

## Chapter One

Jeremiah Stokely slouched on his front porch. He picked aimlessly at a splinter on the worn top step. A yellow moving van pulled into the drive of the Johnson house across the street. He hated moving vans. On the other side of town, a similar truck was arriving at Todd's house to swallow the Miller family's belongings.

This was the first day of summer vacation. But tomorrow, Todd would be gone – Todd, his best friend, with whom he had shared everything since second grade and birthdays since the day they were born. Todd would miss their very first adventure, a trip to see the wild animals at Rescue House.

"Jeremiah," his mother called. "Come and set up the TV trays in the living room. Todd will be here in a few minutes."

"Okay, Mom." He didn't move.

Jeremiah had known something was wrong when Todd's father had dropped Todd off in the top of the second inning of their first Little League game of the season. Todd shuffled into the dugout and slammed his mitt onto the bat bag. Instead of their usual happy sparkle, his black eyes snapped with anger.

"We're moving to Angola. Dad's been transferred," Todd had said.

"Come on, Jeremiah," his mother called again. Nina Stokely had taken the afternoon off from her job at Mason's Supermarket. She stood in the door holding a broom, a dust cloth and a can of dusting spray. A dark curl stuck to the perspiration on her neck. She had cleaned the house and made ham salad sandwiches. Todd was to sleep over on his last night in East Newport.

Jeremiah stood reluctantly. He pulled at the sagging screen door, but it stuck at the bottom. He yanked it and it sprung open and struck him, raising a red welt just below his right eye.

"Dammit!" he shouted.

"Jeremiah Stokely, I don't ever want to hear you say that again!"

"Bill says it."

"You're not Bill. I mean it, now."

"But it hurt, Mom."

"I don't care. You're not to use such words. Hear me?" She turned away quickly, but not before Jeremiah saw the angry set of her jaw.

Jeremiah's shoulders sagged and he stared at the decaying porch floor.

"Let me see." His mother pulled off his Cincinnati Reds cap, pushed back the shock of blond hair and examined the injury. "The skin's not broken," she said gruffly. "You'll live. Go wash your face and set up the trays."

Jeremiah inspected the damage in the mirror. *How come Mom's such a grouch today? She didn't have to yell just because I said a bad word. It wasn't that bad of a word anyway. Packleruma!* He thought. "Packleruma!" He said aloud. Then he smiled ever so slightly. His mind took him back to the first day he, Todd and Stacy Hunter ever said that word. Miguel Sanchez had said something in Spanish on the playground, and Rebecca Smoot, the snitch, told their teacher that Miggy was saying bad words.

"What did he say?" their teacher had asked.

"I don't speak Spanish," Rebecca said.

"Well, what did it sound like?"

"It sounded like 'packleruma,' but I know it was bad," Rebecca replied.

Jeremiah, Todd and Stacy had overheard all this. They thought it was so funny that "packleruma" became their universal bad word.

He moistened a washcloth with cold water and gingerly touched the welt. It didn't hurt much. Other times he might have ignored it, but today he was feeling sorry for himself – every part of himself. He draped the cloth over the faucet and went to the kitchen.

Jeremiah smelled chocolate chip cookies. His mother had just taken them out of the oven. They were Todd's all-time favorite food. The table where he and Todd had shared countless cookies and glasses of milk was littered with photography textbooks, photographs and notes from his mother's night class at Community College. The camera she had borrowed from the college library was perched precariously atop the clutter. He pushed aside one of the books and glanced at the newest set of pictures his mother had taken.

"I'm just sorting out the shots I want to have evaluated in class tonight," Nina said.

He set two tray tables in front of the battered couch. When he heard the Millers' van stop in front of the house, he looked out the door. Behind the van, Todd struggled with a large cardboard box. He motioned to Jeremiah to come help him.

Jeremiah took off in a dead run toward the van.

"What's in it?" Jeremiah asked, lifting a box flap.

"Junk I'm not going to move. I know how much you like junk. I can't carry it by myself."

"Todd," Mrs. Miller called from the cab. "I'll pick you up at nine in the morning. Please behave yourself. Nina, make him behave."

Nina waved and nodded from the doorway.

The heavy box flopped awkwardly as the two boys stumbled with it toward the house. They groaned as they wrestled it up the porch steps.

"What have you guys got there? " Nina peered through the loose screen in the door.

"Hi, Mrs. Stokely. Stuff I'm not taking with me."

