

Prologue

The saw sliced through the flesh and bone with that unique sound and smell and still, after months since beginning training to be a butcher at 1096 Madison Avenue, New York City, he was repulsed by the process.

Lifting a leg, he peeled back the skin before cutting off the foot just above the first joint. He wanted this meat to be the best quality and kept the skin folded back to avoid contamination - the first thing the master butcher in the store had taught him.

Proceeding to the gutting of an animal always made him feel nauseous as a seventeen year old boy and he'd had to train his own stomach to stop doing flips every time the blade slid into the gut cavity releasing that putrid smell.

He remembered vividly the first time he had to slice around a pig's anus before cutting it off to separate good meat from faecal matter before it was expelled during the gutting process. It was revolting but necessary and the more experienced butchers had cheered as he held the ass aloft after five minutes of struggle and gagging. This was a real New York initiation.

The only thing left to do was to hoist the carcass up with his chain and winch before separating the choice cuts. It was never going to be the career he longed for but as his father told him at the time, *'It's a skill for life, you never know when it will come in handy.'*

As a kid you doubt the words of a parent while they try to impose their own will upon you but this time the old guy had made a good point.

Chapter One

Brandon pulled up the collar of his new \$500 jacket, an early Christmas present from Mom - partly to celebrate his first job in the adult world - but mostly to keep out the ten below freezing temperatures covering the Chicago area. Rushing across the city to complete his debut assignment, and desperate to impress Mr Paul Grayson, the Editor of the Chicago Press newspaper, Brandon practised his questions in the back seat of the warm cab. Until this point, the first month of his life as an eighteen year old journalist had mostly included filing old news stories in the haunted back office of the building and searching the internet for upcoming court cases in the area. Neither task ticked the boxes for his inquiring mind, but the flu bug sweeping through the office had at least presented him with an opportunity. Five reporters were at home recovering at the moment so grabbing that

opportunity with both hands, he envisioned greatness as even at his young age he could tell that his fifteen minutes of fame had arrived early.

This task looked straight forward at first glance; the city was experiencing high numbers of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan without support or housing, disappearing through the cracks in the well maintained, expensive pavements. As a result, the crime rate had soared and street violence was threatening to tarnish the name of the city even further. The mayor, Lori Lightfoot, was demanding action from Federal Government and the paper was all out to support her. She was a person the editor described as the best mayor he'd seen, high praise indeed from someone who verbally delighted in shooting politicians down.

The cab ride into the centre was its usual stop start due to the early evening rush hour causing heavy work traffic across the bridge, together with snow that had began to drift down and add to the problem. Tough weather for anyone let alone a rough sleeper. He checked through his hastily written notes again, butterflies appearing in his empty stomach. Mr Grayson had provided Brandon with a contact name and the agreed meeting area. The assignment was to interview a military veteran who ticked all the boxes to get the public behind the campaign. Tommy was a former sergeant in the Marines, decorated for bravery during a fire fight in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. For reasons that he wasn't prepared to explain on the phone, Tommy had bombarded the news desk with calls for the past few days. He demanded an interview and today was his day to tell his own story, whatever that might be.

The story of Tommy was not uncommon; Paul Grayson was a war historian and the picture for war heroes throughout time was similar. When the battle drum of the nation roused them from their homes, they stood bravely to face the machine gun or musket fire. But once the smell of gunpowder had drifted from the valley, the warrior was forgotten. And so the story continued; here was a decorated hero now faced with the humiliation of begging on the streets for food and maybe a warm bed in a shelter if he were lucky enough. He was once a person who you wanted to see in a fire fight, taking up the war on terror. Now, you held your head down and ignored his cardboard sign as you walked past.

For the past week Tommy had been forced to take up residence on North Michigan Avenue near the Cheesecake Factory, a popular chain of American restaurants which were growing throughout the country. It was the only place that he could find in the city which still had large numbers of people brave enough to face the cold weather. On a good day he could pick up a few bucks from visitors to the city and if he was lucky, sometimes even a decent amount from guilt ridden customers with full bellies - not that he could remember what one of those was. His cardboard sign was simple, it read - *'Hi I'm Tommy, Homeless Veteran, Hungry and Cold.'*

The cab pulled up in the brightly lit street, the Christmas cheer shared by those scurrying past but long forgotten by the cold figures trying to hustle a few bucks. Paying the fare, Brandon opened the rear door, a cold blast of wind cutting into his fresh, warm face. He shuddered before watching the taxi pull back into the traffic.

