

The Janitor

A novel by

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For Bruce Taylor, and Bob Shatto, and Ernie Decker. Only the good die young.

And for Leon, who taught me more than anyone that things are not always what they seem.

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Prologue

Alone in the pool with Sally Richards.

Was this it?

I ripped my trunks off and threw them out the second she suggested the idea of skinny-dipping. *Her* stripping was a little more dramatic. Wasn't everything with women, though? She made me stay in the middle of the pool while she undid her fluorescent pink top, untying the straps around her neck with a deliberate pace, like she was unlocking the mysteries of the universe. She let it fall into the water and float away on the same waves that now bounced her chest up and down on its surface.

And oh, that evil smile.

She pointed down, and immediately I went under water to see the rest of the show. The bottoms came off even more slowly as her dark red fingernails slipped them down her legs inch by savory inch. Now completely naked, she leaned back against the side of the pool, making no effort to hide anything.

Just twenty minutes ago the waves were rocking because of six teenagers playing chicken. Jack and Brunno won, of course. They always won. I had Sally on my shoulders and Johnny had Heather on his. Brunno always had Jack because neither one of them ever had a girlfriend. They pushed the girls off our shoulders with relative ease and were never smart enough to understand that if you played the game right and made it look like it was a struggle, maybe the girls' tops would accidentally get caught around a random finger or hand and just pop off. Brunno would never get that concept. He was a bull and charged through life with no regard for consequence. Jack could've and should've gotten it because he was a couple of wavelengths above Brunno, but to that point he as well never used his imagination.

But it was just me and Sally now. Jack and Brunno probably went for beer. Heather and Johnny went in the house to do whatever it was they did when they were alone. And now I found myself swimming toward the ultimate treasure, thinking all the while what a great way to start off the senior year—doing a girl I'd only dated for the last two weeks of the summer, in Heather Hawthorne's pool of all places.

I reached my destination and stayed under until my lungs made me go up. Before I could gasp for air, her lips were on mine, arms pulling me toward her, chest pressed against mine, nipples poking me. Her entire body was warm under the water, almost hot, and I could feel her breath quicken in my ear.

She pulled back from my lips—the evil smile filling her face again—and disappeared under water. I stood there like the king of the world, wondering what I had done to deserve this great end of the summer surprise. A rustling in the bushes thirty feet from the pool distracted my thoughts. I squinted but saw nothing. The bushes moved again.

“Who's there?”

The rustling stopped, and started again when the laughter burst out. It was Jack and Brunno, getting a peek at the action.

“We just want to watch, Tone,” Jack said still giggling like a first grader. “We’ll be quiet, scout’s honor

“Yeah we just wanna-wanna-watch,” Brunno sputtered.

Sally was still under water, but I knew she would be up for air any second.

“No, goddamn it, you can’t watch. Get the hell out of here!”

Sally rose to the surface and looked around. “Are you talking to someone?”

Before I could say a word, laughter from the bushes erupted again. Jack and Brunno emerged from the shrubbery, Jack holding my trunks on the end of a stick.

“Looks like somebody lost their drawers.”

Sally slithered off like a water moccasin under the waves, collecting both hemispheres of her bikini and dressing herself under water before she came up at the shallow end of the pool. “You’re all a bunch of pigs, you know that?”

Brunno let out an oinking sound, proud of the statement.

Sally threw the towel around her body—the body that was just around mine—and disappeared into the Hawthorne mansion.

I looked at Jack and Brunno who were still both smiling like they got the last ride of the day at an amusement park. “You guys are dumb asses, you know that?”

“We know,” Jack assured me and heaved my trunks through the air.

They landed on my head, completely covering my face. A fitting end to the summer. I stood there with the cold trunks covering my head. They almost sizzled against the heat of my skin and the temperature of my teenage blood.

I wasn’t ready for books and tests and asshole teachers. It seemed like summer just started yesterday. School lay not a day ahead of me, but in that depressing thought there was some hope. We were seniors. I looked forward to the fringe benefits of such status and took comfort in knowing that nine months from now it would all be over.

I knew that a great deal of that time would be spent chasing the girl that had just slipped through my fingers. But what I didn’t know was that in the coming days I would meet the best friend I would ever have. And his tale would take us far from the beat of high school hallways into a world of mystery and danger, where agents from the government didn’t wear plastic ID cards on their suit coats and serial killers weren’t just faces on CNN, where the human mind was as powerful as it was kind, and where the extraordinary gifts of one person were both a blessing and a curse. This is his story.

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