

In 1958, the long-closed Lyric theatre sits in a block of dilapidated buildings. Jack Crawford's job is to help restore this old movie house. Act III is an adventure in reading for anyone who is a true lover of theatre!

ACT III

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ACT III

A Novel
BY

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Chapter 1

*"The bells rang from the Chapel while we walked.
Oh, where are autumn days and nights like these!"*

John Holmes

How many years ago had the New England poet John Holmes written those words? Jack had forgotten what it was like to walk along Professor's Row under the canopy of oaks and maples that were just now, in mid-September, beginning to show their color. It was one of those rare fall days when he arrived on the campus – a little too warm to wear a sweater, but just a little too cool to go without one. He hadn't been back to the university in over a year and, even though he had spent three very happy years there, all this seemed like something from another world now.

He made his way down Talbot Avenue toward the Arena Theatre. He had a two o'clock appointment with Dr. Ian Carlson, the head of the Department of Theatre. During his freshman year Dr. Carlson had been assigned as Jack's faculty counselor. He had served in that capacity for the three years Jack was on campus. He had been Jack's favorite professor, his director and his mentor. He had taken every course Dr. Carlson taught and had been in at least one arena production each year, directed by Dr. Carlson. A definite bond had grown between the two – the young dreamer and the realistic advisor, who was always there with encouragement and words of wisdom. Jack was looking forward to the meeting. It had been over a year since the last time he had seen Dr. Carlson.

It had rained the night before and the temperature had dropped precipitously, bringing down leaves from the sugar maples, always the first to cover the ground.

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The huge oaks overhead still held tenaciously to their canopies of leaves. He scuffed through the fallen leaves on the sidewalk as he walked. He could smell the pungent odor from a bonfire. He thought, some ambitious home owner must be getting an early start raking and burning.

He turned down the driveway that ran behind the Chemistry building. There it was – a small, unimposing, wooden structure that had served for many years as the college theatre. It was unlike the sturdy brick and stone buildings that characterized the rest of the campus. Jack wondered if it had once been a storage building for maintenance equipment. If it had been, all vestiges of its former life had long since been removed, rebuilt and remodeled, so now it was an arena theatre. He walked up the wooden stairs and into the lobby. It smelled musty from disuse, but there was something else about the way it smelled. Maybe it was the universal, penetrating odor of grease paint which permeated all theatres. It was a fragrant perfume savored by all actors.

Jack walked through the lobby and into the arena. “Hello,” he called. No one answered. The theatre was in darkness, except for the ghost light in the middle of the stage. It cast marvelous, eerie shadows around the empty arena. He could barely make out the now empty seats that surrounded the oval-shaped stage. Clearly it’s doing its job, Jack thought – providing enough light to ward off any ghosts that may be lurking in the darkness. At the same time, it ensured that there was just enough illumination so that anyone entering the arena would not injure himself by tripping over a piece of scenery or a stray prop left on the stage.

He looked up. Overhead, the light grid had been stripped of its lights, except for one fresnel which hung from the iron pipes aimed directly at the floor below. His

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first thought was how strange it was to leave one light hanging. Then he smiled as he remembered the college tradition – leave one light on the grid to ensure there would always be a continuum.

He heard the front door close and he walked back out into the lobby. Dr. Carlson, with a pile of books in one arm and his old, beaten, brown leather briefcase in the other, hurried in through the door. “Jack, I’m sorry I’m late.”

“I just got here a minute ago myself, sir.”

Dr. Carlson unloaded the books and briefcase on the ticket counter and came to Jack and shook his hand. “You look great, Jack! I’m so glad to see you again.”

“So do you, sir,” Jack responded. “I’m glad to be back.”

Dr. Carlson was a small, thin man who obviously took good care of himself. In his mid-fifties, he had a full head of light brown hair, nicely graying around the temples. It gave him a distinguished, professorial look. He had been an undergraduate at the college himself many years ago. Then he went on to get his masters at Columbia and a doctorate at Yale, after which he came back to teach at his alma mater. Dressed in chinos, with a blue button-down shirt, loose rep tie and Harris Tweed jacket, he was the personification of a college professor, obviously comfortable with himself and his surroundings.

“I read all your letters, but I need to hear about it first-hand from you,” he said enthusiastically. “I can’t believe everything you’ve done in such a short period of time.”

“It sure has been a whirlwind of an adventure,” Jack said. He went on to relate the experiences he had working in a summer theatre, followed by his job touring in *Tea and Sympathy* and then playing the same small

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role of David Harris in the Broadway company. Dr. Carlson interrupted frequently with questions, forcing Jack to provide more details.

"Everybody was so excited when you played Boston last fall. The students didn't stop talking about it all semester. It was a stunning production and you certainly made the most of the short time you were on the stage."

