



# BANDIT

BY ANDREW VACHSS

The Group Home was a garbage can. It wasn't as bad as the Institution, that part was true. We lived in rooms, not dorms. And the bathrooms were like real ones, in houses. The windows didn't have bars, and the fence around the house was nothing — just wood, with no razor wire on top. But it was a garbage can anyway . . . a place where you throw things away.

It was a mix inside. Not like the Institution, that was a mix too, but at least everyone in there was bad. In the Group Home, you had bad kids like me, on the way out from the Institution. You had to stay there for a few months before they let you go for real. But they also had other kids, kids who never did nothing, but they locked them up anyway because nobody wanted them.

That was Rodney. He was smaller than most of the kids, although he wasn't the littlest. Rodney had a bad leg, from where his mother's boyfriend beat on him. He had to drag that bad leg behind him when he walked, and he couldn't run at all.

A big black guy ran the place. He was the Director. That's what they call them in the Group Homes, not Superintendent, what they call them in the Institutions. Mr. Allen, that was his name.

When I got there, he told me it was a place where kids got ready to go out on their own. A Halfway House, he called it. Halfass was more like it — just like the joint, only there was more talking.



We mostly talked in Group. We would all sit in this circle and talk. About our feelings. Mr. Allen, he said that was important. To express your feelings.

I never did that lame stuff. You talk about your feelings, people think you're weak.

Mr. Allen, he wasn't weak. He was an ex-con, a big guy with a hard face and heavy muscles. I want to look like him — it's a good way to look when you're inside. He did State time, years ago. Now he works for the State.

Rodney lived in my room. Just the two of us — the room was real small. I didn't have much stuff, but I had a radio. One day, when I was out looking for a part-time job, three guys from upstairs came into the room after my radio. Rodney walked in while they were doing it. They told him to mind his own business, but he tried to stop them. They rat-packed him, stomped him good. But they left the radio, because they knew from how he fought that he would tell me.

They took Rodney to the hospital. That night, Mr. Allen came into my room. He asked me how come I wasn't playing my radio. I told him I wanted to read. He went over to the radio, turned it on. Nothing happened.

"Where are they?" he asked me.

I gave him the Institution look, but Mr. Allen stared me right back.

"Give it up," he said.

I reached under my bed and gave him one of my thick white socks. Full of batteries from the radio.

"Going for some pay-back, James?"

I didn't say anything.

"That's not the way it works in here," he said.

"I'll take care of it."

The next morning, they shipped the three guys out. Back to the Institution.

When Rodney came back, Mr. Allen told us in Group that the three guys couldn't live by the rules of the Community, so they were expelled.

Everybody nodded, like that was righteous. I could feel Mr. Allen watching me, but I didn't look at him.

One day, in Group, Rodney said he wanted a puppy. He even had a picture of the one he wanted. A black and white puppy. "I would call him Bandit," Rodney said.

Mr. Allen said maybe someday he could have one, if he would take care of it. Rodney got all excited. One of the guys whispered "punk" real quiet, but I heard him. I said I wanted a puppy too, looking the guy in the face. He didn't say anything to me.

Mr. Allen took me aside later. He told me it was good that I watched out for my partner, but not to be stupid.

Rodney cried every night, but I never said anything.

Nobody ever visited him.

Nobody ever visited me either, but that was different. I knew nobody would come, but Rodney, he always thought his mother would come.

The lock on the back door of the pet shop was nothing. I went in like I learned in the Institution.

Rodney cried when I showed him the puppy. "Bandit!" he said. The puppy slept on his bed.

They came for me the next morning. Mr. Allen took me in his office. The cops said it was okay, but they left the handcuffs on.

"Will you let Rodney keep the puppy?" I asked him.

He said he would. His face was sad. "I'll pay for the dog, James," he said. "You pay me back when you can."

"I will," I told him. I always pay back.

Those guys who did Rodney . . . I'll see them soon. □