

PROLOGUE

They walk side by side through shin-deep snow, dragging branches for their shelter behind them. The footprints they made on the way out are little more than small depressions in the drifts of swirling white. It's as if the wind has a single ill intent—to wipe out any traces of them.

“Did you bring your headlamp?” she asks.

“No. You?”

“No.”

“We’ll make it.”

She wants to move faster, to outrun the dark that is chasing them, but knows each step is a struggle for him. The branches are too heavy. But she suspects the real problem is beyond her control. She can barely move her fingers in her gloves. His sneakers are caked in snow. His feet must be anchors of ice by now. She stops and faces him. “Let me carry more.”

“Keep moving,” he says.

“You sure? Because I can—”

“Must. Keep. Moving.”

They trudge on, heads down into the stinging wind, following tracks that disappear before their eyes. She shudders as the nagging thought that was small thirty minutes ago swells into a chest-crushing wave of panic.

Are we walking in circles?

She decides to count. Numbers are a refuge, a singular focus that keeps her mind off the fear and pain. If we don't see the camp in fifty steps, I will tell him that we're lost.

She reaches thirty-eight when he points and says, "There it is."

She spots a small bubble of orange and yellow covered in white. The tent. A shape passes in front of it, hunched over, hat pulled down and covered with snow. Three steps, turn. Three steps, turn. He's pacing. At this distance she can't tell which one of them it is. A low moan rises up through the wind, rhythmic and throbbing.

"Something's wrong," he says.

As they move closer she recognizes the jacket.

Then she sees a big patch of black on the front that wasn't there when they left.

"What happened to his jacket?" she asks.

Her companion breaks into a run, goes three strides and falls facedown, scattering his load. He stands, takes two steps, falls again. She drops her branches, grabs his arm, and helps him up. They stumble together into camp, stop and stare in horror at the stain.

It's on his pants, his gloves, his face.

She knows in this dark moment what it is.

Her scream dies in the howling wind.

Backpacks on and racquet bags in hand, Grahame and I step out of the elevator in Darby Hall, arguing about a matter of great importance: who was better, Michael Jordan in 1995 or LeBron James after he won the NBA title with Miami in 2013. We walk across the lobby toward the front desk, Grahame saying, “Dude, LeBron is too big and too fast.”

I answer, “But MJ never lost a championship final. He’s six for six. Perfection is as perfection does.”

Grahame says, “LeBron had more rings and MVPs than Jordan at the same age.”

To which I respond, “But LeBron went into the NBA straight out of high school. He had a three-year head start.”

We stop at the desk. So far, so good.

Grahame says, “What’s your opinion, sir?”

Mr. Chetsanoyev, aka Mr. Chet, whose responsibility it is to make sure all forty-six students residing in Darby Hall don’t get into any trouble between the hours of 10 p.m. and 7 a.m., looks up from his sudoku puzzle with unveiled suspicion. In his view, all students at Chandler Gates Academy are in constant escape mode,

and he is the only wall of resistance preventing us from scoring our drugs and spiking the teen pregnancy rate. He takes in our geared-up backpacks and matching green-and-gold CGA TENNIS uniforms, and shakes his head. Whatever shenanigans we have planned will not work. We offer smiles, which he does not return. “LeBron has more triple-doubles,” Grahame says to me, using the stylus to sign out on the registration iPad.

I say, “Jordan won defensive and offensive MVPs in the same season.”

It’s a fact I didn’t know until last night.

Frowning at the iPad’s display, Mr. Chet says, “A tournament in San Diego?”

“Yes, sir!” Grahame answers, with a heavy emphasis on *sir*. He had started addressing adults in this manner ever since deciding to be an Army Ranger, which he did after randomly meeting a recruiter in the Denver airport while traveling to Cape Cod to teach at a summer tennis camp for the über rich. Meanwhile I was flying back home to Vermont to count trout at a fish hatchery. Now he finishes every sentence to adults with *sir*, thinking it will prepare him for boot camp. And I swear my hands still smell like fish.

Mr. Chet asks, “Why are you leaving so early?”

“We want to beat the traffic, sir.”

“At four a.m.?”

“There’s always traffic in LA, sir.”

“Is the whole team going?”

“No, sir! This is preseason. It’s just us, plus Rhody and Ceo.”