He scanned the street trying to orientate himself, seeing rough sleepers sitting in every warm place they could find before suddenly spotting a hunched figure sitting at the arranged meeting place. He was a big looking guy huddled in a filthy green jacket, the hood pulled tightly over his face to try and keep out the cold. He sat on a folded cardboard box with his back to an electronic board advertising Pandora jewellery. Wearing military boots that had seen too many miles and dirty blue jeans with holes which were not designer, his whole body seemed to shiver in the biting temperatures as he peered at Brandon from the shadows of his dark hood.

"Hi Tommy, I'm Brandon. You sent a message to the newspaper that you have a story that you would like to tell." As the words tumbled from his mouth, he realised that they seemed out of place and he sounded like a holiday rep on a sunny beach, encouraging guests to take up an overpriced tour. Kicking himself, he wished that he could start again but it was too late for a second take.

"You look about twelve years old man, have you got the food? That was the deal, a meal and a hundred bucks." His voice was deep and croaky.

"I can get you a meal Tommy, but I can't pay you the cash until we find out what you want to tell us. I'm guessing it's about your situation? I'm writing a story about vets so maybe you can help me?" Shit, he had done it again, this time coming over like a desperate kid....*calm down.*

"Veterans?" The man sniffed before giving out a chesty cough. "No one gives a shit about us, that's not the story. If that's what you've come to talk to me about, sorry, can't help you, but have a great Christmas, Junior." He pulled his hood more tightly around his face as though to shut himself off from the keen young reporter. Brandon felt briefly humiliated but composed himself again; he wasn't going to screw up for a third time.

"What's your story, Tommy? Can you share it with a twelve year old? I guess that you're hungry...."

"Always hungry, Brandon." He gave a rattling cough again. "My story? I have seen things happening but the police didn't want to hear me out. You see Junior, I'm a bum - look at me - people don't give a bum the time of day."

"What sort of things have you seen Tommy?" A sigh came from inside the darkness of the hood.

"People are going missing, Brandon, lots of young people. No one is looking for them, no one gives a shit. But I know what's happening, I've seen what's going on. I have watched him doing it and he's still doing it and no one can stop him."

"What is he doing?"

"Not so fast. I asked for food, what can you do for me?"

"How about a McDonald's? I can go buy one now." He bent closer, trying to catch Tommy's eye in the deep hood of the jacket, but the smell of stale breath and tobacco forced his face back. Tommy caught sight of his reaction - he never missed a thing - his fresh, clean pink face screwed up by the smell of the streets and he realised Brandon was disgusted by his appearance. He was a kid, what did he know about life? He would be sleeping in a warm bed tonight tucked up by Mommy, lucky bastard.

"Whatever man, go large on everything, it may be a while till I eat again," he replied, his sunken eyes now scanning the pavements for unseen dangers.

"Sure thing, can you tell me anything else before I go get the food?"

"I could tell you everything I know," he coughed and spat onto the sidewalk, "but not until I've eaten. And one more thing, I saw the look on your face when you spoke to me. When I was your age I was kicking doors down and shooting the bad guys out in places you have only seen in your fucking nightmares so don't you dare judge me by how I look today. You were thankful for the likes of me, you remember, in the good old glory days, when we were kicking ass and flying the flag over Baghdad. I was there, same age as you are now. Just don't judge me or the rest of the guys. We have nothing, but we gave everything."

Brandon kicked himself again, his first assignment and he was potentially uncovering a headline story. He repeated mentally to himself - *'Don't blow it man.'*

"Sorry Tommy, my ignorance, I didn't mean to offend you."

Brandon's pulse raced as he headed away, this had started as a simple chat but had taken a twist into something much larger. He ordered from the terminal before grabbing the paper bag from the counter and racing back to the street. The cardboard sign was still propped against the glowing advertising board but Tommy had vanished into the winter gloom. He looked around hoping to catch a glimpse of him but he was long gone. One of the dozens of other homeless people in the area sat watching what was going on, a look of amusement on his face. Brandon approached him.

"Hey, did you see where Tommy went? I have food for him."

"He's gone man, give me the bag and I will tell you what he said to me."

"Tell me first; if you don't tell me I will give it to that guy over there," he said, pointing out another cold body across the road.

"Ok, Ok, some guys who are after him just appeared, he owes some young skateboarding punk money for drugs. He thought you were going to give him \$100, that's what he owes. You won't see him again now, he'll be gone out of town. You die in this place for a hundred bucks, even if you are a hero."