"Come on in and eat. You can carry the box up to your room later, Jeremiah. Is there enough space somewhere in that horrible mess for one more box?"

The boys sank into the couch and started eating. When Nina returned to the kitchen, Todd whispered, "I've got this great idea. My parents are so sick of hearing me complain about moving they won't even let me talk about it. I think we should do something to protest."

"Like what?

"Why don't we shave our heads? "

"Shave our heads? Are you crazy?"

"No, I'm mad. If we shaved our heads, every time they looked at us they'd know we were mad, and we wouldn't have to say a word. They can't yell at us for complaining if we're not saying anything."

"No way, I'm not cutting off my hair, Todd."

"Let's get a tattoo, then."

"Tattoo? That's the worst idea you ever had. Besides, where could we get a tattoo? "

"We could sneak out to the tattoo parlor behind the record shop on Vine Street."

"I'm not even listening to you. Get a tattoo?" Jeremiah put his hand on Todd's forehead to check his temperature.

"What's this about a tattoo?" Nina said as she returned with a carton of milk to refill their glasses.

"Todd thinks he can get back at his parents by getting a tattoo. He says it's a protest. Tell him he's crazy, Mom."

"You're crazy, Todd."

Todd suddenly became more serious than Jeremiah had ever seen him. He looked at Jeremiah and then at Nina.

"I know it's crazy, but if I don't think crazy thoughts, I'm afraid --"

Todd turned away and looked at the wall. Nina put her hand on his shoulder. Through his bravado, she could see tears starting to fill his eyes.

"We're going to miss you, Todd. But it isn't like you're going to Katmandu. Angola is only a hundred miles away."

"A hundred and twelve," Todd said in a small voice.

"Okay, a hundred and twelve. But, your mother said you can come here for a week and Jeremiah can go there for a week. It isn't like we won't ever see you again." Nina bent to look into his dark eyes, but Todd wiped his face on his sleeve

and turned away.

"I'll write you every week, Jeremiah."

"Todd, you don't write letters," Jeremiah said with a laugh.

"I do, too."

"The only letter you ever wrote was when we were in Mrs. Pulaski's third grade."

"Not true," Todd protested.

Jeremiah laughed. "It's true, Mom. We were supposed to be learning to write friendly letters. We were writing to kids in the other third grade and Todd wrote a letter to Timmy Slade."

"You tell everything you know, don't you," Todd said. He tried to put his hand over Jeremiah's mouth, but Jeremiah ducked.

"Listen, Mom, this is good. Todd's letter said, 'Dear Timmy, When I see you on the playground, I'm going to beat you up. Your friend, Todd.' Some friendly letter."

"I got an A-plus on that letter, smart guy."

"Only because Mrs. Pulaski thought Timmy deserved to be beat up."

Todd grabbed Jeremiah around the neck. He put all his force into a headlock, and they rolled in a laughing tangle to the floor.

Nina moved the trays out of the way. Normally, she wouldn't have allowed roughhousing in the living room, but these were not normal circumstances.

The boys lay on the floor, out of breath. They propped their heads against the tattered couch and shoved the last two cookies into their mouths.

Nina organized her schoolwork, placed the borrowed camera in a canvas bag and came to the door of the living room. "I'm going to class now. I'll be back in about two hours. Todd, don't get a tattoo while I'm gone."

"Tell him not to shave his head either, Mom," Jeremiah said.

"Todd, don't shave your head."

"Okay, Mrs. Stokely. Can I pierce my nose and put a ring in it?"

"Please don't do anything weird. See you guys after a while."

She kissed her fingertips and patted both boys on the cheek, picked up her canvas bag and started for the front door.

“You’d better get this box to your room, Jeremiah,” Nina said.

“Okay, Mom. See ya.”

They struggled with the box of Todd’s junk until they got it to the top of the stairs. Jeremiah shoved over a knee-high stack of old *National Geographic* magazines so they could maneuver the box into his room.

Out of breath and wiping perspiration, they sat on the edge of Jeremiah’s bed.

“I see that Bill Loker is still giving you old *National Geographics*,” Todd said.

“I bet I have the best collection in town,” Jeremiah bragged.

“Do you read them?”

“Of course, stupid.”

“Just asking. Packleruma!”

Jeremiah picked up a four-foot-long redwood sign with the carved inscription, "Why are you NOT in here?"