Mr. Chet smiles for the first time. This response is known as the Ceo Effect.

He says, "Is Coach Carson picking you up?"

"No, sir! Coach is in Boston at his niece's wedding. He won't be back till Tuesday."

"Till Tuesday, huh?"

"Correct, sir."

"Who's driving?"

"I am, sir."

"If you're playing in a tournament, then why the giant backpacks? Will you be climbing Everest between matches?" He smirks as if this question will be the one that trips us up. As if we'd forgotten about the packs. Grahame doesn't answer. Not because he doesn't have an answer lined up. It's because the ball is now in my court.

"We're camping in a nearby park," I say. My statement is mostly true. We will be camping, and we will be in a park. The nearby reference is relative. San Diego is three hundred miles from Yosemite and three thousand miles from Ball Mountain State Park in Vermont. Compare the two distances, and Yosemite qualifies as nearby. The flaw in this logic is that Mr. Chet may ask the name of the park, in which case I would be forced to tell a bald-faced lie. Ceo said the odds are four to one that he wouldn't ask that question. I have a name lined up, just in case.

"Hmmm, this looks pretty suspicious," Mr. Chet says, twisting the hairs in his beard. He rocks back in his chair and watches us watch him. What bugs me about this whole scenario is that we're all seniors. We should be able to do whatever the hell we want. But after some dismal scores on college placements, the Chandler Gates Academy board, commonly referred to as "the sacred six," made a highly contested policy that seniors may not go on extended

weekend trips, as in more than one night, without parental and/or staff approval. The end result is we have to be more creative in how we get out the door. And no one is more creative than Ceo.

Mr. Chet shifts his gaze directly to me—the weakest link. Ceo anticipated this move because I’m the “honest” one. The guy least likely to break or even bend the rules. Not because I have a more highly evolved moral code. More like I’m the guy with the most to lose. One misstep and my “scholarship” is history. That was made abundantly clear during my interview with Coach Carson (one of the best in the country) and Maxine Taylor, the overlord of the Chandler Gates N-FAP (Needs-based Financial Assistance Package) treasure chest.

I brace myself for my next role in this mission.

“Colin,” Mr. Chet says, “did Coach Carson sign off on this?”

“There’s a note on the Need to Know page.” Also true—sort of.

“Hmmmph.” Mr. Chet frowns, rocks forward. Taps the display a couple of times. The changing screens flicker in his wire-framed glasses. Hopefully, Rhody got the upload done. He was scanning the revised version of Coach’s note when we left his room last night. The revised version states we will be camping at a “nearby park” instead of what the original version from a different tournament states, which is we’ll be staying at Ceo’s father’s guest condo in La Jolla. If Rhody didn’t get that done, then we wind up playing tennis in LA smog instead of breathing the clean mountain air of Yosemite. I’d be okay if that happened. Make that *ecstatically* okay. But Mr. Chet settles on a page and reads the paragraph. If he were to look for this version in two hours, it would be gone. When he’s

finished, he says, "I think, given the actors involved, the best, ah, alternative, is for me to call Coach Carson."

Alternative is the word we were waiting for.

Grahame bumps me with an elbow.

I say, "That is one alternative. But it's seven a.m. in Boston, and Coach is jet-lagged. He needs his sleep for the big party."

"Well, I'm still not seeing a second alternative."

Grahame slips a small envelope out of his pocket and places it on the desk in a way that can't be seen by the security camera behind us. He nudges it forward and says in a near-whisper, "Here are four alternatives, sir."

Mr. Chet's eyes flick down, then up.

Grahame whispers, "Lakers versus Cavs."

"Same seats?"

"Better, sir. These are right behind the visitor bench."

Mr. Chet reaches out and tucks the envelope under his sudoku book. This action assures us that there will be no phone call to Coach and no follow-up phone call to Ceo's father, who is still in Tuscany buying wine for the cellar in their third home high on a cliff in Big Sur. And there will be no conversation with Coach about this conversation. Ever. If Coach wants to check online to see how we did in the tournament (which he won't, because it's small and not sanctioned), the link Rhody sent him will redirect him to a bogus page that shows the event was canceled due to lack of entries.

"Good luck in the tournament," Mr. Chet says.

We thank him and turn to leave. I'm reaching for the door when

he says, “Tell Ceo that LeBron would eat Jordan for lunch and dinner.”

