



CHAPTER ONE

‘Walk you little turd.’ A large glob of spit shot from the window and Clive jumped backwards.

‘But dad, you’re ...’

Clive’s words were drowned by the V8 engine gunning away, and then he was staring at the fast-disappearing SS Commodore’s metallic badge emblazoned across the boot. The Old Man’s pride and joy he thought bitterly as he kicked a stone after it – his *only* pride and joy.

Are you alright?

Clive turned around and scowled at the dumpy man with his impossibly neat suit and flat tie, Mr. Douglas Elfman, Deputy Principal, commonly known around school as Doug the Ass. Just his luck to have him sneaking around. The guy was always giving him a hard time.

‘Yeah, I’m fine,’ he mumbled, and carefully smoothed his features as he shrugged on his backpack to begin edging away.

‘Wait.’ Elfman tilted his head upwards, trying to catch Clive’s gaze. The boy, who couldn’t be much older than fifteen was already head and shoulders above him. His feet moved in their black Oxfords as his heels pressed into the lifts. Douglas had a secret loathing of tall boys, and especially tall boys who looked like famous Latin soccer stars and even managed to play a little like them. There was a list enshrined in his mind of the worst type of students, and right at the top of that list was tall, good-looking, sporty boys, closely followed by bullies and troublemakers. He stared hard at Clive, shuffling in front of him. This one ticked two of those three boxes. He’d never subscribed to the three strikes and you’re out model. That was way too soft. Two strikes were enough for him. This *daddy thing* might be the leverage he needed to get the boy out of his school.

‘I’m making an appointment for 10am on Monday with Mrs. Coetzer.’

Clive stiffened. He hated the Reflection-Room with its muted colors and one-dimensional counsellors. ‘Why?’

Douglas shook his head, a sympathetic smile on his face. ‘You have serious issues, Clive. You’re constantly in my office for disrupting classes and causing trouble.’ He didn’t bother to lower his voice and the surrounding kids moved closer. ‘Maybe it’s time we got your father involved.’

‘But ...’

‘But nothing Clive, have a good weekend,’ and Douglas gave him another smile filled with solidarity and right under it was slyly triumphant.

Without another word, Clive began walking away. It was a steep climb to the school exit, and then there were at least eight more long hills before he made it home. He kicked another stone as he began trudging up the slope, his backpack rubbing against his shoulders as he ground his teeth in time with his steps. What was Elfman’s problem? He’d been on his back for the last couple of years. His thoughts returned to Monday and his teeth ground harder as he walked. He could chuck a sickie or wag. But then that would mean another detention and another reflection, and sooner or later he was going to crack and pull up his shirt. Oh yeah, that might answer a few of Coetzer’s stupid questions, and he gave a terrible grin as he imagined her face. But then what? He shook his head as he turned out of the school and started along the gravel lip of the road that wound its way through the mountains to his house, almost ten kilometers away. They’d remove him from his father and put him in the foster system, where he’d either be farmed out to some psycho family worse than his Old Man (if that were possible), or he’d be trapped in the system where the other boys would get him.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. His eyes burned. That’s what Gran had always said when he’d got himself into a scrape. It had been different when Gran was alive. The Old Man hadn’t dared beat him too badly then. But once she’d gone, his father had become the father he’d always wanted to be, and Clive had started being really careful about taking off his shirt. He wondered if his father would have been different if his mother had survived his birth, but he didn’t think so. *Bad to the Bone*, that song had been made for his Old Man. Clive blinked hard and took a shaky breath. There was a train station about half a kilometer away, and one of the services carved its way through the mountain ranges. If he caught it, he’d only have about a fifteen-minute walk at the other end. He didn’t have the fare. Too bad.

Evan knew he was a nerd, and he didn't care. Early on, way back in first grade, he'd realized he was different. While the other kids were shoving crayons up their nostrils, he was creating stories that made his teacher swoon with joy and working on probability and statistics before he even knew what the two words meant. Back then he hadn't realized how bad it was to be smart, to be different. Back then he'd been happy to expose himself. And back then he'd been pitched off verandas and bashed on the oval. Back then he'd lived in a bewildering world of pain and humiliation. But not anymore.

In Grade 7, after hauling himself out of the wheelie bin that Frazer and this thug mates had shoved him in, he'd peeled off the banana skins and picked off the orange peel and decided that if he was smart enough to work on the harmonic oscillator question, he was smart enough to outwit the dummies who surrounded him. And that realization had been the beginning of a whole new schooling experience for Evan.

