

Prologue

Preston Smith loped toward the gentle volley his coach sent toward him. He lined up his feet and brought his racquet back, preparing to smash the ball across the net. It would be the first perfect return of a morning beset with a deplorable lack of tennis skill. For the first time he would move fast enough. Preston smiled in anticipation. Even the coach would have trouble returning *this* one.

A thundering boom swept over the hushed courts of the Turtle Creek Country Club, and Preston stopped. "What was that?" The ball whizzed past him.

"I don't know," the coach replied. "If we were in the country, I'd say someone was hunting. But we're not. Probably a car backfiring. Now get your head into the game, Smith. No more excuses. Your dad is paying good money for these lessons, and you've been screwing around all morning."

Preston felt the heat of embarrassment creep up his neck. "Okay," he said, but something was wrong. Everything was too quiet. Even the birds had fallen silent. "Okay." He crouched down, readying himself to fire the ball back from the coach's serve.

As soon as the ball left the coach's racquet, Preston realized he was in the wrong place. He started across the court, but he

Tamara W. Hanson

was too slow. He swung far too late and the ball bounced against the fence behind him. He'd flubbed yet another easy shot. He hurled his racquet into the net.

"That's it, Smith. You're out of here. Playing like a doofus is one thing, but throwing your racquet . . . You're a lousy sport. I don't have time for that. Get your stuff and go home."

The coach turned and headed for the clubhouse, leaving Preston to pick up the three dozen practice balls left on the court and to ponder whether or not the coach was going to call his dad. Preston took his time. He didn't want to get home before the lesson was supposed to be over. That would raise questions.

Preston trudged toward home in the miserable, sweltering, August midday sun. He was supposed to help his dad trim the trees in the backyard when he got home. He knew what that meant. He'd have to climb the fourteen-foot ladder he hated and saw away on the stupid trees his dad loved. With any luck, the coach wouldn't have talked to his dad before they started that chore, or he'd have to listen to a lecture on sportsmanship he knew his father would deliver.

An ambulance, siren blazing, passed Preston and turned the corner several hundred yards in front of him. The neighborhood was filled with old people. Maybe one of them had had a heart attack. He quickened his pace.

Preston tried to think of how he'd answer his dad's inevitable questions about the lesson. His dad, he knew, would agree with the coach. Preston needed to show better etiquette, to try harder. The trouble was, he was hopeless. They expected him to play like his brother, Cliff. Well, he wasn't Cliff. That's for sure. And it was time they figured it out.

His dad had told him clumsiness was part of growing up; it would pass. Well, as far as Preston was concerned, the sooner the better. He slammed the toe of his sneaker against an uneven square of pavement. He didn't relish another dressing down from the coach. He'd just quit if it happened again. He smacked his racket against the pavement.

MASTERING THE DANCE

A police car turned the corner. The warble of its siren caused Preston's heart to constrict. He'd seen a fire truck accompany an ambulance, but never a police car. This must be something big. Maybe a robber had shot someone. Maybe that's what he'd heard. He rushed along.

Well, he couldn't quit tennis. That would disappoint his dad. His dad counted on Preston for the matches they played nearly every evening after dinner. It was something they'd done for as long as Preston could remember.

At last he turned the corner. The trees blocked his view, but he could hear the ambulance and police car as they stopped their high-pitched whining sirens, each with a groan. He raced to the end of the block. He could hear the crackling of the police radio. They had to be near his home.

Preston turned the last corner and took the hill. His lace came untied. He stumbled. The sidewalk blurred beneath him. The incline seemed steeper than it had yesterday. When had it grown so long? His breath came in ragged bursts.

He crested the hill and took in the spectacle that would haunt him for the rest of his life. The ambulance and police car were both in front of *his* house. The ambulance was backed into *his* driveway. No. Impossible. Everyone had been okay that morning. Everyone had been better than okay.

Oh, my god. Who were they coming for? Cliff was at work. Was it his mom? His tennis racquet clattered to the sidewalk. His dad? Just another block. He had to know. He abandoned the uneven sidewalk and took to the center of the road.

Who? The question hammered him. Who? His other lace came untied. His side began to ache. Just a few more yards. He fell. He righted himself and closed the distance that separated him from his family. His hands were burning, and blood leaked from his knees, down his shins, into his socks. At last he reached the hood of the ambulance and braced himself against it, gasping for air.

His mother's voice found him, "Preston, oh, baby. Preston, honey, come here." She was coming out of the house with Cliff,

Tamara W. Hanson

who was in the blazer he'd worn to his new job that morning. Her white blouse was blotched and smeared an angry red. Cliff had his arm around her, but she started toward Preston, holding out bloody hands to him. Preston recoiled. What was going on?

Mom was okay. That meant . . . A blinding hot rush of wind engulfed Preston, and something inside his chest crumbled.

Dad? Preston's heart pounded in his head. No. Not Dad. He'd been fine at breakfast. Just fine. They'd joked around about how big Preston's feet had looked in his new sneakers. About how long it would take for him to grow into his feet.

