

CHAPTER ONE

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# SPRING OF SIXTH

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VAL PRIZER & SUSIE SHANNON

“Man, where d’ya get *that!*”

The first day of eighth-grade b-ball, one of the kids at my new school saw this scar on my right thigh and went kinda nuts. It’s a bad one, all right, still purple and all sort of lumpy. “You shoulda seen the white goo, ya know, not just the blood but the guts when I did it. I’d a puked, but I was stuck up on this fence and I had to get off first. It was this fence prong that cut me, and it was stuck in me like half a finger deep. I was goin’ nuts. But I pulled the prong outa the gooey stuff, slow, like taking out an arrowhead, and then sprung off that fence like a lunatic. Then you shoulda seen the blood. I mean, it was like a river.”

I let out a few more facts then about my old life on the South Side, now that the scar got us going a little on my story (which starting up of things, a little blood and guts is always helpful for). Told ’em how down there I lived on

the edge of a huge city forest preserve called Ryan's Woods, which was on the other side a the fence that I caught my thigh on. The fence was this nine-footer cyclone, for privacy and stuff, I said. Then we were talkin' for a while. And then I talked about Memorial Day and the Fourth of July and how all kinds of people would come for picnics, which even as I was saying it, I was wanting to pull the words back, 'cause the kid asks, "Colored?" Which wasn't like a shocker question, but it, for a bunch of reasons, I guess, sorta bugged me the way he said "*Colored?*" So I told him, "The music, on those huge picnic days, it was so cool, Rich. It would go on way into the dark, and I used to listen up in my room, lyin' in bed. Drums and saxophones, like poundin' and blazing away all night. It was cooler than anything I ever heard in my life. I used t' just lie there and want it to keep goin' for a month."

And I've been thinking now, lyin' back in my new bedroom here up north, that it's been a month and then some since I moved here from the South Side. If I were sixteen, I could drive, go see Frankie and the gang, and maybe Patty...if I had the guts for going to see Patty. But I'm still four months short of fourteen, which is to say I'm goin' nowhere fast, while the days keep going nowhere fast, right along with me.

And I've been thinking like hour after hour tonight about the Dead End, which was out in front of our house on Hamilton. The Dead End. It was so cool—sort of like God stuck his thumb into The Woods just to clear out this place for us to play ball in. And, down at the end of it, there would be that cyclone fence again, only here it was stuck on top of this other major deal—I mean this four-foot concrete wall, which they put there so cars wouldn't go nosin' down into

the ravine that cuts through The Woods there, just the other side of the fence. By the way, we had a way through the fence here into The Woods: a kind of rabbit hole we dug under the bottom cyclone prongs, past where the concrete stopped, very secret and cool. And blood brothers this rabbit hole made us, since we all got belly-ripped a time or two or three, shimmying head-down into it on our backs.

And was it not one perfect place to play ball in, the Dead End—at least if there weren't lovers parked down by the wall, makin' out. There'd be no cars coming—'cause it was a NO OUTLET—and there was that concrete wall and fence, which together was like a home-run fence in the majors, thirteen feet all told. But only Jackie Leonard ever got the thrill of sailing one over it. Frankie Malone and I would do the best we could to muscle the old rubber-coated out, but—truth compels me, or whatever that saying is—to say we never even came close. Jack, though, *believe it*, had a swing like a real ball player's. I swear they could've put a picture of it on a card, starting when he was like nine. Lefty, too, which is always so much sweeter. And it wasn't just all of us that Jackie was better than: it was all the Vanderkells too.

The Vanderkells. I swear, like a month and a half and I'm not caring about that stuff at all anymore. Vanderkell versus Christ the King. And you wanna know the real truth? Both sides had good guys, and neither side gave a single crap-ball about the religion part. It's just, you know, that you're gonna duke it out with what's not the same as you. And when it's their huge, humongous block of a school right smack across the street from your huge, humongous block of a school.... I mean the only natural thing is gonna be pretty much total war. But I couldn't care anymore about any of it, except to say this, which I'll always say

about the toughest kid I ever knew: I'll be glad till the day I die that Jackie Leonard was on our side—and that like for every single day of the eight years before that one stupid second he died in (which wasn't Frankie's fault—no way it was), Jackie and I were true best friends.