In less than six months his grades slipped from straight A's to straight D's. His topics of conversation never varied from the three things dearest to a *non-nerd* boy's heart. Who was the better wrestler, Destroyer Dave, or Conrad The Killer, and whether in that famous WWWF Championship title two years ago, Chopper had taken a dive? The footy wins and losses on the weekends, including the best plays and the worst calls by the ref, and of course – girls. Who was hot, who was not. Who was taken, who was dumped. As he continued to fly way under the radar, the merciless brutalities of his classmates trickled to a halt.

Two years on, if he wasn't one of them, he wasn't one of their punching bags either. Evan took a couple of skips along the train's platform and then stopped, looking around furtively. Skipping was a slapping offence. Still, he couldn't help a slightly nerdish grin spreading across his face. It was the weekend. For two whole days he could skip when he wanted and be who he really was. He loved the weekends.

'What have I done wrong?

Ruby studied the vending machine's glass face, ignoring Julia.

'What have I done?' Julia almost shouted this time. Taller than the average fifteen-year-old, she ducked her head trying to make eye contact. She was determined to have it out. School was a nightmare, and it was all because of the fabulously popular, fabulously poisonous Ruby.

The whirring of the levers and a chocolate thump as the bar landed in the slide out drawer were the only sounds, other than some laughter up the other end of the platform. Ruby grabbed the chocolate and turned to face Julia. Disdain settled across her face as she tossed

her long blonde hair so that it brushed across the front of her straining shirt. 'Move,' she ordered and dropped the chocolate wrapper on the grubby beige tiles studded with the hard black gum of a hundred students past.

'Not until you tell me,' Julia planted herself in front of Ruby, her arms on her hips, her legs astride.

Ruby shrugged and pointed at Julia's school skirt, regulation length and at least four inches longer than Ruby's hip hugging mini, and then at her face. Her snub nose wrinkled in derision as she said, 'I'm not desperate.' She took a large bite of the bar and smiled through streaked-brown teeth.

'Alright, I get it, you don't like me for whatever reason, and we'll never be friends but ...'

Ruby laughed out loud, and chocolate saliva sprayed Julia's cheek. 'Friends? Not in your wildest dreams.'

'Believe me, it wouldn't be a dream, it would be a nightmare,' Julia snapped.

Ruby jabbed the remainder of her bar into Julia's chest and pointed down the platform to the six girls clustered around the Grade 10 boys. 'You don't know what a nightmare is... yet.' She stalked down the platform and joined her group, who swung round as a single unit, and gave her the bird.

CHAPTER TWO

The train slid into the station with a whisper quiet shh, and a tinny, male voice blared from the overhead speakers, ‘Service 29. All passengers for Gwinnen, Hornsby, Wedego and Condrill, then express to Wommin.’

The platform had been steadily filling for the last ten minutes and office-workers, mothers with prams, couples with shopping bags, and students with backpacks and mobiles gave each other careful space as they stepped over the yellow lines and into the yawning mouths of the carriages. It was unwritten law, known to all commuters, that the last carriage belonged to students. This kept everybody happy. The general population had a distaste for the loud, foul-mouthed, pupils and the students had contempt for anybody old.

‘Come on.’ Ruby weaved her way through the crowd to the end of the platform, followed by her pack of girls and the ever-hopeful boys. The last carriage was less than half full as around twenty kids jostled in, shouting, laughing, and swearing as they threw themselves and their packs into the hard, green vinyl seats at the back. Julia hung back until the last second, making sure Ruby and her crew were settled in the rear with the boys, before she made her way to the front. It was quiet up this end, just Clive and a younger kid with a dopey grin across his face. Sinking low in the seat opposite Clive, she rummaged through her pack and pulled out a novel, holding it close to her face. The carriage doors sealed tight, and the train slid out of the station.

As Julia held the book sightlessly before her eyes, she shook her head. All she’d wanted to do was make them leave her alone and instead she’d made it worse. She was such an idiot. Why hadn’t she kept her big mouth shut? She felt her face heating up, her eyes getting scratchy. There was no way she was going to cry in front of Clive. No way.

