

Chapter 1

Twenty-three lads jostle for position, nubby knees conking, toes twitching, eyes searching. *Where's me Mum? Where's me Dad?* The race is about to start. They're just five-years old, these lads, but fierce as the wind that slams in from the Atlantic, thrashing the west coast of Scotland.

At the far end of the row, a small, pale boy cowers, hoping no one will notice him. That's me: made in the USA, from different stock than the Scots. I am the only Yank, and a scrawny, anxious one at that.

"Are you ready, lads?" the master's voice booms over the wind and rain.

Twenty-three lads scratch their private parts and squeeze tight their bottoms, while their parents huddle under tartan umbrellas, each dreaming of their boy, victorious, and the pride of Scotland.

My lips are blue. I need to pee.

"On your marks."

Twenty-three pairs of shoes paw the mud, race horses chomping at the starting gate, muscles taut and ready. My shoelace is untied. My shorts hang at half-mast. I am no race horse.

"Get set."

Twenty-three hearts thump eagerly. One heart trembles.

"Go." Twenty-three muddy bodies strain every muscle, slurping in the mud, muddy faces, mud up their noses, mud under their fingernails, mud splashing arms and legs, mud on backs, mud on bellies.

We are at Campusdoon School for boys in Ayr, Scotland, my first school, my first field day. I hope there will never be another. Grey, stone faced Campusdoon rises from the coastal mist, close enough to the ocean that you can smell the salty sea air. My spindly legs, churning through the mud, quiver like stalks of beach grass in the wind.

All eyes follow Harold Tweedy. Harold is the fastest boy in Scotland, or so it seems to me. He races to the front of the pack as expected, while I stumble about, dazed, chewing my thumbnail, forgetting about the race, lost in fantasy land. Someone yells, "Go, Harold. Go, Laddie." Harold is already half way to the finish. I am barely across the starting line, a distant 23rd, creature of some lesser world.

The pack surges forward. But wait. A gasp from the crowd. "What is it? What's happened?" "It's Harold. He's ... " Harold staggers. He rights himself. No, he tries, but he's ... he's down, face down in the mud and behind him, McDougal trips and then MacDonald and McBride and following them Buchanan and Burns and Calhoun, falling all over one another now, tripping in the mud, squealing like pigs, trying to get up, tripping sideways and backwards, slipping and sliding and sprawling and stumbling, and then Bruce and Bodie glance over their shoulders to see and down they go too, and McHarg and MacGreggor, down they go, down they all go, boys in the mud and groans in the crowd.

All that's to hear is the squeel of the pigs and the suck of the mud. But then a voice in the crowd sounds the national alarm. "Blimey, would you look at that little bugger on the end. The wee one. The Yank, isn't it? He's the only one still standing. He's gon' 'a win the bloody race."

All eyes turn to the scrawny American, stumbling along like a drunken sailor, feet pirouetting, arms windmilling wildly. I hear my mother's high pitched call from the crowd, "Go, Peter, go. Don't stop 'til you cross the line. Run." I stagger forward, across the finish line. The master in his kilt takes me by the shoulder and walks me to a long table which is covered by a white table cloth, which is covered by prizes, which are boxed and lined up like the houses along Wheatfield Road. I stand by the table, dazed as a daisy in winter, wiping my snotty nose, squishing the warm mud in my hands. I stare in horror at my fallen classmates, still squealing and struggling

to right themselves. Why am I here, alone with the prizes? I search the crowd for an answer.

The rain beats down. Where is my mother?

Under their umbrellas, Scottish parents shake their heads and wail their disbelief. "I dinna can. How d'it happen? A dark day for Scotland it is, this scraggly Yank grabbing the prize."

The master's face is glum. He takes my hand. We pose for a photo, then he slips me the prize. "Well, Laddie, here you go. Just like a sneaky Yank, found a dry patch o' ground over yonder, ya did."

The prize is a box of toy soldiers. I don't deserve them. I don't want them. I stare at the carnage on the field. "No!" I scream, but the sound is lost in the sucking mud.

We are home, at dinner, the night of the race. My father – we call him "Padre" – smiles and claps his hands. "What a lad! You bloody-well showed 'em." You have to love Padre's enthusiasm. He's a kid tricycling through life, carefree – so it seems to me, anyway – and happy. I love Padre. Of course, I never tell him. The word "love" is not spoken in our home. We talk about passing the peas and the importance of going poo after breakfast, that kind of thing.