“Roger that, sir!” Grahame says.

We step out into the cool morning air.

Phase One of Operation Cannabis Cove is in the bank.

We load our packs in the back of Grahame’s aging Jeep Cherokee, then shed the uniforms down to our camping attire underneath. I noticed a shiny new ax in the rear compartment that wasn’t there yesterday when we gassed up. Grahame must have made an extra trip to a hardware store. I think about asking him what’s up with the ax, why not something lighter like a hatchet, but decide it’s his business, not mine.

It takes a few cranks before the Cherokee shudders to life. Grahame guns the engine till the idle settles, finds the dreaded Road Trip playlist on his Samsung and cranks it up. We roar out of the parking lot vibrating to the thumping bass of Bob Marley telling us all to be happy. It’s a three-minute drive to Larner Hall if you honor the speed bumps behind the library and don’t cut across the PE parking lot. Grahame does it in two. Between impacts he says in his bogus Jamaican accent, because that’s how he rolls when he be crankin’ da reggae, mon, “Are ya sure about dis ting, Q?”

“I’m sure.”

“Ya deedn’t look so sure last night.”

“I was tired.”

Dropping the accent, he says, “I’d still be pissed if I was you.”

“I’m not *still* pissed.”

He looks at me, frowns. “Then what are you?”

BAD CALL

“I’m . . . transitioning.”

He grunts, *Bullshit*, makes a screeching left into the Larner Hall parking lot. Ceo is under a streetlamp, leaning against his red Mercedes convertible, sending a text.

Grahame says, “But cha won’t be sleepin een da Ceo’s tent, eh, mon?”

“Roger that,” I say.

Grahame pulls into the parking space next to Ceo's car, guns the engine to keep it from stalling. Ceo pockets his phone, which has me wondering, Who is he texting at 4:15 a.m.? I get out, slip the *Good Will Hunting* screenplay out of my pack. I ask Ceo if he'd like shotgun, thinking I'd rather read about an undiscovered Einstein in Boston for the third time than listen to Grahame talk about one of the many girls he had "privileges" with while teaching backhands at camp Rich 'n' Famous. Ceo says, nah, he's going to sit behind Grahame, then whispers to me, "That way I can strangle him if he talks in that freaking accent." He loads his backpack in the rear compartment with the rest of our gear, takes a moment rooting around, then climbs into the backseat.

"Hit it," Ceo says.

Grahame pumps the gas. The Cherokee spews a cloud of black smoke but we don't move.

"Works better if you put it in *D* for *drive*," Ceo says.

"There's an empty seat," Grahame says.

"Is there? I hadn't noticed."

"Where's your flaky roommate?"

“Flaking.”

“What?” Grahame stares bullets at Ceo in the rearview mirror.

“He isn’t coming.”

“Since when?”

“Since twenty minutes ago when I said get your geeky ass out of bed and he said my geeky ass is staying here.”

This is news of the worst kind. Rhody is the only person on the team, Coach included, who can keep our undisputed alpha males from going nuclear. He’s like the team rodeo clown, hence the name Rhody, along with the convenient fact that he’s from Rhode Island. Without him as a buffer, all the pressure falls squarely on me. Plus, I don’t see the point of rodeos, and clowns are straight-up evil.

I say to Ceo, “Why the change of heart?”

“The usual Rhody bullshit. Too many tests, too little time.”

“You reminded him that this is a sacred poker vow?” Grahame asks.

“Absolutely. He was stressing a couple days ago. I told him that this isn’t just a camping trip. It’s a pilgrimage. I thought that settled him down. But you know how he gets.”

Grahame looks at me. I shrug. It’s widely known that if Rhody had to choose between an emergency splenectomy and risking the loss of his lifetime 4.0, he’d sacrifice his spleen and go for the GPA. On the other hand, Ceo can talk a turtle out of its shell. This isn’t a case of an irresistible force meeting an immovable object. Rhody would cave. We all cave in the presence of Ceo. Rhody wanted to go on this trip and now he isn’t. Something smells fishy. And if anyone knows what fishy smells like, it’s me.

Grahame pounds the steering wheel. “Well, sheet, mon. Who’s gonna pay hees share uv da gas, because me don’t wanna be doin’ dat, don’t cha know.”