"Playing at the Plymouth was a huge thrill, but when all of you came to see the play on the opening night in Boston – I can't tell you what a kick that was for me."

"What about the job running the theatre this summer? How did that happen?"

"Actually, I didn't run it. Brian Evans was the artistic director. I guess you could say I was the number two man." Jack filled in the details of the past summer, recounting the highs and lows of operating the summer theatre company.

"I have to be honest, Jack. I never thought you'd come back to school."

"I loved every minute of it, but I realized that without a degree, if anything happened, I'd be out in left field."

"But it seemed as though you had everything so well under control."

"Doc, you know there are hundreds of guys like me in New York, all with lots of talent. Most of them spend their days going from one audition to another, barely making a living by waiting on tables at night. If they get lucky, they snag a walk-on in a show, hoping against hope that it's a hit and will last for at least a season. Then they're waiting table again until the next break comes. Only a few of them ever make it. That's not for me. I've got to be sure I have something to fall back on if being an actor doesn't work."

"That's smart, Jack. So, what we have to do is set up a curriculum for your final year, is that right?"

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"Yes, sir. Actually, I was hoping that I could perhaps carry a double load and finish in one semester."

Dr. Carlson frowned. "That might be a little tough."

"Is there any way I could get some credit for the work experience I've had over the past year?" Jack asked.

"We've never done anything like that before, but what you've done during the last year is certainly a great educational experience. It might just be possible. Let me talk to the dean and see what he thinks. I'm certainly willing to give you some credits based on your experiences last year. Perhaps, if the dean agrees, you might be able to do the whole thing in one semester."

"That would be wonderful."

"I hope you're planning to do some work at the theatre this semester. We've got an interesting schedule for the fall."

"I don't know if you remember, but during my junior year I stayed away from the theatre for almost an entire semester, thinking that perhaps if I became involved in other things, I could get rid of the theatre bug."

"It didn't work, did it?" Dr. Carlson said with a smile.

"No, it certainly didn't. I can't wait to get back on that stage in there again!" Jack said enthusiastically, pointing into the arena.

"Give me a day or two to see if I can work this out with the dean and I'll get back to you."

"That will give me a chance to get settled. I've got a place off campus, but I don't have a phone yet, so I'll call you, if that's okay."

"That's perfect." Dr. Carlson shook Jack's hand again. "I can't tell you how glad I am to have you back."

Jack had managed to find a two-room apartment on Curtis Avenue, just off the campus. He already had unloaded the old neon blue 1950 Ford Fairlane, but he

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needed to put things away in his rooms and get himself settled. He had considered living in his fraternity house, but rejected that idea. If he was going to try to complete his degree in one semester, he was going to have to concentrate on his studies and avoid the temptation of becoming involved in activities at the fraternity house. This was especially true if he planned to take a role in a play at the arena.

The thought of spending the rest of the afternoon unpacking was most unappealing. As he headed back to his rooms, he walked down Professor's Row again. Temptation got the better of him and he turned up the walk and into the front hall of the fraternity house.

"Hi, can I help you?" A young man whom Jack didn't know was sitting in the living room and rose when Jack came in.

"My name is Jack Crawford. I'm looking for Jason Peale."

"I think he's up in his room. I'll get him for you." The young man headed up the stairs, leaving Jack alone. Not much has changed, Jack thought as he wandered from the living room into the large dining room. The furniture was all the same – a little more worn after another year of use, but still quite respectable. Obviously, some of the brothers had done a major cleaning job to get ready for the new school year. The two large American Oriental rugs had been vacuumed and someone had dusted all the furniture. Even the glass in the three sets of French doors leading to the front porch had been cleaned. Not bad, he thought. The brothers still have some pride in the old place!

"Jack! Jack Crawford!" shouted Jason, as he bounded down the stairs. "What in hell are you doing here?" Jason had been Jack's roommate and the two young men had not seen each other in almost a year.

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Jack smiled and threw his arms around Jason. "I'm surprised you're still here. I thought you would have been thrown out of school by now," he said with a laugh.

Jason was tall and thin. His brown hair was cut short – almost a butch. He was wearing a tee shirt with the fraternity logo on the front, a pair of tan shorts and boat shoes. "Nope. Without you to help me get in trouble, I've managed to squeak through another year by keeping my head down and my face covered." Jason laughed. "But you haven't answered my question – what are you doing here?"

"I'm back at school to finish my last year."

"I've got a sophomore rooming with me, but I can chuck him out and you can move in anytime."

"Thanks for the offer, Jas, but I've already got a place over on Curtis Ave."

"What in hell did you do that for? You know there's always room for you here."

"I'm going to try to do two semesters in one and I know damn well that if I live here it would never happen," Jack explained.