What had happened? Had he fallen trimming the trees in the backyard? That was it. He'd fallen. Dad hadn't waited for *him*, and he'd fallen trying to do it by himself. If Preston had been home instead of at that lousy tennis lesson, this never would've happened.

Preston moved toward the arms his mother held out to him and embraced her. They walked away from the house to the grove of trees near the street. Cliff trailed along beside them, looking over his shoulder to the open front door. They all stopped beneath the largest tree and waited . . . for what, Preston wasn't sure.

"What happened? Where's Dad? Is he hurt?"

Cliff said, "Dad's dead."

"Dead?"

Their mother began to sob. "I'd just come in from the grocery store and . . ."

"How? What happened?" Preston asked.

Cliff answered him. "He shot himself."

His mother seemed to be in a daze. "I called an ambulance," she said. "Then Cliff. I didn't know what to do."

"You're wrong. He can't be dead. How can he be dead?"

Two men came out the front door bearing a gurney. The men carried their burden far too slowly toward the ambulance. Why didn't they hurry? Idiots. They could save him. He needed to be rushed off to the hospital. They could save him if they'd hurry.

MASTERING THE DANCE

But, no, he realized with a shudder. They didn't need to hurry. The sound he'd heard on the tennis court that morning had been his father's gun.

As if Cliff thought the men easing their father into the ambulance were at fault, he glared at them and turned away. The scar Preston regretted having given Cliff stood out in vivid relief. Cliff kept his own stony counsel.

Their mother's mascara streaked down her face, tears dripped from her chin, but it wasn't until Preston pressed his own face against the shoulder of her blouse that he noticed his face was wet too.

She put her arm around him. "It'll be okay, son. We'll be okay. You don't have a thing to worry about. Your brother and I will take care of you." She hesitated. "This had nothing to do with us. Your father loved us very much." She choked, took a deep breath, and continued, "It was business. Just business. Your dear father was under too much strain. He didn't know how to handle . . ."

"It was *him*." Cliff interrupted her. "You know it and I know it. He killed Dad."

"Not another word. I will not have the man who betrayed your father mentioned in my presence again. I mean it." Her voice rose. "Do you hear me, young man?"

"But, Mom, he's responsible for Dad. He should have to pay."

"Don't you understand? Revenge will only take you too, and I can't bear that right now. You're all I have. Your brother and I have lost enough. Think about someone besides yourself, Clifford."

"I'm thinking about Dad."

"If your father were alive, he'd tell you the same thing. Vengeance brings no one peace. And it won't bring your dear father back to us."

Cliff hung his head. "Yes, ma'am. I hear you." But Preston could see that his brother was not convinced.

"Good. Then we will *never* speak of this again. What's done is done. All your talk, all your anger, won't do any of us any

Tamara W. Hanson

good.” Preston felt her arm tighten around him, and he buried his head again into her rigid shoulder, letting loose a volley of grief. “Especially not for this boy,” she concluded.

“Yes, Momma,” Cliff replied in a wooden tone.

“Now, I want your solemn promise. We’ll bury this with your dear father. He’d want us to carry on.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I want that promise from you, Clifford, Jr.,” she said in a tone that Preston knew meant she’d accept nothing less than his full cooperation.

“Yes, ma’am. I promise.”

“Thank you. I love you, son.” She placed a hand on Cliff’s cheek. “We’ve got a big job in front of us. Let’s make your daddy proud.”

Tears were caught in Cliff’s eyelashes. “Yes, ma’am.”

Cliff trudged over to the ambulance and sat with their father’s body for a moment, but Preston, who wanted to join him, was restrained by his mother.

Her stained blouse was redolent with perfume and translucent, soaked through by his tears and hers. “Let’s go in now, son. We’ve done all we can,” she said to him.

Preston looked back to his brother. He was talking to a policeman who was holding his father’s deer rifle.

His mother tugged at him, and Preston proceeded with her to the dining room.

When she spoke, he felt like an intruder. “I can’t believe you’re gone. Gone. Just like that. Why would you do this to us? You loved us, sugar,” she said, using the endearment she reserved for his father. “I know you did. We’d have gotten through this together. Like we always did.” She collapsed at the table and dropped her head onto her folded arms. It was the last time Preston heard her question his father’s motives.

Preston stood at her side, patting her shoulder. There was nothing he could do or say to stop her tears. The blood from her clothing and hands was smeared on his tennis whites. Dad’s

MASTERING THE DANCE

blood. Dad was gone. Dead. Without a word or a sign that Preston had been able to understand.

If he'd just paid more attention, could he have stopped his father? Would a word at the right time have made the difference? If he'd complained less? Played tennis better? There must have been something he could've done, something he could've said. Dad was always there for him. Cliff had Mother. Who did he have without Dad?

He wiped his own eyes with the back of his hand and watched the police make their way back and forth from the hall bathroom to the front door, eradicating what was left of the life he'd known with each task they completed.

In the days, weeks, and months that followed, Preston overheard his mother extract the same promise from Cliff several times until that time when whoever or whatever had caused his father to choose such an abrupt departure from their lives no longer seemed as important. The struggle just to manage overshadowed it.

Tamara W. Hanson