Clive recognized that muffled gulping sound. Julia was crying. He stared out of the window, watching the eucalypts flash past. The leaves looked dark green, almost black against the dying sun as the branches stretched for the carriage in the cold winter air. He shivered and looked back at Julia as another sob escaped her throat. What should he do? Julia had come to the school at the start of the year and been allocated the seat next to him in math. But even if she'd been sitting on the opposite side of the classroom, she'd have caught his attention straight away. She had this energy and her sense of humor was wicked. She even managed to make math funny. He guessed if he pulled down her book right now, and parted the long black hair she was using to curtain her face, those blue eyes that caught you every time you looked at her, would be full of tears. He balled his fists, angry with himself. What should he do? He knew the answer to that. Nothing. he'd do nothing. For the last three years, since the Old Man had got extra creative with the boots and the fists and the cigarette butts, he'd made sure he kept his distance from everybody. She'd get off the train at her stop, and the secret thoughts he had about her would always be secret. He rummaged in his backpack and pulled out a soccer magazine, determined to ignore the small sobs that hovered in the air like black kites.

Evan heard the girl and raced through his memory files. That's right, it was the new girl, Julia, Grade 10, two years up from him. He didn't know much more than that, except whenever he'd seen her at recess she'd been on her own, dodging the bullets Ruby shot at her. Ruby, and he flung a look down the other end of the carriage as the blonde knelt over the top of a chair, giving the guys a good look down her shirt. Every boy from Grade 8 up knew Ruby. Oh yeah, she was almost the first name he heard whenever a *girl* conversation began. He was probably the only boy in the whole of the school who didn't want to go out with her. Another gulp came from Julia, and he was in the perfect position to see her profile. Small droplets trickled down her cheeks and dropped into her lap. Without thinking, he scooped up his backpack, slid out of his seat and walked the couple of paces to drop beside her. Clive was opposite, but he was caught up in his soccer magazine and didn't look up.

'Hey,' he said softly. 'Are you alright?'

Julia jumped and pressed the book against her nose. 'Yes,' her voice was muffled. 'Go away.'

'Do you want to talk about it?' Evan was unperturbed. He knew misery when he heard it.

‘No, go away.’ She lowered the book and turned her head to glare at him, her eyes red and puffy.

Evan wasn’t going to back off. She needed help. He wished somebody had been around to help him when he’d been going through the bad times. ‘Sometimes talking about it can help. What have you got to lose? I’m just a nerd Grade 8’er.

Julia smiled through her tears. He did look like a nerd with tufts of brown hair stuck up in all directions, a grin plastered across his spectacularly freckled face. And suddenly it all came blurting out. The uprooting of her life when Mom and Dad had split, the new town, the new school and Ruby. She couldn’t stop it vomiting from her, every poisonous episode that had shaped her life into one of complete misery. And the nerd was right. She was feeling a tiny bit better. ‘Hey what’s your name?’ she said as she swiped at her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket.

‘Evan, but you can call me Bond, James Bond if you’d like.’ Evan’s soft brown eyes twinkled and for a moment they reminded her of Turbo Rose, the dog she’d loved and lost during Mom and Dad’s disintegration. ‘I won’t call you James, but I might call you Turbo every now and again.’

‘Turbo, hey cool. Nobody ever thought I was fast before,’ and Evan wobbled his head and flexed his puny arms.

Julia laughed, startling herself. A few minutes ago, she’d been at the edge of an abyss and now nothing seemed quite so dire. This kid was good.

‘So where do you live?’

Julia stopped laughing and shot him a look. He wasn’t trying to hit on her, was he? But no, his face was open with honest enquiry and he still had the dopey grin.

‘I’m off at the last stop, Wommin. What about you?’

‘Me too. Hey that’s cool, maybe we can walk home together.’

She gave him a hard look and he blushed.

‘I just thought you might like the company. Ruby gets off at Wommin.’ As soon as Evan said Ruby, he wanted to bite his tongue. Julia’s smile slid off her face like it had never been there and she dropped her head and gave a big sigh. ‘You’re right Evan. That’s Ruby’s stop.’

CHAPTER THREE

‘What’s she doing down there with Clive?’ As Ruby spoke, she tossed her head in Julia’s direction.

‘I don’t know, let’s go down and hassle her.’ Jessamine rose as the train lurched around a curve and was thrown across the aisle into Justin’s lap. She giggled and wriggled, and Justin was fire engine red before she climbed off and stood in front of Ruby. ‘Come on, what are we waiting for?’

