Prologue

We did not laugh much in my house when I was growing up. At least I didn’t. Nor did my little sister, Neil. It’s not because we were abused, went without things, or forgot to celebrate holidays. We simply always had serious matters to consider. And we both knew there was a right and a wrong way to behave.

Our dad descended from crop pickers, shopkeepers, and Bible thumpers in rural Georgia. His father, Conway, the only boy among eight children, broke away from the family pack to ride as a cavalry officer into the first World War. Along the way, he picked up a medical degree. Conway Jr. also became a doctor.

Our mom, Jean, was a dazzling debutante. As an only child, she was the single star in the galaxy as far as her parents, Kit and George Lowman, were concerned. There were pictures of her in local newspapers modeling stylish clothes. Her dance card was always jammed tight and there were shiny cars around the clock in front of the Lowman home.

Conway Hunter Jr. met Jean a few years after the end of World War II—a tragedy he was thankfully too young to serve in. He was a pre-med student at Emory University and she was a freshman at the University of Georgia. I don’t know how they met but each was a mainstay in a local, lively crowd in a part of Atlanta called Buckhead. One spring, they joined a beach party on St. Simons Island, Georgia, which was soon followed by wedding bells.

Around the time of my birth as Conway Number III (aka Chip), my mother was diagnosed with a terminal disease. She fought it all the time I knew her, wearing costume jewelry every day. Jean’s despondent parents, for a while, were encouraged by the medical expertise the Hunter clan brought to the table. But in spite of aggressive treatment, no cure was to be found. And failure of one radical, experimental procedure drove a wedge through the heart of my family.

None of this made sense to me or sister Neil. But we found ourselves in a strange world which required everyone to be quiet almost all the time. Friends were rarely invited into the house. Adults told me through words and actions that we were not a normal family.

Still, mine was not an unhappy childhood. Just quiet. I retreated into books, quiet games, and television. Words in books created pictures in my head and pictures could be translated back into words which know no limit.

Voices and sounds of noisy children drifted in through open windows but rarely generated from within. There were constant disputes within my family, so crowded, busy reunions—like those in other homes—were rare. In fact, they were nonexistent.

I looked elsewhere for noise and interaction with others. School, for instance. I was one of the few kids I ever met who actually looked forward to going to school. I loved the process, the preparation, selecting wardrobe the night before. Even homework was not a big deal to me. I was lucky this way.

I mostly rode a bus to school and almost instantly made friends with whomever sat next to me. It was a knack I found easy to master. My grandparents, Kit and George, taught me to speak up and introduce myself. Most kids I met were shy, but almost immediately they opened up to me on the bus. Each always had an interesting story just waiting to fly out, some new adventure, or personal grievance. I discovered how to ask loaded, leading questions and listen to them tell all. If I had a weakness it was remembering details. But this rarely mattered to the speaker who was simply happy to share their tale with a new kid.

And I was almost always the new kid. It wasn’t until the sixth grade that I went to the same school two years in a row.

So, I was left to create my own circle of friends. Most often they were imaginary. For instance, early on I learned to play baseball by myself. I did it with two sets of cards. I had a huge collection of mechanically autographed baseball cards from which I would draft opposing lineups. Team names did not matter. I was the Commissioner, though I did not know to call myself that. I would place player cards face up in the shape of a diamond on the position the big-name player normally stood.

Then, a face down stack of regular, shuffled playing cards drawn one at a time represented action at home plate. Numbered cards were always outs. Face cards represented hits. A Jack drawn face up was a single. A Queen always meant a double and King a triple. Aces, of course, were home runs and the odd Joker meant something unexpected like a steal. I was very careful in drawing the cards not to favor one team over another. I spent hour upon hour cross-legged on the floor playing baseball-card-baseball by myself.

Television was a big thing in my home. First were the cartoons I would watch as baby sister Neil was learning to walk. Then, adventure shows had strong appeal for a boy like me. Game shows were fun because there was always a lively host, smarty-pant contestants, and a noisy audience one rarely saw. Those in seats watching the stage could not stop laughing and I wished I could join them inside the TV box.

Without doubt, these formative years, spent basically entertaining myself, led to my interest in live performance. This book, *Stage Monkey*, begins during the prime of these years.

The story that follows relies heavily on memory, daybooks, and diaries written hurriedly in my twenties and early thirties during the 1970s and ’80s. There are references to people and places that now seem dated or even obscure. Please pardon language or references reflective of the time which some may find offensive.

Now, it must be 8:05 P.M. somewhere because the orchestra is in place, houselights are dimming, and this curtain is going up.