

**THE
PURSUIT
OF
COOL**

**by
ROBB SKIDMORE**

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The Pursuit of Cool is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Place names and any resemblance to events or actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental.

To Ingrid,
The sun in my sky.

I agree with no man's opinions. I have some of my own.

~ Turgenev ~

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROM INCIDENT

1986

Lance Rally sat alone at his assigned table. The funk band blasted the room with hysterical sass, yet only static reached his corner. His cuffs peeked out the sleeves of his tuxedo, revealing cufflinks affixed the wrong way. The decorative studs hid inside the cuffs with the swivels sticking out. He was not aware of his mistake. His mind searched for an unknown, as it often did, but one larger and more insidious, a ruin which lurked in a swirl of standardized tests, college applications, and outsized expectations. A feedback explosion pierced his eardrums, snatching his breath.

Where had his prom date gone? His shoulders were rigid, but his eyes darted wildly, as if trying to escape his head. Minutes ago, Tanya had said she didn't like their table and was bored. He didn't know what to do and sank into turmoil. Now he couldn't find her. To him she was impossibly complex. Tanya, the neighborhood pool regular and frequent wearer of a citron zippered neoprene bikini top, the Stephen King reader, the mall enthusiast, the picker of sentimental movies, the habitual chewer of grape bubble gum, had vanished. The funk band stomped their feet and snapped their Jheri curls side to side for a lone couple on the dance floor. The Mason Prep seniors of Alexandria, Virginia had danced themselves into a lather, then lost interest. As fifteen minutes dragged into forty-five, Lance concluded she had left the premises, his evening done.

He stood and flipped his purple napkin toward the table's motorcycle centerpiece. It landed over a candle, igniting, and he yanked it away and stamped it out. The prom theme was "Take

Me With U,” from Prince’s *Purple Rain* album. “Let’s Go Crazy” had been shot down by administrators fearful of stoking youthful destruction. He locked his hands behind himself and tried to stretch his clenched back muscles.

“We’re going to a party,” Tanya said, suddenly at his side. Her face, glowing with fresh makeup, was a wondrous sight. He gazed as he had when he first spotted her at the change machine in the video arcade. The leonine volume she had achieved with her brown hair was remarkable. In a pink gown with huge shoulder ruffles, she tugged him toward an exit. They shuffled past a tableau with a lavender backdrop where a photographer posed couples. Earlier, Lance and Tanya had posed, she boldly attempting an exotic look, which on proofs resembled a silent film starlet. Lance had looked startled and glued to his date.

The party was in her neighborhood. During a happier moment, they clicked plastic cups of cheap champagne. After many cups he experienced a modest relaxation and a sponginess about his neck. He smiled at her with relief. After five glasses, Tanya’s chatter had sped up to indecipherable, and she was giggling and scrunching her face.

He checked his hair in a bathroom mirror. It was not a freestanding creation, not a puffed wave, not an exciting or rebellious color. A sandy brown, it sat flat on his head, doing nothing. His facial features were symmetrical and well-spaced, with a prominent brow on a square-shaped head which seemed disproportionately large for his body. He worried he had a giant gargoyle head. Coming out of the bathroom, he checked his zipper. Tanya threw her arms around his neck and stuck her wet tongue in his ear. This gave him the impression something might happen that night, though Tanya was as predictable as the outcome of a dice roll. The idea cut through the fog and dominated his thoughts, overjoyed him, terrified him, and made him grind his jaw—he hadn’t considered this possibility.

They walked across lawns on the way to her house. Lightning bugs flickered. He stole glances at her, amazed she

was with him. In a way, he didn't see her at all. He saw ladies from his mother's *Cosmopolitan*, who had so captivated him earlier in his youth, or the underwire-supported and scissor-legged women of J.C. Penney. The models all wore the same facial expression to match their slim torsos and precise hair. This look was in their burning eyes, the sublime crease of their mouths, their shiny lips and the angle of their chins. The look hinted at a terrible boredom, or pleasures they sought to keep from the world, or a closely guarded bit of wisdom, or something he couldn't fathom. It meant everything and nothing.

