

Chapter 1

December 1969

“Come on... come on, start! Dammit, *start! Please!*”

I’m begging for cooperation from an industrial dishwasher. Ridiculous, I know – but I’m far past reason in waiting for this monster machine to work. Tonight of all nights, it won’t – it *can’t* – hold me up.

My evening routine never varies. After shoving in the last rack of dirty dishes, I shut the machine’s mammoth mouth, press its round red “start” button – and wait. Then I try everything to get it to cooperate. Eventually, it does. How long that takes is purely a matter of speculation.

I’ve been battling this stubborn button for three long months, ever since I began bussing tables and washing dishes in the kitchen at Princeton University’s Stevenson Hall. Those of us who toil here call ourselves the “workers of the world.”

Being actual workers, we're making fun of the rich kid "Marxists" on campus who parrot the Communist manifesto: "Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!" These so-called revolutionaries know nothing of the real "workers of the world" who labor in the back end of Stevenson's kitchen.

As a scholarship kid, I have no "chains" to break. Six nights a week, I cheerfully tie a white plastic apron over my worn corduroys and tattered Princeton sweatshirt. I'm happy to swap the grind of studying for a few hours in the kitchen, where I can lose myself in the mundane motions of scraping, wiping and spraying plates.

I'm thankful to have this steady job. It covers my books and everyday expenses – and it has introduced me to fine, real-world men like Cleveland "Cleve" Washington, an expert cook, and John "Caddie" Cahill, who supervises the kitchen's operations.

Most nights I'm the last one in the kitchen, tackling the dishwasher alone. I always start gently, hoping it will behave. Tonight, as usual, nothing happens.

"Please!" I beg softly, as if my sweet tone might seduce the machine.

I wait, listening for the rush of water filling the tank. But no.

"Goddammit!" I bark.

Then, as usual, I resort to a harsher approach. I forcefully punch the thing.

"Oh, come *on!* Start, dammit!" Frantic by now, I bash the button again and again. "I cannot deal with this shit tonight. I need to *leave.*"

"Bruce!"

I jump backward when I hear Caddie, the big boss, shout my name. He's a tough, brawny Irishman who seems old to me – probably all of 50, I suppose. Almost military in his bearing, Caddie keeps his graying hair

cropped in a crew cut. His pants are sharply creased, his white button-down shirts pristine. His entire appearance is a statement defying the counterculture uniform of most college students: long hair, colorful collarless shirts or tie-dyed t-shirts, flared bell-bottom pants.

I turn to see him standing in the doorway, gazing at me with narrowed eyes. Blood rushes to my face when I realize that he heard me swearing. Even worse, I'm abusing his prized equipment.

"Caddie –" I start, before he can tell me that he won't stand for that kind of language in his kitchen. I've heard him give this speech before – not to me, but to my co-workers: the greeters and servers (who include some of the first women admitted to Princeton, just this semester), the food preparers, the humble bussers and dishwashers.

We dishwashers do our filthy, numbing work at a cramped, steamy sink, scraping countless plates of slop, using a scrub brush and, when we're rushed, our bare hands. We're the lowliest workers of *this* world. But I don't mind. The steady whir of machines, the familiar clash and clang of

giant pots and cheap cutlery, all comfort me. And I love to listen to WABC's Cousin Bruce, whose Top 40 radio show booms through every shift.

"Bruce!" Caddie says again, and my stomach drops.

I never want to disappoint Caddie. In just a few months, he has taught me so much about life, in and out of the kitchen: getting the job done, being patient with machines as well as people, appreciating the value of all work.

With one step, he reaches for the radio to snap off Peter, Paul and Mary's "Leaving on a Jet Plane," underscoring what he's about to say.

I left California in the fall of 1967, two years after my father's death, still mourning and bereft. Now, a couple of years into my Ivy League education, I've realized that Caddie and Cleve, more than most of my Princeton classmates, consistently challenge my ideas and truly have changed my mind. Night after night, as I've worked alongside them, both have become father figures whom I've grown to love.

Cleve is Caddie's opposite: a 40-year-old African American who turns out hamburgers, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and lasagna for 160 hungry Princetonians nightly. In Cleve's kitchen, I abandon myself to its homey smells: bubbling tomato sauce, chicken sizzling in hot oil, the cucumbers and onions and anchovies that he lovingly preps for his favorite project, the salad station.

