing dusk as he began silently, warily to climb the rocks up to the house. He reached a clump of pines on the edge of the lawn and sat down there, watching the windows and listening carefully. Through the open windows came the murmur of women's voices, the cry of the baby, Tommy's high-pitched laugh. Tom waited a long time, then stared hard at the silhouettes that appeared, finally, in the upstairs windows, and watched as the lights silently went out, one by one. For a long time after the cottage was dark he sat motionless, the shoebox next to him on the pine needles. Finally he rose and skirted the house once, then he crouched down and crawled under the porch. Where the porch ended he had to lie on his stomach and wriggle between the dank ground and the floor of the cottage. He stopped far underneath it and in the blackness opened his shoebox. He carefully wedged it against a fat post sunk in the ground, set the fuse, and slowly unwound it, as he crawled back out from under the house, across the yard, and down among the giant rocks. Crawling inside a hollow formed by three big boulders, he lit the fuse and a cigarette with the same match and settled down to wait. The tide was rising now, and the surf smashed into the rocks below him with a fury. At each crash white drops of surf flew high into the air, glittering in the moonlight. A brisk breeze blew in his face and made him shiver in his thin shirt.

The explosion sounded differently than the ones during the day. This one cracked out, sharp and well-defined, while those in the thick afternoon heat rather rumbled out in a dull roar. Inter-

esting, he thought. When the debris had stopped falling, Tom stood and looked up at the place the cottage had been. Part of it was still standing, but he noted with satisfaction that fire was leaping through it. He watched the glow light up the sky, and far away he heard the beginnings of a siren. He turned to go, then froze. Far above him, he saw a figure stumble around the corner of the house, carrying something in its arms. As it became silhouetted against the flames, he saw that it was Barbara, and her long blond hair was on fire and she was screaming his name.

