

Chapter 1

“Grandmother, I'm going out for a run,” Trystin shouted from the living room, where he sat on the sofa gnawing at a knot in his shoelace. Jogging was something he had taken up at Coach Miller's suggestion, to build strength and stamina, and weather permitting never missed a day.

Anne Brock pushed away from the kitchen table and struggled to her feet. She carried the TV Guide crossword puzzle and her teacup to the sink, rinsed her cup and set it in the dish drainer, and then made her way toward the living room.

“For Pete's sake, Trystin, you've been on the go all day. Why don't you stay home?” Anne said, from the archway that separated the kitchen from the living room of the tiny apartment they shared.

He may be an adolescent bundle of energy, especially today, but it was nearly 11:00 P.M. and she was exhausted.

Anne's day began at 6:00 A.M. to a blaring alarm clock. She got out of bed, brewed a cup of Earl Gray while she nibbled a buttered English muffin with a dusting of sugar and organized the day in her mind. At six-thirty she woke Trystin, who as the newly appointed swim team captain insisted on being to practice early; so early that most mornings the doors were still chained when she dropped him off at Lincoln Memorial High School's Aquatic Center. He would pace like an expectant father while waiting on Coach Jerry Miller and the team to arrive. Anne's normal routine was to return home to enjoy her pillow for a few more hours, but not this morning, today was Trystin's sixteenth birthday.

After twenty-seven years as head cook at Lincoln Memorial Anne was at home in a kitchen. At half past seven she stood on the threshold of the battlefield wrapped in her favorite red rooster apron. Silver-blue hair pinned in a bun beneath a hairnet, hands on plump hips, she paused before squeaking across the spotless linoleum floor in her white orthopedic nurse's shoes, gathering the accoutrements for a surprise birthday cake. Without the aid of a recipe card or cookbook Anne had spent the morning blending a touch of this and a dash of that, for a proper birthday cake was measured by taste, not with electric mixers and measuring cups.

The string of imitation pearls danced a hula around her neck while she folded batter into greased pans and sang along (horribly off key) to her birthday present from Trystin: “Elvis' Gospel Collection”. Knowing Grandmother loved “The King”, he managed to save his spare change to purchase a money order for the cassette tape. Anne had smiled as she wiped the bowl and licked her finger, recalling how Trystin had quivered like a wet puppy while she sawed through bright yellow gift paper, wrapped with the dexterity of a three-year-old. “God bless your little heart,” she'd said, and then crushed him to her bosom.

Anne walked across the living room and tossed the *TV Guide* to the ottoman. “You've been bouncing around here like a bee in a clover field ever since Jessie dropped you off. Why I can't remember when I've seen you in such a good mood.”

Trystin sprang from the couch and buzzed a flight around the living room before coming to rest and slipping into his running shoes. “I'll be back in half an hour,” he said, tying each lace into a double bow.

“Don't forget, it's garbage night.”

“I'll get it when I come back.” He sprang from the couch and bent at the waist until his nose touched his knees.

“You'll get it before you leave,” Anne said, firmly.

“Ah,” Trystin protested.

“Garbage.”

Trystin tossed his Walkman next to the *TV Guide* and leaped his five-foot-four frame onto the ottoman. Arms flailing he said, “With AIDS, and world hunger, and the threat of nuclear annihilation and you're worried about the garbage?”

Anne casually folded her arms across her chest. “Well if they drop the bomb tonight I want it to be on a clean house.”

He jumped to the floor. “Ah...”

“Ah nothing, mister. Either the garbage goes out or you don't.”

She stepped in front of the door and tipped her head to look at him overtop her bifocals. It was *the look*; he had seen it before. Grandmother's way of saying there would be no further discussion on the matter. Trystin mirrored her stance and gave his version of *the look*. Like two pugilists sizing up the opponent, their eyes locked in visual combat. Neither blinked, or diverted a glance, lest the other claim victory. He edged forward with nearly indiscernible steps, fists balled up at his sides, until he was close enough to smell peppermint tea on her breath. He lashed out like an octopus seizing a lobster and pinned Anne to his chest.

“No one tells the California Kid what to do,” he growled.

Three years had passed since Trystin's parents died in a plane crash off the California coast. Abruptly uprooted after the funeral, he boarded a plane at the San Diego airport (temperature seventy-one degrees) and five hours later made a perilous landing on a snow-covered runway in Cleveland (temperature nineteen degrees). “So this is where God puts the hose when the world needs an enema,” he said from the lobby of Cleveland Hopkins Airport. He claimed his luggage, located his grandmother, and walked to the parking deck and a new life in Warren, Ohio.

During his second winter in Ohio he learned about Alberta Clippers. Film footage on the “Weather Channel” did no justice to how bitterly cold northern Ohio gets when Arctic air plunges across the Great Lakes. During the weather phenomenon, daytime temperatures hovered in the single digits while nighttime lows shivered down the minus side of the thermometer. One good thing about Ohio winters, at least in Trystin's opinion, school was frequently canceled. That was fine by him because he hadn't made any friends anyway—not until he met Jeremy Sivoh.

Overnight a lake effect snowstorm dumped four new inches of new snow on top of the existing eight inches of ground cover. From the warmth of Grandmother's kitchen, Trystin sat perched on the counter (strictly forbidden when Grandmother was home) sipping Carnation Instant Cocoa and watching a kid with long blonde hair shovel snow from HarborView Retirement Village's sidewalks. The thermometer outside was buried at zero. Trystin shivered involuntarily as gusts of wind whipped miniature tornadoes around the hatless boy.