He felt like he should say something, but could think of nothing. Her pink satin pumps in hand, a mashed corsage swung by a thread from her wrist. She sang softly to herself, *I will be there tonight*...a ballad she'd heard on Hot 102 FM. He wondered intensely: what was she thinking at this moment?

"Oh my God—I think I stepped in doo doo!" she shrieked.

At the Krieger house, she flailed her silk purse against her dress. "Dammit. I lost my keys!" He fumbled in a flower bed, peat chips crunching painfully under his knees until he found the fake rock that hid a key.

"Are you sure they're asleep?" The Krieger ranch house always exuded a mild hostility.

"I'm in trouble if they aren't. They haven't made it past ten o'clock in the last ten years." She pecked at the deadbolt with the key. What Lance hoped but also feared might happen with Tanya would not be the first time. It would be the second; the first memorable the way a car wreck was memorable.

Inside, amid the polished early American furnishings of the Krieger household, fatigue and confusion set in. Lance threw his coat over the couch and unclipped his tie, relieved to be less constrained. A smoky smell permeated the house, a reminder of Mr. Krieger's Firestone franchise. That guy had a punishing handshake.

"Have you had a good time?" she asked, somewhere in the dark.

“Well, sure.” The sound of his voice spooked him.

“You don’t seem like it.”

Then they were kissing on the couch, frantic, as though it were urgent business delayed by the night’s formalities. He held her in his arms and she lay across his lap. A classic movie pose. She tapped his lips; he held them too tight again. The muted television was on, flashing commercials. He groaned as he worked his lips, a satisfaction and perfection warming him. There really was something there between them, he wanted to believe. Wasn’t there?

He leaned forward and pulled her closer.

“Owww! Are you trying to break me in half?”

“Sorry.”

Next she straddled him, her legs settling onto either side of his pants. He pulled his arms out from under mountainous billows of dress and fluff and lace and things he wasn’t sure about. More kissing. A *Saturday Night Live* skit unfolded on the television. Two people dressed as pilgrims, part of that anonymous and irritating cast of the post-Eddie Murphy era. Even with sound the skit wouldn’t have been funny. It went on too long, beating the initial premise into the ground and leaving only a passing interest as to how the weirdness would cease.

They’d been kissing for what seemed hours and hours, exhausted from it. Each in a dreamy daze. Now see, he told himself, things were fine. Something bumped in the kitchen. She turned her head, then said, “It’s just Ranger,” meaning, the family dog was nosing around his bowl. She zipped her dress down in the back. This allowed slack in front. Enough to slip his hand inside the silky garment and underneath a breast.

A metallic sound. Then a bright tumble of light from the kitchen door, stinging their eyes. He was slow to recognize the robust figure of Mr. Krieger in the doorway, like it was some vision from the television. Tanya shrieked and pushed away, scratching his neck with a fingernail. She retreated to an unlit corner. Mr. Krieger shook his head, then mumbled something, a

dull exhortation without overt meaning, but sounding harsh, like a dog's bark. He slammed the door. In darkness again, Lance stood, unsure if his heart would rupture. The first smashing sounds reverberated inside the kitchen: the hard, terrifying smack of china against floor tile, the explosive scatter of shards. Percussive waves bounced around the house. Chunks sprayed against the kitchen door.

Where was his tie? And Tanya?

"You can't leave now!" Tanya said, pressing her face close, tugging at his sleeve. This failed to interrupt his search for tie and cummerbund. She rushed toward the kitchen in bare feet, her dress swishing. He found his coat behind the couch. Mr. Krieger shouted in gruff tones. Leaving the front door open, he fled down the brick walk. Near the dark street, Tanya called to him from the steps. Mr. Krieger's vibrating form filled the door frame. Tanya flowed toward him, swishing again, holding her dress. Grateful, he anticipated an embrace.

"You need to leave! Get out of here!" she yelled. She put a hand on his lapel and pushed. He stumbled backward a step, stunned, waiting for some whispered communication, a secret apology. "You stupid jerk!" She stepped forward again, this time with both hands. He turned and walked off briskly to escape her. Part of him felt bad for her. The other part hated her.

After a block he slowed to get his breath.

More daunting than his fear of Mr. Krieger coming down the street in a car and more crushing than his date's betrayal was a single confounding thought, about Tanya and all the other Tanyas who populated the world: they could just as easily shove you as stick a tongue in your ear.

