

Chapter 1

On a wet June morning, Tess shivered as she tried to edge closer to her mother's warm body in their shared bed, only to find that her mother wasn't there. Startled fully awake by the drops of water landing on her face, she squirmed further under the play structure in Arsenal Park that only half-sheltered her from the rain. She froze when a hand grabbed her ankle. Looking over her shoulder, she saw a young man squatting next to her and backed slowly out of her leaky nest. He flashed her a silver-toothed grin from beneath the hood of his black rain poncho.

"SloMo, leave me alone, for God's sake," she said. "I'm tired of you always comin' after me. What do you want, anyways?" She tried to hide her fear and play for time although she knew the answer. Sitting up in a crouch, she got her feet under her in hopes of a chance to sprint away.

"Same as always, girlfriend. I want my share of your take from yesterday," he said as he moved a toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"I didn't do nothin' yesterday. I don't have any money."

"You sure about that?" He pushed her onto her back and swung his leg over her, pinning her down while he jammed his hands into her pants pockets and up under her bra. She twisted under his assault and tried to spit at him but missed.

“Well, now, that’s a shame,” he said as he released her. “Nothin’ there. What’re you gonna eat today?”

She scowled as she tugged her shirt down, trying to look tough. “I don’t know yet, but I’m hoping it won’t be some pimply kid’s pecker.”

“Oh, now, life ain’t all that bad. You got to survive somehow, and I got me a business to run.”

“My mama didn’t raise me to be no ‘ho,” she said angrily.

He stood and nudged her with the toe of his boot. “Girl, your mama’s gone and you’re squattin’ in my ‘hood, so you better think about Plan B. I’ll check in with you later,” he said calmly as he sauntered away.

She waited until he was gone before she retrieved a hooded sweatshirt from a small duffle bag and pulled it on over her damp clothing. Taking everything with her, she set off across the playground to the women’s restroom. While she was in a stall, she could hear voices from outside the wall. The words were muffled, but there was obviously a drug deal going down. She waited silently until the voices moved off before she flushed and opened the stall door. *No good getting in the middle of anything*, she thought. It was a rule she had observed daily since taking up refuge in the park two weeks earlier.

The rain had stopped. She spotted a bench drying in a patch of sunlight and sat down on it to warm up. It was a lucky thing SloMo hadn’t checked her shoes

for money. The twenty dollar bill she'd earned yesterday off of some fifteen-year-old would buy her breakfast at the drive-in down the street. She'd rather hold onto it for a while, though. It was the last money she had until she was forced to degrade herself yet again.

She sat in the sun waiting for her clothes to dry. None of this situation was good, but it was no worse than what she'd run away from. Not just once, either. Each time she ran, she'd been caught and returned almost immediately, because she'd made mistakes. This time she was determined not to repeat those mistakes, and so far she'd been on the streets for about a month without being turned in. She had moved from one place to another – parks, alleys, and one night on the front steps of a church - in an effort to evade SloMo, but he always found her. She stayed on her guard, watching out for the police, keeping out of sight of the drunks, the druggies and the crazies who were her fellow campers. She had once resorted to chasing pigeons off of a discarded sandwich so she could eat it herself. The effort of staying alive was exhausting.

Thinking about food, her stomach started growling, so she stood and began a thorough search of the trash cans in the picnic area. After half an hour, she'd come up with nothing but greasy paper napkins and take-out cups. She rinsed her hands at the drinking fountain, wiping them on her pants, and then made a

decision. She had to get away from SloMo. How was she going to find her missing mother when she was spending all of her energy just to survive?

The park trash was picked clean daily by a regular crew of homeless gleaners. She thought about trying to camp in a more upscale neighborhood. Surely she could find better leftovers in a waste bin behind someone's kitchen, and maybe better shelter in a thick hedge or under a tree in someone's yard. She was pretty good at staying out of people's sight. She feared she might face an upset dog from time to time, but that seemed better than being shaken down by SloMo every day.

Arsenal Park had once held some good memories for her. Her mother had brought her to the playground many times when she was younger, and she remembered Mama explaining to her the civilian tragedy behind its Civil War memorial. Tess's mother was pretty and smart. She always dressed neatly, and she watched carefully over Tess, teaching the girl to take care with both her appearance and her manners. Tess had loved to visit the park with her strong, confident mother. Now, though, the park had become just a sketchy refuge for a homeless girl. It seemed dirty and dangerous, and she thought that pretty well described her current life. It was time to move on.