“So what did he say?” Brandon waved the bag in exchange for the conversation.

“He told me to tell you to find Melissa Jagger near Austin, Texas as she knows the story. I don’t know anything else.” Brandon handed over the bag knowing he wasn’t going to get anything else out of the man.

“Enjoy the food - if he comes back, ask him to contact the paper again.”

Two weeks later.

Melissa’s home phone rang, she cursed and pushed a pile of paperwork out of the way almost spilling her cup of cold coffee.

“Hi, how can I help you?”

“Hey, my name is Brandon. I’m a journalist for a Chicago paper. I know that this is a long shot and this sounds a strange story, but hear me out for a second. I had an interview planned with a homeless guy in Chicago but he disappeared before I could ask him any questions. He left a message with another rough sleeper. He told me to phone Melissa Jagger from around the Austin area – you’re the fourth I’ve tried so sorry to bother you if you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

She sat in silence for a couple of seconds before replying.

“Homeless guy? His name wasn’t Tommy by any chance?”

“That’s the man, what’s the story? I’m confused...”

“He found me down here a few months ago, he told me that he had information about missing people but he vanished as fast as he came and I never heard from him again. Do you have a spare hour to chat Brandon? Maybe we can help each other out.”

“Sure, tell me what you know.” He heard her take a deep breath before speaking.

“Ok, my daughter Mia disappeared nearly a year ago, ten months, three weeks and two days ago to be precise. No one saw or heard anything and the police have dropped the hunt. Apparently they have concluded that she left after an argument, and she’s eighteen years old so can make up her own mind. They don’t give a shit.”

“That’s a disgrace, is there anything that you can do about that?”

“Hold on, let me explain. I started an online group for people in a similar situation and within a week I was flooded with desperate parents looking for their missing kids. But get this, during the past two years there have been at least two thousand people aged eighteen or over who have vanished into thin air in America. One day happily living at home with the family, next minute they have disappeared off the face of the earth. The police log them as missing people, but do nothing else.” Melissa was in full flow. “Ok so back to our man Tommy – well, here’s the big story. When I started the hunt to find Mia, it received some local media attention, partly because I had decided to set up home in a tent outside the police captain’s house as a protest against no damn action or interest taken from their office. I had a five-foot wide billboard made free of charge from a local company. My daughter’s face stared at him every time he left for work and he had me arrested twice - that is until the regional TV stations took an interest. After that he left me alone following local pressure from the town people.

One evening a homeless guy came calling to my tent, told me his name was Tommy Cookson and that he was a military veteran. He also said that he knew what was happening to the missing people. He said that he had seen it with his own eyes, just like that, completely out of the blue. Trouble was when I looked into those eyes all I could see was a cocktail of drugs whizzing around his brain. He said that if I gave him a thousand dollars he would tell me the story.

At that time, to me it seemed obvious that the guy was trying to get drug money, you know, shake me down. I told him to take a hike, thought he was full of bullshit, trying to hustle a desperate mom out of her last few bucks. As he was walking away he shouted across the road. *“She was wearing a black t-shirt with the word ‘Scorpio’ across the front. She was taken from the shopping mall car park - like I said, I saw it with my own eyes.”*

And then he was gone, hitched a lift in a truck before I could shout for him to come back.”

"Would anyone else have known that detail?"

"I did tell the police about her clothing, the fact is I thought Mia had gone to see friends in town, you know coffee and stuff. I didn't know that she had visited the mall so I asked the police to check CCTV and sure enough she was there, in the t-shirt this Tommy guy had described, but she was alone. So strange - how would he know all of these details if he didn't see it?"

"So he could be the....," he stopped and stumbled over his words, "...the kidnapper."

"You nearly said killer Brandon, don't worry, you're not the first."

"It's not what I meant to say. He must have been the last guy to see her though?"

"He wouldn't have contacted me, or told you to contact me if he had taken her, that doesn't make sense. No, I just think he saw what he said. Trouble is, until today I didn't know where he had travelled to and now he has gone missing again. Back to square one I guess."

Brandon thought for a second, spinning his pen on his desk while he focused on the problem.

"Can I fly down to meet up with you Mrs Jagger? Maybe we can help with some publicity from up here?" Melissa replied immediately, she had developed the habit of snapping up all the help she could get.

"Sure, what do we have to lose? Give me a call when you come into town, I'm always around, and you can call me Melissa, I've never been a 'Mrs', never much cared for marriage."