“Q,” Ceo says. “Translate whatever the hell your roommate just said.”

Ceo knows exactly what Grahame said, but I play along anyway. It’s the path of least resistance. I say, “He wants to know who’s going to pay Rhody’s share of the gas.”

Ceo opens his wallet, peels a fifty off a thick wad of bills, slaps it on the center armrest next to Grahame. “I’ll cover his gas.”

“Ah don’t know, mon,” Grahame says, eyes on the crisp bill. “We be three people instead of dah four. Dees blows da whole fookin’ deal, don’t cha know.”

Ceo leans back, tilts his Dodgers ball cap low over his eyes. “I’m working on a new fookin’ deal.”

Grahame gives me a querying look, says, “What do you think?”

As if I have a clue about what goes on in Ceo’s head. If Grahame had asked me fifteen days ago, then yeah, I would have shared my opinion. But that was before the challenge match. Before Ceo scorch-earthed our friendship and left me and my future swinging in the breeze. Now it’s a struggle to muster up the will to care. I say, “Your car. Your call.”

He takes a moment, slips the fifty into his pocket.

Steps on da fookin’ gas.

Operation Cannabis Cove requires one stop before we leave town—Big O Donuts for breakfast. They have the undisputed best donuts on the planet, and you can buy a dozen for \$2.99 between four and four thirty. We make the cutoff with two minutes to spare. Grahame loses the three-way coin flip and gets the honors. While he's inside, Ceo asks me if there were any problems with Mr. Chet.

"None," I say. "You?"

"All good."

"Except Rhody."

"Except him." The backseat goes quiet, probably because he's checking his phone. He mutters, *Shit*, then asks, "Did Mr. Chet like the package?"

"He did."

"The Jordan versus LeBron thing worked?"

"As advertised. But I thought you were only doing two tickets."

"I figured a little extra insurance wouldn't hurt."

I wonder about the cost of that extra insurance, do the mental math, and come up with a number exceeding what I make in three

months folding towels. Then I wonder how Ceo scored the tickets in the first place. I could ask him. But I don't bother because he'd just say something evasive like *Craigslist is a gift from God*, or cryptic like *I know a guy that knows a guy*. We watch Grahame pay the cashier, then head for the door with a box of pastries in hand.

Ceo asks, "Are you curious about my new plan?"

"Not especially."

"I think you should ask me about it."

I'm really not in the mood, but I say, "Okay, what's the new plan?"

"It's still forming. But you're going to like it more than the old plan."

"What about Grahame?"

"That wheel's going to need some extra grease."

Somehow he manages to be evasive *and* cryptic.

Grahame opens the door, digs out a donut, hands the box back to Ceo. Just as the Cherokee is turning right onto Nelson Ave., heading for the highway out of town, an irritated voice out of the dark behind us says, "Dude, what the hell?"

"What's wrong?" Grahame asks.

"They're all maple bars!"

"You wanted a dozen donuts, I got a dozen donuts."

"This isn't a dozen donuts. This is the same freaking donut twelve times."

Ceo has a lot of secrets. More than anyone I know. One of those secrets is not his open disgust for any food with maple in or on it. On the day we met he told me he would never go to Vermont just because of all the maple trees.

Grahame takes a shark-size bite out of his pastry and asks, “How’s da new plan workin’ for ya now, chief?”

Ceo doesn’t talk for thirty minutes. I think he’s asleep back there with his hat so low it rests on his nose. Grahame consumes three maple bars while asking me sample questions from the ASVAB, which he’ll be taking in two weeks and expects to pass with scores that will qualify him for a signing bonus big enough to retire this piece of shit Cherokee. Then out of the blue Ceo, with the hat still down low, says, “I need someone to answer a question for me.”

“What question?” Grahame asks.

“Why is there an ax in the trunk?”

“I thought it might be useful.”

“Useful how?”

“You think we might want to cut some firewood?”

“You think it might be a little heavy?”

Grahame turns up the music.

Ceo raises the hat a quarter inch, says over the noise, “Dude. You’re joking, right?”

No response from Grahame.

Ceo says, “Tell me you’re not seriously thinking about hauling a freaking *fifteen-pound ax* on a *twenty-mile hike*?”

Grahame grins into the rearview, says, “I wasn’t.”