He walked home glumly, his shoes scratching on pavement. It was dark, only a trace of moon from a lidded sky. Maybe Tanya had broken up with him and he hadn't realized it yet. He thought of them together and felt depressed. He'd never dated anyone

else. This loss would put him at zero. He had always idealized the feminine, his eyes wandering across the playground sandbox to the composed and secretive girls. While he was fidgety and nervous, they seemed freer, happier, possessing some inner magic he could only wonder about. And strange, doom-like circumstances had followed him since. He'd held hands with Karen Dell in Sunday school only to discover a spreading urine stain on his pants. He'd passed a love note to Jenny Whitley in second grade, vomiting on it the next moment.

In a few short months, he would be in college. It was a chance for redemption, to build himself into the person he imagined.

A humiliating moment flooded back—the dance floor. There was such pressure to perform, to be instantly fluid and Travoltaesque. A funky song had inspired him to bust loose and unleash his feet in a daring flourish, but the slick rental shoes betrayed him and his ass hit the floor. He had popped into a martial crouch and scowled at amused onlookers.

He turned into the Linden Chase subdivision at either 3:20 or 2:20 am. The vertical gray lines of his plastic Swatch, lacking numbers, seemed to twist as he studied the black hour hand. He paused at the sight of his family's house, which contained his parents and little sister Vickie. A tall prosperous house on a coveted cul-de-sac lot. The house loomed, serious and self-possessed. He was proud to live there (houses in nearby Willoughby Chase were more expensive, but less new).

The house and thought of his family made him lift his chin. His spine straightened and his chest filled with air. His father, a Harvard Business School graduate, was a senior vice president of a national consortium of aerospace companies. His much older brother, Kevin, was in medical school at Johns Hopkins. One grandfather had been a three-star general. Two uncles were high-powered antitrust lawyers, Yale men. The keen Rally intellect. All the men in his family were brainy, upright people with advanced degrees. A winning formula, it seemed. Lance's

own high school showing had been unremarkable, compared to the scholarship bonanzas his father and Kevin had orchestrated, but he had excelled in some areas and showed potential. It frustrated him, his relative mediocrity, the subtle doubts he sensed from teachers.

He closed the front door behind him soundlessly. His parents would be asleep. The excitement of the evening still tickled him, the violence, the wacko conclusion. But could he be arrested for something?

A leathery smell drifted from his father's paneled study. Diplomas and award plaques and antique weapons and a mahogany desk sat in reverent silence, an epicenter of dark power. In the living room (or, more accurately, the television room) he sloughed off his coat and melted into the couch. This room calmed him, with its stacks of *Reader's Digest* and *TV Guide*, and its catatonic wall hangings. The television, that old mischievous friend, sat waiting for him, but it was so late. How many hours had he spent watching his beloved movies? The hard-bitten war flicks, the subtitled foreign oddities, the steady diet of obscure cable fare. His parents, concerned with his obsessive behavior and fearing the contamination of bizarre notions, had restricted his watching when he was a young child. So he snuck downstairs in the wee hours and watched in darkness, the sound low. The movies stood in contrast to the routines of church attendance and Sunday school, the mundane progress of Cub Scout projects, the drab ritual of school assemblies, the exhausting difficulty of grass cutting or leaf raking. Transportation to foreign worlds became possible. The freaky mind-blowing excellence of *Apocalypse Now*, the heroism and steamy undertones of *The Year of Living Dangerously*, the sublime violence and tension of *The Road Warrior*.

The end of the couch was grooved to his slump. A remnant of positive cinematic feelings touched him. That floating, out of body feeling from inhabiting a parallel world. In *East of Eden*,

he had witnessed James Dean mumbling and lying about, as cool as the ice blocks he lolled against. This lackadaisical immunity to the opinions of others was amazing, enviable. It drove Julie Harris mad, forced her to fall in love with him. This ability to veg out, to let go and lie around as though near physical collapse was a marvelous invention. If only real humans could manage it. This approach ended with tragic consequences for Dean however, both in the movie and real life. On the big screen things were much easier. In *Easy Rider*, Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper could toss their watches into the dust and tear across the Western landscape on choppers, finding an awesome freedom. Sunglasses fixed, the wind in their hair! But as the credits rolled, and more so when the music stopped, the feeling faded, as if such freedom was an entertainment trick and unattainable.