To most students, Cleve is invisible, like all the cooks and janitors and librarians on campus. But he and I had hit it off right away, and he now takes care of me, slipping me a few soft white rolls during my shift to make sure I eat. He always catches my eye and winks when he hears one of the overprivileged "Marxists" advocating social change. Cleve, I've learned, has read a lot of books, and he believes that Americans need Malcolm X much more than Karl Marx.

On this night, I will begin to truly appreciate what each of these men means to me. This is the night that will bend the arc of the universe, for me and for every young man on campus. All day long, the hourly tolling of the bell in the cupola of Nassau Hall, the oldest and most revered building on

campus, has taken on a baleful tone. ... as if it were counting down to the momentous event that will go down in history on this date: Monday, December 1, 1969.

Most nights, as I clean up the tables, students linger in the comfortable dining room, putting off their studies as they sip coffee and chain-smoke cigarettes, often snuffing out the butts in the food left on their plates instead of the ashtrays on the tables.

But tonight is different. Nobody sticks around for one more smoke. No one feels like debating whether Princeton should sever ties with a defense contractor or how the U.S. should get out of Vietnam.

Everybody is in a hurry to leave. So am I.

This day started like every other day. I met my classmate, Ric Singer, for breakfast at Chancellor Green, the student center, at 6:45 a.m. sharp. We're always the first to arrive. By 8, we're heading to the library to study.

I share practically everything with Ric. In addition to being a good friend, he's also student administrator of Stevenson's Food Services. Every Sunday he inquires, "What shifts do you want, Jerome?" – an inexplicable nickname he gave me shortly after we met. I quickly realized that I could pick up an open shift any day, even at the last minute. Nobody else wants extra shifts in a job that leaves you stinking and soaking wet, especially in a frigid New Jersey winter. Hair and clothing were guaranteed to freeze the minute you stepped out of the steamy, soggy kitchen.

Today, at breakfast, Ric and I talked about the kitchen schedule, the upcoming basketball season, Princeton's irascible coach. We were evading what weighed heavily on both of us – so heavily that Ric even called me by my real name. We seem to feel that if we don't mention it, maybe it won't happen.

Across the table, I watched Ric work his way through his regular breakfast. He has a funny habit of consuming each item on his tray individually, always in order: first, scrambled eggs, then bacon, and, finally, hot chocolate. Gazing out the window into the cold, dark morning, it strikes me

that, tonight, Ric and I will be pitted against each other. What might that do to our friendship?

All day long, an angry murmur had blanketed the campus – a buzz you couldn't really hear, but you could definitely feel. Maybe it was detectable because, otherwise, there was nothing but eerie silence everywhere. The usual antiwar pickets and protests were absent. People were behaving almost furtively, eyes downcast, avoiding direct contact with everyone.

During my last seminar of the day, Modern American History, the entire class – including me – had struggled to pay attention to Eric Goldman's perspectives on President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Goldman is the main reason I'm here: after reading *Rendezvous with Destiny*, his stunning book about the history of reform movements in American politics, I had decided I needed to go to Princeton for its stellar history department.

That this had actually happened still seems like a miracle every time I attend a Goldman class. Usually he's spellbinding, but today, I noticed every single student – including me – crooking his neck every few minutes for a glance at his wristwatch.

For once, I couldn't wait to get out of Goldman's class. I'd rush through my dinner shift at Stevenson, and finally – after months of worry and anticipation – find out what my future holds.

“Bruce!” Caddie says again, and I'm dreading what he'll say next.

“I'm so sorry, Caddie –” I talk over him, hoping to preempt his speech.

“Bruce, I wanted to –”

“I... I don't have time to mess with the dishwasher tonight, Caddie. I have to leave right now.” I yank my apron over my head to emphasize my point.

For a moment he stares intently at me, studying my face. Then he says quietly, “I'll get it started.”

This confuses me, because Caddie is a stickler. We're always expected to finish a job, and he never does our work for us. Is he going to fire me?

He steps toward me, and, to my astonishment, throws a muscular arm around my shoulder, pulling me into a hug. I stand rigid: sweaty after a night in the kitchen, worried that I stink, utterly bewildered by his gesture.

"I wanted to say..." Caddie says softly, and I find myself leaning into him.

"...I wanted to wish you the best tonight. I hope things will work out."

Tears fill my eyes. When Caddie releases me, I turn away, not wanting him to see me cry. But I can't hide the stress and worry I've buried during the day, and for so many days before.

Then he throws his arm around me again. He pulls me in, shakes me a little, and whispers into my ear, like a prayer: "Good luck!"