But there was this day, about a year and a half ago, when I was alone, no JL, no friend with me, and I crossed the path of the number-one rat among the Vanderkells, Val Prizer (and between me and Prizer there was enough bad stuff so that I *won't* just be forgetting things or forgiving, not till I'm smart enough to see how a real, true rat is something besides a real, true rat).

It was at the mailbox near the end of the driveway of what everybody called Reed's Castle, the only house in the neighborhood bigger than Prizer's own house, which was across Hopkins Place from Reed's. But Reed's Castle was really, really beautiful, and Prizer's place was the spittin' image of Castle Dracula. I swear—it was like a mile high and all pointy and crooked, and it had the steepest driveway I ever saw. It was like their driveway should have been illegal. And inside—get this—there were animal heads of like every kind there is, sticking out from every wall—because Prizer's old man, who nobody ever laid eyes on, *ever*, was this famous big-game hunter. And no doubt about it, the guy put to death maybe every kind of creature that ever moved. I mean, picture a giraffe neck and head, I mean the whole—what?—eleven-foot deal?—stickin' out from over their fireplace, and then the seats around the fire, ever so nice and cozy, being the cut-off legs of elephants. Cut-off legs for chairs! What a pack a spooks those people were.

And where this punk Prizer got me was dead cold at the

Murder Place, the spot where, about a month before, a taxi went slamming into the mailbox—and not from any plain-old car accident but because a madman who was the cabby's passenger, just for kicks put two bullets in the back of the cabby's head (and any kid who hadn't seen the blood on the leaves from when they took out the dead guy wouldn't be able to say much about anything).

“EAT IT! EAT IT, you *PUNK!*” Those are words I won't be forgetting any time soon. The rat had me pinned against the new mailbox with the stick of this push broom he'd picked up at the end of Reed's drive. I'd seen him unscrewing the thing as I tried to sneak by, quick like. And how dumb was I? What would Val Prizer be unscrewing a broomstick for but to whack the livin' crap outa me with it? Not that the punk needed anything extra. He was old for our grade, born in like November of '47, which should have put him a grade ahead, but when he moved here from Arizona, or maybe it was Mars, they decided to start him late for some reason. But he'd a had me by about twenty pounds anyhow. Not baby fat, either. It was that serious punk muscle of a kid who got the foghorn in his throat way before everybody else, and zits, and even a few black hairs mixed in, even before he hit thirteen. You know the kinda guy. It's like he knows he's gonna be a fireplug midget in the long run, so he's gonna whomp the crap out of everybody while he's got the chance.

“EAT IT!” After he'd pinned me with the broomstick against the mailbox, he'd gotten one end of the stick under my right arm and he'd like pried me off my feet and slammed me to the ground. I got my arm free, but I felt the broomstick now shoved against the back of my neck and the ten tons of this guy like half on my back, as he held me

down in the dirt, and half on my neck, where he shoved my face toward a pile of dog crap that lay right where the lunatic pumped the two bullets into the cabby's brains. "Eat the shit! You little chicken! Eat it, Collins! You're a fly! So eat shit like a fly!"

"You'll never make me! You'll never make me, Prizer, you punk! And someday...!"

"Someday! Someday *what!* Collins! What are you gonna do *some day!* Say it, Collins! Say it, you little chicken shit, so I can get really pissed at your chicken life! Call *me* a punk! You say what you're gonna do *some day!* You say it, *punk!*"

As he kept spewin' out his crap-balls, he kept jerking the stick down, over and over, hard as he could against my neck. And I mean it—it was like *total lunatic madman NUTS* how bad that rat wanted my face smeared into that crap pile, which some Vanderkell devil must've put there nice'n fresh because he *liked* Val Prizer and cabbies' getting their gray matter blown out by crazy men. My neck was shaking and my whole body was like on fire as I tried, with all I had, to keep the stinkin' dog dung off my face, pressing my neck back, just about blowing my veins out, though the pile and the stink were so close now I was afraid to open my mouth, thinking I *would* swallow the shit if I did! But I shouted, "You can't make me, Prizer, you punk! You can't make me do anything!"