"Well, at least plan to have your meals here. Marcus is still cooking and he'll be glad to make one more meal, especially if he knows it's for you."

"That's not a bad idea. I'm a lousy cook and eating in the college cafeteria is not something I'm looking forward to. Breaking bread with you guys would solve a major problem for me."

"Consider it done. Let me grab a jacket and we can head over to Ball Square and toss down a couple of dimies," Jason suggested.

"As much as I'd like to, I can't, Jason. I just dumped my stuff in my room and I've got to head back and get settled in. But I'll be back for dinner – six o'clock, like always?"

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"See you then." Jason shook Jack's hand. "Damn, it's good to have you back. I really missed you last year."

"Well, it's your fault I wasn't here."

"My fault? How in hell was it my fault?"

"If you hadn't begged me to play a role in *The Silver Cord* so you could pass your damn directing course, none of this ever would have happened."

"That's my Jack – always blaming someone else." Jason slapped Jack on his back as the two walked to the front door. "I want to hear all about it at supper tonight. I'm so jealous of you, but then, I wouldn't have had the guts to do what you did."

Jack headed back to his apartment. When he arrived, everything was where he had left it in the middle of the room. He spent the next few hours hanging up and putting away clothes, arranging books, making up his bed and generally arranging things so that he had a livable space. It was small, but clean. There was a bedroom with a dresser and night stand. The main room was larger with a desk and an old oak, five-shelf bookcase, a worn easy chair and an old couch. He hooked up his Pioneer portable phonograph and set it on one of the lower shelves with his collection of LP's next to it. He set his portable Royal on the metal typing table he had brought with him.

There were several boxes of books on the floor and he was putting these away when there was a knock at the door.

"Mr. Crawford, I hope you've found everything you need." It was Mrs. Esther McDonald, the owner of the house. She was a widow in her seventies, white hair, heavy glasses and a widow's hump on her back. Still, she seemed to be a bright and vibrant person. Jack had made the arrangements to live there over the phone and

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had met her for the first time that afternoon when he moved his gear into the house.

"Thank you, Mrs. McDonald. Everything is fine."

"Good." She surveyed the room. "It looks as though you've settled in already."

"Pretty much so," he responded. "I've got to finish putting these books away and I'll be in good shape."

"You know the bathroom is just down the hall and you'll be sharing that with Mr. Henderson, who rents the room across the hall. He's a fine young man. I'm sure you'll like him," Mrs. McDonald said.

"I'm sure I will."

She turned to leave and then turned back. "By the way, both of you are free to use the kitchen downstairs to prepare your meals."

"I've made other arrangements for my meals, but thank you," Jack said. "I'm sure I'll use it for midnight snacks when I'm studying."

"Well, alright then. If there's anything else you need, you just let me know."

"I'm sure I have everything I need."

"One last thing. You can use my phone if you like until you have your own installed. The number is 587-9444."

Jack jotted down the number. "Thanks again, Mrs. McDonald." He closed the door and surveyed his efforts. He was pleased with the way things seemed to fit together in the room. He looked at his watch. It was just after five. He picked up a towel and a bar of soap and went to the bathroom at the end of the hall. The door was open and he went in, washed up and returned to his room. It was a tradition that everyone dressed for the evening meal at the fraternity house, so Jack grabbed a tie and jacket before heading out for dinner.

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The living room was filled with young men when he arrived. He saw many familiar faces, as well as a lot of new ones – obviously young men who had pledged the fraternity the previous year. “Jack! Over here!” Jason called. Jack joined Jason and was immediately surrounded by a group of brothers he knew. They were glad to see him again and greeted him warmly. The familiar sound of the dinner bell sounded. “Let’s go in and grab a seat together,” Jason said.

There was room for about forty people in the dining room, but since the new pledge class had not yet been selected, there were only about twenty-five brothers at dinner that night. When everyone was seated, the president stood and called for quiet. “Brother Phillips, will you lead the grace for us tonight?”

Around the table, heads were bowed. After the grace was said, there was a hubbub of chatter. Jason stood, hit his fork against his glass and again the room quieted down. “We have a famous guest with us tonight. Many of you know him, but for those of you who don’t, I want you to meet Jack Crawford.” There was applause and some cheers. “Brother Jack took a year off, during which he became a Broadway star. Now he’s back again to finish his senior year and he’s going to be joining us for his meals.” More applause. “Welcome back Jack. Say hello!”

Jack rose from his seat. “Thank you, Jason, for your kind words, but I’ve got to make one correction in your introduction. If indeed I had become a Broadway star, I’d be having dinner tonight at Twenty-One with a beautiful star – probably someone like Julie Andrews. But I didn’t, and I’m not, and I’m happy to be here to break bread with all of you.”