Chapter 2

I chant Caddie's benediction to myself – “good luck, good luck, good luck” – with each step I take beneath the massive, skeletal maples and elms that line Prospect Avenue -- The Street.

Along The Street, I first pass the old mansions that are closest to campus. No longer private homes, they now serve Princeton's wealthiest students – those who can afford the fees at these aristocratic, fraternity-like eating clubs, which offer social spaces, an activities calendar, and a specific culture in addition to meals. Stevenson, the eating club at the far end of The Street, doesn't require sophomores to “bicker” or compete for admission. The reasonable cost and policy of openness at Stevenson attract an eclectic mix of students. Environmentalists and engineers, whose buildings are nearby, share tables with jocks, lefties, many of the few women on campus, even grad students and the occasional professor.

I draw a deep breath and exhale a frosty mist. The night is clear and crisp, with just an occasional snowflake flecking the air. But the atmosphere is downright creepy. The Street is silent; no one is partying; no one is even out and about – except me. An ominous quiet blankets Princeton's Gothic buildings, its stone archways and wrought-iron fences.

Shivering, I start to sprint down The Street. The old wool overcoat I bought from a senior two years ago, when I confronted my first real winter, does little to shield me from the night's piercing cold. The fear shuddering through me only intensifies the icy tremors.

Tonight, for me and hundreds of thousands of other American men, life and death will lie in a number, to be determined by our birthdate. Tonight, in Washington, D.C., a random lottery drawing will assign a number to each date of the year. That number – every young man's birthdate – will dictate the order in which we'll be drafted into military service to fight in Vietnam. The lower the number, the greater the peril.

Everyone knows the United States is losing the war in Vietnam. Protests wrack college campuses, and recruitment isn't meeting the military's growing need for manpower. To get more soldiers, the government has stepped up the draft system, which conscripts young men who lack the means to attend college. As long as they stay in school, college students are exempt. After graduation, they will be instantly eligible for the draft, and that likely means going to Vietnam. Tonight's drawing inaugurates the lottery system intended to boost enlistment while conveniently reducing opposition to the war.

President Richard Nixon's decision to institute the lottery is both cynical and politically shrewd. A lottery, on its surface, is fair; randomly and without prejudice, it distributes the responsibility to fight among all young men of draft age. However, around half the men involved in the lottery will be effectively exempt from serving because of their favorable numbers.

Nixon's lottery will siphon off thousands of men who otherwise might have joined the antiwar movement out of self-interest, fearing for their own lives. This way, he can conscript more men to fight while also dousing the flames of the antiwar movement, which he despises.

This is the first time in 29 years that the United States has used a draft lottery. In the fall of 1940, a year before the United States entered World War II, some 20 million men were sorted for the military draft by birthdays, just as we'll be sorted tonight. The age range for the draft has dropped, however; today's lottery affects men between 18 and 26, while the 1940 draft lottery took in men between 21 and 36.

Ironically, most of us students aren't old enough to vote against the war. But we're old enough to die in it.

Back in 1940, to underscore the lottery's importance in defending democracy, warplanes had flown in formation over the Selective Service building while a government official solemnly stirred the 366 capsules containing birthdates (February 29 included), using a wooden paddle made from a rafter from Independence Hall. The Secretary of War, blindfolded with a swatch of fabric clipped from a chair used in the signing of the Declaration of Independence, had then handed each capsule to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who announced its date.

Tonight, there will be no warplane flyover, no ceremonial blindfold or wooden paddle. No president or cabinet member will have the "honor" of pulling the numbers. Nixon has left that dark task to Selective Service officials. Some have refused to participate, saying they don't want to be used as props by the Nixon administration. The entire event will be conducted in full view of television cameras, so no one can cry foul.

This bizarre bingo game starts at 8 p.m. Almost every man my age will be glued to a TV or radio as our birthdays are drawn. The sooner you hear your birthday announced, the worse the news. Being among the first 120 birthdays means that you'll probably be sent to Vietnam. For college students like me, that will happen when the protection of our student deferments disappears. If my number comes up later, I'll probably be safe, free to live my life and pursue my longtime goal of going to law school and becoming a public defender.

But right now, I need a television desperately. Immediately.

Stevenson Hall isn't an option. The Trekkies control the TV room, tuning in nightly to "Star Trek" reruns. No one, nothing, interferes with their evening ritual of worshipping Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. Not even the lottery that might upend their futures, even take their lives.