Ruby shook her head. ‘I don’t need you for this.’

Jessamine pulled a face. ‘Oh, come on Ruby, it’ll be fun.’

Ruby’s *no* was sharp. She stood and gave Jessamine a light push back into the seat. ‘You stay here.’

As Ruby walked towards Julia, her face settled into a sneer. There she was, head down, having an in-depth conversation with a little nerd. Just what she’d expect. Her gaze travelled to Clive and her sneer melted into something else. Clive. What a hottie, and the only boy who hadn’t responded to her come-ons. She’d lain awake at night wondering why, and then one day in math, she’d discovered her answer. Julia had gone up to the board to demonstrate some answer, being a smart-ass as usual, and Clive had followed her progress with puppy-dog eyes. And she couldn’t remember ever being so insulted. He preferred the new girl with her long skirt, baggy shirt, and smart mouthed quips in class to her, the cutest chick in school. And right then and there, as she’d scored scratches in the laminate desk with her pen, she’d sworn revenge. She’d get Clive, then dump him, and she was going to take Julia down.

The train slowed for the Gwinnen Stop and a couple of kids got up. She wove her way around them, heading for Clive. ‘Hi,’ she said as she dropped into the seat and pressed against him.

Clive leaned away. ‘Hi.’

‘What are you doing?’

Clive rolled his eyes behind his magazine and rattled the pages. ‘Reading.’

‘Oh yeah, what is it.’

‘A soccer mag.’

‘Oh yeah, who’s the guy?’ And she leaned across him as she pointed at the page. ‘He looks like you.’

Clive shrugged her off and moved down a seat. ‘I don’t know, I haven’t been able to read it.’

He half turned his back on Ruby and lifted the magazine to his face.

Ruby flushed and looked across to catch Julia and the nerd watching with barely suppressed glee. She clenched both fists and let fly. ‘What are you staring at nerd?’ she said, her voice loud.

Evan transferred his gaze to the window and began a studious examination of the eucalypts and banksias flashing past.

Ruby threw him a triumphant look and turned to Julia. ‘You’re a stupid slag.’

Julia sighed. Ruby wanted it right here, right now. Okay, and she grabbed a great big chunk of her grandma’s Irish and came out swinging. She gave Ruby a look of contempt, ‘You have such a foul mouth, Ruby. Matches the rest of you.’

‘Why you little ...’ and Ruby launched herself.

The interior of the carriage was displayed on a transparent wall and the Comptroller studied the candidates. ‘Those four at the front.’ As the Comptroller spoke, he manipulated what looked like a gunmetal joystick on a panel to his left and immediately the wall was filled with the images of Julia, Ruby, Evan, and Clive. Genetic, physiological and environmental data on the selected subjects was uploaded instantly. ‘Form predictions,’ he ordered. And in a nano-second the organic database streamed with information.

His second-in-charge, Hetch, a gelatinous mass of rainbow-colored bacteria, identical in appearance to the Comptroller, moved to another panel next to a large disc embedded in the floor. Experimentation on inferior life-forms was banned under the Relpek Convention. If this were discovered, his defense that he was following orders wouldn’t save him. He knew

that, just as he knew the Comptroller wouldn't hesitate to execute him if he refused to obey. He'd try one more time. 'Comptroller, I don't think it is wise for us to be ...'

'You are not here to think Hetch. Await my mark.'

'Yes Comptroller.' Hecht, floated to the disc. His breath was shallow and sharp through gills converting the oxygen the subjects breathed into hydrogen.

'Three, two, one, initiate.' As soon as the Comptroller said *initiate*, Hetch, with only a nano-seconds hesitation, formed a limb and depressed the glowing green button on the panel in front of him. The disc projected cosmic rays and Hetch extracted a rod of rust colored manolithium from a glowing hole in the panel and inserted it into a gaping maw beneath the button. 'Locked in, Comptroller,' he reported as a sibilant sucking sound reverberated through the control center.

The Comptroller nodded once and code ran across the transparent wall, tattooing the four subjects. 'Engage.'

Hetch waved his limb over a pool of ununpentium in the console and turned to watch the wall, his gills fluttering. The subjects appeared for a moment longer before the wall cleared. 'Operation complete,' he said, and dropped his gaze to the undulating floor, terrified.