

S T E V E W A T K I N S

**ON
BLOOD
ROAD**

Scholastic Press / New York

Copyright © 2018 by Steve Watkins

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

While inspired by real events and historical characters, this is a work of fiction and does not claim to be historically accurate or portray factual events or relationships. Please keep in mind that references to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales may not be factually accurate, but rather fictionalized by the author.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-19701-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

18 19 20 21 22

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, November 2018

Book design by Nina Goffi

January 22

My mom is waiting up when I come in—so late after midnight that I don't even bother looking at my watch. Our apartment is on the Upper West Side, on the nineteenth floor with a view of Central Park. Mom sleeps with earplugs and an eye mask, and her bedroom is a mile away from the elevator, so I don't know how she heard me.

But here she is, her usually perfect hair all frizzy, no makeup, standing right inside the front door with her arms crossed, tapping her foot. The ash on her cigarette is so long I think it will fall onto the plush carpet that she just had installed. Like she's been waiting for me for who knows how long. The whole scene catches me off guard.

"Where have you been?" she demands, as I peel off my coat and scarf and this Russian winter army hat with fur-lined flaps that I wear all the time. "And don't even think about lying to me, Taylor, because I will find out. I will call every one of your friends' parents, and be assured that someone will know something."

I spent the past few hours at a music club called Max's Kansas City with my best friend, Geoff, and two girls from our French class, and a couple hundred other people, all of us packed in so tight that nobody could dance, just sway in rhythm. A psychedelic West Coast band called Moby Grape had been playing.

"Concert," I say. "In the Village. So what?"

Mom looks for an ashtray, finds one, stubs out her cigarette, and glares at me.

"Don't you 'So what' me, young man. You know you're not allowed out at night without permission and an escort. We are in New York City. You could be hurt, or mugged, or killed. And it's a school night!"

I know I should just apologize and get it over with and blah, blah, blah. But since when did she start caring what I do? I feel a flare of resentment at this sudden show of concern. Normally I'm invisible while she's off planning charity events and silent auctions and whatever else she does as an excuse to dress up and hang out with other rich moms and brag about their lives.

"Isn't it kind of late for you to be up?" I retort. "Isn't this, like, when you get your beauty sleep? Put cold cream all over your face? Talk to Dad?"

My dad is a Special Attaché for Something or Other at the US embassy—in Vietnam of all places, which is why when he calls

it's at all kinds of weird hours. He isn't home much. Too busy working on the war, or pumping up the South Vietnamese economy, or making his own business deals on the side, or whatever. It's 1968, and President Johnson keeps assuring us that we're winning the war, that there's light at the end of the tunnel, that the American troops—half a million and counting—will be home soon from Southeast Asia. It's all over the nightly news.

“As a matter of fact, I already spoke with your father,” Mom snaps. “And when he wanted to talk to you and you had snuck out, well, that was it. He agrees with me that you have been out of control lately, and it's time we did something about it.”

Wanted to talk to me? Yeah, right. Ever since my dad left for Vietnam, I haven't exactly been of high interest to him. More like my mom asked if he wanted to talk to me and he felt obligated to say yes.

“Did something like what?” I ask, but then I interrupt her before she can even get started. “You know what? Never mind. You can tell me in the morning. I'm tired. I'm going to bed. Got school tomorrow, remember?”

I try to step past her, but she blocks me. “Oh no you don't,” she says. “You're going to hear me out. This isn't the first time your so-called friends have talked you into sneaking out of the apartment and going to hippie clubs in the Village. Especially that boy Geoffrey you're always hanging out with.”

I throw myself down on the sofa, resigning myself to whatever she wants to say. “How do you know I’m not the one who’s the bad influence on Geoff? Huh? Ever thought about that?”

Mom’s face turns beet red, but she plows on, listing ways I’m the worst kid. “Your grades are atrocious. You’re barely passing classes and you’re on academic probation. I don’t understand what your problem is. Do you know how many kids would kill to go to the Dalton School?”