Upstairs, he crept down the hall past his sister Vickie's room, thinking of her with consternation. Vick the Stick had turned thirteen and was looking and acting like Vickie the Vixen. With the onset of menstruation and the strange, chaotic forces of womanhood, she had somehow gained psychic advantage. Recently, Lance had walked into the kitchen as she stood in a tight satin nightgown, her pert new chest outlined by the thin fabric. She was sporting blood-red lipstick. "Wear clothes often?" Lance had said. She leaned against the preparation island, eating an instant pudding. Gazing blankly, she ignored what would have been a dagger a few years back. And her friends: Cammy and Tammy and Kaitlin. They'd been hand-holders, whisperers, their greatest joys horseback riding and watercolor painting. They had regarded Lance with respect. Now a wild, she-devil edge infected them. Their main activities were phoning boys and screaming *God, he's so hot!* at *Dynasty* actors. Last week they surrounded and trapped Lance in the kitchen, speaking in a rapid unintelligible code with wet orthodontic mouths, babbling like they had just come out of anesthesia, their richly conditioned hair swinging. And their

laughter! The mocking laughter of sadists having achieved final vengeance over an enemy. They invented a spontaneous nickname—Lodo or Loddy or Lano, it kept changing—based on an imperfection in his chin dimple. He escaped this mob, but his face turned crimson.

The truly weird thing was that Vickie now had the ability to read Lance's thoughts. "Why don't you just call her?" Vickie had said impatiently as he brushed his teeth. He had been thinking of Tanya but hadn't noticed it.

He clicked on the overhead light in his bedroom and exhaled, as he could only in his sacred place. He tossed his jacket, kicked off the pants and unbuttoned his shirt, realizing his mistake with the cufflinks. Embarrassment flared with the intensity of a physical ache. He struggled with the shirt. It flapped at the ends of his wrists, sailing through the air, the improper links stubbornly holding tight; he cursed until he was free. Inspecting the pants, he found a triangular rip on the seat, courtesy of the dance floor.

Exhausted, he slumped onto an oversize beanbag chair, mud brown, his hands flopping dead to the carpet. Familiar posters came into focus. He looked about, imploring, as if hoping one might jump off the wall and befriend him. A surreal photograph of a lime Porsche 911 Targa. Max Headroom, the computer-enhanced talking head. Also, a bumper sticker—HE WHO DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS.

Tanya: he recalled the first time he inhaled Jean Naté and grape Bubblicious standing behind her on the mall escalator. Why had she French-kissed him after that argument? Not returning his phone calls for six days? She kidded him constantly about his most sensitive feature—his little toe which lacked a nail. So he kidded, once, about the mole on her shoulder, then felt horrible for causing her tears. She was a sweet-smelling enigma, a Rubik's Cube which had remained scrambled despite months of analysis from his relentless Rally mind. His failure to figure her out, to find her guiding logic—it

was infuriating, crushing. He ached for what he thought she had stood for, this notion dying a small, unobserved death. He vowed to figure them all out.

His own behavior baffled him just as much. The swell of discomfort in her presence—brooding, powerful feelings he couldn't identify. They rose into his throat and threatened to strangle. She seemed to trigger an electronic glitch within him. Tanya, composed and emotionally nimble, would watch him squirm.

He studied a taped photograph from *Sports Illustrated*: Cheryl Tiegs in midstride on a beach in a fishnet bathing suit, her nipples prominent and unobstructed by the netting. This vision of Cheryl, so lithe and so sharply erotic, always moved him deeply. The bright dazzling eyes, the kind smile. He pretended a woman with equally fantastic qualities was strolling toward him: a steadier, more powerful version of himself. A woman whose beauty and candor would deliver him into woozy splendor, a sensual nirvana from which he would never return.