"Such a thrilling race," my mother – "Madre" – says. "It's a proud day for America."

"Mother Margaretha said we're going to have a cooking class," my sister Virginia says. "There'll be a prize for the best cake."

"They don't give prizes for cooking," I tell her.

"Yes, they do." Virginia is two years older than me. She thinks she knows everything.

"I haven't seen your prize soldiers," Madre says. "Have you played with them yet?"

Madre is American, but she speaks with a cultivated British accent, a noble voice, like the queen of England. She has a broad forehead, noble too, and beautiful, deep green eyes. Her hair is permed, curls that are tight enough to withstand the Scottish gales, loose enough to spring seductively when she tosses back her noble head. She frowns at Padre, "The weather out there

was absolutely shocking. I'm sure it's sunny and warm in Washington. I was not brought up for Scottish weather.”

Padre has moved us from Washington, D.C. to Ayr, a small town on the west coast of Scotland. A recently retired pilot in the British Navy, he is opening a flight training school in Ayr. Madre is uncertain about "village" life in Scotland. She is the worrier.

There's a lot to worry about. It's 1947. The war has been over two years, but rationing is still part of life in Scotland. Three eggs per week for a family of four, one quart of milk. Madre tears out two small green tickets from our ration book. “A crying shame, what we have to put up with,” she says. I am learning my way around Ayr – where to hear the bagpipes, which of the Scottish lads are friendly and which to avoid, where Madre hides the cookies. I both love and fear Scotland, where the wind blows stronger and the rain falls harder than any place else on earth. At least that's how it feels to me. Head down, slicker up, feet swimming in galoshes, two sizes too big, I do battle every day, me against the wind and the rain and the fog.

I'm getting used to the brogue – lads who sound like they're talking with a mouth full of pebbles. The school uniform is scratchy: blue gabardine shirts and a maroon and blue striped tie, knee high grey socks and grey wool shorts or a kilt if you like. My knees turn blue every morning. On warm days, they thaw out by three.

Behind our house in Ayr, the back yard is wild, rocky and defiant, like Scotland. I practiced for field day there, racing Harold Tweedy around the yard, but he hopped faster than I ran. Harold is a winner. I am a loser. I don't even want to open the box of soldiers. I hide my prize under the bed. The masters and the boys, the whole school will soon realize their mistake and come knocking at my front door, demanding I return the soldiers.

Except that Padre finds and opens the box of soldiers first. “Ooo, look!” he exclaims. Padre lines the soldiers up on the white bookcase next to my bed, their busbies like huge wigs,

their bayonets shined for action, proud and defiant against all odds. "Aren't they wonderful," he smiles. "They'll remind you of the race. You must be so proud."

I turn my head away.

Looking at the soldiers gives me nightmares. I dream the boys from Campusdoon are coming after me. Their eyes are on fire, their bayonets fixed, like the soldiers, ready to gore me. At dinner the next night, I can't eat. Madre gives me an extra helping of pudding. "For the fastest boy in Form One," she says. I shove the pudding away, stare at the floor.

"Peter, what's the matter?"

I run from the table. They're coming. They know I'm a fraud. They're going to take the soldiers away. They're going to take me away. I'm an imposter. The masters know it. The lads know it. Everyone knows it now

Winning the race pleases my parents, and pleasing my parents is what matters, but inside I am ripped apart. I am forming an image that despite – or because of? – winning the race, I am a loser. I am a fraud. I am unworthy. And so I make a pact with the devil. Not consciously, but I make a big decision: I will be a fraud. I'll cut away my heart, if that's what it takes, to make my parents (teachers, friends, would-be friends, bosses, heroes, and even strangers) happy.

It worked. My parents approved. My teachers approved. And I approved of their approvals, never imagining the debt I was incurring. But the demons of childhood never fully die. They lob grenades into my breakfast cereal and replay their old tapes in an endless loop. Forty years later, the echoes of that five-year old's unconscious decision still rattle in my brain, as a white coat leads me down a long, gray, antiseptic smelling corridor and ushers me into my hospital room. I am still a fraud, a heart exiled from my body, a head stuffed with doubt, a soul in search of itself.