

John Searles

Strange But True

Chapter One

Almost five years after Ronnie Chase's death, the phone rings late one windy February evening. Ronnie's older brother, Philip, is asleep on the foldout sofa, because the family room has served as his bedroom ever since he moved home from New York City. Tangled in the sheets -- among his aluminum crutch, balled-up Kleenexes, TV Guides, three remote controls, and a dog-eared copy of an Anne Sexton biography -- is the cordless phone. Philip's hand fumbles in the dark until he dredges it up by the stubby antenna and presses the On button. "Hello."

A faint, vaguely familiar female voice says, "Philip? Is that you?"

Philip opens his mouth to ask who's calling, then stops when he realizes who it is: Melissa Moody, his brother's high school girlfriend. His mind fills with the single image of her on prom night, blood splattered on the front of her white dress. The memory is enough to make his mouth drop open farther. It is an expression all of the Chases will find themselves wearing on their faces in the coming days, beginning with this very phone call. "Missy?"

"Sorry, it's late. Did I wake you?"

Philip stares up at the antique schoolhouse clock on the wall, which has ticked and ticked and ticked in this rambling old colonial for as long as he can remember, though it never keeps the proper time. Both hands point to midnight, when it's only ten-thirty. Back in New York City, people are just finishing dinner or hailing cabs, but here in the Pennsylvania suburbs, the world



goes dead after eight. "I'm wide awake," Philip lies. "It's been a long time. How are you?"

"Okay, I guess."

He hears the steady whoosh of cars speeding by in the background. There is a thinly veiled tremble in her voice that tells him she is anything but okay. "Is something the matter?"

"I need to talk to you and your parents."

If she wants to talk to his father, she'll have to track him down in Florida where he lives with his new wife, Holly -- the woman his mother refers to simply as The Slut. But Philip doesn't bother to explain all that, because there is too much to explain already. "What do you want to talk about?"

Before Missy can answer, his mother's heavy footsteps thunder down the stairs. A moment later, she is standing at the edge of the foldout bed, her worn-out white nightgown pressed obscenely against her doughy body. A few nights before, Philip had caught the second half of *About Schmidt* on cable. Now he thinks of the scene where Kathy Bates bares all before getting in the hot tub -- this moment easily rivals that one. He shifts his gaze to his mother's curly gray hair springing from her head in all directions like a madwoman -- which is fitting, because to Philip, she is a madwoman. "Who is it?"

"Hold on," Philip says into the phone, then to his mother, "it's Missy."

"Melissa? Ronnie's girlfriend?"

Philip nods.

And then there is that expression: her eyebrows arch upward, her mouth drops into an O, as though she too has been spooked by the horrible memory of Melissa's prom dress splattered with Ronnie's blood. "What does she want?"

He gives an exaggerated shrug, then returns his attention to Melissa. "Sorry. My mom just woke up and wanted to know who was on the phone."

"That's okay. How is she anyway?"

All the possible answers to that question rattle around in his mind. There is the everyday fact of his father's absence, his mother's binge eating and ever-increasing weight, her countless pills for blood pressure, cholesterol, anxiety, and depression. But all he says is, "She's fine. So what do you want to talk to us about?"

"I'd rather tell you in person. Can I come by sometime?"

"Sure."

"When would be good?"

Philip thinks of his life in New York, the way he asked perfect strangers over to his camper-size studio in the East Village at all hours. The buzzer was broken, so he had to instruct each one to yell from the street. "How about now?" he hears himself say into the phone.

"Now?" Melissa says.

He waits for her to tell him that it's too late, too dark, too cold. But she takes him by surprise.

"Actually, I've waited too long to tell you this. So now sounds good to me."

After they say good-bye, Philip presses the Off button and tosses the cordless back into the ruffled mess of the bed. The skin beneath his cast itches, and he jams two fingers into the narrow pocket of space just above his kneecap, scratching as hard as he can. His mother stares down at him as an onslaught of questions spill from her mouth like she's regurgitating something and she cannot stop: "Aren't you going to tell me what's going on? I mean, why the hell would that girl call here after all this time? What, she doesn't know how rude it is to phone someone so late? For Christ's sake, aren't you going to answer me?"

Philip quits scratching and pulls his fingers free from the cast, which looks more like an elongated ski boot with an opening for his bruised toes at the bottom, instead of the plain white casts kids used to autograph when he was in high school only a decade ago. "If you shut up for a second, I'll answer you."

His mother crosses her arms in front of her lumpy breasts, making a dramatic show of her silence. The other night he'd watched *Inside the Actors Studio* and one of those actresses with three names (he could never keep track of who was who) had talked about playing her part for the back row of the theater. That's how his mother has gone through life these last five years, Philip thinks, her every move broad enough for the people in the cheap seats.