There was laughter and applause. From the kitchen came a booming voice. “I heard you haven’t had a good meal in over a year and couldn’t wait to dig into some of

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ole Ambrose's lumpy mashed potatoes! Come here, you old dog and let me look at you!" Ambrose Simmons, wearing his chef's hat, came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron as he came into the dining room. Ambrose was a large black man who had been the cook at the fraternity house for so many years that no one could remember when he actually started to work there. He was the one constant for the ever-changing group of young men who lived in the fraternity house.

Ambrose threw his arms around Jack in a huge bear hug. "Ambrose, you're bigger than ever!" Jack said with a smile. "I guess you must have found someone who knows how to cook to help you, because you sure couldn't get that heavy eating the food you dish out." There were hoots and cheers from the brothers around the table.

"You just keep that up Jack-man and ole Ambrose will see that you get extra lumps in your mashed potatoes from here on in."

"I see nothing's changed. I thought lumpy was the only way you knew how to make mashed potatoes."

"That's enough now. I gotta get back in the kitchen or you ain't gonna get anything to eat at all."

The meal was served family style. Jack had forgotten how well they ate in the fraternity house, especially on Monday nights. Ambrose had cooked strip steaks. There were bowls of salad greens, mashed potatoes, peas and green beans, and other plates piled high with dinner rolls. When all the plates were filled and they had begun to eat, Jason began to pump Jack about his adventures in the theatre.

Jack told them about the frustrations of auditioning for both Broadway and off-Broadway shows and how he finally landed a small part in the touring company, which led to his appearance in the same role on Broadway. Several brothers had been at the opening

performance at the Plymouth. They wanted to know about the stars of the show and what it was like to play with them. Did Jack spend much time with them when he wasn't performing? What kind of person was Robert Jackson, who had played the male lead? Was Glenda Howard as nice as she appeared to be?

Jack answered their questions and also told them about his experience helping to manage a summer theatre. When the meal was over, Jason suggested they take a walk together. He had some questions for Jack, but they were personal and he wanted to talk privately with him. They walked along the Row. The sun had not set, and there was a cool breeze blowing, rustling the leaves on the trees overhead.

"You haven't mentioned Sid. How is she?" Jason asked.

"She's fine."

"I thought the two of you would be married by now."

"So did I, but I guess that's not going to happen – at least for a while."

"What happened?"

"Hey Jas, this is tough for me to talk about. Sid got a teaching fellowship at the Boston Conservatory. That's part of the reason I decided to come back here to finish my degree – to be near her."

"So you two are still together then?" Jason asked.

"Yes and no. Sid feels that she has to find out whether or not she is good enough to make it as a concert pianist. She needs some space to do that and, as much as it worries me, I understand. So, quite frankly, I'm not sure where I stand at the moment."

"So, Sid's here in Boston then?"

"Yeah. Why?" Jack asked.

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"Honestly, I've always had a crush on Sid – from the first time I met her. I never made any advances because you and she..."

"Right! Sid and I were, and, as far as you're concerned, still are a pair."

"But you just said you didn't know where you stand with her."

"Jason, please don't complicate this thing more than it is right now. Sid needs some time to think about her career and I've backed off to give her that time. The last thing either one of us needs is someone else getting involved."

"Okay, Jack. I won't, but if Sid calls me ..."

"She won't!" Jack was getting concerned about the direction of this conversation. They walked in silence for a while. Jack changed the subject. "How about you, Jas? Everything going okay in your life?"

"Oh yeah, nothing new – the same old thing," Jason said. "What do you say we head back?"

Jack realized that something had just happened between them. He felt uncomfortable and now, when he asked Jason about how his life was going, he got no response. Jack wondered if there was something wrong – something that Jason didn't want to talk about. He decided not to pursue it. He looked at his watch. It was early, but he decided he didn't want to get in the habit of spending time at the house. "Thanks, Jason, but I think I'll head back home."

The two friends parted. As Jack walked away, Jason called to him. "Jack! You got a phone yet?"

Jack pulled the paper with the number on it out of his pocket. "It's 587-9444. You can leave a message with Mrs. McDonald."

Jack walked slowly back to his rooms. He wondered what Sid was doing tonight. Was she thinking about

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him? She had given him her Boston number and he thought about calling her, but decided against doing so. What he had told Jason was right. She needed time and if he called...

He climbed the stairs and went into his room. Had he made the wrong decision? Maybe he should have opted to live in the fraternity house. At least there he would have friends around him – people to take his mind off... At that moment he was lonelier than he had been since the first time he left home and started college. He put on a recording of Brahms' Third Piano Concerto. The LP had been a gift from Sid. If he could not be with her in person, at least he could be with her through the music.

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