"Ok Melissa, I'll see what I can do and will hopefully be there in a few days." Brandon ended the call and knocked on his editor's door.

"Mr Grayson, can we talk?"

His editor was considered to be a good guy. Bald and just past his seventieth birthday, a slight well-earned paunch had developed over the past few years and was now showing under his neatly pressed white shirt. A former Air Force pilot during the Vietnam war, and now a solid go-to sort of man, he had married his childhood sweetheart when he returned home in the '70s and raised a strong family of five girls. Brandon had taken to him straight away, the type of grandfather figure he would love to have had.

"Sure Brandon, how did the interview go with the veteran?"

"Not good, he didn't want to talk."

"Really? That's crazy. The guy phoned me like twenty times - did he ask you for a hundred bucks?"

"Yeah he did but I didn't pay, I didn't even have it. He ran away, apparently owed the money to some drug dealers from the city centre."

"Good, I'm glad you didn't pay. I told him that if he came up with a story that sold me three million copies, I would give him a hundred bucks."

Brandon laughed, "If I come up with a story selling you three million, I want more than a hundred." Paul smiled, he was growing to like this new kid.

"So what are we discussing?"

"It's a long shot, but I think we may have a big-time serial killer on the loose." Paul raised his eye brows; he was used to big claims made by hungry reporters.

"We haven't had one of those for a while; jeez Brandon, how can you be so sure?" Paul's tone of gentle cynicism was lost on the enthusiastic reporter.

"I just had a conversation with a lady from near Austin, Texas, a town named Fredericksburg. She's investigating the disappearance of thousands of kids across the country and this guy Tommy is a key eye witness to one of them. He seems to think that we have a serial killer with a long list of victims."

"Is this lady a cop?"

"No, the mom of a missing girl. I'm flying down to speak with her next week, so can I run a story?" Paul put down his pen, his interest building.

"I'm not paying for your flight." Brandon was unmoved, Paul was well known for counting every cent of the paper's budget and he shrugged as he replied. "Relax, I'll do it at the weekend and with my own cash."

"Ok, but be careful Brandon, these vigilantes can get a bit obsessed, I don't want you going missing." He laughed and continued, "Or she might be a cougar and eat you up for dinner." At last

seeing his editor's joke, Brandon smiled. "Very funny, I'll let you know after the weekend Mr Grayson, that is if I'm still in one piece."

Sitting back behind his small desk in the large newsroom office, he checked the internet for missing people across the country. She was right, thousands of missing young people every year and the figure was rising. His mind went back to Tommy and his comment, '*He is still doing it and no one can stop him.*' He had obviously been following this guy, had he seen him kill more than once? And for a former war hero marine to say, '*No one can stop him*', what on earth did that mean? He needed to find Tommy again and quickly, but he could be anywhere in the USA – the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Then it came to him; war pension, the guy must be getting some money still from the Government so he tapped - *Tommy Cookson, Marine* - into Google. A full story appeared alongside a bright eyed Marine Sergeant receiving a medal from the President of the USA. He looked the same height as Donald Trump, just a stomach that was a quarter of his, and a torso that looked ripped. A far cry from the guy he had spoken to two weeks ago.

He had a citation which would have made John Wayne proud, halting an advancing group of Taliban fighters while saving the lives of countless American servicemen and women caught in the ambush. Shot through the thigh, he continued to carry soldiers to safety while returning suppressing fire and calling in artillery bombardments; a true hero amongst today's snowflake celebrity generation.

After an hour of further research, he had his answer. Tommy was entitled to a full pension after the Marine Corps medically discharged him from service. However he vanished the same day without leaving any forwarding details. The discharging officer said that Sergeant Cookson seemed to have given up hope for any future and the money owed to him was still sitting in a military bank account awaiting his instructions. A phone number that he had given on the war pension data base system was never answered.

In answer to Brandon's query, the woman on the help desk tried to sound upbeat.

"He will resurface, these people sometimes just need some space to decompress. He knows that he has money waiting for him so he will make contact, they always do." This wasn't helping Brandon so he fired back another question.

"Next of kin? All soldiers leave a will and a letter before battle."

"Yeah, we have checked through all of that but unfortunately it doesn't help us. He only gave his mother's name and she passed away while he was serving overseas. We don't have any further details."

Brandon puffed out his cheeks in exasperation before letting out a sigh.

"Ok, thanks for your assistance, I guess we shall all just have to wait for Tommy to come through."