My own room in Patton Hall is out, too, because my roommates and I don't have a TV. I could sit on my bed and listen to my little AM radio, but I don't want to face this moment all by myself. Being around others who also are learning their numbers will make me feel less anxious. We can help each other cope with the news, maybe figure out what to do.

But where can I go?

Then it comes to me. The student center, over in Chancellor Green, has a TV. Lots of people will be watching there. I'll probably find somebody I know in the crowd.

As I race up the student center's steps, a guy I know from Stevenson is leaving the building. "Hey, Wasser! You here to watch 'Mayberry RFD'?" he laughs.

Of course, nobody in college ever watches “Mayberry RFD,” a spin-off from “The Andy Griffith Show” that’s even more countrified and mortifying than Opie. Anyway, I think CBS will preempt its usual shows to broadcast the lottery.

At the arched doorway, I peer into the hazy student center to assess the crowd for this nationally televised event. It feels like the Apollo 11 moon landing, just a few months ago. Then, Americans watched, astonished, as Neil Armstrong stepped onto the surface of the moon and proclaimed: “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

Now, for this considerably less auspicious event, at least sixty guys are jammed into a large room already crowded with old couches, squashed pillows, and shifting, tumbling piles of trash. Everyone is facing the TV – but far from watching the 19-inch screen, they’re bombarding it with any lightweight thing they can lay their hands on: wadded-up notebook pages, paper napkins, pencils, Styrofoam cups. Blue cigarette smoke hangs so dense and low over the room that I can’t even see if anyone I know is here.

When a few guys sit down, I can see that the newscaster, Roger Mudd, is perched on a flimsy folding chair in some government building's frumpy old meeting room: worn brown carpet, heavy beige curtains, mismatched office furniture. Mudd, a tall man, has to twist his frame to face the camera as he speaks. I assume he's announcing each birthdate and its lottery number – but I can't hear a word.

Besides Mudd, all I can see is a somber-looking government official digging his hand, over and over, into a glass bowl holding 366 blue plastic capsules. Each capsule is a fortune cookie, its slip of paper ready to reveal every young man's fate.

Bedlam rules the room. Guys are yelling at each other, shoving anyone who blocks their view, screaming at the TV and each other: "Fuck you!" "Shut up!" "Hell no, we won't go!"

The shouting voices coalesce into an angry chant that rattles the antique light fixtures. "One! Two! Three! Four! We don't want your fucking war!"

Feet stomp and fists pound to emphasize the yelling. All around me, rage is overflowing like the ashtrays.

“Good luck!” I hear Caddie say again. I’ll need it, I think, just to find out my goddamn lottery number!

I stretch my neck to see around the guys blocking my view of the black-and-white TV. I catch just a glimpse of a jaunty holiday commercial for Norelco shavers.

“Sit down! We can’t see!” someone in back yells to the guys in front.

“Fuck off!” someone in front yells back.

When a few people finally sit down and I get a clearer view of the screen, I see that the camera is showing only a few rows of dates at a time, not the whole board. I don’t see my birthday.

Frustrated, I walk back out to the lobby, where a guy I don't know is sitting on a folding chair, cradling a transistor radio to his ear. His foot and knee are bouncing rapidly, like a jackhammer.

"Hey," I call out, "you find out anything?"

"This is bullshit," he says, his leg still jiggling. "It's impossible! The announcer is calling out birthdays and numbers so fast that I can't tell if a birthday goes with the number before or after the date."

He doesn't look at me when he talks. He seems to be simply registering his exasperation with the universe.

"They called my birthday," he continues, "but I still don't know my fucking number! I'm either 91 or 347."

"Maybe *The Daily Prince* will publish the list tomorrow," I say – and it gives me an idea. I can go to *The Prince's* office to see if the editors have the list. They've got to have a Teletype machine!

But where the hell is the campus newspaper office? I have no idea.

Then I remember that there's a teletype machine outside of WPRB-FM, the campus radio station, in the basement of Holder Hall. When I lived in Holder last year, I always checked the scores of the Boston Celtics games there. That machine has to be spitting out lottery numbers.

I rush back out into the frigid night air, needing only a few minutes to cover the short distance from Chancellor Green to Holder Hall. As soon as I see the Gothic building, my mind is flooded with memories of last year's juvenile antics. As a sophomore, I'd shared a suite in Holder with a high school friend, Chris Lipsett, and another guy. We were way up in a corner turret of the U-shaped dorm, only steps away from Commons.