So after packing her bag, she headed down 40th Street, planning to slip in the back door of a bus on Penn Avenue and travel east. She was small and quick. If anyone noticed her "crashing" the rear door of the bus as several passengers got off

at Penn and 42nd, no one called her on it. She rode for a while, peering through a window, and left the bus at a stop near several restaurants. She walked until she found an alley cutting through the middle of the block and followed it until she came upon several dumpsters behind the restaurants she'd spotted.

When she started climbing into the nearest one, the smell of rotting fish overwhelmed her. She looked up to read the sign over the restaurant's back door, proclaiming that it was a Japanese sushi bar. She dropped to the ground and surveyed the other two choices, settling on the bin behind a Mexican restaurant. Tacos and enchiladas, covered paper cups containing nachos, an entire salad that looked untouched in its take-out carton, all were scattered among the usual garbage. This, she decided, would work for her.

She wondered why she didn't have any competition from the usual street crowd. These were much better pickings than anything she'd found in the trash cans at the park. Then she realized that it was early morning and they were all probably still sleeping off whatever helped them through the night.

The amount of food that people threw away amazed her. She filled her stomach with what she deemed to be reasonably healthy food and then crammed an entire package of tortillas, along with several still-wrapped pats of butter, into her bag for later. She felt a lot better once she had eaten well without having to break the twenty-dollar bill in her shoe. With the whole day ahead of her, she hopped

another bus, intending to scope out the scenery along the route and get off when a location suited her.

In a city like Pittsburgh, made up of distinct neighborhoods each with its own culture and history, it mattered where a person lived. Tess had been born and raised in Lawrenceville, a solid working-class neighborhood with an industrial past. She had learned in the fourth grade that it was named for Captain James Lawrence, a hero of the War of 1812, whose dying words were, “Don’t give up the ship!” Her mother had told her those were good words to live by. The neighborhood had been changing in recent years with the addition of hip new businesses and an influx of young people, but a lot of it had stayed the same – the tattoo parlor, the Arsenal Bowl, the hair and nail salons, the coffee shops, the bail bond offices.

A first-floor apartment in a divided row house was home for Tess and her mother Rose - until the day when Rose disappeared and Tess’s whole world fell apart. While they were never anywhere near well-off, it seemed like the two of them had been doing okay on their own until Gram died. Tess didn’t understand all of the details, but she remembered that her mother had a hard time paying the bills after Gram was no longer there to help out. She didn’t think Rose would have let Antwon move in otherwise. A sharp pang of sorrow struck her when she thought about her grandmother’s sudden death.

Now, riding the bus away from that familiar neighborhood, she felt tears burning in her eyes, threatening to roll down her cheeks and start a keening that she might not be able to stop. She shoved her fist into her mouth and bit down on the knuckles, willing herself through the pain to regain control. She could not draw attention to herself. Survival depended, for now, on staying under the radar. *Don't give up the ship*, she reminded herself.

The stop and start motion of the bus, the jostling of passengers against each other, and her careful reconnaissance of the various streets that passed by, all helped to calm and focus her. The bus turned down Friendship Avenue, taking her into Bloomfield. Its row houses looked a lot like where she'd grown up, only they didn't have so many cars parked out front, and the lawns looked greener. As the route continued on Friendship, passing into the Shadyside neighborhood, the shops disappeared while the houses grew in both size and grandeur. She didn't see too many people walking around, and the only ones she saw that had brown faces were the gardeners. She figured she'd better get off and back-track into Bloomfield, since it looked a little more down-home and less ritzy.

She got off the bus and started walking in the opposite direction. Gardeners were out trimming hedges and watering flowers. Some of them looked her way, peering under their hat brims, but no one waved or greeted her. She had the feeling that she stuck out like a raisin on a bed of rice, and she didn't like the sensation.

She walked on for another mile or more, until things got less posh and businesses appeared on the street again.

After backtracking several blocks, she found herself in a long, narrow sliver of park that she'd seen from the bus. She decided to rest a while and laid herself down under a tree with her duffle beneath her head. A full stomach and relief at being out of danger (for the moment) washed over her, and she slept for much of the afternoon.

She awoke when a soccer ball rolled into her side and a boy of about six came running to retrieve it. Deep brown eyes stared at her for just a moment from a face framed with nappy black curls, then he snatched up the ball and ran off again.

Sitting up, she looked around. The after-school crowd of mothers and children, and just a few fathers, were enjoying some sunshine before going home to fix dinner. Women in hijabs, others in workout clothing, grandmothers, people in business suits, what Tess thought of as a normal neighborhood was what she saw. She felt like she could camp somewhere in this area without attracting suspicion. The trick would be to stay out of sight while she continued her search for her mother. She hoped desperately that she'd left SloMo behind her for good.