"Oh yeah! I can make you do whatever I feel like, Collins! I can make you eat dog shit, you punk! So EAT IT! I say EAT IT! EAT IT right now!"

He threw the stick away and started with his two hands to try and grab the back of my head, so he could make it for dead-cold certain now my face'd be wearin' a shit beard. But—when he tossed the stick away—he lifted his weight

enough off my back—just enough—so I could get my right foot pulled up. And I shoved with my right leg, and got him off me. Then I took off. I was running for my life, but—like an idiot, counting on my speed—I shouted back, "Some *day*, Prizer, I'm gonna kick your ass!"

Which of course cinched it. The big rat wouldn't be through with me now, not by a longshot. And, truth, how stupid and dumb could I be, thinking my speed was good enough to keep me outa the reach of Val Prizer. Was I nuts? The guy was just as quick as he was tough. And I didn't have any lead, just to Kearns's. So by about Bobby Stupnicki's, I felt against my thigh the first whack of that broomstick, which naturally he brought with him. I nearly peed my trou. I couldn't run another step. The pain was like spreading fire all up and down my leg. So I could only limp and hop. But I had to keep goin' because I could hear the whistle of a second one on its way. But what, really, was I gonna do? I was completely screwed. And *whack!* the second one caught me right on my calf, every bit as hard as the first one. I was screamin', "You punk! You punk, Prizer!" But already my nose was running and tears were falling. I was bawlin'—shit!—in front of Val Prizer. And I couldn't move. I could only scrunch down to my knees and grab my leg, which was on total fire from the two shots. Then there was this huge black shadow standing all over me. So what would it be now? Death?

"Say it again, *punk*, you're gonna do *what* to me someday? Kick my *what?!*"

I was rippin' my sleeve over my eyes because of the stupid tears, and with my other hand I was holding my calf, and under my other arm I was hugging my thigh, tight. I figured he might crack apart my brains now like the cabby's,

but I was blubbering, “You’re a punk, Prizer! You’re a punk. You can’t make me...”

“Oh ho ho ho ho, I can make you all right, Collins! I can make you do anything I feel like. I can make you crawl. See! See how I’ve made you crawl on your punk-shit knees. And I can make you *kiss* my ass. Not kick my ass, Collins. Get it! But for now, my little fly, I just want you to *get up and start walkin’!*”

I felt the stick then poking me hard, right square in the back. And I couldn’t believe how dumb I was or *nuts*, but I wasn’t gonna do what this gigantic *punk* told me to do. I just scrunched up tighter into a ball, and was blubbering, “You can’t make me...” But then I heard the stick rising....

“Oh *yeah!*”

And then I heard the stick coming down, whistling, so I exploded—and broke into a run. My leg could move again, sort of limpy like. And he didn’t catch me right away, trying as hard as he was to whack me to death. So I made it all the way to Allens’, our next-door neighbors’, before I felt his hand gripping my shoulder, and then his forearm putting a choke hold around my neck. And his mouth in my ear, like he wanted to eat it.

“I have to ask you, Collins. Just *where* do you think you’re going? You keep playin’ games with me. *And I don’t like that! Ya hear!*”

Before he strangled me, he threw me off, but he put himself between me and my house, and I couldn’t get past him and his lunatic stick. He held it sideways out in front of him, and he backed me off from my house, back out into the street, with right-hand shoves and then left-hand shoves, steering me where he felt like. “Where *ya goin’*, Collins! Eh?! Where *ya goin’ now!*” He was laughing with that frog

voice of his as he kept backing me up and steering me, shovin’ me where he wanted. “Where *ya goin’*, punk, hunh! Tell me where you’re *goin’!*”

“I’m goin’ wherever I wanna go, Prizer, you rat-face punk!”

“Oh, is that so? It must be you wanna go *this way*, then. And *this way* and *this way* and *this way!*”

He kept backing me up and steering me wherever he felt like, and I wanted to get around the lunatic into my house, but I couldn’t pull it off. So I broke and ran the other way, along Mathis’s yard toward Howland. Then I heard that insane stick again—and then *wham!*—one more time the fire on the back of my leg! And it stopped me again, dead. I grabbed my knee up to my chest and was hugging my thigh in both arms, hopping on one leg like the other was being blow torched. And Prizer wouldn’t give me a second of time.