I had earned the reputation of being what Princetonians called a "flamer" – short for a flaming asshole. This meant that I shamelessly involved myself in frequent inane stunts. For example, during the first snowfall of my sophomore year – before women were admitted – I happily participated in

the nude Winter Olympics held in the Holder quadrangle. Events included jumping jacks, push-ups, and relay races – all by participants wearing only smiles.

At Princeton, exams were not proctored, offering rich opportunities for flammers to compete in outrageousness. During the final in my freshman sociology course, ten upperclassmen lined up on a narrow balcony that framed the classroom and mooned dozens of shocked test-takers. Another flamer disrupted a final simply by snapping his fingers – summoning into the classroom a scantily clad woman carrying a waiter’s tray bearing half-filled wine glasses.

I became known for my own unique prank in my freshman dorm, Witherspoon Hall. Built in the 1870s, the building was heated with big, bulky, clanking radiators. These relics from the previous century absolutely fascinated me. Coming from San Diego, I had never seen anything like them.

One evening, I pocketed some of the half-eaten fruit left on plates at the Commons and returned to “Spoon” with a plan. I lodged the apples and

oranges in the bowels of the downstairs radiator. Soon enough, pungent odors wafted through the dorm. This instant success led me to repeat the prank.

Imitators seized upon this stunt, provoking the ire of Stanley, the janitor. Invariably, I caught the blame. Stanley would corner me as I walked to class and threaten me.

“Wasser,” he’d say, not even half-smiling, “if I catch you stuffing that shit in the radiators again, I’m gonna make you lick it out with your tongue!”

I would look him straight on. With my best poker face, I would innocently reply, “Stan, what are you talking about? I’d never do such a thing!”

All that seems so long ago now.

As I walk downstairs to the radio station, I see two guys who must have just found out their numbers. I don’t have to ask. They climb the stairs without a

word. One hangs back, as if his shoes are full of cement, laboring on each step. The other bounds up lightly, taking the steps two at a time.

The familiar rat-a-tat of the teletype calls to me. On the table, thick pleats of white perforated paper spill into receiving trays. Usually the pages stack onto themselves, folding neatly into an accordion. But tonight, some are ripped apart and strewn around, with one pile cascading to the floor.

Clearly, others have checked here before me.

I rifle through the crumpled sheets, but I can't think straight, can't find what I'm looking for. "Slow down," I say to myself. Then, out loud: "Look for a list."

But the machine's annoying clickety-clack and constant spewing of paper amps up my agitation. The sheer volume of news stories the machine transmits seems to mock the one story, the single number, that I seek. Now my quest feels insignificant and strangely irrelevant.

"But the lottery is the only thing that matters to me tonight," I hear myself say, making my case to the machine, as if it were alive.

I take a deep breath and start again, scanning the evening's news stories:

- Los Angeles Police Chief Edward Davis announced arrest warrants for members of the Manson cult on murder charges.
- The first legislation to limit aircraft noise levels at airports was introduced into the U.S. Federal Air Regulations.
- The first peacetime draft lottery in the United States since 1940 was held. September 14 was the first of the 366 days of the year selected.

Peacetime? Now is *peacetime*? That's bullshit! It's Orwellian! Just a few days ago, what they call "the My Lai massacre" was in all the papers, all over the radio and TV. A year ago, in a little Vietnamese village, American soldiers brutally murdered some 500 people – women, children, old people. The military kept the whole horrifying story secret until an investigative reporter uncovered the facts.

Then I reread the last headline, and relief sweeps over me. September 14.

Right on! At least I'm not Number One!

Slowing down, I neatly fold page after page as I search for the list itself. I come upon a sports story about the Celtics, but I don't even stop to read it. Instead, I force myself to keep running through pages, looking for one that has lots of numbers in a sea of white.

Maybe, I think, whoever got here before me tore off all the pages and took the whole list. Then what do I do? I guess I'll have to stand here and wait for the Associated Press to retransmit it. How long will that take?

But then – just as my panic surges – my eyes fall on what I'm looking for. Not only has the AP printed the complete draft lottery list; it also has conveniently organized the numbers according to the calendar.

Breathless, I scour the sheets. January. February. March.

April. I run my index finger down, just past the first two weeks of the month:
13, 14, 15, 16, 17.

I land on April 18.

I slide my finger along an invisible line to the right-hand column. It comes to rest beneath two numerals.

My heart pounds in my ears. I stop breathing.

There it is. The answer to my question. My draft number.

90.

I am 90.