"She wants to talk to us," he says.

"About what?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is, she's going to tell us in person."

"When?"

"Now."

"Now? She can't come over now. It's the middle of the night."

"M," he says. The letter is a nickname Philip has used for her ever since he moved home one month ago. She's never questioned it, but he assumes she thinks it stands for mother. By now you might realize that it stands for that other M word: madwoman. His own private joke. He goes on, "Two A.M. is the middle of the night. Technically, it is still early evening. In New York, people are just finishing dinner."

At the mention of the city, she squeezes her lips into the shape of a volcano and shoots Philip a disgusted look. It makes him think of the only time she came to see him there, after the police called to tell her that he was in the hospital. She took Amtrak in. His father caught a JetBlue flight up from Florida. They had a Chase family reunion, right there on the tenth floor of St. Vincent's as Philip lay in bed, the wound on his neck buried beneath a mummy's share of gauzy bandages, his leg freshly set in its ski-boot cast, his body black and blue beneath the sheets.

"This is not New York," she says before turning and thundering back up the stairs, offering him a glimpse of her dimpled, jiggling ass through her threadbare gown.

A whole new meaning to the words rear view, Philip thinks.

When he hears the dull clamor of her opening drawers and slamming them shut, Philip reaches for his crutch and uses it to leverage his

thin, aching body out of bed. The lights are off in the family room, but there are tiny ones everywhere: the red dot on the cable box, the flashing green numbers on the VCR, the blinking green light on the charger of his cell, the orange blur on all the dimmer switches. Together, they leave him with the vague impression that he is gazing out the window of an airplane at night. That image stays with Philip as he limps down the wide, echoing hallway. He takes the shortcut through the dining room no one ever uses, with its long mahogany table and Venetian glass chandelier, then crosses through the foyer into the bathroom beneath the stairs, which is about as small and confining as one on an airplane.

Philip's face in the mirror looks older than his twenty-seven years. There are no crow's-feet or creases in his brow or any of those obvious signs of aging. There is, however, a distinct pall of sorrow and worry in his eyes. It is the face of someone who has seen too much too soon. Then there is the matter of that wound—well on its way to becoming a fat red zipper of a scar across his throat that the doctors said would fade but never go away. Philip finds one of his baggy wool turtlenecks on top of the hamper, puts it on for camouflage, then combs his tangled brown hair and brushes his teeth. He's about to go back into the hallway when something makes him stop and open the medicine cabinet. The inside is still untouched, just like his brother's locked bedroom upstairs. He reaches in and pulls out the retainer. Ronnie's most obvious imperfection: an underbite.

"What are you doing?"

He turns to see his mother dressed in her librarian clothes, or rather the kind of clothes she wore when she was still a librarian. A beige cowlneck sweater and beige pants that she

must have bought at the plus-size store at the King of Prussia Mall. She should have picked up a new nightgown while she was at it, Philip thinks. "I don't know," he tells her.

She steps inside, bringing with her a cloud of Right Guard for Women sprayed on upstairs in lieu of a shower. Her pill-swollen hand snatches the retainer from him and returns it to the exact shelf where he found it, between a dusty peroxide bottle and a tilted pile of cucumber soaps. When she closes the cabinet, her reflection in the mirror speeds by him in a dizzying flash, causing Philip to .inch. "I don't want you touching his things," she says.

It is an argument they've had before, and he won't allow himself to get caught up in it. Melissa will be here any minute, and the last thing he needs is to get his mother more worked up. He steps past her and heads down the hall to the kitchen, where he snaps on the lights. After making do with the camper-size kitchen in the studio he sublet in New York from that kook, Donnelly Fiume, Philip can't help but marvel at how sprawling this one is. It has dark wood cabinets, recessed lighting, and a porcelain tiled floor that's made to look distressed, as though it belongs in a Tuscan monastery rather than a house on the Main Line of Philly. Most of their meals have been microwaved these last four weeks, but no one would ever guess, judging from the mountain of pots in the sink and bowls scattered across the granite countertop, all smeared with green. A few nights before, his mother had been possessed by one of her cravings. Pea soup, this time. Years ago, they had a cleaning woman who came twice a week for just this reason, her services paid for by his father's hefty salary as a heart surgeon at Bryn Mawr Hospital. Not anymore. Philip pulls open the refrigerator and takes out a paper sack of coffee to brew a pot the way he used to in the city when he was

waiting for one of those strangers to shout up to him from the street.

"You're making coffee now?" his mother says from behind him.