I brush my hair out of my face and shrug at her.

“And your hair! You look homeless with it that long.” She seems like she’s picking up steam, so I tune out, until she says, “We’re taking you out of school. For the next two weeks. Whether we send you back will depend on how you conduct yourself during that time.”

I laugh. “Sweet! A vacation. And we just had Christmas break!”

“You’ll be accompanying me to visit your father for his fiftieth birthday, which is next week if you forgot,” she says.

“No way!” I shout. “Did *you* forget he’s in Vietnam, and there’s a little something called a war going on over there?”

“The war is in the North,” Mom says. “In the Central Highlands. Your father explained it all to me. There is guerrilla activity in the South, but it is contained. Most of it was eradicated in military operations last year. So we’ll be safe.”

I roll my eyes. She sounds like she's reading one of Dad's secret briefing papers that he sometimes forgets are supposed to be so secret. He had a stack of them with him when he came home for a week at Christmas. He was so busy poring over his precious documents and talking on the phone and making day trips down to Washington that I barely got to see him. I thought I'd finally get to hang out with him, but guess I'm the idiot. Good thing Geoff found plenty of stuff for us to do.

I can't believe this is happening. One minute I'm grooving with Geoff and some girls to Moby Grape, and now this? One of the girls, Beth, just started at our school. Geoff and the other girl, Cassandra, hooked me up with her when we met in the Village. And so far, so good. Beth is sixteen like me, and pretty, with straight brown hair that's so long she can practically sit on it. She and I stuck together the whole night, dancing, or I guess swaying, at Max's. When we all split up afterward, Beth gave me a flower she'd been wearing behind her ear and said we should hang out again sometime.

"Well, I'm not going," I announce to my mom, sounding like a little kid. "And you can't make me."

She smiles for the first time—an icy smile that makes her look less like her usual Hollywood star and more like Cruella de Vil. "We'll see about that," she says. "You are a minor, and as a minor, you don't get to make these decisions for yourself."

“I’ll run away,” I say, knowing I sound even more childish.

“You’ll do what you’re told,” she says, and that’s the end of it.

A week later, on a stone-cold January afternoon, Mom and I take off on a Continental Airlines flight to Saigon—twenty hours sitting side by side, not saying a word, at least not to each other. It’s been a long week of silence in our apartment. We’re in first class so she can talk to the other rich people, and I can stretch out with my portable eight-track tape player and headphones and a new album by the Doors. I listen to the song “Love Me Two Times” over and over, thinking about Beth. We talked on the phone a couple of times since that night at Max’s Kansas City. When I told her my mom was making me go to Vietnam, she went all Romeo and Juliet about it. She made me promise I wouldn’t get killed, as if she thought I was going into the army instead of just getting dragged away for two weeks to visit my dad.

I told Geoff and he laughed his butt off. “Dude, you get to go to Vietnam, the coolest, most wretched place on the planet. What do you care about some girl? Two weeks of exotic vacation in beautiful, bombed-out Southeast Asia. Wish I could get punished like that.”

“They might not let me come back to school,” I said.

“Big deal,” he said. “You’re gonna get drafted anyway when

you turn eighteen. Unless you do like I'm planning and go the conscientious objector route."

Geoff had dragged me to this big antiwar demonstration last year, a hundred thousand people marching from Central Park to the United Nations in an April downpour, demanding an end to the war, burning draft cards, singing Bob Dylan songs. Martin Luther King Jr. was one of the leaders. Him and the baby doctor, Benjamin Spock.

"My dad's head will explode if I don't register for the draft," I said. "Better yet, he thinks I should enlist like he did in World War II. And like his dad in World War I. I thought he was going to fly home and strangle me when Mom told him about the protest march."

"Yeah, I remember that," Geoff said. "Too bad you and your dad can't just, you know, sit down and talk about it. Half the country wants us out of Vietnam already."

"Hey, what can I tell you?" I said. "War is the family business."