His eyes moved to his poster of *Eraserhead*, the early David Lynch film. The shadowed, bulging eyes and illuminated high hair of Henry Spencer struck a note of terror, like a cold steel instrument against his spine. Disturbed, he whistled, covered his eyes and tried not to think about the hellish industrial world Henry blankly inhabited, his wife giving birth to a mutant snake, and that tiny singing woman behind the radiator who provided Henry his only solace. But now he *was* thinking of the movie, which illustrated some cruel truth verified by his evening, that unending torment existed for certain people, possibly himself. He groaned loudly, thumping his head into the bag and carving out a pocket of beans, now thinking about Mutual Assured Destruction and nuclear winter, the planet ravaged, scavenging for food. He did not want to think about these things, but once you started it was hard to stop.

He gnawed on his fingernails, chomping one down to the

quick; this steadied him.

His eyes trailed over to his bookshelf. He scanned the presidential biographies his father had given him, the science fiction titles, the odd gifts. One title was tucked out of sight behind the others. *The Young Person's Guide to Sexuality*, his most embarrassing volume. His mother had given him the book. The *Guide* said sexual intercourse was a very serious gift given to people in love, *married* people, and between unmarried people it was known as fornication, which made God unhappy.

He respected his mother's opinion and decided it would be better to wait, yes. He had experienced a righteous feeling of goodness, of responsibility.

This information had hung over his head like a cautionary cloud, on a special afternoon at Tanya's parents' lake house. In the master bedroom, Tanya with the sneakiest of grins had peeled off her wet bikini. The decision was made for him as his principles crumbled. Added to his nervousness were guilt, and scrutiny from an onlooking, disapproving deity. And then it happened way too quickly, surprising both of them. Tanya was disappointed, a reaction he replayed a million times in a shameful loop. Afterwards, she looked at him differently, her eyes dulled, her respect halved.

He closed his eyes tight, this memory still like rope burn.

His component stereo, his shrine, beckoned him with its scientific blinking lights, its sleek consoles and knobs that begged to be tweaked. A list of bands and albums breezed through his mind. Van Halen. Thomas Dolby hit a special inner point. The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* he craved, but rejected. It would have swelled uncomfortable and potentially uncontrollable emotions—he sensed them right at the surface—that bursting sense, which led to crying, which was embarrassing and very unRally. His sadness stayed within, an unexpressed lump.

His ears still rang from the prom band and he lacked energy to get up. He burrowed deeper into the beanbag. Floating within

this protective womb, he took stock of himself. He was so uncool. Feeling none of it, zip. This, he realized, was the evening's judgment. It was a complex thing and his mind whirled, considering car commercials, movies, television, comic books, fashion: this steady assault of conditioning and subtle judgments. Cool existed whether you wanted it or not, and was all around. Where to begin? His inability to phone females without using a weird oxygen-starved voice was probably his most uncool quality. He'd read extensively about the lives of American presidents, and tried to emulate their exemplary qualities. He'd signed a Drug Free pledge and had strictly adhered to it. He owned five identical pairs of khaki pants he wore to Mason Prep. Another five pairs of white oxford shirts accompanied them. But the ultimate arbiter of cool, the proving ground, was the dance floor, which hours ago his ass had slid across.

In his defense, he could name chronologically every band Eric Clapton had played in. He'd stolen a watch from a drug store in sixth grade. And watching James Dean marching off his property line in *Giant*, he had felt a joyous tug, a kinship so satisfying surely it was a kindred spirit thing; the thought of it now made him briefly feel he was OK. Except Vickie, who seemed destined to be correct, who possessed natural female cool, no one else in his family understood these factors, or appreciated their implications, or had it. Certainly not Kevin, the violinist. This seemed to work against his chances. Still, the factors were ever-changing.

He made an ungainly exit from the beanbag. Blood rushed, his vision darkened and he swayed. He fell back into the bag and waited for the yellow spots to clear.

A copy of the Mason Prep Spring Report lay on the floor. The school motto: *High Character, High Expectations*. The Report listed colleges each senior had been accepted to, scholarships and accolades granted. Lance had suffered a painful slew of Ivy League rejections, and been waitlisted at

Brown. His final choice had been Langford. He liked that it had four thousand students, was far away and had proximity to a major city, Atlanta. It had a growing reputation of putting students into top tier graduate schools, which was key.