“You don’t seem to *get* me, Collins. You’re gonna go where *I say*. You’re gonna do what *I say*. *And nothin’ else. Ya get me!*” He began again then with his witch broom held sideways and shoving it at me righty, then lefty, to back me up. He wanted to corral me now down into the Dead End, where he could really murder me.

But right then and there, it happened. A true miracle! I swear I got a *true miracle*, just when that insane rat had me backing over the manhole cover that was our home plate. Susie Shannon! And, oh, man, I loved her for this one! Over his shoulders, I could see her. She was coming up the hill on Howland, her pony-tail hair bobbing, her school uniform (which was like the cleanest, most beautiful thing I ever saw. White and blue. I swear—it made me think it was like a gift to see her), all beautiful as ever. She was coming home this way from the Academy of Our Lady, ’cause their bus would drop her off at Longwood and 87<sup>TH</sup>. Then

she'd walk through The Woods down Longwood and then come up the hill on Howland. She was carrying her books like usual, the way girls do, like holding a baby.

And I was maybe even gonna shout, "Susie!"—things getting as bad as they were, which would've been deadly embarrassing. But I got spared. 'Cause Susie saw it all herself—the Rat King backing me down the slope now toward the Dead End wall, steering me with those righty and lefty broom shoves. She didn't need any explanations. She flung her books down right there on Mathis's lawn and came running faster than lightning.

"I've had about *enough* outa you, Collins! Ya little *shit face!* You and your little games. Tryin' to get *away from me* and workin' your smart little mouth about what you're gonna *do someday!* Who do you think you are, eh? Just who do you think you *are!*"

So Val-boy kept right on spewing. And wouldn't he start really foaming now as I started *not* moving where he wanted me to, but even standing my ground, knowing of course that the rat's time was juuust about up, which he didn't know 'cause he couldn't see Susie flyin' right at him. I even started like grinning, right in his whiskery-pimple puss, which threw him really off his rocker. "You crazy little punk shit you wipe that smile off your punk face or I'll crack your brain in two!"

"Oooh, you scare me, Prizer, you punk. You really scare me. Think you're so, so tough. You're nothin'. You're *nothin', you punk!*"

"Why you little dirt crap shit, I'll knock your brain in two! I'll knock your head right off your skinny shit shoulders!"

He raised the stick like Mr. Hyde, I swear, right outa the movie, and was gonna bring it down on my skull to finish

me—when he felt it get stuck!—like somebody put a spell on him from outa nowhere!—'cause Susie had it grabbed! She had it grabbed! I mean, it was so perfect I couldn't a planned it in a million years! "You *will not!*" she said. And there he was, kid a the famous Big-Game Spook, standing there like all his muscles had just croaked. All's he could do, trust me on this one, was turn around and see who told him what he *wasn't* gonna do. And now what he *was* gonna:

"You drop this stick *right now!* Do you hear me! You *drop it!* Or you'll be sorry, you *coward!*"

She had him so completely ambushed he couldn't hold that broomstick for a million bucks. So she just snagged it off him like nothin'. And there she was, her cheeks all flushed and beautiful, holding that stick like a spear. I swear she was to me the number-one most beautiful girl in the universe. Number one, no contest, not even close. Because think about it—who's more beautiful to a twelve-year old guy anyhow than a seventeen-year old girl who was like a complete legend in the neighborhood for her looks—and there she is, on top of it, standing with that brown-gold pony tail, her blouse cleaner white than anything, and that spear in her hand—and, in the bargain she's just sliced up my number-one enemy in the world and saved my life.

"Only a coward picks on smaller people, and with a stick. Do you hear me? Only a coward!"

Oh, man, I'll tell ya I was loving every word; or I can't even tell you, it was so cool. And now she started holding that stick like it had a very nasty disease. Like it was something *she'd* never need, that's for sure. And when she told that punk Prizer, "You should be completely ashamed of yourself," I swear if the grenade was there, I'd've fallen on it for her, dead cold like nothin'. I loved Susie Shannon