This time, he doesn't turn around. He scoops two tablespoons into the filter for every cup, remembering how his heart used to beat hard and fast after he tossed his keys out the window and listened to the clomp-clomp-clomp on the crooked old stairway. "Yep."

"But won't you be up all night?"

"Nope."

They don't say anything after that. She gets a can of Diet Coke from her stash in the fridge and a bag of Doritos from the cabinet, then sits on the wooden stool by the chopping block and chews. Loudly. As Philip pours water into the machine, he thinks back to the last time Melissa Moody came for a visit. The summer after Ronnie died, she stopped by unannounced. His mother had been upstairs staring at her bedroom ceiling, his father pattering around his study, pretending to read one of his medical books. Philip had to put aside the assignment he was working on for his poetry class at the Community College of Philadelphia and drag them to the family room, where they sat, staring at this blond, brokenhearted girl covered in bandages until finally, his father walked her to the door and told her good-bye.

Now, as the coffee machine starts to gurgle and spit steam, white lights fill the room from the window. A car door slams in the driveway. Philip's heart begins to beat hard and fast, just like it used to those nights in New York. He places his hand against his chest, then absently traces his fingers up to that wound beneath the turtleneck as he follows his mother to the foyer.

To each side of the thick paneled door is a narrow slit of glass. She presses her face to the one on the right and broadcasts in a how-dare-she tone of voice, "She's pregnant. I can't believe it. The girl is pregnant."

Before Philip can remind her that Melissa has every right to be pregnant, she begins rambling again, keeping her face to the glass.

"Do you think that's what she's come to tell us? It better not be. That's all I have to say. The last thing I need to hear right now is how happy she is married to someone else when my son is rotting six feet beneath the ground."

"M," he says, "why don't we try something unconventional? Let's wait for her to tell us what she wants before you throw a fit."

She turns around and looks squarely at Philip, a pink smudge in the middle of her forehead from where she had pressed it to the glass. "I wasn't throwing a fit."

"Well, I can tell you're getting ready to. Besides, it's obvious you've never liked Melissa. But it's not her fault that Ronnie is gone."

"Maybe not," she says. "But you don't know everything."

"What don't I know?"

"I just told you. Everything."

"Whatever," Philip says, giving up on the discussion.

He puts his face to one of the narrow slits too, standing so close to his mother that he can smell the sweat beneath her Right Guard. As he gazes out at their snow-covered lawn, Philip inhales and holds it to keep from breathing in

her odor. In the silvery winter moonlight, Melissa's body is a perfect silhouette, her stomach bulging before her as she navigates the icy, unshoveled walkway. When she gets closer, he sees that she is wearing nothing but a baggy Indian-print shirt that hangs down past her waist, and a loose pair of army green cargo pants. Before she reaches the front porch, his mother pulls open the door. Her lips part to say hello, but her mouth just hangs there.

"Hi," Melissa says from the shadows.

His mother is blocking the view, but Philip calls out, "Hi. Aren't you freezing?"

"It's not that cold."

Even as she says it, a gust of wind kicks up in the yard and blows into the house. Behind her, the branches of a tall oak tree make an angry scuttling sound in the darkness. Philip's mother is still locked in her strange, stunned silence, so he asks Melissa to come inside. Once the door is closed and she is standing in the bright light of the foyer, he realizes why his mother is so taken aback. Melissa is no longer the pretty blond girl his younger brother had taken to the prom five years before. Her once shiny, shoulder-length hair is now impossibly long and straggly, the color darkened to the same drab brown as Philip's. Her small ears, formerly bare and delicate, are now pierced with so many silver studs and hoops that it looks painful. The biggest change, though, is Melissa's face, which used to be so gentle and feminine, the kind of pure, all-American girl you might see in an ad for spring dresses in the department store circulars that come with the Sunday newspaper. Now that face, that smile, those eyes, are ruined by the scars from her last night with Ronnie. Philip would have assumed that she'd gone to a plastic surgeon, like the ones his father played golf with in Florida, but no.

Imprinted on her left cheek is a crisscross of lines. Above her right eye is a mangled patch of skin that has somehow interfered with the hair meant to grow there, leaving her with half an eyebrow and a permanently lopsided appearance. She keeps her lips sealed in such a tight, unyielding way that it makes him think of a coin purse snapped shut. Only when she speaks does he get the briefest glimpse of the dark vacancy where her two front teeth used to be.

"What happened to you?" she asks Philip.

He is so preoccupied by her appearance that it takes him an extra second to remember his own physical state. "Oh," he says, realizing that it's best not to bring up what his mother calls "that business back in New York." He looks down at the hard gray plastic of his cast, the black bucklelike contraptions across the top of his foot. "I had an accident. A skiing accident."