The Report listed no scholarships or accolades by his own name. With a bare toe he nudged it under his bed, next to a grade-school-era bottle of Ritalin. He fought off a yawn and hung his head wearily. It seemed a lifetime of effort just to get to this point. The entrance tests for private schools, the weekend tutoring, the SAT preparation, the constant arms race of scholastic achievement. The stress caused his breath to get tight, made his stomach raw and achy. He also flicked report cards under his bed, like the one blemished by a cataclysmic C in Physics, or that C- in Trigonometry, word of which had triggered raised eyebrows and whispers of alarm through his household. The C- was a poke in the eye, a liver punch, until the hateful report was banished from his presence.

The sight of his Junior Achievement award plaque for Outstanding Project of the Year revived him. His eye often traveled there for sustenance, to the dark mahogany and smooth brass plate with its cursive lettering. He drank in the superlative, *Outstanding!* His project idea had been The Alexandria Game, like Monopoly, but with the city's streets and landmarks around the board. He'd sold hundreds of them to bookstores, civic organizations and friends. At last, a discovered talent. As in his mind, this achievement was echoed by his parents to friends and extended family: he was the *business natural*, a decent scholar but more the *little wheeler-dealer*, the *young gifted economist* of the family.

Standing before the award, a second wind stirred in him; his limbs became weightless and clarity entered his thoughts. In college, where things really mattered, he would correct his wrongs and prove himself.

Energized, he did a side-to-side dance move he invented on the spot. Before his mirror he snapped his fingers, rocked his

shoulders. It was conceivable someone in the background of a music video or a cola commercial might do such a dance. He was smart, he assured himself, smart enough; he felt that way inside, the way his brain worked briskly and retained facts, and because he came from good genetic stock, his father being a Harvard Business School grad. Mom had a Vassar communications degree and was summa cum laude. Falling below this baseline was unthinkable. That would mean either he hadn't received the smart genes, or that he was a fuckup.

After his Junior Achievement success came a mention in the newspaper, which he played up big in college essays and which had probably gotten him into Langford (his SAT scores necessitated emphasizing his *special abilities* and where he made a *unique impact*). His college counselor had recommended economics and business school as a *focus plan*. His father concurred. It made sense to Lance. He had to pick something.

You had to think about all this beforehand if you were going to do it right and get anywhere in life. A pain in the ass? Perhaps, but a little foresight paid dividends. And for his trouble, he intended to earn lots of dividends. He sensed across the land a spirit that making it big was good and right and cool, and those who had made it big with hot careers were wearing shocking bright pastel colors and driving sports cars and being celebrated and cheered on by a tax-cutting president. Indeed, his screen idol, Tom Cruise, had illustrated these very principles in *Risky Business*, proving that the right shades, a sharp sport coat and the right attitude could turn your life around, leading to mountains of cash and transformational sex with Rebecca De Mornay. Cruise was ready to grind up the world with those big white teeth.

And the kicker: how could the woman of his dreams turn down such a mighty success? She would not. So he would do what it took to get there.

Armored by the security of his future, his mind turned back to that evening. In a few months he'd be surrounded by college

women. Who cared about Tanya? He snorted. He recalled the outfit she had worn to the mall: coral red cotton overalls, striped blue socks, ripped white mesh t-shirt. With two similarly dressed girlfriends, the three of them unconsciously, or maybe by design, skipping along like the Bananarama girls on a sunny London day. And the gobs of makeup she wore! It had first seemed worldly, illicit, like she was an older woman. Not uncommon for clumps of mascara to stick to her eyebrows. She was a constant flirt, always brushing her hair.

He did several irate pushups. This exertion fed a building rage. The thing that angered him—it had frustrated him without surfacing until this very moment—was the feeling he got from her...how to put this?...that he was *doing it wrong*. She wouldn't tell him what it was, she just narrowed her eyes in dissatisfaction. Clenching his teeth, he wanted to scream, to crash cars, to smash someone's face. But carefully, as he had been trained, he calmed himself and stayed rational.

He yanked her picture out of his mirror. Next he started composing a letter to one Tanya Krieger, informing her of her many crimes and outrages and that he was finished with her. He crumpled this page into a ball, however, and pulled himself to his bed in late, late evening, possibly morning. Relaxed for the first time since being lip-locked on the Krieger couch. He could still feel her in his arms, still smell the strawberry shampoo and taste grape bubble gum from that last slow, wet kiss. He savored this memory, holding it tight.