He emerged from the apartment bundled in a fleece-lined green corduroy coat, two long-sleeve sweat shirts, blue jeans over thermal underwear, green mittens, a scarf, and a ski mask pulled down to protect his face. He waded through knee-deep drifts to where Blondie labored over the sidewalks. Bundled up and leaning against a snow shovel like a shepherd's staff, Blondie shook his head at the sight of Trystin.

“I ain't payin' you nothin'. You shovel and it's on your own,” Blondie said. “And what's up with that stupid hat?”

Trystin's breath formed a cloud as he spoke. "Who said you had to pay me? My grandmother made it, what's wrong with it?" He pulled the cap down in the back to cover his neck.

Blondie walked a curious circle around Trystin and said, "You planning on robbing a bank or something?" He snapped gloved fingers. "I've got it! I know what you look like."

This attempt at striking up a conversation, or, heaven forbid, make a friend, was not working as planned. Quizzically, Trystin cocked his head to the side.

Blondie's rosy cheeks rose to a leering grin. "A dick. Yep, a big bundled up penis." He returned to shoveling.

Trystin glared at the back of Blondie's head for a moment, and then scooped up a shovel-load of snow and launched it. "Up yours," he snarled.

A gust of wind turned the sender into the recipient. Snow carried back into Trystin's face and under his clothes, his steel-gray eyes bulged from the ski mask like a startled owl.

Blondie howled. "I rest my case."

Trystin gyrated against the snow dripping down his back. "This stuff's cold."

"Snow usually is, genius." Blondie rolled his eyes. "Where'd you come from anyway?"

"California originally." Trystin shook his clothes and thumbed over his shoulder. "I live with Grandmother in building two hundred, apartment three."

"Oh, you're the kid whose parents got wiped out in a plane crash?"

Trystin's chin drooped to his chest. "Yeah," he said to the toes of his boots.

Blondie saw his wounded reaction and tried to apologize. "Sorry, I didn't mean nothing by that. It's just that..."

"Forget it." Trystin slung the shovel over his shoulder and turned for the apartment. "I hate this place and everybody in it. Ohio sucks!"

Blondie grabbed his shoulder. "Jesus, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. You wanna' help me shovel?"

Trystin pulled away and continued for the apartment. "Nay, I gotta' get going."

"Look man, you help and I'll split what old man Bettiker gives me for shoveling."

"Forget it."

When Blondie stepped into his path, Trystin calculated the distance to the apartment, and the amount of force needed to render the obnoxious pain in the ass helpless enough for him to make it inside and lock the door.

"Man, look, honest, I'm really sorry. Let's start over." Blondie pulled off a glove and tucked it into his armpit. "I'm Jeremy Sivoh."

Trystin regarded Jeremy's apologetic blue eyes for a moment and then pulled off his mitten. "Trystin. Trystin Brock."

Proper introductions complete they returned to where Jeremy had jammed his shovel into the snow.

"I can be such a dick sometimes," Jeremy said.

With a cautious grin, Trystin held out his cap. "Wanna' wear my hat?"

The boys spent the next few hours throwing more snow at each other than they shoveled from the walkways. Playing in the snow with a friend made the cold tolerable. They eventually made their way to Brock's apartment where Grandmother Brock, delighted to see Trystin had a new friend, indulged them with homemade chocolate chip cookies and hot cocoa; not Carnation Instant, but real cocoa made from melted Hershey bars and milk. They spent the afternoon in Trystin's bedroom slaughtering the mutants of Doom II on his Sega game machine.

Anne squirmed free and said, "California Kid, my keister. Garbage."

"All right, you win."

"Hon', I always win."

"Only because I let you," he said, on the way to the kitchen to rummage through the junk drawer for plastic ties. He bounced the bags on the floor and then twisted each closed. He lugged the bags through the living room and picked up his Walkman, clipping it to the waistband of his sweatpants and draping the headset around his neck. "Will there be anything else, Madame?"

With a wave of her hand the queen discharged her attendant. "You're dismissed for now."

His cheeks dimpled into an impish grin. "You think maybe you could get the door? Jeez, I'd hate to spill trash in the house before the carnage begins."

Anne snorted out a laugh and held the door open as he wrestled the bags past her and stepped into the balmy August evening and made his way toward the dumpster with a bag hoisted over each shoulder.

"You look like one of Santa's little elves," she said from the porch.

Trystin spun about ready to deliver a smart remark but laughed instead. The yellow bug light filtered through her blue hair giving the appearance of a green halo over her head.

"Remember, there's a curfew," she said as Trystin tossed the bags into the dumpster and dropped the lid with a bang.

"Grandmother, that's for criminals, not me," he hollered over his shoulder. Checking the duct-taped clip on his Walkman he decided it would hold until he could get to Wal-Mart and buy a new one with his birthday money. He adjusted the earphones and pressed play.

"Perfect," he muttered, as the opening chords of Pink Floyd's "Breathe in the Air" exploded through his headphones. He lowered the volume to a notch below deafening and began a slow trot along the evergreen lined driveway that led to State Highway 5.

Anne proudly reflected on what a good boy he had become, despite the hardships. She stepped back into the apartment and closed the screen against the mosquitoes with no way of knowing Trystin would never return home.