"You like this sign Bill made for me?"

"What does it mean?" Todd asked.

"It's from one of Bill's favorite stories. There were these two friends, poets or something, a long time ago. One was Henry and the other was Waldo."

"I used to have a book about a Waldo with the red striped shirt who got lost in crowds. Is that the one?"

"No, Todd, these guys really lived a long time ago. Henry didn't think his taxes should be used to buy guns for war, so he wouldn't pay them. They threw him in jail."

"How much did he owe?"

"A dollar and a quarter."

"He went to jail for a dollar and a quarter?"

"It's not the amount. It's the principle. Anyway, that's what Bill says."

"So what's the rest of the story?"

"Well, Waldo went to visit Henry in jail. He said, 'Henry, why are you in here?' and Henry said, 'Waldo, why are you *not* in here?' "

"Well, that's dumb, he wasn't in there because *he* paid *his* taxes."

"That's not the point, Todd. Henry went to jail for something he believed. He thought Waldo should have done the same. It was a protest."

"For a dumb dollar and a quarter? I have to move and you won't let *me* protest?"

"Get a life, Todd."

"Want to see the junk I brought?" Todd asked. He jumped off the bed, opened the flaps of the box, and ceremoniously withdrew a ball glove.

"Ta -- daaa. My old mitt. You have more use for this than I will."

"Won't you need it in Angola?"

"I've got my new mitt broken in."

Todd dug into the box again. This time he pulled out his rollerblades.

"You can *have* the mitt, but I'm just loaning you the blades. Hey, remember the first time we used them on the parking lot of the church?"

"Cool, thanks, Todd." Jeremiah remembered well the afternoon at the Baptist Church parking lot.

Jeremiah pulled a handful of newspaper clippings from Todd's box. "What's this stuff?"

"Articles Mom cut out of the paper. I was afraid they'd get lost before we got to our new house."

They leafed through the clippings.

"Hey, here's the picture of our tee-ball team the year we played in Richmond. That was the first year that boys and girls played on the same teams," Jeremiah said.

"Look at Brad doing that silly rabbit-ear thing behind your head. He's such a jerk. Do you think he'll be your best friend now?"

"You'll always be my best friend, no matter where you live. Brad's being real nice, though. I guess he's trying to make up for all the trouble he got me into. Maybe he's learned his lesson."

They looked at each other. "No way!" they both shouted.

"There's Stacy at bat. Look how short her hair is," Todd laughed.

"Look how short *she* is." Jeremiah said. "I can't believe it. This picture was taken just three summers ago. She was shorter than I was then. Now she's more than an inch taller than me."

"Girls grow different than boys."

"No fooling," Jeremiah said, remembering how grown-up Stacy had become.

Todd continued to drag things out of the box.

"A boom-box with tape *and* CD? And earphones? Are you sure you want to leave these?" Jeremiah said.

"Got another one just like it for my birthday. Lots of CDs in here, too." He showed Jeremiah several iridescent disks.

They poked through the box and found Todd's old Junior Detective set with real handcuffs, a badge and a fingerprint kit. The tattered box disintegrated in Todd's hands, spilling the contents on the floor. Jeremiah picked up the handcuffs and hung them on the doorknob. They remembered when they both pretended they were detectives and set out to solve all the crimes in East Newport, even though there were no crimes to be solved.

There were jigsaw puzzles and a dog-eared deck of UNO cards, a box of sixty-four broken crayons and a handful of scented felt markers. They found an envelope with Todd's old report cards.

"Don't you think your mom might want these? I know my mom keeps mine," Jeremiah said.

"I took out the good ones for her."

They leafed through some more clippings and spent the usual amount of time arguing about almost every one of them.

They were so engrossed that they were surprised to hear the front door slam.

"I brought burgers and fries. Anybody interested?" Nina called.

After a race down the stairs, they cleared the table, ate the burgers and played "remember when." They had done that a lot lately.

Nina glanced at the clock. "Nearly nine-thirty. I suppose it would be too much to ask of you guys to get a good night's rest."

"You think we're going to stay up all night, don't you, Mom?" Jeremiah said as they headed for the stairs.

"You did the last time Todd was here. I'm telling you guys, the giggling stops at eleven o'clock. I've got to go to work early tomorrow."

It made no difference that they had promised Nina that they wouldn't keep her awake. The deadline came and went and the laughter continued. It was after midnight when exhaustion ultimately won.